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## Restoring performance : personal story, place, and memory in post-Katrina New Orleans

Anne-Liese Juge Fox

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*

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RESTORING PERFORMANCE: PERSONAL STORY, PLACE, AND  
MEMORY IN POST-KATRINA NEW ORLEANS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Theatre

by

Anne-Liese Juge Fox  
B.F.A., New York University, 1991  
M.Ed., University of New Orleans, 2002  
December 2013

I dedicate this work to my husband, Greg Fox, Jr., who made the largest sacrifice for me to be able to achieve completion. I am grateful to know the strength and joy of a loving partnership. I would also like to dedicate this work to my grandmother, Florence Sigg Juge, who was not able to pursue completion of her doctoral degree due to poor health. Her spirit of curiosity continuously inspires me.

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## ABSTRACT

Following the devastation of 80 percent of the city of New Orleans and the prolonged period of trauma due to levee failure and lack of effective emergency response in 2005, New Orleanian performing artists independently and along with national artists to create post-K performances as acts of restoration. This study explores post-disaster New Orleanian performances that engage with the interaction of personal story, place, and memory in response to disaster. How are these site-specific performances at significant sites of memory performative in the J.L. Austin sense? In the context of disaster, what are ethical implications of remembering? How may certain post-disaster performances animate community; sustain and convey cultural memory; reclaim lost spaces; incorporate marginalized stories; counter and resist master narratives; forge bridges of pre-and post disaster identities; and open an imaginative space to envision recovery. For this study I draw from the theoretical work of Jill Dolan, Peggy Phelan, Elin Diamond, Diane Taylor, Joseph Roach, Sylvie Rollet, Dwight Conquergood, James Thompson, Jan Cohen-Cruz, Sonia Kuflinec, Paul Connerton, and Pierre Nora to approach these performances. The act of making community visible to itself through the vehicle of story unleashes a performative power in these performances that follows conceptualizations of memory as embodied, connected to the present moment, and always in movement. These post-K performances engaging personal story, place, and memory take many forms: a bus tour, gutted home visitations, a communal feast, hauntings, an occupation, story sharing in community sites and in red tents, improvisational performance, and symbolic reclamation of iconic sites of disaster. How do these performances, through their overt process of recollection, inhabit a present moment and emphasize presence? How do these performances of memory invigorate a movement forward in the direction of recovery for communities reeling from disaster? This

study looks most closely at *LakeviewS: A Sunset Bus Tour* by Home NOLA?; Paul Chan/Creative Time's *Waiting for Godot*; *Swimming Upstream* coproduced by V-Day International and Ashé Cultural Arts Center in New Orleans; and the ongoing work of NOLA Playback Theatre in micro-community settings.



## CHAPTER ONE

### PERFORMANCE IN POST-DISASTER NEW ORLEANS: AN INTRODUCTION

Before I begin to engage as a scholar with the artistic afterlife of disaster I will begin by engaging with aesthetic engagement with the event itself as expressed in intentional and non-intentional installations around my neighborhood in the first months following the disaster. My aim is to clarify as well as contextualize how I approach the performances of this study and their significance as performatives. Throughout this document I will use italic text to distinguish performative writing of more personal experience of the disaster and performances around the disaster from the analytical work of this study.

*Every two or three years, my mother would have a large load of mud dumped on our driveway to fill in our slowly sinking yard in our neighborhood in New Orleans located near Lake Pontchartrain. Growing up in a below sea level area, it was one of my only childhood experiences of a hill except for the manmade levees that contained Lake Pontchartrain to the north. Actually an estuary, Lake Pontchartrain until very recently boasted the longest bridge in the world at twenty-four miles. Our neighborhood, which was nearly completely devastated with the 17<sup>th</sup> Street Canal levee breach in 2005, is a relatively new one for New Orleans. It opened in 1946 after fifty years of efforts began by the New Orleans Swamp Land Reclamation Company followed by the New Orleans Levee Board and the Works Progress Administration. For over a century, Lake Pontchartrain's swampland was drained and in its place hydraulic fill pumped to create the predominately white, middle class neighborhood generally described as Lakeview (Mitchel n.pag.).*

*In August of 2005, the 17<sup>th</sup> St Canal levee on the western border of Orleans and Jefferson parishes broke due to stress from Hurricane Katrina. Lake Pontchartrain rushed back into this part of the city with a vengeance, undoing a century of manmade efforts to contain it and*

*destroying every home and business for miles. My home as an adult with my own young family was a mile away from the lake and took in eleven feet of floodwaters. It would be nearly a month after the levee breaks before Lakeview residents would have their zip codes announced to allow them back into their flooded homes to begin the process of salvage and recovery.*

*In the weeks following the 17th Street Canal levee break, a pile of all piles was hastily formed smack center of the largest thoroughfare West End Boulevard. Almost as tall and long as a levee, the pile grew daily as the debris from every home in Lakeview was hauled to feed it. In the persistent heat in November of 2005, the pile had grown to tower three stories and the entire length of the neutral ground (median). About half a mile in length and as wide as a city block, flooded pieces and household objects of thousands of gutted homes of Lakeview neighborhoods composed the debris pile. There had not been a drop of rain since Hurricane Rita. The hot, dry air was thick with dust carrying the acrid smell of flooded household chemicals from the floodwaters and the flourishing mold that was spotting and even cascading ceilings, walls and closets of Lakeview homes. The environmental hazard of this pile was emphasized by workers in HAZMAT suits operating the machinery that pushed the debris up and into the growing pile. That November, the neighborhood newsletter, The Lake Vista News, usually featuring the "Garden of the Month" in its two pages, now sought information on missing elderly residents. Coming into this formerly comfortable neighborhood, took major planning and effort including recommendations for tetanus, hepatitis A and B vaccinations before re-entering.*

*For my part, in preparation to re-enter my devastated home to recover salvageable possessions, I wore what had become typical home-gutting attire: rubber boots, donated pants, T-shirt with bandanna, rubber gloves and respirator to protect against the dust, sweat, and*

*mold. I brought a bottle of water with me, as there was still no electricity or running water in my area, nor would there be for months yet to come. I only had a couple of hours before curfew but I wanted a closer look at the pile as it had grown since my last forage into the devastation the week before. I parked alongside bungee-corded refrigerators on the curb that had yet to be picked up. The “Welcome to Lakeview” sign still stood but its bus bench was missing, perhaps swept away unto someone’s back lawn. Neon orange vinyl fencing barred people from approaching the pile too closely. There were so many stories to climb on top of and tunnel through: stories turned to filth. I thought about climbing in the fill piles as a child and realized that there were almost no children in New Orleans.*

*The pile, fascinating in its enormity and its vileness, contained molded, rotting sofas, cushions, dolls, plates, clothes, books, as well as broken appliances and furniture taking almost unrecognizable shape. From this spot by the swept-away bus bench, in every direction, is flooded home after home way beyond what I can see with my own eyes, way beyond what I can even imagine. It is an amazing sight. Every home is vacant. Every home has a flood line where the waters settled for weeks. Every home has its own spray-painted “X”-mark on its door telling a tale of what group searched the house, when, and whether or no animal or human corpses were found there. Each home is a story of extended evacuation and displacement of months and even years. Each home has its own story of loss and misery of haggling with home insurance companies that refuse to reimburse for flood damage, of obtaining the correct and current city permits to rebuild, of finding a place to live while trying to pay bills and figure out what to do with your home. I have so little time before curfew and I have a long drive back to the campsite where my family is staying north of Lake Pontchartrain. If there is anything left in my house to salvage, it must happen now because we’re gutting it and everything is going into this*

*community pile. I am just one of thousands of residents going through this, but in front of this pile, I feel completely alone.*

What struck me, aside from the awesomeness of the pile, was how the heap of refuse made an aesthetic impact on me. I was horrified and attracted to the pile, perhaps because it was “too horrible” to behold, perhaps because I had nothing in my “real” life to relate it to, or perhaps because in an appalling way the material means that made up this pile impressed me. The pile was so overwhelming in size and fascinating in its horrific detail when I looked at it up close that I unexpectedly experienced it *as if* it were a massive and horrific art installation. Made by whom? That November evening just before curfew there was no one in sight to claim ownership of this unbelievable exhibit of destruction. The horror was tied to the anonymity of this pile, an inanimate monstrosity that absorbed the everyday details of the former lives of hundreds upon hundreds of homes. The stories this pile turned to filth, turned to anonymity, lay rotting in wait to be discarded once and for all.

Historian John Caputo writes that irrecoverable loss and irredeemable suffering instantiate time of ruin. He states ruined time cannot be worked into an economy and it is without redemption or possible remuneration as there is no reward for the suffering but only the misery of “ruined time, of pure, loss, of disaster” (91-92). Next to this horror of a pile, the aesthetic experience was an alternative to that of utter loss and defeat. In the first several months after the disaster, in this time of pure ruin, some New Orleanians survived with expressive gestures on the remains of devastated front porches and lawns. In most instances it was also the only way to broadcast to our dispersed, surviving neighbors in this pre-Facebook popularity period.

*Halloween of 2005, I return to retrieve items I had kept out in the sun for weeks and brush the mold off my favorite pair of boots. I just might be able to restore them. We had not had rain since Hurricane Rita. The skies are blue and the air is just getting crisp. Last Halloween the kids ran from house to house and enjoyed my neighbor Joe's spooky soundtrack and "haunted" front porch. This evening before curfew, the neighborhood literally has transformed into a haunted town in a state of angry unrest. I'm all alone and there is not even the sound of distant traffic. Instead of the haunted front porch, my neighbor Joe has displayed a mannequin with the non-child friendly message "FUCK FEMA." The front porch of the deceased elderly couple across the street from us has been transformed into an altar for them. I thought how appropriate it was for All Saints' Day. The mummified bodies of the aged couple have just been found. Although the markings on their door marked "no bodies," the remains of the elderly couple were found over a month later in different rooms of the home, buried by debris and furniture. I didn't know them well. I'd wave to them as I sped in and out of my car going to and from errands as Mr. Rodriguez would carefully assist Mrs. Rodriguez in her walker as they very slowly made their way up the walkway to their home. I moved too quickly to get to know them; it was from their scholarly robes hanging centrally in their front porch altar that I learned they were professors at Tulane University before they retired and before their horrific death.*

The impetus behind this study tracks theater and performance's ability to gather community and in a deeply personal and collective process, revive the specificity of memory, story, and hopes. In the context of disaster, performance can ring in a realm of recovery even as it disappears, leaving intangible remnants that are rebuilding New Orleans site to site as well as within the interior spaces of audience participants' imaginations.

## PERFORMANCE AS PERFORMATIVE ACT OF RECOVERY

The focus performances selected for this study are Home NOLA?'s production of *LakeviewS: A Sunset Bus Tour*, V-Day International and New Orleans based Ashé Cultural Arts Center's *Swimming Upstream*, and the ongoing work of NOLA Playback Theatre in micro-communities in New Orleans from 2006 to 2013. In this project I argue that the focus performances of this study perform as performatives that carve out a space-time outside of that of ruin and move participants in a direction towards restoration. Specifically, I examine three sets of post-disaster production (focus performances) in New Orleans. Each one, I posit, adjoins elements of place, personal story, and memory in ways that enable a productive, community-based vision of possibility. In doing so, these performances avoid a range of pitfalls or negative tendencies of commodification, whitewashing, and re-traumatization that are all too often associated with post-disaster performances.

Certain performances in New Orleans have been valuable in my personal recovery process; there have also been "Katrina" performances, both locally produced and nationally imported productions that have outraged and offended me. Ultimately these adverse experiences challenged me to articulate why certain performances strike me as narrow acts of negative reification, co-option, or opportunism; while others seem like opening gestures of recovery, affirmation, and resistance. Ultimately the selection process I employed to narrow my investigation into post-disaster performance were those that did not attempt a mimetic relationship to the disaster but rather were committed as performatives in that they *do* or *create* something *other than* and *resistant* to the space-time of catastrophe.

Theater scholar Jill Dolan makes a plea for theater scholars to "come home" by bringing attention to performativity in theatrical performance. Referring to J. L. Austin's performative

speech act where saying something actually invents and affects realities,<sup>1</sup> Dolan states that cultural theorists often ignore theater as a site of performativity because it is too highly associated with “high art”, and is considered “simple, closed, known, and coherent” (67). Dolan encourages scholars to ask how the “liveness” of theater performance reveals performativity literally, not just as a metaphor in other sites for cultural studies (79). Taking my cue from Dolan, my project seeks to explore *how* these focus performances function performatively. That is, what is it that these performances *do* in the ruin-space of disaster’s aftermath, and how do they accomplish that doing?

The context out of which these performances emerged changes rapidly as the performance fade into disappearance. Performance scholar Peggy Phelan writes that it has become increasingly imperative to find a way to remember the “undocumentable, unreproducible art” made despite the paradox that in writing a “testimony to the power of the undocumentable and nonreproductive” it is necessary to engage in the reproducible written text (31). The focus performances of this study, outside of my own writing, hold little to no place in the archive. The “lessons learned” they can impart depart with them. With increasing evidence for global warming and the impact of coastal communities around the world at risk, disaster studies is emerging as an economy and field of culture studies. As artistic response to disaster has its responsibility to “lived lives” more information on creating and supporting efficacious performance projects in communities in crisis are of value.

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<sup>1</sup> Elin Diamond describes performativity derived from J.L. Austin’s concept of the performative utterance “which does not refer to an extra-linguistic reality but rather enacts or produces that to which it refers” (4).

## SUMMARY OF FOCUS PERFORMANCES

Chapter two, “Layered Stories in Shifting Ground: Lakeview and Lower Nine New Orleans”, of this study looks at one neighborhood performance project of the New Orleans artist collective Home NOLA? *LakeviewS: A Sunset Bus Tour* had participants load two busses the first weekend in June in 2007 with multiple stops in the devastated, predominately white, middle-class neighborhood where I grew up in Lakeview. The sites of *LakeviewS*, in varying stages of ruin or renovation, revealed their stories as well as opened a space for story sharing among audience participants as they traveled from site to site in the devastated neighborhood of Lakeview. The value of story sharing in *LakeviewS* was so pervasive that even the bus had recordings of elders telling stories of the neighborhood while the passengers were en route. The sites of *LakeviewS* were significant community sites of Lakeview, sites of erasure, and personal spaces of the individual participating artists. Personal story in the context of *LakeviewS* was told through distinct aesthetic choices made by participating artists and was an open invitation for audience participants to build community amongst themselves at each site and in the culminating feast at sunset overlooking the lake that drowned the neighborhood a year and a half before. Relevant to the performance of *LakeviewS* is a sense that site-specific performance and story sharing creates not only a community for those present, but a “contingent communality” across generations as site and story reveal interconnection (Pearson 10). In all three focus performances but especially in the chapter in the performance of *LakeviewS*, space and story allow a possibility to build connection not just with the recent past before disaster, but also with the deeper, generational layers of place that assert a time outside of catastrophe. The chapter also discusses a foil to *LakeviewS* with an alternative use of memory and a devastated neighborhood site with the well-known production of Paul Chan/Creative Time’s imported production of *Waiting for*



*Godot* presented a few months after *LakeviewS* over two weekends in the devastated neighborhoods of Gentilly and the Lower Ninth Ward. A discussion of Paul Chan's well-crafted production helps articulate the limits of virtuosity and fiction to respond or represent catastrophe for communities in crisis. It also demonstrates how certain modes of outside artistic engagement can actually unintentionally participate in the very regressive politics the artists seek to resist.

Chapter three, "Reclaiming, Remembering, Resisting: Swimming Upstream Sources in the Superdome and Spills into the New Orleans Diaspora" focuses on the collaborative development and multiple performances of *Swimming Upstream* which premiered in the Superdome in the spring of 2008 as part of V-Day International's tenth anniversary celebration and as a co-production with New Orleans Ashé Cultural Arts Center as an act of reclamation and affirmation of resilience of African American, New Orleanian women. Set in the iconic space of disaster of the Superdome and later near the Convention Center as well as near Congo Square, this chapter looks at how personal narratives of primarily African American women compete with master narratives and national patterns of erasure and overwriting of survivor perspectives. This chapter looks at the monologue format as a performance device that is easily portable to other contexts and how that bears on the performative potential of the piece. As *Swimming Upstream* tours to cities in the New Orleanian diaspora, its message and ontology shifts into a stronger semiotic field where performers are at risk of becoming signs of themselves. *Swimming Upstream*, developed and performed sporadically over a period of four and a half years, also speaks to temporal passages and shifts and reveals the possibilities of performance to stage memory as an act of resistance.

Chapter four, "Rebuilding New Orleans One Story at a Time: Personal Stories and Performance in Post-disaster New Orleans Micro-communities" looks at a selection of the

community work of NOLA Playback Theatre from 2006 to 2012, which employs story-sharing in performance and community processes including Playback Theatre improvisation and story circle method. In these story-sharing events in micro-community settings, memory is spontaneously recalled and performance of memory is collaboratively negotiated with audience participants and the performance ensemble. Typically performed in sites that are significant or part of the everyday spaces of audience participants, NOLA Playback events depend entirely on participants' voluntary sharing of personal stories. These processes create a space to hear and open up difficult stories surrounding trauma and ongoing effects of disaster. This chapter addresses issues of representation of difficult stories and some of the tactics adopted by NOLA Playback Theatre to support an efficacious and ethical practice as a metanarrative practice emphasizing polyphony, audience-perspective, and community building through witnessing.

In this study I argue that *LakeviewS* (2007), *Swimming Upstream* (2008-2011), and the work of NOLA Playback Theatre (2006-2012) are performances that connect the space-time of ruin with personal narratives of recall. Each performance reaches forward towards recovery as it extends backwards in memory as a way to inhabit and claim the present moment and physical presence of the co-creative time and space of the performer and audience participants. Each performance creates its own vocabulary of memory and space through its own method of eliciting and sharing these memories. These acts of memory in turn activate community, open a process of visioning, and provide the possibility of resisting the worst effects of disaster aftermath.

For this study I rely strongly on the critical work of James Thompson and his theory of performance affects in contexts of crisis to address ethical issues around memory and

performance. I also depend greatly on the theoretical groundwork laid by Paul Connerton and his articulation of collective memory and Michel de Certeau's articulation of spatial practices.

The focus performances are all exemplars of sustainable support from national sources out of New York City and state with local performing artists and New Orleans-based arts organizations. A periphery argument emerging in this study is for national investment in New Orleanian artists and arts organizations to respond to their own disaster specifically for the communities they serve. I have selected performances that are uniquely positioned to actively engage as New Orleanians to fellow New Orleanians through performances set in unique sites of memory that hold personal significance to the art-makers, the audience participants, or both. The performances discussed are not bounded within traditional theatre spaces and do not present themselves as "complete" or even finished in terms of their own creation. If New Orleans is a city in process of recovery, these performances often present themselves as performances in the process of becoming a performance. Performance scholar Elin Diamond writes that to study performance is not to study completed forms but to become aware of how performance itself is a "contested space" where "meanings and desires" are generated, obstructed, and multiply interpreted (4). It is this *opening* in performance that Diamond writes of that is key to the performativity of the focus performances as an opening towards recovery from the disaster.

In exploring the performative potential of these performances as acts of recovery, I look to them as reclamations of space and as spaces "becoming" through story. As such, they are also reclamations of memory. These performances contribute to a culture of memory: as memory preservation acts, as acts of resistance to cultural loss and erasure, as reclamation and reactivation of spaces at risk and communities dispersed from the disaster and the enduring economic hardship of the region. Diana Taylor writes of the performative aspect of performance

as “vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity” (2-3). Taylor seizes on the “liveness” of these embodied processes. The focus performances remember in a way that is an opportunity to counter how most of the world *knows* the disaster experience through mediatized forms of telling. The “record”, ever fixed and available to our “googling” fingertips; can be questioned, destabilized, and opened with alternate, embodied ways of remembering through live performance. The focus performances of this study offer an exchange of the performers’ stories, at times audience stories, along with the obvious or revealed stories of the lost spaces becoming something else in performance.

These post-disaster performances in New Orleans are unique instances of performance performatives working within a landscape of disaster and throughout a diaspora that is historically distinctive in terms of its breadth, duration, response, and enduring impact. When I began my investigation into post-disaster performance in New Orleans, I could not imagine that the Gulf Coast would so soon bear the brunt of another man-made disaster with the BP oil spill, whose long-term impact has yet to be apprehended. Compounded with the worldwide economic crisis brings additional layers of urgency, dismay and outrage to post-disaster performance in New Orleans. This study specifically addresses performance as response in post-disaster New Orleans and contributes to a wider discourse of theater and performance’s role to respond to communities in crisis due to war, famine and manmade and natural disaster.

## CONTEXT AND IMPACT OF DISASTER

I have discussed my own position as a scholar investigating post-disaster performance in New Orleans and my orientation towards performances that emphasize place, personal story and memory. I also touched on the contribution this study makes to the field by engaging with performances that are not at this point part of the discourse of performance response to disaster.

In this introductory chapter, I contextualize the performance field of the focus performances by approaching a description of the impact of the disaster in New Orleans as well as its impact on the theater and performance community. I look at the part the theater and performance scene in New Orleans have played in the recovery of New Orleans. I discuss ethical implications of representation in remembering disaster in performance and the theoretical lens I employ to articulate how memory, place and personal story operate in these performances to activate community. I conclude with a justification of my own methodology as an insider to some of the performances and theoretical tools I employ to analyze the efficacy of the focus performances.

In this study, I use the term “post-disaster” to qualify performances in New Orleans occurring after the levee breaks disaster as it is more concise than the wording “post-Katrina-related levee breaks disaster” and it is more accurate than the more popularly used “post-Katrina.” At times in this study, I employ the term “Katrina response”, “Katrina play” or “Katrina response work” to connect with how these works are described and discussed by national artists and scholars. Within this nuance of the term are local stakes that distinguish an inevitable and in-actionable event of nature from the enduring manmade conditions that can legislatively be altered to protect Gulf Coast citizens. For the Gulf Coast, the disaster scope of 2005 is wider than Hurricane Katrina and the levee breaks as it includes within its compass of devastation the hazards and destruction wracked by Hurricane Rita following soon after Katrina. Together, the two hurricanes following so closely after each other ripped through the Gulf Coast across three states. As my study is limited to the performance pieces of my hometown of New Orleans, I narrow discussion of the disaster to New Orleans when able.

According to a comprehensive study on worldwide studies occurring since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the disaster wrought following Hurricane Katrina is incomparable to any

previous disaster in the U.S. (Kates et al.,14655). The New Orleans Katrina levee breaks disaster flooded 80 percent of the residences and businesses and brought a major U.S. city to its knees with the slow emergency response and the enduring struggles of the disaster months and years after the event of the hurricane itself.

Within a month of the disaster evacuated New Orleanians were found in every sate of the U.S. An estimate of only 37 percent of pre-disaster population of New Orleans had returned four months after the disaster. The costs of hazards due to disaster are often hidden, so the exact cost in human life, property, losses to the economy, the cost of emergency and reconstruction is unknown. The estimated death toll in Louisiana was 1,570 of primarily New Orleanian citizens. Estimated costs to Orleans Parish are financially estimated at 40-50 billion dollars. The social disruption of forced out-migration, traumatic experience, and breakup of community is immeasurable with the African-American, poor, aged, and infirm citizens of New Orleans bearing the worst of the burden of the disaster (Kates et al., 14656).

New Orleans' former daily paper, *The Times-Picayune*,<sup>2</sup> announced this past spring of 2013 that census figures show that New Orleans reached 81 percent of pre-Katrina population in 2012. *The Times- Picayune* cites current Mayor Mitch Landrieu as stating that this is a clear sign of growth and recovery and adds “We’re out-innovating, out-educating and out-building the rest of the nation” (Eggler n.pag.).

Landrieu’s optimism is somewhat attenuated by the recent city report of the Chief Demographer of the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center which stated a few months earlier this year of 2013, that although the population is growing in New Orleans, the rebounding is tempered with the fact that the major industries of New Orleans’ regional economy: tourism,

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<sup>2</sup> In the summer of 2013, the *Times-Picayune* stopped its daily format and only publishes in print three days a week.

oil and gas, shipping and logistics have “shed tens of thousands of jobs” between 1980 and 2010 (Plyers). The fleeing of major international corporations out of New Orleans negatively impacts future investment in the city (City Business *Freeport-McMoRan*). New Orleans is also less likely to attract workers as the report continues that Post-Katrina housing is “unaffordable” with 63 percent of renters paying more than 30 percent of their pre-tax income on rent and utilities in 2011 (Plyers). The violent crime rate of New Orleans is nearly twice the national average and since 1932, 29 percent of the wetlands that protect the New Orleans metro area have been lost (Plyers). The rebuilding and maintenance of urban infrastructure is another complicated issue that the report does not mention. The New Orleans Recreation Department, which maintained the facilities and programs throughout New Orleans for community and outreach including public pools, sports stadiums, after school arts classes; is nearly completely disabled with facilities closed indefinitely and the city’s “fiscal constraints” and “ongoing haggling with Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)” (City Business *Opinion*). Mental Health services, formerly provided for by the terminally closed Charity Hospital, continue to be elusive to most New Orleanians despite the fact that in 2007, the National Institute of Mental Health surveyed and found that nineteen percent of people in the Gulf Coast reported a mental disorder after the hurricane (NIMH).

### **Stages of Recovery**

From Mayor Landrieu’s optimism to the City Demographer’s report, recovery in this eighth year since the disaster is up to interpretation. Visible recovery in this eighth year as you drive block to block ranges from “better than ever” as it is in places in my former neighborhood, to as desolate and devoid of services as it was in the immediate aftermath. Driving down my former street, a new house has been built on my former lot; Halloween Joe built a smaller,

snazzier looking house with a contemporary design. Rose Marie was able to purchase the lot next-door to hers to expand her property. A new occupant down the road rebuilt a home raised eleven-feet on cinder blocks (about the flood line for our block during Katrina levee breaks). The home of the deceased elderly couple, the Rodriguez, is still boarded up with the “X” mark on their door. With all the new gardens and lawns and new homes on the block, the persistent “X” mark stands as an unintentional reminder of the death and destruction that covered our block and every other block for miles eight years ago. What would be full recovery for just our block? If we don’t tell the story of the Rodriguez couple and their boarded up home, does it go away? Should their life story be reduced to the horror of their tragic end? What is ethical in this process of remembering the disaster and moving on and rebuilding our lives?

In an effort to stabilize what could be considered “recovery” for the city of New Orleans I turn to a group of researchers (R. W. Kates, C. E. Colten, S. Laska, and S. P. Leatherman) who explored this question. The researchers identified four post-disaster periods that make up reconstruction: emergency, restoration, re-construction, and commemorative/betterment reconstruction (Kates et. al., 14655). In New Orleans, the authors mark the emergency period following Hurricane Katrina as the longest in duration than any other of the studied disasters (14656). The restoration period, which includes repairing what is repairable in the urban infrastructure, was slow due to the forced dispersal of the population and the low rate of return (14657). Based on long-term studies of disasters around the world and New Orleans’ own environmental history, the researchers estimate that it will take 8-11 years to reach the third period of reconstruction of the physical environment and urban infrastructure (14654). The persistent economic challenges of New Orleans pre-dating the disaster bring the authors to the conclusion that the commemorative-betterment period of reconstruction of New Orleans “is



nowhere in sight” (14658). When you add to the researchers predictions published in the summer of 2006, the additional financial strain on the State of Louisiana from the BP oil spill in 2010 and the international economic crisis, it is perhaps only within the temporary spaces of post-disaster performance that communities can engage in visioning the commemorative-betterment period of reconstruction.

### **New Orleans Theatre and Performance Before and After**

If theatre and performance is a possible site for launching the final stage of recovery (commemoration-betterment) if only in our collective imagination, it has also literally been a force for urban renewal and community development of the two neighboring neighborhoods of the Marigny and the Bywater as well as what is now called the St. Claude Arts District of New Orleans. The post-disaster influx of young volunteers as well as young theater and performance artists have encouraged the renovation and transformation of spaces into performance venues. Such renovation is a bit ironic-as since the mid-twentieth century New Orleans has literally not made much room for theater. Although New Orleans is an important site for early American theater history (we boast the first opera house in the United States) theater in New Orleans has for generations waned in the shadow of our festival culture, unique cuisine, exploding visual art scene, and of course our much revered and enduring musical legacy and culture. New Orleanian theatre artist, Richard Read, writes of New Orleans’ longtime history of 20<sup>th</sup> century traditional venues built during an economic heyday of New Orleans running into disuse and demolition by the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Read n.pag.).

In a region reeling from disaster and in the current international economic crisis, theatre makers in New Orleans have a hard sell in terms of finding funding for their productions and organizations’ outreach programs when the area struggles to meet basic services. Even before

the levee breaches of 2005, the New Orleans theatre community had very few accessible performing venues and producing organizations. Whether or not the few presenting venues sustained physical damage in the levee breaks of 2005, over half of the venues closed permanently or indefinitely. The rest closed for nearly a year following the disaster, losing their season and their subscription/audience base in the diaspora.

Until very recently, New Orleans had boasted the longest continuously running community theater in the U.S. with Le Petit Theatre located in the heart of the French Quarter. Le Petit Theatre Board Chairman Harry Widmann claimed that the theater was the victim of the perfect storm as Hurricane Katrina “brought down the curtain on the Crescent City” and left the theatre dark for almost an entire year. Widmann continued that the worldwide economic crisis dealt the “final blow” (McCash n.pag.). Le Petit fortunately has literally “just” re-opened its doors after prolonged controversy, which ended in the financial compromise of surrendering half of Le Petit’s space and smaller stage to be taken over by the New Orleanian celebre restuarateur Brennan family for their new restaurant “Tableau” which enjoys Le Petit’s prime location in Jackson Square (Mahne C8). Another established pre-Katrina theater, Le Chat Noire Cabaret, located in the Warehouse District, was a “hub” for the New Orleanian theatre scene. Le Chat was one of the first stages to come back after the disaster featuring the New Orleanian Cabaret favorite Ricky Graham. However, Le Chat Noir Cabaret closed its doors permanently around the same time as Le Petit.

New Orleans’ only Equity Theatre, Southern Repertory Theatre, formerly located at the crux of downtown and the French Quarter in Canal Place Mall, survived the storm and aftermath only to find its could not cope as well with the economic “comeback” of New Orleans in select neighborhoods. Competition for Southern Rep’s “hot” location went to a higher-paying tenant (a

movie theater). When Southern Rep lost their venue at the top of rehearsals for their slated spring 2012 production of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* starring its own Artistic Director, Aimee Hayes as *Blanche Du Bois*, Southern Rep went with the local zeitgeist, and opened their production in an art gallery on Elysian Fields at a location that *could be* across the street from Stella and Stanley's address. So far, there are no plans for building a theatre or restoring a defunct one for Southern Rep. In an article announcing Southern Rep's season staged at four different venues, Hayes states that Southern Rep has turned a "potential disruption to advantage" as they are able to reach more audiences at each site chosen to support aspects of each drama in their season (Waddington n.pag.). In terms of a lost venue restored, The Saenger Lowes Theater on Canal Street, which presented productions from the touring Broadway musical circuit, reopened its doors this fall 2013 with a full season.

As so many of the performing and theater artists in New Orleans depended on teaching jobs to supplement their income as artists, after the disaster they found themselves jobless on both counts with the closures and reorganizations of the New Orleans public schools and the closures and suspended seasons of theaters. Another significant "loss" in the aftermath of the levee breaks was a dedicated theatre reviewer in New Orleans' former daily paper *The Times-Picayune*. The lack of regular attention of what theatre and performance makers are doing in New Orleans makes it more challenging to build audiences as well as obtain "authoritative" reviews to establish applications for state and national arts funding. Funding in this disastrous climate, challenged before the disaster, has become downright grim as more corporations have left the region and the city has faced bankruptcy. Dwindling state tax revenue statewide, Governor Jindall states, is the cause of his vicious cuts in arts funding (Chatelain n.pag.) with the Decentralized Arts Funding and Statewide Arts Grants cut by 41 percent (Kern n.pag.).

According to the Louisiana Partnership for the Arts: “These cuts affect artists, teachers, non-profit organizations, festivals, libraries, museums and theaters alike” (Kern n.pag.).<sup>3</sup>

As performance venues disappear at a staggering rate in the post-Katrina map of New Orleans, performance in non-traditional venues is happening all over town. Performance spaces in basements, café bars, community center gyms, factories, and old school buildings emerge as they dodge neighbor complaints and city building code restrictions. New Orleans theatre artist Emilie Whelan comments on the exceptional scarcity of traditional performing spaces in New Orleans and how that has impacted the performance scene in New Orleans post-disaster to transform move beyond desperate acts to find performance spaces to become rather a way of working. Whelan states that each performance reveals new spaces as a way to uncover New Orleans’ historical layers. Whelan writes of the success and growth of the New Orleans Fringe Festival, launched in 2008, located in the Bywater and the Marigny neighborhoods, from 4,400 audience members its first year to 11,000 audiences in its fifth year (Whelan n.pag.). The festival has been a major force in helping to establish the conversion of non-traditional spaces into regular performing venues and has become a center for new ensemble theatre companies of young, native New Orleanian and transplant performers often dedicated to devised work<sup>4</sup>. As the years tick on and these young companies continue to contribute significantly to the body of work

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<sup>3</sup> Roger Wilson, President and Director of Broadway South, became a strong voice for performing arts in New Orleans soon after the levee breaks. Wilson proposed legislation that would mimic the tax incentives offered to the film industry in Louisiana in the hopes that a similar financial boom with live “Broadway bound” performances in theater, opera, ballet, jazz, comedy and variety entertainments. Broadway South’s vision is/was that New Orleans become a “try-out” city and thus create jobs and encourage local and out-of-region developers to “rebuild, repair or renew vital infrastructure throughout the state with private dollars.” (<http://www.broadwaysouth.com> 2007). Although the Broadway South Law was signed by Governor Blanco in Nov 8, 2007, the lack of a single venue in the city with the wing space of a contemporary Broadway theater and no daily paper theater reviewer to cover emerging works, Broadway South is a legislative de jure.

<sup>4</sup> NOLA Project, Cripple Creek Theatre Co, Goat in the Road Productions, New Noise.

being done in New Orleans, it is evident that these initial “rebuilding” efforts have long-term stamina and have become lasting structures in the redefining of the New Orleans art scene.

The online journal *HowlRound* in the beginning of 2013 featured a special series of New Orleans artists defining the current spirit of the performance scene in New Orleans. Richard Read calls the influx of new performance ensembles, original works and opening of performing spaces as “dizzying and inspiring” (Read n.pag.). Whelan relates it to her sense of theater in Chicago in the 1970s or New York in the 1960s (Whelan n.pag.). Aimee Hayes of Southern Rep writes that despite the lack of corporate funders, individual donors, or venues that New Orleans theater is like the “wild, wild, West” as it’s open for enterprising theater makers (Hayes n.pag.).

The primary strength of this developing performance scene seems to be nourished by the cooperative spirit, networking, and resource sharing among the companies. For example, ArtSpot Productions, MondoBizarro and the emergent theater company New Noise share the same rehearsal, shop, and office space in the Marigny. Collaboration between the more established ArtSpot Productions in its second decade and MondoBizarro reaching its first have resulted in three productions to address coastal loss in Louisiana and have most recently received national foundation support from MapFund for the current collaborative performance set at the coast of Louisiana in St. Bernard Parish with *Cry You One* (2013). In an interview with Nick Slie of the performance group Mondo Bizarro, Slie stated that he and artistic partner Bruce France were not interested in making “Katrina” theater, but to map the “levee break” issues through their work: “absence, exhaustion, social dysfunction, racism, loss” as well as to address persisting issues central to the disaster in addressing racism and coastal, and cultural loss in Louisiana (Slie).

For many New Orleanian and Louisiana resident theatre and performance artists in the first years following the disaster, making performance was as much a part of the hard work of reclaiming their sense of home as gutting a house and facing the bureaucratic trials of filing for permits, applications and insurance claims. Performance artist, Danielle Vignes, expresses the need for story sharing in discussing the development of her performance piece, *Hanging out to Dry* (2007) and the importance of story sharing to preserve culture:

Art, particularly the art of oral history, becomes a necessity instead of a luxury in times of disaster. [...] the people of Saint Bernard Parish need their stories to be told. Only through storytelling does my culture have any chance of survival and sustainability. (346)

One aspect of post-disaster New Orleans that deeply impacts the creative work is the palpable rebounding effect of the disaster that has not only rebuilt entire neighborhoods, but also attracted a new generation of transplants and inspired a surge of creativity in performance in New Orleans. No matter what the content, form, or purpose, creating performance in New Orleans post-Katrina has been one way to literally and metaphorically recover territory, community, identity, affirm continuity, and declare “We’re home.” The New Orleans levee break disaster has not only instigated unique and multi-various expressions of performance by New Orleanian theatre and performance artists, it has shaped a unique audience within New Orleans and throughout the New Orleanian diaspora. Funding program manager for the Louisiana Board of Regents, Carrie Robison, writes of the “gargantuan efforts” made by New Orleanian theater and performing artists to reestablish themselves and their communities (6). In contrast to the trend of cuts in our state budget, Robison cites that according to the National Endowment for the Arts, “culture historically has been the second-largest industry in Louisiana, and its restoration is essential to the economic revitalization of the region.” Robison claims that the arts are a way for Louisiana residents to understand its “rich and troubling past” as it offers

“solace and hope, and an anchor to stop our drift” in our uncertain future (7). Visual artist, Jan Gilbert and Curator and Interim Director of Visual Arts at New Orleans’ Contemporary Arts Center writes similarly of the role of the arts for recovery. Gilbert states that early “post-traumatic images” of the flood and the “mangle of their homes and personal belongings” were not only a source of suffering but also what New Orleanian artists had to use for creative expression as a “comforting beauty” to both remember the disaster and re-vision the city (*Tank Drama* 20).

One aspect of the community-wide project, *LakeviewS*, initiated by Gilbert, handed out pieces of wallpaper from the flooded homes of Lakeview and asked audience participants to write or draw something on the paper and mount it on a collective mural. This simple activity as a collective act of remembrance of sifting through the rubble or gazing at the Lakeview pile emphasizes the nuances of how Gilbert’s commemorative art work peels “layers of memory” that “reveal both trauma and beauty” (*Tank Drama* 20). Key to this project is looking at how New Orleanian artists open possibilities for this spectrum of remembering and visioning. I have found that in many ways, the transformation of New Orleans from a scantily supported, diminishing traditional theater scene to a vibrant, performance scene speaks to New Orleans’ enduring attraction as a space for artists to express themselves, collaborate, and create. New Orleans is remaking itself and along with it, the theater and performance community. For the audience member, performances addressing the disaster have an impact determined by the individual proximity of their relationship to the disaster and their own personal willingness, in their every-changing stage of recovery, to experience performance on this subject. New Orleans theater critic David Cuthbert in a telephone interview in 2007 explained that “people want to be

entertained...they've been through a drama...not even legendary theater figures could hope to do... and people are going to be selective on Katrina-themed things they go to" (Cuthbert 2007).

There has been a diverse selection of such disaster responses performances in New Orleans. One of the first performances to take the stage was New Orleanian cabaret artist, Ricky Graham's musical comedy solo performance *I'm Still Here, Me* in 2006 at Le Chat Noir. New Orleanian touring artist, José Torr  s gives voice to the undocumented in *Cone of Uncertainty* (2006). Torr  s' work articulates the exploitation of the disaster-related influx of the latino undocumented worker population in New Orleans. Southern Repertory commissioned all three of Loyola University professor and playwright, John Biguenet's trilogy, which was also produced in other regional theaters in the U.S.: *Rising Waters* (2007), *Shotgun* (2009) and *Mold* (2013). *Rising Waters* is a two hander set on a Lakeview home rooftop. Biguenet reaches for more of the story of racial relationships in *Shotgun*. *Mold* addresses issues of return for one couple a year after the disaster. New Orleanian playwrights Rob Florence and Jamuna Yvette Sirker (relocated in Massachusetts) have had New York readings and full productions of their disaster response plays at the Jefferson Performance Arts Society in New Orleans' neighbor Jefferson Parish for *Katrina's Path* (2007) and *Pink Collar Crime* (2006) respectively. Sirker's *Hell and High Water* (2008) also enjoyed performances in New York but has yet to be produced in New Orleans. New Orleans playwright Jim Fitzmorris premiered numerous plays through Tulane's Shakespeare festival that bring out specific local issues surrounding post-disaster questions. *Vote Lear* (2007) mounted in the festival season of 2007 specifically responded to New Orleans' longstanding racial tension and the political vacuum left in the wake of the levee breaks in New Orleans city government.



## ETHICS IN REMEMBERING: KATRINA THE NATIONAL MUSE

Numerous artistic responses to the disaster and its aftermath have already been expressed through documentary films, art exhibits, books, television series, poetry, plays and performance. This urge is not just local but national as cultural critic Helen Taylor describes the national “cultural outpouring” as Katrina “hit the mark of the national psyche.” Taylor continues that the Hurricane Katrina disaster “redefined” a “national and international mood” in much the way the events of 9-11 and the death of Princess Diana did before. Taylor describes Katrina as an international wake-up call to the realities of global warming and exposure of the horrors of American racism (484). For Taylor, it is the subsequent “cultural outpouring” through film, television, visual arts, music, literature, performance that has “strengthened and given substance to the return home-and to the remaining, or returning residents” (488). I take a sidestep from Taylor’s survey of major cultural works inspired by the disaster and its place in the restoration of New Orleans in that Taylor makes no distinction between what she terms “Katrina art” made by New Orleanians for New Orleanians and how that differs from response art made by others outside of New Orleans for national audiences that are not local audiences. There are also great differences in impact and reception in the “imported” works of disaster art works when out-of-region artists bring their Katrina-themed work down to New Orleans as well as for disaster response works “exported” out of New Orleans to wider audiences in other states. These different positionings of “Katrina-themed “artistic expression offer a whole spectrum of engagement between the theme of disaster and its aftermath, the art object located either within or without the landscape of disaster, and its audiences in New Orleans, in the New Orleanian diaspora, and beyond. These perspectives bring meanings, interpretations, and implicate

audiences differently. As responses to the disaster and its ongoing impact, there are ethical implications in this exchange of making and showing art inspired by the disaster.

For this exchange, I rely on performance scholar James Thompson's ethical orientation of performance *affects*. Thompson's project criticizes the tendency for western aesthetic and therapeutic default modes of "telling one's story" in order to heal from trauma over locally produced and rooted aesthetic traditions that celebrate resilience and joy as a way to displace suffering in contexts of crisis. Thompson argues that in a context of suffering, "hedonism is a bunker" (2) and argues for a methodology that places what a community considers beautiful as its center for performance projects. Thompson's preferred performance projects are more often related to particular sites and attached to community interests where beauty is defined on their own terms (5). Thompson's theory of performance affect is founded in part by Hans Gumbrecht's argument for analysis of art that seeks to describe the "presence effects" of the art object: as moments of intensity (Gumbrecht 97) and the "ability for the presentification of past worlds without any explanation (94) and Jill Dolan's *utopian performatives*. Thompson warns that a work in a particular site or community does not inevitably lead to an attention to social justice (5). Performance theorist Elin Diamond similarly warns that the performativity of performance can participate in forces that are regressive as well as progressive (5).

For this study I made a very deliberate effort to see every "disaster" play or performance in New Orleans. As much as I argue for national investment in local artists and arts organizations to respond to their own disaster; it has been incredibly shocking to see how politically regressive many local productions have been. Some of the local productions mounted in New Orleans in response to the disaster reified some of the worst political effects of the disaster through their own complicity or lack of awareness. One of the weakest but most highly

funded productions was produced by the Contemporary Arts Center through a generous NEA grant of former CAC Artistic Director Jay Wiegel's opera *Seven Days of Paradise* (2007). It was singularly the most racially offensive and aesthetically disastrous production I have seen to date. Caucasian Artistic Director Wiegel chose visual artist Jeffrey Cook's African American experience as the source material. Wiegel outsourced most of the creative labor to non-resident New Orleanians but hired local performers for interpretative roles. The theatrical disaster that ensued staged the worst of racial stereotypes and laughably offensive representations of the disaster where ballerinas in pink tights and tutus literally mimicked helicopters spinning over the city. One strand of the storyline for the performance was the story of a friendship between a white girl and African American girl who grow up respectively to be a doctor and a prostitute. The two are reunited in the French Quarter immediately after the levee breaks where the African American prostitute's pimp sets out to rescue the Caucasian doctor's father in Lakeview. The production also featured what were supposed to be comedic sketches with an African American woman costumed and giving banter in the racial stereotype of "Mammy." In-between scenes the opera featured screenings of interviews mimicking Spike Lee's interview style for his documentary film *When the Levees Broke*. The opera's screening interspersed actors' real-life testimonies with made-up ones for comedic relief and dramatic pathos in an uncomplicated presentation where all is taken for "truth". It is only because I know the actors personally that I know who acted dramatically for the camera *as if* their mother had drowned in the flood, and who had not even moved to town until after the disaster and yet filmed a humorous testimony of taking drugs during the storm when a goose flew into their window. It is perhaps still a problem of lack of local voice in the collaborative process when fundamental creative choices were made.

Another problematic disaster piece was created and performed by the same actress who

portrayed the white girl become doctor in Wiegel's disastrous opera. Diana Shortes created an enigmatic solo performance piece that included a haunting presence/performer in *Ventriloquist Voices* (2008) for the third anniversary of the levee breaks. Not only was the timing significant for Shortes' piece but it was produced at the former Alamo Theater which was a makeshift performing venue in the garage of the very same house where Shortes stayed on a rooftop during the disaster. Shortes partnered with African American dancer Monique Moss who neither spoke nor danced but occasionally appeared on the stage in silence as the white speaking subject of Shortes monologued and seemed oblivious to Moss' presence. It was bothersome to have Moss's character exist but have no opinion or agency, even more so because there was no complication or questioning of her character's lack of agency before the Caucasian solo artist Shortes. Thankfully, none of these disappointing local responses to the disaster have been remounted in New Orleans or elsewhere.

Southern literary critic Minrose Gwin opens the question of ethical issues of aesthetic engagement in the reality of lived human suffering in the disaster (6-7). Gwin's commentary on literary response works to the levee break disaster forges a connection between the national amnesia of the slave foundations of New Orleans to the "spectre of anguish and mourning" awakened by the disaster (7) that is expressed in "powerful, raw, embodied work" that Gwin claims "mourns, performs and challenges." (8) For Gwin these artistic expressions are not just a medium for ruin and disaster but are in themselves performative enactments of cultural mourning and remembering and as such, Gwin states they bear both ethical and aesthetic responsibilities to "actual lived lives" as well as to cultural and historical memory (8). For this study, Gwin's commentary outlines the stakes of how national and local artists remember the disaster through their work. Disaster response performances in New Orleans bear aesthetic and ethical weight

that can either resist the very manmade, oppressive forces that are responsible for the ongoing experience of the disaster and continued threat of yet another, or can participate in national tendencies to forget inconvenient realities and the framing of the disaster as the inevitable, pitiable natural disaster called “Katrina”. As these performance bear on how we remember the disaster and its ongoing impact on New Orleanians and residents of the Gulf Coast, issues of representation are vital to producing progressive rather than regressive works.

Performance theorist Elin Diamond provides grounding questions of subjectivity, location, conventionality, and politics that bear on issues of representation: “Who is speaking/acting?” “In what sites/spaces?” “How are meanings produced?” “What ideological or social positions are being reinforced or contested and are embedded in the bodies and acts of performers?” (4) Diamond’s questions help situate and articulate ethical implications of how the focus performances remember at their sites.

Such ethical implications come into sharpest focus in the second and third chapters where the performances in question seek to represent and perform for African American New Orleanians. When Diamond’s grounding of subjectivity, location, conventionality, and politics are not appropriately registered, reifying acts of overwriting African American experience ensue in tandem with the literal whitening of New Orleanian neighborhoods. I draw from Joseph Roach to articulate in the first two chapters his notion of surrogation which he describes as how culture reproduces itself in the gaps and vacancies left by other groups that have departed due to death or other reasons (2). Addressing this issue specifically in post-disaster New Orleans, performance scholar Rachel Carrico writes of the commodification of African American Culture and of the levee break aftermath as the “most severe” in a long history of defending New Orleans against a band of “cultural” thieves after years of colonization, imperialism, and gentrification

(82). As she herself, was a post-Katrina émigré, she calls herself the “Good Thief” who came with the good intentions to do good work but never thought to ask before “Whose bodiless spirits populated her playground.” (82) Performance can provide this “pause” to ask who was there before, who is missing, and what were the conditions surrounding their departure. In these focus performances I ask how the missing are incorporated into the imagined community of the performance event? Is it ethical to remember *for them*? How do we ethically approach representation of this catastrophe that altered all of our lives in New Orleans as it persists to move through us? How do we represent the unspeakable?

Jean Baudrillard writes in his essay “Requiem pour les Twin Towers” that aesthetic recuperation of “exceptional events” is odious morally and politically. Certain events according to Baudrillard, such as 9/11 are beyond aesthetics as the events in themselves “absorb all imagination” as it closes in on itself in all directions and nothing can equal it (19). Any attempt to represent or comment on the event does nothing, according to Baudrillard, but irrevocably distance us from it (21). I take Baudrillard to mean that we know the exceptional event *less* through our aesthetic engagement not *more*. Can “aesthetic recuperation” move beyond mimetic representation and concentrate on forces outside of this blackhole Baudrillard describes of catastrophe that absorbs every attempt to portray it?

I see a conundrum as the world, even the mayor of New Orleans, is speedily trying to push a story of almost full recovery, which negates the economic, political, social, and environmental issues that persist. The national story is a story of a hurricane named Katrina where the local story is one about land loss, vulnerability, poor government response, and economic divestment. How can performance insert alternate perspectives to the national story? How can performance activate communities of care for the Gulf Coast and encourage investment

in New Orleans? How can performance resist the way our story is being told by telling our own stories to each other so that we can make a new story for our city? How can performance *do* these things, as some of the focus performances *have* and at the same time estrange themselves from ways of remembering that attempt to aesthetically represent the unrepresentable? Is there a way to respond aesthetically that may not bring us closer to the exceptional event but can bring participants closer to thinking and doing in directions that can address and redress manmade constructions that perpetuate catastrophe?

Throughout my study, French cinema studies scholar Sylvie Rollet's work with documentary films on genocide has helped me articulate how artists can honor the "unrepresentable" through building a relational ethic with audiences where what is represented are the ruptures and gaps of catastrophe. Her articulation of how artists can "show" the gaps of representation as an ethical practice to encounter catastrophe through documentary film develops an active audience that is no longer consumer/bystander but one of a witness. Rollet's description of witness connects to this study in that her articulation of witness is also a way community is activated in the focus performances through a relational ethic in evoking thought and memory of catastrophe without directly representing it. Site, memory and story, which frame the focus performances of the study is not only an aesthetic organization but part of the performative dynamic of these performances.

Scholars Rollet, Diamond and Cruz posit framing questions that illuminate my focus performances' performative impact and organizational contexts. Diamond's questions cited earlier around subjectivity, location, conventionality and politics as well as a closer look at Jan Cohen-Cruz's structuring of a "necessary fit" of subject-venue-and audience clarify these structures for the three sets of performances. How these performances navigate these ethical

guidelines distinguish, according to Cohen-Cruz, between an “opportunistic display of victimhood” disguised as performance and successful community work.

Contributing to this discussion is the work of community-based theatre scholar Sonja Kuftinec who provides four essential questions for critical analysis that also guide my investigation: how the performance animates and includes community members, the appropriate representation of traumatic events, the institutional relationship to power, and finally a methodology of criticism *within* the context that “respects the expressed goals of practitioners, asserts the responsibilities of the critic to “express indignation,” and attends to the voices of community participants (17). The efficacy in terms of community for the focus performances lies in each performance’s own navigation of these ethical issues of representation in how they use memory, place and personal story.

#### THEORETICAL DYNAMIC: PLACE, PERSONAL STORY, MEMORY

The theoretical framework of my investigation of the focus performances--memory, place and personal story--consistently tie into community in a circular pattern where story is the central cohesive element; the linchpin that connects this operation of memory and joins it to community. In this section I will stabilize theoretical terms used in this study as well as describe this circular, and interactive interaction of place, personal story and memory. In the next couple of paragraphs I will briefly outline the contribution provided by specific theorists followed by a more detailed discussion of the theoretical frames I am employing in this study.

Paul Connerton and Pierre Nora’s work in collective memory, history and memory lay groundwork for my understanding of the connection between personal and collective memory. In the focus performances, I argue that an act of integrating personal story into performance is an act of collective memory as it is shared among the participants at an evocative site for ongoing



community life or community memory. This act of broadening collective memory is community forming, emphasizes polyphony, and embraces notions of commonality and difference. The work of theater scholar Sonja Kuftinec, performance scholar Dwight Conquergood, as well as cinema scholar Sylvie Rollet, articulate nuances of community that are useful to this study, which I will discuss more in detail towards the end of this section. French philosopher Michel de Certeau's conceptualization of story and place as a spatial practice underpins this study, which I will outline directly.

### **Story as Spatial Practice**

"Place" in this study names where community members gather, not necessarily in a theater but where a space is made for performance within the active or defunct spaces of community. In New Orleans post-disaster, where so much of the physical environment was in ruin, it was the stories evoked in the spaces from those who remembered that revived them out of the mold, rot, rust, and dust. Place in the focus performances invite temporary communities to collectively re-member as a community and thereby re[member]. The type of remembering enabled by these performances open towards polyphony, which resist master narratives of the disaster and act as counter-memory practices. As de Certeau's articulation of spatial practices was the theoretical starting point for my investigation into why certain performances post-disaster were performative, I will begin with a brief discussion of his concepts for story and place.

French theorist Michel de Certeau describes how story founds a "field" where multiple, fragmented, oppositions of individual, family, and community stories can be set in a process emphasizing polyvalence (125). The focus performances in this study use personal narratives to contribute to the opening of performer stories, stories of the site(s), and to varying degrees

audience stories as they construct collective memory. The way the stories are shared in the focus performances resemble de Certeau's description of fragmentation as structurally the stories emerge in performance as pieces of a whole rather than a cohesive totality or Aristotelian in structure. De Certeau describes story as a "spatial practice" in that it is what transforms "places into spaces" (118). Story, according to de Certeau is a "culturally creative act" that has "performative force" in that it does what it says" (123) as story orients, contextualizes, and "temporalizes" space (117). In operational terms for this study, story is what ties place and memory together. Story in the focus performances does what it says in that through the act of telling, there is a transformation through this visible process of memory: a witnessing, a formation of community, a resistance to erasure, an opening of how we think we know disaster. In the focus performances story transforms the "fixed and stable" concept of place into the "polyvalence" of space. It is story that transforms lost places into recovered spaces. It is story that enables a process of memory: memory that is specific, individual, plural, polyphonic and collective.

Building on de Certeau's sensibility of story as a spatial practice for site-specific performance that relates to the focus performances of this study, performance artist and theorist Michael Pearson articulates how site-specific performance and story sharing is a process of making more visible the multiplicity of meanings "that resonate from landscapes and memories" (17). Pearson describes the permeability of place and people as places and landscapes are constructed out of the actions and experiences of people and similarly, people are "constructed in and dispersed through their habituated landscape" (12). Paul Connerton previously asserts this claim for collective memory as dependent upon the relative stability of the images of social spaces. Connerton explains that it is our social spaces we occupy and with which we always

have access that serve as mnemonics for to enable the process of memory (21). Both Pearson and Connerton touch on a very personal and rich creative source for New Orleanian artists to chose to create installations and performances at significant sites of memory. The loss of 80 percent of all constructed spaces in New Orleans is not just a loss of urban infrastructure and homes; it is a loss of identity, culture, and personal memories. In post-disaster New Orleans, the sense relationship Connerton describes as permanence in space and ephemerality in terms of event are flip-flopped as present-day New Orleanians abruptly outlive their homes, neighborhoods, community, and much of their region. However, it makes very evident why the tactic of creating performance at sites of memory or sites important to community is a vital choice in terms of performatively engaging in acts of restoration. The ease of forgetting with the loss of the mnemonic of physical spaces and its members gives post-disaster New Orleans performances located at the remains of such social spaces, an additional thrust of urgency in terms of telling personal and spatial stories in order to arrest the progress of oblivion. Pearson describes place as “a layered location,” a “container of memories, stories, and legends,” and is “where we stand personally and politically as well as spatially” (22-23). In post-disaster New Orelans it is perhaps the overwhelming loss of architecture that brings out a more urgent need to grasp our stories before they vanish before our time. The artists of the focus performances chose their sites to make their stand for what they refuse to lose and refuse to forget: the at-risk intangible, invaluable parts of personal life and culture. The damaged/renovated sites of the focus performance are not “metaphors” or a “scene” for a drama enacted but are conceived as sites of “recovery” where these spaces are reclaimed or re-invented by all those present for the performance through story.

## **Memory: Multi-Directional, Plural, Individual and Collective**

The theoretical concept of memory is the most slippery and troubling for this project as it bounds across disciplines and wrangles artists, writers, social scientists, medical doctors, and neurologists. I perceive memory in the focus performances discussed in this study as a collaborative act of imagination that performatively creates and inhabits the present moment in that it alters it. This act of memory, always anchored in the present, and in this case, in the present moment of performance with others, plays with the concept of memory-in-movement multi-directionally. My insistence on memory as more about the present than the past is supported by Nora's explanation that memory is always a phenomenon of the "eternal present" (3). Through the activity of memory, the imagination flickers or meanders backwards as it visions "forwards" and claims the present moment temporally, spatially, socially, personally. My sense of this operation of memory in performance is shaped by performance theorists Joseph Roach and Diane Taylor who have built their own conceptualizations of memory in performance through the theoretical work of Paul Connerton's work on collective memory and the work of contemporary French historian, Pierre Nora. Nora describes memory as a spectrum where memory is "multiple yet specific," "collective and plural yet individual" (3). In the focus performances, personal narratives of individual memory open into the plurality of experience of disaster and recognize it as part of a collective memory of a community.

When there are no spaces and activity of community left standing, it is our sense of memory of what was before that guides gestures towards recovering a future. When memory itself is unstable and fleeting, it becomes evident that memory is always about the present moment: how we live in it, the choices we make in it, how we connect to our future. These performances are in one aspect, commemorative, but they are also physical and temporal stages

where a temporary community can launch competing and complementary visions of a renewed New Orleans. Sociologist Paul Connerton explains that “all beginnings contain an element of recollection” (6). Pearson explains that all present experiences contain traces of the past that are part of the constitution of the present (24). Tying these multi-temporal conceptualizations of memory with performance, performer and audience participants unlock together the multi-directional dynamic of lost/returning spaces, of community, and of experience as performer(s) and participants envision a future beyond the rubble outside of catastrophe. For the performances of this study, it is the permeable exchange of performer, participants, personal narratives and space that unlock the performative aspects of memory.

Paul Connerton distinguishes personal memory from collective memory where personal memory claims are acts of remembering one’s life history in their personal past and collective memory is dependent upon a collection of common memories where each individual memory is also shaped by the individual’s social world.<sup>5</sup> In the focus performances I insert into Connerton’s discussion of personal memory and collective memory that the *way* personal memory become part of collective memory is through the sharing of personal stories which is how a personal memory is transmitted. This process is a creative act and is where the focus performances most vary aesthetically. Even within a singular performance of any of the focus performances, an artist or audience participant’s personal story *is told* aesthetically through

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<sup>5</sup> French philosopher and sociologist of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Maurice Halbwachs’ work on memory, is founding ground for the theorists important to this study. Collective memory is described by Halbwachs as already an action of an identified community. Collective memory is dependent upon the collection of common memories (*masse de souvenirs communs*) where each individual memory “is a point of view of the collective memory” and that that point of view is contingent on the individual’s “place” in the community, and that that place changes as well depending upon his or her relationships with the others in the environment (33). Individual memory Halbwachs describes is personal and internal but also is shaped by and belongs to the social world to the outside world he or she didn’t create (34).

varying artistic expressions and frames. With *LakeviewS* the variances are revealed from site to site, in *Swimming Upstream*, the variances are evident in the differing voices of the writers/performers and in the iterations of the performances at different sites. With NOLA Playback events, there is a wide range of enactment approaches and what it means to the teller to tell their story depending on what stories were shared before or after them at an event.

As Connerton explains, personal memory is tied to self-identity and self-concept. These notions in turn, necessarily involve community as personal memories are “enveloped” within a social context (22). Connerton’s description evokes an image of a web of memory where an individual’s memories are embedded and part of an interconnection of others’ memories evoked by what Connerton describes as the physical and social spaces of the group (21,37). As part of an artistic process, the focus performances make this connection and web visible through performance when the stories and memories of the spaces and individuals (be it artists, audience members or all three) are made visible. Each of the focus performance achieves this in differing ways. Intentional or unintentional acts of Roach’s term surrogation discussed earlier I view to be attempts to erase or permanently make less visible the missing lines of connection, lines that include lived disaster experiences of African Americans, the poor, and the disadvantaged.

French historian Pierre Nora writes that history is a reconstruction or representation of the past, “always problematic and incomplete” of “what is no longer.” Emphasizing the orality of living memory over literacy of historical knowledges, Nora writes, “memory is constantly on our lips because it no longer exists” (1). It is not just the passage of time that makes memory disappear for Nora, but the process of official history-writing that erases it. Nora writes that history’s project is to “demolish and repress memory” and to “divest the lived past of its legitimacy” (3). What this means for the focus performances in New Orleans post-disaster, is a

way to resist history's oppressive domination through memory practice in performance. This is a practice of counter-memory, a term Joseph Roach adopts from Michel Foucault to resist the displacement of information and memories or "organized forgetting" in historical processes (26)<sup>6</sup>. For Roach, counter-memory is the gap between history as it is broadly "transmitted" and memory as it is "publicly enacted by the bodies that bear its consequences" (26). The performance of memory as counter-memory Roach describes as resistant and that has revolutionary potential of strategies of empowerment of the "living" (34).<sup>7</sup>

Memory in these performances is evoked by spaces in the community but finds a home in the intangible space of exchange among the performer(s) and participants and the action to collectively open the flow of memory in these sites. Roach writes that the embodied memories is something that can be a resource stored up and reinvented in the body as not only a transmission of memory but a transformation of memory through movement of the human body (72) in a way that can operate "interdependently" of the archive and official places of memory (27). Embodied memories according to Roach are a way of remembering the "otherwise unthinkable, just as dance is often said to be a way of expressing the unspeakable" (27). Roach here builds a path to approach aesthetic engagement with the unspeakable experience of catastrophe.

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<sup>6</sup> Roach states that the terms counter-memory and surrogation is taken from Foucault's essay *Hommage a Jean Hyppolite* (1971).

<sup>7</sup> Nora articulates a distinction between places of memory (*lieux*) and environments of memory (*milieux*). Places of memory are official sites of memory such as museums, monuments, archives where memory is "extracted and isolated" (Roach 26). Nora states that it is our anxiety of what is lost in memory through history process that makes us "seek refuge" in places of memory as we no longer dwell among our memories as we would in environments of memory (2). Roach's take on Nora's environment of memory for performance implicates live bodies and living memory (26).<sup>7</sup> For the performances discussed in this study, both aspects of Nora's concept of memory are activated in devastated sites of New Orleans. The sites of the performances, set in locations significant to audience participants or in key sites of the disaster, answer the need to find a refuge for memory as in *lieux de mémoire* and fulfill the purpose to "not forget" as literally every structure, community activity, and most of the community population in the landscape was for a long time, absent in New Orleans.

In terms of memory and how memory is transmitted through story, Paul Connerton writes that what remains untold is always at risk of being forgotten and what is told is at risk of “the range of interpretation”. Both processes, according to Connerton, partake in the construction of power and domination tactics (1). For the Gulf Coast, when the media focused attention on the region it was with endless looping of disaster, destruction, suffering. These images authoritatively close a vision of possibility and discourage investment in New Orleans. At the same time, as the cameras move away and the national memory moves on, the issues impacting residents of the Gulf Coast persist. The Katrina-related levee break disaster, beyond the poor emergency response, extended closure of services, bureaucratic struggles of return, and loss of coastal wetlands is nationally storied simply into a “natural” disaster. In this national narrative, there is no need for action towards prevention or recovery. In the focus performances of this study, the intricate revelations of live bodies engaging in significant sites of memory in New Orleans resist national amnesia, and disrupt national narratives of the disaster as counter-memory.

### **Community**

So far story I have described story as an agent to re-form a sense of community by making visible memories of place and people through a process of incorporation of marginalized stories and by making visible the lines of connection. Personal stories in performance is a way to make visible common and disparate elements in community. Connerton links this self-reflexive revelation of community as a performative utterance (59). Theater scholar Sonia Kuftinec’s work on community-based theater investigates how performance creates as well as disturbs notions of community as “fixed” or “univocal” (20). Kuftinec describes how performance can make visible community elements of commonality and difference (9, 68). Dwight



Conquergood's theoretical concept of co-performative witnessing connects as well the notion of polyphony in community activation as performance can open towards a mutuality and reciprocity of bearing witness to personal and spatial narratives. How may a witness carry responsibility to another in a way a spectator may not? My sense of the focus performances is that the community created, negotiated or affirmed in the focus performances activates community in a direction of recovery (perhaps the betterment-reconstruction stage) to vision and commit to a more inclusive, aware, and engaged culture of memory. The performative possibility of community through performance is made more strikingly apparent in New Orleans where many New Orleanians yearn for a sense of community after having lost their own. The sense of community the performances evoke is in itself a restoration.

## METHODOLOGY

In terms of establishing critique for these locally made productions centered around the disaster, I have found my own criteria yearns beyond the confines of the performance itself and seeks to understand what the stakes of the theatre makers are and how the performance has emerged to meet the needs of its stakeholders. My hope for New Orleanian performance centered on the levee break disaster is a gesture beyond personal emotional release for the performer/creator in their process into a community event that has impact and meaning within that community struggling with recovery. Community-based artist and scholar Jan Cohen-Cruz argues that it is the practitioners themselves who have invested the time and may be personally invested in community goals who are well positioned to assess community-based performance (374). Cruz cites New Orleanian community-based theatre artist and my colleague John O'Neal, that criticism only works when it comes out of a "shared community goal" otherwise it is nonsensical (375). Cruz states that although most publications ignore the practitioner position in

critical analysis, it is a vital way of writing “from the source” that validates theory based directly in practice (374). Thompson writes similarly about the “archive’s” “beholder bias” where the emphasis of the writing on art is more from the perspective of art historians, theorists and audiences than from the artists themselves (158). For Thompson, this contributes to assumptions of “ephemerality” of performance by performance critics which is in contradiction to the experience of performers “who hold a performance within them for many months both before and after” the performance event (158). Pearson as well speaks of the significance of critical analysis from the performer’s place and against the “authoritative documentation” of performance from the position of spectatorship. Pearson states that this bias ignores embodied epistemologies and ignores the performance process over the end product (221). Thompson writes similarly by claiming that criticism of applied theater projects that place maker/participants’ notions of beauty in the center is less about beholders and more about the experience of participants co-creating work from their own “desires, delights or inspiration” (158-159). Cruz also speaks to this value in assessment as she argues that the perspective in these projects is in “doing” something, rather than “representing something done” (374). In evaluating the efficacy of these projects aesthetic considerations are of value to me, but more importantly I value how well the projects reached shared community goals. Kuftinec writes that as a scholar and community-based practitioner, she feels a responsibility to include in her critical analysis “voices of participants in asserting validity of individual experience alongside structural, and aesthetic critique” (18-19). This aspect of performers and community having shared stakes, reciprocal responsibility of these community long-term desires and goals is expressed as well in Dwight Conquergood’s theoretical concept of co-performative witnessing which I take up in the final chapter of this study.

The focus performances of this study are worth investigating because they avoid the pitfalls of remembering in a way that participates in regressive politics, explicit representation of trauma, or compliance to apolitical master narratives of transcendence or victimization. Though their local focus makes them relevant to my project here, the focus performances offer a model for the field to examine how performances can contribute positively to post-disaster situations in other contexts. The focus performances I selected for this study were personally significant to me in my own recovery process. I am deeply implicated in each of the featured performances of the three chapters of this study. I am a participant/observer with high stakes in the performance featured in Chapter two in my own neighborhood of Lakeview where the performance literally drove me past the site of my former home and had me re-enter my childhood friend's home and church, as well as go into a part of the neighborhood I had not until that moment had the heart to witness. I was a writer and performer in every performance of the subject of Chapter three with *Swimming Upstream* and in Chapter four I write about the work of my own "disaster response" with the formation and ongoing work of NOLA Playback Theatre in New Orleans over a period of seven and a half years. However, my first scholarly curiosity and artistic response about the disaster was on my own former doorstep in Lakeview during one of the early trips back into the neighborhood and inspired by my departed neighbors.

*The few of my nearest neighbors that I had seen during my quick forages into my devastated home were staying in other states: Texas, Georgia, Tennessee, and as far out as California. Anne-Marie next door to Halloween Joe was living in Dallas for the year and had her kids make a big poster that she affixed to the door to cover over her "X" mark. It simply read: "We're Coming Back!" Although our street was empty of residents, the remains of front porches and lawns had become sites of creative expression as well as those of rubble and dead*

*gardens. My own front steps, shifted away from the door threshold by half a foot, had my husband's note written in Sharpie on the vinyl siding to alert S.P.C.A. volunteer rescuers that we had found our cats. We placed our white lace dining room curtain in the front door flag post as in a gesture of surrender.*

I surrender to the fact that the disaster has left its invisible floodline on me. It has forever altered the way I live in my body and how I invest in the world around me. In this effort to remember what we miss, comes this need to respond, to replace, to restore and to re-story our experience. The focus performances of this study respond to this need and desire to replace ruin with a world we want to live in again: to bring New Orleans home to us because we all knew too well *what it means to miss New Orleans.*

## CHAPTER TWO

### LAYERED STORIES IN SHIFTING GROUND: LAKEVIEW AND LOWER NINE NEW ORLEANS

*I am sitting at one of the surviving venues,<sup>8</sup> Southern Repertory Theater, at the first “Katrina Play” to receive national attention. It is a cultural import written by three East Coast playwrights, Joe Sutton, Catherine Fillioux, and African American playwright Tarell McCraney.<sup>9</sup> The stage is dark with a loud soundscape replicating the sound of stormy waters. A man with a costume piece that offers the illusion that he is rowing in a boat is holding a doll that is meant to represent a dead baby. The lead character is a handicapped man (without his wheelchair) wailing on the floor as if he were drowning. The man in the boat holding the dead baby tells the shouting handicapped man, “Mac” that he’d better hurry and swim to him or he won’t help him. It was so thoroughly annoying a scene: that the hundreds of boat rescues carried out by residents tirelessly for days before outside help came was reduced to this exchange, that I secretly wished Mac would drown and we could move on to the next “Katrina play.”*

#### ETHICS IN AESTHETIC REPRESENTATION OF CATASTROPHE

Each playwright of *The Breach* used the levee break disaster as a backdrop to promote other issues, issues even irrelevant to the disaster, replete with their own assumptions and biases. The fact that it was poorly written and crafted added another layer of offense to what was already perceived by local artists as a breach of confidence in the ability for New Orleanian theatre artists to respond to their own disaster. Even the sound design meant to capture a New Orleanian sound was out-sourced out of New York. New Orleanian playwright and author of *Katrina’s*

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<sup>8</sup> New Orleans’ only Equity theatre and one of the surviving venues that did not suffer flood damage

<sup>9</sup> Sebesta and Nigh *The Breach: A Story about the Drowning of New Orleans*

*Path* Rob Florence writes of his frustration of the pattern of “nationally established playwrights” pattern of interpreting the Katrina experience on stage “and missing it by a million miles” (Florence). The impetus behind the creation, the playwrights claim, was to help New Orleanian “Katrina” victims remain on the national radar (Berson, n.pag.). Despite these honorable intentions, the end result only brought to mind Peggy Phelan’s warning that “representation is almost always on the side of the one who looks and almost never on the side of the one who is seen” (26). *The Breach*, in other words, was a product created of, by, and for people *watching* the disaster from afar—not for those people so poorly represented by the play. *This* brings us back to Elin Diamond’s point that performance can promote an agenda that might be as regressive as it can be progressive (6).<sup>10</sup>

In this chapter I probe more deeply into ethical implications of engaging aesthetically with catastrophe. I look to theorists Diamond, Cruz, and Kuftinec, and Thompson for guiding critical guidelines to assess and describe efficacy of these performances. The aesthetic framework of the two performances I discuss use place, memory, and personal story in divergent ways. I will begin by discussing Paul Chan/Creative Time’s production of *Waiting for Godot* set

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<sup>10</sup> In Joe Sutton’s narrative where a Caucasian, male freelance reporter comes down to New Orleans soon after the disaster to investigate a rumor that the levees did not accidentally break but were bombed. The reporter’s desire to write a big story leads him into a descent into a sort of Conradian *Heart of Darkness* where he enters a devastated African American, unnamed neighborhood and meets up with his African American contact. The encounter is made dramatically threatening with dark lighting and African American actors holding candles to their grim faces in the darkness in a sort of ritualistic circle. The reporter lectures to his contact that she has to be careful about how she spreads rumors if she wants to be taken seriously. The white, patriarchal authority (the media) literally comes to bring the light to the obscured and misguided “natives” of New Orleans. The colonial encounter as described by Diane Taylor, is staged uncritically in a predictable, formulaic, “hence repeatable fashion” where Taylor claims the “novelist, the playwright, the discoverer, or the government official”—(in this case the reporter) “stars the same white male protagonist-subject and the same brown found ‘object’” (12). The colonial encounter of Sutton’s character is another production of Sutton’s own colonial, however well-intentioned, engagement with the Katrina disaster in New Orleans.

in the devastated neighborhoods of Gentilly and the Lower Ninth Ward and then discuss *LakeviewS* set in multiple sites of devastated Lakeview. I close this chapter by referring to questions posed by Sonja Kuftinec to assess the efficacy of community formation for each of these projects and their use of memory, personal story, and place.

Diamond states that as “performativity comes to rest on a performance” questions of “embodiment, of social relations, of ideological interpellations, of emotional and political effects” emerge (6).<sup>11</sup> Her work urges us to question not merely what a performance *is about* but also what a performance *does*--in what way the performance *performs* in its specific historical and spatial context. *Diamond’s* questions about the performativity of performance remove an uncomplicated innocence about the beneficence of performance; just as performance has the power to do “good”, it also has the power to harm. As Phelan observes a lack of scrutinizing the power dynamic of “who is required to display what to whom” is a weak political agenda” (26). Diamond’s guiding questions discussed in the first chapter enable such scrutiny of these issues of subjectivity in performance in terms of location, conventionality, and politics (Diamond 4). In addition to Diamond’s line of questioning and Jan Cohen Cruz’s formula for criticism of applied theater projects as an appropriate relation of subject-venue-audience, I also turn to community-based theatre scholar, Sonia Kuftinec for critical guidelines to investigate these performances concerning the appropriate representation of traumatic events, subjectivity, shared community goals, and inclusion of participant perspective in my analysis (17).

Minrose Gwin writes about the specific ethical challenge summoned by the disaster and the ethical implications of creating aesthetic pleasure out of horrific human experience<sup>12</sup>. Gwin

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<sup>11</sup> Diamond defines performative from J.L. Austin’s concept of the performative utterance which enacts or produces that to which it refers (4).

<sup>12</sup> Adorno “Committed Art”

states how *unwanted beauty* haunts the Katrina disaster. This was my own experience in front of the massive pile in Lakeview: it's awesomeness (though terrible in what it meant to me and to everyone else around), was striking. Gwin writes how this unwanted beauty has inspired a nationwide outpouring of art works in response (7). The irresistible art subject of the levee break disaster, reduced to the name *Katrina*, has spawned numerous plays, most never to be presented in New Orleans. French cinema studies scholar Sylvie Rollet speaks to this troubling aspect of representational art and horrific human experience where in "showing" catastrophe *Rollet explains it is not possible to "see the victim be a victim" without at the same time be in a position of enjoyment* (A L'épreuve 52). In New Orleans, the levee breaks disaster offers a tantalizing set of dramatic situations for riveting drama.

Applied theatre practitioner and theorist James Thompson addresses this ethical issue by placing the concept of aesthetic pleasure in contexts of crisis from the subjective viewpoint of those living through the crisis, rather than that of an outsider to the crisis. In contexts of disaster and sites of war, Thompson argues that aesthetic expression can be a place of respite but also something "more radical" as "integral and necessary parts of change itself" as acts of "resistance and redistribution" (11). Thompson upholds an argument that the feeling of aesthetic pleasure, or affect, is best upheld by an experience of beauty over pain. He explains that performances of beauty could be understood as a different starting point and a different way of relating to pain itself where the subject creates aesthetic expression not as a representation but as a "displacement" with the intense range of sensation through beauty (149). This orientation Thompson argues overlays the painful in a way that can give respite and does not depend on process to exhibit or exploit pain on the body (149).<sup>13</sup> A theater artist grounded in Thompson's

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<sup>13</sup> Acknowledging how beauty can be co-opted for vicious and terrible acts, Thompson insists



ethic of affect would consider a scene of an ugly spectacle of a dead baby or a drowning man fails to inspire a productive affect.

Referring to Baudrillard's comment in the first chapter about how unique events absorb all imagination (19), Sylvie Rollet states that fiction cannot represent catastrophe because fiction must remain a closed world; if it opens itself, it destroys itself. Rollet describes catastrophe as an "épreuve vécue" (lived hardship) that cannot be reduced into a an experience that can be "conveyed" (*transmissible*) because catastrophe "exceeds all imaginative, conceptual or rational synthesis (*toute synthèse imaginative, conceptuelle ou rationnelle*) and does not have a place in an explicative scenario or in a chronological narrative (How can fiction represent catastrophe, Rollet asks, when it cannot be opened and catastrophe is "rupture itself of humanity?" (A L'épreuve)

Given the conundrum Rollet lays out where fiction destroys itself trying and catastrophe cannot be represented, *the documentary films on catastrophe Rollet finds laudable embrace the missing gaps of representation and create a relationship with the spectator that makes the audience do the work of re-composition through their own imaginative thought processes* (A L'épreuve 56). Rollet describes that this process of translation where the spectator through their own thought and imaginative process creates the necessary spaces of what is "not seen" creates a transformative act where a spectator becomes a "witness" (A L'épreuve 58). Rollet writes how the documentary film that overtly shows it is showing as well as the gaps and the presence of the spectator, creates a relational ethic with the spectator who puts it together. In this way, Rollet says the filmmakers make the "unthinkable" catastrophe "thinkable" and thereby acknowledge our responsibility as we construct a shared memory of the catastrophe (*L'Art*

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that beauty alongside or within a context of suffering, can "perhaps, deflect it" (149).

*Témoin* 10). The possibilities Rollet opens up to evoke “thinking” about the unthinkable, also opens up a space of responsibility where possibilities for change can come to the table. I believe that if we stop with Baudrillard’s impossibility and don’t tackle the real actionable possibilities to prevent catastrophe, we set up a path to repeat the unspeakable. I appreciate Rollet’s emphasis of witness as bearing responsibility, of sharing this heritage of catastrophe. Rollet describes in contrast the ethic of representing catastrophe and the habit of “showing” images of or a catastrophic past through a “fetishism of images.” Rollet states that this way of representing catastrophe participates in the hegemonic practices of patriomonalisation and monumentalisation of the past, which dominate and assert themselves as the total “truth” of an event (A L’épreuve 58). The way Rollet describes these memory practices is complicit with the totalizing processes of history, which Nora states seeks to destroy the legitimacy of lived memory (3). Rather, Rollet argues for an ethic of representation in documentary films that open to the multiplicity of presented images, where their meanings are continually contested (A L’épreuve 58) in much the same way Diamond describes the possibilities for performance (4). Although Rollet is discussing documentary film, I believe that the same ethics and aesthetics of representing disaster apply to performances in New Orleans.

Two significant performance events set in three devastated New Orleanian neighborhoods, both emerging around the second anniversary of the disaster, offer insight into how performance can use memory and space that enable or disable possibility for polyvalence in communities of returning New Orleanians: Paul Chan/Creative Time’s cultural import of Samuel Beckett’s classic, *Waiting for Godot* and local collaborative Home NOLA?’s performance project: *LakeviewS: A Sunset Bus Tour*.

De Certeau's distinction between place and space is helpful in articulating how space operates in these two performance sites. De Certeau positions *place* as fixed and stable, whereas *space* is a "practiced place." Individual, family, and community stories situate place, give it resonance with time, and orient it so that places become spaces (117). For de Certeau stories are "spatial trajectories" which de Certeau likens to vehicles of mass transportation that "traverse and organize places; they select and link them together, they make sentences and itineraries out of them" (115). In *Lakeviews: a Sunset Bus Tour*, story is the vehicle (or bus) that carries audience participants from site to site as a performance and act of memory in motion. *LakeviewS* is an itinerary of story where the concept of story is so central to the project that there are recorded stories of elders of the neighborhood speaking of their experiences played during the bus ride. *LakeviewS* conceptualization of space and story in flux and in movement is in contrast to Paul Chan/Creative Time's remounting of Beckett's classic in Gentilly and in the Lower Ninth Ward. In that case, the production team needed to arrest the progression of recovery of the site in order to fulfill Chan's vision for this remounting of *Waiting for Godot*. In Chan's production the stories of the space are semiotically neutralized and arranged in such a way as to support the diegesis (storying of the world of the play) of Chan's vision of Beckett's world and fulfill his artistic statement about the disaster through a strategic use of the space as metaphor. The way these two productions *LakeviewS* and *Godot* engage story, space, and memory within sites of lost spaces in devastated create differing connections to community and impact the performative potential of the productions within this context of disaster aftermath.

To this date, the most well-known, well-documented, and funded, "Katrina" theatre production was international digital artist Paul Chan's cultural import of a restaging of Classical Theatre of Harlem's 2006 production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in outdoor sites in

Gentilly and the Ninth Ward of New Orleans through the economic backing of Creative Time. The major tie the *Godot* production held to New Orleans was in the casting of Hollywood star and New Orleanian native, Wendel Beavers (of HBO's series *The Wire* and later *Treme*).<sup>14</sup> All other paid creative and production labor was out of New York City with a lot of production labor done by New Orleanian and national volunteers living in New Orleans to help in the recovery process. The production team of *Godot* and Creative Time expanded the field of their two-weekends of performance of *Waiting for Godot* through their publication of *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans: A Field Guide* to serve as a reference and model for artistic engagement for communities in crisis. Because of the incredible impression this production made in the national press and its wider claims for community made by their marketing campaign and in their *Field Guide*, I seek to investigate more closely the efficacy of this project and their use of personal story, place, and memory. Discussion of *Godot*, unlike the weak aesthetic product of *The Breach*, offers insight into the performative possibilities and limits of aesthetic virtuosity placed within a context of disaster.

After a visit to New Orleans following the disaster, internationally renowned digital artist Paul Chan felt the devastated landscape evoked Beckett's classic *Waiting for Godot* and had the idea to bring the play to New Orleans. He approached Creative Time for funding<sup>15</sup> to remount Christopher McElroen's direction of Classical Theatre of Harlem's Katrina-themed production of

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<sup>14</sup> Local favorite actor Mark McLaughlin came out of a long retreat from the stage in the role of Lucky with the minor roles of the messenger boys played by New Orleanian students.

<sup>15</sup> Chan's *Godot* was in direct competition with applicant for the project *LakeviewS* (Gilbert interview).

*Waiting for Godot* set on a set design of a rooftop.<sup>16</sup> Over two weekends, Chan/Creative Time's *Godot* was staged in the outdoors in the devastated sites of Gentilly and the Lower Ninth Ward.

#### WAITING FOR *WAITING FOR GODOT*

*It's Saturday, Nov. 3, 2007—about two years after the first returning New Orleanians armed with their own water, clad in rubber boots and respirators, began rummaging through their flooded homes. It's two years later and I'm standing in line again. This time it's not for water, disaster food stamps, baby diapers, or a Red Cross or FEMA application. This time, I'm waiting for *Waiting for Godot* in the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward--Creative Time/Paul Chan/Classical Theatre of Harlem's *Waiting for Godot*. Even though I have arrived a full hour and a half early, a record for any New Orleanian theatrical event where audiences notoriously arrive fifteen minutes after curtain, I'm towards the end of a very long line. Despite the chill the mosquitoes are biting. I came early because a friend told me that on the premiere the night before they turned away 500 people from the door and that she almost didn't get in until someone recognized her (she's one of the people on the production thank you list.). Another friend of mine had to circle the neighborhood and sneak in a back way and many of my other friends waited to no avail. The four free public performances have been announced and aired on NPR regularly as well as have appeared in all our local newspapers numerous times. Even the NY Times has written about the show. I had seen some of the *Godot* publicity signs that so were subtle they were mostly subliminal advertising for the show. It wasn't until I drove up this evening that I made the connection between the signs and this piece. I think the NY pre-press has made impact. The group directly in front of me, who later get whisked into the gates, look definitely SOHO-esque.*

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<sup>16</sup> Classic Theatre of Harlem's homage to New Orleans in (DATE) with their version of *Godot* was already a reconfiguration of other famous mountings of *Godot* set in what an Associated Press journalist termed "bruised landscapes" in San Quentin State Prison in California and Susan Sontag's staging in Sarajevo during the Yugoslavian civil war in the 1990s (Burdeau).

*Has the disaster tourism industry really expanded to this degree? Are there indeed travelers who have flown down to New Orleans expressly to see this unique staging of Beckett's classic?*

*The line behind me is now longer than the line ahead of me. It comforts me a little that maybe I will get in. The crowd looks to be mostly white middle class folks but this particular portion of the lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward, now a ghost town of vacant lots and blinking red lights, was traditionally African American. Here, in yet another blasted neighborhood, I'm struck by the awesomeness of the magnitude of the destruction where I am over a forty-minute drive east from my gutted home. I still see disaster with no end in sight.*

*It's not yet 7 pm. The line is not moving but is growing. People are starting to grumble and worry that they are waiting for nothing. It is the time they are supposed to let us all in for a gumbo reception sponsored by Chef John Folse Company. The volunteer at the gate, a college-age white woman, says they have already let in 600 people and they can't let in anymore. I'm the "unlucky" thirteenth person from the closed gate. I tell the volunteer that we're used to Jazz Fest in New Orleans, and that we don't need seats. No dice. But I'm not leaving.*

*It's now 7:15. A group of eight women with NAACP T-shirts come straight to the front of the line and tell the volunteer that they are supposed to get in. The volunteer points to the 500-person line behind us and explains that it is not fair to the rest of the people who got here earlier if she lets them jump the line. The shortest of the women moves forward (I learn later her name is Mary), points to her NAACP T-Shirt and says that they're only letting white people in and they're going to complain. Mary's voice is getting louder as she tells the twenty-something blond-haired young woman at the Godot gate how someone came to their meeting and invited them to come, but they're only letting white people in. Mary has a point. When you look through the gate, it's all white people for the most part as is the line behind us. The volunteer walks away*

*from the gate, perhaps for reinforcement or support. I can hardly keep track because they let in ten more people and I am absolutely one of the last still waiting at the gate to get in. We were told to go away, but I'm still hoping. They quickly let the last four people in and I have literally just made it. I quickly advance through the gate without looking back, knowing there are hundreds behind me still waiting that will be turned away.*

*I get a hot cup of gumbo and I'm just in time for Rebirth Brass Band to do a fifteen-minute set leading the audience to their seats. It's a party and we're the lucky ones who got in. Around the gumbo table I see that the group of women from the NAACP did get in after all. Mary embraces me and says she's so happy we both got in. Her friend whose name I did not get, take a picture of us. Then it's a scramble to find a seat. I spot some theatre friends of mine and squeeze into the benches next to them wondering how the show could ever top the suspense of just walking through the gates.*

The limited run of only four performances over two weekends<sup>17</sup> and the success of a nationwide marketing campaign resulted in thousands of New Orleanian being turned away for the “free to all” production. The production team and national media took both the turn-out and turning-away of so many New Orleanians who came to see *Godot* as a signature of success as in the terms of a “box office smash.” *American Theater's* write-up on *Godot* praises the success of turning “thousands” away and how it “generated waves of national attention and became a unifying force for many in the traumatized community” (Wallenberg n.pag.). Unfortunately by turning away so many New Orleanians after long lines of waiting, the *Godot* production team actually replicated some of the harsher experiences of the disaster where people were turned away from resources after hours of waiting in long, uncomfortable lines.

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<sup>17</sup> One additional performance was added the second weekend

## Structure of Outsourcing

Gavin Kroeber describes the success of their project owing to an ethical value of “deep listening” and “spending the time” (144). I am fascinated by the reference in the *Field Guide* by various contributors to their impression of having spent an incredible amount of time. Of course, time is a relative notion. The Creative Time production team for *Godot*, had only a couple of months to prepare for their two-week run. Their process of community investment was a schedule of potlucks around the neighborhoods they were performing in to promote and recruit support for the project and overcome the skepticism that was as part of the post-disaster landscape as abandoned buildings.

Producer Kroeber describes their underlying strategy of listening as an “ethical imperative” that soon became a practical imperative as Creative Time had no presence in New Orleans (144). Faced with that obstacle, Kroeber admits that local partnerships would be important to the production. However, Kroeber stated that the production team opted *not* to collaborate with local partnerships based on their assumption that they would inherit the legacy of racism:

In event production, there are generally two obvious solutions to this kind of problem. The first is partnerships, but we decided early on that in this one regard, we perhaps benefited from our outsider status, that being feed from institutional partners and city agencies, we would not inherit the profound segregation of audiences and legacies of distrust that characterize New Orleans. (144)

An even rudimentary commitment to *listening* or research could have opened them to integrated, connected partnerships with arts and activist organizations that have had a presence in New Orleans for decades. Even Producer Gavin Kroeber describes their concern and doubts of their outsider status and their ability to “understand our audiences’ experiences and perspectives:

[...] everyone was worried about mounting the show in our own interest, walking away, and wearing our time in New Orleans like a badge of good citizenship... “Carpetbagger” became a watchword. (142)



Unfortunately Creative Time's choice to exclude local collaboration, ruled out their best hope of avoiding the worst aspects of using their own institutional position of power and monetary force for their level of engaged work with New Orleanian communities. They ruled out a possible gateway to understanding their audiences' experiences and perspectives. The *Godot* production team did not allow their audiences any decisions in the representational questions of what would be shown to whom where or why. New Orleanian performance artist, Nick Slie of Mondo Bizarro expresses his distaste for the uncomplicated acceptance of *Godot* by national media as "the best thing for the community" when they never asked the question "what do *you guys* want to do?" Slie states "when you don't ask that question, you're really only giving lip service to community engagement" (Michna *Hearing* 352). Slie continues that Chan was always going to do *Godot*. If he had asked the community the question, "he might have found a different answer" (Michna *Performance* 63). The *Godot* team found some enthusiastic individuals to support and promote the project, as well as help with volunteer labor but their process required the price of a short-term occupation. Kroeber describes how money was what they needed to cut through red tape and put on the show:

The second standard answer is money: Hire enough unions, local production companies, and law enforcement and suddenly, there is a strong incentive for a municipality to work intently with you in adapting the streets to your purposes. (144)

Kroeber admits that they were concerned about the impact of their "top-down" methodology, which "would be as divisive and contrary to the project's ethics as local partnership." Kroeber concludes that since they lacked "local anchorage" and had very little money, that time was all they had on their side and they used it to their best ability. In total, this wealth of time is six weeks from late September when the New York production landed in New Orleans and concluded with the first performance on November 2 (144).

Sonia Kuftinec describes an alternate model of engagement with community in her study of the work of Cornerstone Theatre Co. where community residents rewrite classic texts along with Cornerstone company members over several months to “claim and contextualize these stories.” For Kuftinec this keeps the social and political power of these productions in the hands of community residents (141). Kuftinec explains how involving community members directly in the rewriting of these “universal” stories gives members a voice in the story’s “re-presentation.” Kuftinec further explains how the result of these adaptations work against the “idolization” of the original text and works against a notion that an audience needs to rise to the level of the work; rather, Kuftinec cites Cornerstone co-founder Bill Rauch’s statement that the classical plays “need to rise to the level of the community” (142). This approach to working, according to Kuftinec, utilizes theater as a representational medium with the potential to “provoke controversy” in issues of “cultural authenticity” and the “nature of adaptation”: immense issues for New Orleanian neighborhoods struggling to reinvent themselves in widespread recovery efforts. Kuftinec claims that Cornerstone’s empowerment model in community engagement allows the framing of vital questions of subjectivity and the politics of place. For Kuftinec it is not so much the goal to produce authoritative answers but rather for performance to develop a rich debate that explores the boundaries of community involvement and of community itself. Kuftinec describes an ability for theater to act as a representational tool to make manifest the “symbolic construction of community” (142). I cannot help but wonder how differently the *Godot Field Guide* would read had they decided to commit to an engaged model of community. Would it still be considered a Paul Chan masterpiece? Would their production choice be a remounting of *Waiting for Godot*?

*Godot* benefited from the vitality and good will of out-of-region volunteers and returning residents who brought resources, connections and labor to help *Godot* get off the ground. As this is a *Field Guide*, Kroeber advises other artists interested in translating their methods to other scenarios to consider that post-disaster New Orleans was particularly “bereft of cultural resources” where the few of the remaining population is “almost universally politicized and staunchly dedicated to the revitalization of the city.” Kroeber states that in perhaps better times or in places with more resources or with a less-active populace, “*Godot* would not have mustered much interest” (148). Kroeber admits some ethical questionability to their methodology but summarizes that the overall significance of the project “in the face of an ongoing tragedy” provided justification for their questionable methodology: “[...] the fact that our community groundwork was, in effect, “monetized” in free local labor and city assistance raises necessary questions of exploitation” (150).<sup>18</sup>

Although Kroeber’s final statement could be interpreted in multiple ways, I take Kroeber to imply that the urgency of the ongoing crisis in New Orleans warranted a theater of rescue in spite of some unethical aspects of their methodology. Many New Orleanian artists do not agree with Kroeber that the play justified the means as expressed by New Orleans performance artist Jose Torres-Tama: “\$200,000 to perform *Waiting for Godot* in a devastated landscape? How is that a measure of healing for a traumatized community? Couldn’t that \$200,000 have been distributed more wisely or fairly to so many” (Wallenberg, n.pag.). New Orleans historian Catherine Michna summarizes her account of *Godot* as a surface appearance of a gesture of solidarity on a “grand scale” from a powerful New York art organization to the struggling city of New Orleans.

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<sup>18</sup> “But I think our reticence is rooted not so much in these inevitable questions of ethics and method as in a perspective that recognizes the impossibility of measuring the project’s significance in the face of an ongoing tragedy.” (150)

Michna states that “It is not until we evaluate the potential space-making and social dialogue possibilities that *Godot* swept aside that we begin to see it as a parasitic rather than a reciprocity-defined endeavor” (*Hearing* 347)<sup>19</sup>. Michna includes Slie’s comment that evidence toward the limited investment in New Orleans is the fact that Chan has not returned to New Orleans (Michna *Performance* 63). As I see it, the follow-up and follow-through investment on Creative Time and Paul Chan’s part was dedicated primarily to the publishing of their *Field Guide*.

Chan/Creative Time’s approach to move forward without local partnerships or longer term community input created aesthetic dissonances that may serve the play but do not represent the community the *Godot* team intend to serve. Chan’s imposition of a metaphor of “waiting” is in fact incongruent with the community feel across New Orleans in 2007: its incredible activity, energy, spirit of collaboration, feats of courage that characterize the efforts for recovery and return in New Orleans. Creative writer and New Orleanian native Ann Gisselson also critiques the passive metaphor for post-disaster New Orleans as it erases “the enormous, historic, exhausting amount of civic activity.” Gisselson continues that in fact people are not waiting but “are rather moving forward and doing” (245). The amount of movement and activity in New Orleans was in fact problematic for the *Godot* production team. Producer Kroeber claims that it threatened the “sublime beauty” of the “eternal ruin” that first captivated Paul Chan. Producer Kroeber states that In Gentilly, the redevelopment of the neighborhood was in fact so vigorous

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<sup>19</sup> In *American Theatre*’s article on post-Katrina performance in New Orleans by Wallenberg New Orleanian theatre artist Nick Slie continues this critique of the *Godot* production methodology as an offense in the face of local challenges: “since that \$200,000 was spent, we’ve watched organizations struggle to keep the doors open and have their budgets slashed and I’ve watched my colleagues struggle to keep their lives afloat.”

that it was necessary to offer a “fee” to a property owner to cease his exterior rebuilding efforts and in his front yard until *after* the show closed (147).<sup>20</sup>

The lack of a more engaged creative process in New Orleans in terms of time and collaboration with New Orleanian organizations and creative artists had not only a cost in the production budget and labor effort but was also evidenced in the aesthetic impact as it lacked a connection to New Orleans’s culture. Chan claims the “out of context” and “out of sync,” *Godot* in these neighborhoods was similar to a “spaceship” landing “in the middle of the street for people to experience” (Chan 325). Kuftinec writes that when artists “swoop into an oppressed area and out” they don’t spend the time needed to understand the community, much less represent them. Rather, the “art” produced by these visiting artists affirm their own “misperceptions” of a community’s oppression (131). In the case of *Godot* this methodology is also at risk for unintentionally reinforcing systems of oppression.

The two sites of devastation for *Godot* were taken up as a backdrop to Beckett’s play rather than a revealing of those spaces through their own stories. The actual site of ruin became material environment for Paul Chan’s artistic vision of Beckett’s world, which is overlaid on these sites submerging their own stories. Erasing the specificity of the site, Chan leveraged the emotional charge that resonated in the devastated neighborhoods as a layer of authentic aura surrounding his set design. The actual set for *Godot* (in the Ninth Ward) designed by Paul Chan was an empty lot with a field of overgrown grass extending beyond it. It would actually be a pleasant pastoral setting if you didn’t happen to know that those grassy fields used to be urban homes lined in rows. Chan constructed an actual fire hydrant and a hybrid of a pole/ tree

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<sup>20</sup> Kroeber complains that despite a “fifty-percent good-will payment in his pocket, the neighbor broke the contract with the stripping of the building’s sides and the premature installation of new windows (147).

standing alone. The bottom half of the tree was a metallic pole but its branches held a “real-seeming” solitary leaf. Besides the lighting and video crew filming the event, this tree/pole is the only obvious “touch” from the outside. Without insider knowledge of what is actually *missing*, homeowners of an African American neighborhood, this is a beautiful backdrop to present the art object of the pole and the highly skilled rapport of the actors. What is *missing* is completely erased within the fictional diegesis of *Godot*. The play with “real” and “represented” in this case do not vie with “real” stories of the neighborhood. The lived stories of the site are subordinated out of the mere *habit* of making what *is not* the “play” disappear in order to invest in the world of the play. What ever remains of the overlain site brings an extra emotional charge that fuels the dramatic intensity of the setting. Acknowledging that within the erasure of individual devastated family homes is a fictional representation that is metaphorically referring to the disaster *in general* Phelan offers some insight: “the real is positioned both before and after its representation; and representation becomes a moment of the reproduction and consolidation of the real” (106). I understand Phelan to mean that the real is read through representation, and representation is read through the real. An alternating relationship made visible with the pole/tree object constructed by Chan.

By sacrificing the specificity of the story of the neighborhood and home sites included in *Godot*’s backdrop, Chan enabled the sites to be transformed into temporary art spaces for his interpretation of Beckett’s “ruinous” world.<sup>21</sup> In Chan’s *Godot*, the effort is to *not* see the specificity of a ruined home but to suspend the individuality of the space and accept Chan’s aesthetic vision. Kroeber describes with satisfaction that they were successful in maintaining the

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<sup>21</sup> In contrast, Kuflinec explains that Cornerstone’s “artistry” for their adaptations remains grounded in a value of “locality and inclusion” (190) which often bring the element of surprise to adapted classics derived from “cultural collisions” between the text and where they are (190).

aesthetic power of the (Gentilly) site as a ruin: “which had caught our attention in an atmosphere of deceptively sublime silence some six months earlier” (147). The *real* altered performance sites for Chan’s *Godot*: the demolished and hauled away homes, the mowed grass, the cleaning up of debris for safety, the clearing of space, the addition of light, the subtle set additions, the pay-off to neighbors, function to transform the site into a high art environment that we can view from our stage seat.

David Cuthbert of the once daily *New Orleans-Times Picayune* praises Chan’s crafting of the ruins of the Ninth Ward neighborhood for his “ability to see ‘art’ in the devastation” (*Artist* n.pag.). Associated Press article cites Chan after the production as calling it a form of “resistance” to take a “landscape that does not seem to be fertile to develop any sort of art” (Burdeau, n.pag.). I believe that on the contrary, the awesomeness of the disaster was so striking and created such intense and surreal images, that every place invited a photograph. On a very basic level, the devastation I drove through, walked through, waited in to arrive at the performance site “out-Becketted” Beckett.

I question the ethical value in this practice of “willing suspension” of lived stories of African American residents in service for this production of *Godot* especially when there was no other space in the performance event to reflect on them or on the missing. This is especially problematic when there were so few residents of the neighborhood who were in attendance. It is only in *Godot’s Field Guide* that I learned years *after* the performance events that their Ninth Ward neighborhood “ambassador” Mr. Green lost both his granddaughter and his mother in the flood at the performance site (Gisselson 245). Unlike Rollet’s possibility for *witness* of catastrophe through a relational ethic of showing the gaps in representation, the temporal and physical space of *Godot’s* performance event provoked no thought on *who was missing* in this

performance event where a predominately white audience in a devastated African American neighborhood enjoyed a first rate play imported from New York City.

### **Story of Race in *Godot***

Elin Diamond's question "who is the play for?" becomes a haunting question in Gentilly and in the Ninth Ward. For the national press such as *The Huffington Post*, *Godot's* audience turn-out and turn-away is an uncomplicated story framed as a box office smash: "Tickets were free, and so the poor were able to walk to the performance, while the gentry ventured downriver in limos and fancy rigs that were lined up along blocks now emptied of all but the scraped concrete slabs where houses once stood. Courage was rewarded" (Horne).<sup>22</sup> The *Field Guide* included an essay by community organizer (Renaissance Project) and mayoral candidate Gretna Gladney who was a former resident of the neighborhood. She complicates the national media's reception and post-racial ease of the poor on foot and the gentry coming in limos striding in ease and side by side through gates of *Godot*:

My one regret was that—well, we had no way of knowing that thousands of people would line up for a performance in the Lower Nine. And residents had mixed feelings. It was funny because folks were trying to usher us. We were sitting on the stairs of what was a house, just the stairs were left, and one of the ushers was trying to tell us to get in line or whatever. And we basically said, "No." I remember Ken Ferdinand (Kalamu's brother) said, "Baby, I'm just too tired." From the perspective of residents of Lower Nine, well, you really can't herd us and tell us we have to get in line when we used to live right over there. There was a feeling of, "This is our neighborhood and you're invited guests in the neighborhood. And we're going to do what we want and you have to deal with it (Chan 309).

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<sup>22</sup> Kathy Halbreich's conversation with Paul Chan published in the *Field Guide* reveals an assumption that large number of New Yorkers in the audiences of *Godot* were in fact the intended audience: "You took this horrible abstraction for those of us who were viewing it from afar through the media...[and] crafted an experience that wasn't any longer an abstraction" (Chan 327).



Gladney continues to talk more specifically about the crowds of white people coming into the African American neighborhood and asks the question: “Where were the black folks?”:

There were strong feelings about the number of whites who had come down for a performance. And I remember in the first show, when Wendell [actor] made a joke about look at all these white people in the Ninth Ward, we fell out laughing. Because whites, unless they were going to Saint Bernard Parish, had, you know, no reason—not in numbers volunteers and all. It was a little traumatic for us, too. We were happy to have the help, but it was strange. And we wondered, where were the people of color? Where were the black people who were supposed to come and do something grand in the Lower Ninth Ward? They never showed up. (Chan 309)

Gladney’s question is echoed by New Orleanian activist poet, Kalamu Ya Salaam, “What to do with the Negroes?” which confronts the whitening of New Orleans. Unfortunately, Chan does not enable a reflection about the *Godot* production’s own whitening.

Creative Time/Chan’s Pre-show activities for *Godot* of sharing gumbo and having a mock second line to the audience seats Michna states give the white visitors of *Godot*’s audience the pleasure of feeling they were “authentically” sharing in black cultural traditions along side a few “real” Ninth Ward or Gentilly residents (*Hearing* 347-348). Michna describes this pre-show event a performance of an “”NGO-sponsored post-racial politics of place” (*Hearing* 353) while simultaneously mirroring the very real racial divisions of race and class that that were becoming more exacerbated with the recovery process (*Hearing* 348). I concur that Creative Time/Paul Chan however unintentionally, staged and reinforced the whitening/gentrification turn of recovering New Orleans. Performance Studies scholar Rachel Carrico focuses on the post-Katrina incongruity between “rhetorical celebrations of culture” and the very real inequitable distribution of resources that participated in the whitening of New Orleans. Carrico summarizes that in short “New Orleans’ culture is/was valued while the city’s cultural practitioners are/were not” (80). Roach writes of the historical process of surrogation as how our culture reproduces

and recreates itself in the “cavities” of loss through death and other forms of departure (2).

Carrico writes how in post-disaster New Orleans, it became very evident that when culture is constructed as an “autonomous product” rather than as a “collection of bodily practices” it can circulate independently removed from the people who create and maintain those practices (81).

Reflecting on this post-Katrina phenomenon to the *Godot* event in the same post-Katrina dynamic, Creative Time’s second line re-staged, inadvertently the surrogation of New Orleanian African Americans who were not able to come home, who were not able to enter the *Godot* gates and provided the opportunity for those who gathered to performatively appropriate black New Orleans cultural traditions. The fact that there was no crafted space to reflect on *the missing* made it all the easier.

If the off-stage story of race was an actual reification of the surrogation and appropriation of African American peoples and culture revealed in the post-disaster New Orleans, the on-stage story of race participated ultimately in a post-racial reading of Beckett’s *Godot*. The primary cast featured racially opposing pairs with the African American Estragon and Vladimir and the white Pozzo and Lucky.<sup>23</sup> The exchange between Estragon and Vladimir featured expert clowning of bowler hats, double takes, umbrella play, and other impeccably timed repartee. Pozzo, entered in a white suit with a siren and a megaphone by which he issued orders to Lucky, played by New Orleanian talent, Mark McLaughlin who had not taken the stage in years.<sup>24</sup> The choice of racial pairing in casting could say so many different things at different

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<sup>23</sup> The second weekend of the production took place in actor Wendel Beaver’s former neighborhood of Gentilly.

<sup>24</sup> His reappearance alone was an act of restoration for the theatre community. Mark McLaughlin passed away in 2013.

stage moments that a unifying theme of race or racism does not hold.<sup>25</sup> Chan describes Lucky as pushing a “pimped-out shopping cart” decorated with bags of brightly colored feathers to recall the Mardi Gras Indians which Chan stated that he considered to be one of New Orleans “most inspiring elements” (Cuthbert *Artist*). The fact that the white actor playing the downtrodden “slave” Lucky is associated with an emblem of African American New Orleanian culture contributes to intentional confusion and/or unintentional cultural appropriation.<sup>26</sup>

## Shadows

The pre-production team made efforts to make lasting impact on the neighborhoods where they visited through resident activities at the Anthony Bean Community Theatre after school program, and Dillard and Xavier Universities, which all traditionally serve African American students. Community members invited to potlucks expressed a desire for more lasting impact and the production team made gestures towards a “Shadow Fund” to match the production budget dollar for dollar through private donations to directly benefit local organizations in the neighborhoods where the performances took place. Nato Thompson, Curator and Producer of Creative Time writes of his desire to avoid “unjustly exploiting its (the site of post-disaster New Orleans) metaphoric fecundity” and rather bring a production of *Godot* that would be efficacious to the city as a socially-engaged performance

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<sup>25</sup> Anticipating audience confusion over the casting, former *New OrleansTimes Picayune* theatre critic David Cuthbert provided Chan’s interpretation of the casting of Pozzo and Lucky as white men where Pozzo is an aristocrat to symbolize his childish stubbornness

<sup>26</sup> Catherine Michna, provides an interpretation into the racial casting of this production by explaining it as participating in a “post-racial narrative” that “depicted the city’s antagonists, its “Pozzos,” to be the Federal government and defunct local public institutions. I do not see the metaphor holding for the entirety of the play, especially in the second act. There is really nothing about the rapport or the costuming that suggest to me a FEMA antagonist. Michna continues that the racial casting of this production set up a paradox where DiDi and Gogo were both non-racial, universal symbols and also endangered blues culture-bearers. (*Hearing* 349).

(39). The stated goal of matching the production budget was not met over the short production period. No mention of the shadow fund reached national media in their pre-performance international publicity of the show and the *Field Guide* reported no effort to continue to build the shadow fund after the performance period. However, 50K was raised and distributed in small gifts of \$1000 to \$5000 (Chan 313). Unfortunately the wide distribution of the monetary gesture removed the possibility for “lasting impact” and seems to be more of a gesture of what they reported community members stating to the *Godot* team: “You gotta spend the time and you gotta spend the dime.” (Kroeber 143) The funny thing about shadows are that depending on the angle of the light, they can seem a lot larger than they are.

Beautifully acted, well-directed, and set in a charged space with all the excitement built around just *getting in* to see it, *Godot* was a delight to see. It was a rare opportunity for New Orleanians at any point in its history to have such a highly-produced theatrical event. James Thompson’s argument for beauty in the context of disaster as a “respite” and displacement of pain as a move towards criticism in order to build a better world, does not operate however in the context of this production. Primarily this is so because for Thompson, beauty is negotiated with community members themselves as to what they consider beautiful (136). In this subject position, beauty according to Thompson is the base for criticism of oppressive forces (24). In Chan/Creative Time’s *Godot*, the horrors and specificity of the site are sublimated; therefore the possibility for criticism is muted. The *only* way to experience the beauty of Chan’s work with his *Godot* is to invest in the metaphor of the passive wait for New Orleanians and divest in the specificity of the site and the neighborhood. The immensity of the disaster site is reduced to a “setting” in order for us to *see* Chan’s artistic vision of Beckett’s world. The awesomeness of the disaster site is able to be “eternally sublime” is if the uniqueness of lost lives and lost community

is effectively erased for us. Through erasure of huge, traumatic narratives of African American residents, the live performance is able to overlay its own artistic metaphor and method of Chan's political critique. The site, cut-off from its own memory, can then serve the play and Chan's political purpose. I am critical not of the artistry of *Godot*, but of the fact that outside the fictional frame of *Godot*, the production team did not strive to find other ways to bring out and bring back the site's own story, and people.<sup>27</sup>

Personally, it was a joy to see such a wonderful production in New Orleans or *anywhere*. It was my *enjoyment* of *Godot* that troubled me. In so many unfortunate ways *Godot* replicated my Katrina experience of white culpability. While my family got out of the disaster zone and escaped to safety. It was primarily African American New Orleanians who were left in New Orleans during the disaster, trapped on rooftops, the Superdome and the Convention center and it was primarily African Americans who did *not* make up the audiences of performances of *Godot* set in devastated African American neighborhoods. The fact that there was no space to reflect on the missing or to celebrate the resilience, resourcefulness, and activity of New Orleanians struggling to return, negatively participates in ethical issues of surrogation and representation. Rollet's warning of fiction and catastrophe bear in this staging of *Godot*, as it necessitated an erasure of the story of its space, it necessitated an overlay upon the space of Chan's Beckett, and it unintentionally staged a pre-show opener that reified the celebration of African American cultural traditions without African American people.

My intention is not to take away from its merits as a beautiful performance, but to problematize the *Field Guide* and Creative Time's agenda of justifying their process by ignoring

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<sup>27</sup> For *Swimming Upstream* and V-Day's celebration in the Superdome, V-Day activist volunteers organized the return of 1000 New Orleanian women with places to stay, meals, all the services of V-Day's offerings, and premiere seats to performances of *Swimming Upstream* and *Vagina Monologues*.

their real pitfalls and over-stating their successes in community healing. The harm they do in reinforcing national narratives of arts funding for traumatized communities in the U.S. is due to their own lack of retrospection, or deliberate *cover up* of their ethical and logistical mishaps, made more problematic by the fact that they stage the *Field Guide* as a *model* of intervention for artistic engagement with communities in crisis. To this date, it stands as the most significant record of the most well-known and well-funded performance of the levee break disaster” in New Orleans. However, Paul Chan was not the first to approach Creative Time for arts funding to respond to the disaster in New Orleans. The city-wide arts collective, Home NOLA? initiated by visual artist Jan Gilbert was in direct competition with Paul Chan’s project for *LakeviewS: A Sunset Bus Tour*.

#### *LAKEVIEWS: A SUNSET BUS TOUR*

When the nation turns its attention to Katrina and New Orleans, it is the Lower Nine neighborhood that resonates in media memory, not Lakeview. Outside of the striking resemblance Lakeview holds to many middle to upper class neighborhoods in the U.S., perhaps it is also pragmatism that directs the media’s focus in Katrina disaster coverage. Lakeview’s middle class residents always held more hope collectively of coming back and recovering than residents of other neighborhoods of New Orleans already stretched over an edge of survival. And nearly eight years into the recovery of the disaster, the comeback in this neighborhood is well above other devastated neighborhoods in New Orleans that did not receive intense outside assistance.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Many streets in Lakeview still have at least *one* boarded up or unoccupied home. These persistent wreckages and vacant lots are upstaged by new landscaping, high rate of reconstruction and new businesses that have come to the area. The primary commercial street, Harrison Avenue, recently reopened its public school into a newly built, bigger and better facility. It has also welcomed more midscale restaurants including Mondo by celebre New

The performance project *LakeviewS: A Sunset Bus Tour* the first weekend of June 2007 was an itinerant performance event that literally covered the ground of personal and collective lost spaces. The performance implicated memories shared in diverse ways throughout the journey as the community of the audience added their own layer of memory to the sites.

*LakeviewS*, embracing the notion of the devastated neighborhood as *in motion*, framed itself as a tour. The sold-out bus tour began at the former site of West End Restaurant off of West End Blvd,<sup>29</sup> made three stops at four performance sites before returning deeper into the Seafood Restaurant alley by the former site of Brunings Restaurant. The tour featured haunting figures, disembodied voices through recordings on the bus itself and at installations, multiple stops in devastated places in varying stages of recovery in front lawns, empty lots, and gutted houses.

*LakeviewS* project instigator, visual artist Jan Gilbert of Vestiges, is a lifelong resident of Lakeview and has a long track record with national funding and international touring of her work. She understood the obstacles New Orleans-based artists, especially displaced artists would face, in seeking to create work in response to the disaster. She began the process of forming Home NOLA?, a city-wide collective, to form a network of New Orleans artists across different neighborhoods working in different mediums. Home NOLA?, individual artists as well as those affiliated with universities and presenters created a structure to facilitate national funding for local response art and community healing<sup>30</sup>. Home NOLA? artists organized different art responses in four different neighborhoods. In a personal interview, Jan Gilbert

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Orelanian chef, Susan Spicer. When I seek parking on Harrison Avenue, now grown difficult, I am amazed at how out of sync I am. Only the street names have remained the same defining neighborhoods in clusters of Confederate generals, jewels, and birds.

<sup>29</sup> West End Blvd. is also the site of the massive three-story pile described in the introduction.

<sup>30</sup> Home NOLA? attracted significant early collaborators such as Ron Bechet, visual artist and professor at Xavier University, Barbara Haley of Tulane University, the Contemporary Arts Center of New Orleans, Ashé Cultural Arts Center, ArtSpot Productions and individual artists across neighborhoods.

explained that she sought well-known, outside artists who had previously lived in New Orleans to “reconnect them as lifelines to the city as the infrastructure in New Orleans was so broken.” One such artist was theatre and performance scholar Richard Schechner who then invited his colleague at New York University, Jan Cohen Cruz to get involved. Schechner and Cruz acted as consultants and helped to form a college course bringing NYU students to New Orleans and crossover with Tulane and Xavier students for a semester-long project to support and learn from Home NOLA? projects including *LakeviewS*. Schechner and Cruz both felt it vital that whatever work come out of Home NOLA? be created by those invested in the neighborhoods. *LakeviewS* was created by artists who were all longtime residents of Lakeview which Gilbert states was key to the ability for this collaboration to succeed: “No artists were coming to the rescue. We were helping ourselves and each other because we were all in the same boat.” (Gilbert Personal Interview)

Gilbert describes her work as oriented in terms of an “engaged format” that Gilbert describes as community art grounded in relational esthetics rather than as an art “product”. Stories of spaces, hidden and revealed, is the theme that carries across the different invitational sites of *LakeviewS*. The roving nature of *LakeviewS*, the careful crafting of each site, and the freedom for participants to create their own experience at each site is a very conscious application of reclaiming space and claiming community identity. *LakeviewS* presented, revealed, invited and evoked *story* at each site fulfilling an important link that *LakeviewS* arranges its “ritual of rejuvenation” as stated in the program through this transformative act of reclaiming destroyed places as spaces with a history that hold a kernel of vision for the future. The use of space and place in performance in *LakeviewS* demonstrates what performance theorist Dwight Conquergood writes as a “port of call and exchange” or a “membrane” rather than fixed



boundary where “location” is “imagined as an itinerary instead of a fixed point.” With Conquergood, an understanding of “local context” expands to include historical, traumatic, “movements of people, ideas, images, commodities, and capital” (*Health* 145). New Orleans’ Lakeview neighborhood, named *LakeviewS* in this performance, opens up varying vistas of the neighborhood’s past, invisible gaps, layers of life, and vitality. The itinerary, a bit different in order depending upon which bus you ride on, emphasizes the movement of memory itself and the literal, incredible movement of the neighborhood as its residents struggle to come home. This is in direct opposition to thematic metaphors taken up in Paul Chan Creative Time’s project of endless, static, waiting where nothing happens in two acts.

*I was very nervous about going to the performance of LakeviewS a little more than a year and a half after the disaster. At this point, driving around my old neighborhood and seeing house after house boarded up would bring me to sobs behind the wheel. I arrived early and realized that I was dangerously low in gas and there were still at this point very few places where I could fill up. I was also extremely thirsty on a very hot June evening. None of the few spots that had re-opened their doors in Lakeview were open on a Sunday afternoon. It was still an edge of “civilization.” On the way to the meeting place, I drove by my old gym and grocery store that had been submerged to their rooftops. I realized as I drove that the meeting place brought me to a part of town I had unconsciously avoided since the flood: the seafood family restaurants overlooking Lake Pontchartrain. I think I held hope that if I didn’t see them destroyed they would somehow still be there. Sure enough upon arriving I discovered that there was nothing but parking lots left of these long-standing establishments. However, for this performance of LakeviewS there was a large gathering of people and a lot of excitement. I began talking with the other audience participants and found that my apprehension was overtaken by the charged*

anticipation coming from the group. The nervousness was more about actually being one of the lucky ones to get a seat as there was limited seating for the two school busloads over two weekends. I sat next to a middle-aged woman from Old Metairie (semi-devastated neighborhood) named Ruth. Just as in many conversations in that early post-Katrina period, we situated ourselves by whether or not we came from a dry or flooded area. Ruth (dry) had many friends from Lakeview who had lost their homes and expressed to me that she was worried she might get emotional during this performance. I shook my head in agreement. As we started on our journey a recording played a mixture of traditional New Orleanian tunes and voice-overs of personal stories. Again, at times the recording of these stories were unintentionally lower than the music, and it was hard to follow. But, occasionally, I'd recognize that an elder was talking about the neighborhood. I was distracted as we actually drove by the site of my old home. At this point, we had already spent the rest of our home equity line to gut it and then finally demolish it. It now stood with nothing on the lot but a palm tree that used to frame the front steps and a hand-written "For Sale by Owner" sign. I told my bus neighbor Ruth, "that's where I lived". It felt good to tell someone. I looked out the bus window and I was surprised that for the first time since September 2005, I had a relief from the emotion of seeing it. Ruth then told me her evacuation story and as I listened to her the bus window became a moving picture frame whizzing past my past. Layers of memory of my home at 6678 Vicksburg St. competed with the square of mowed grass I saw: what it looked like when we bought it, after we fixed it up, what I planned for it, right after it took eleven feet of flood, after it was gutted and all our contents were in a trash heap and the trees cut down. I am able to see my lot-my loss- from another angle than pain. Another vacant lot has their own hand-written sign: "We Will Rebuild" and I feel as if all

*of Lakeview is caught in this performance of memory in motion going multiple directions as ephemeral as the rapidly changing landscape from the bus window.*

Thompson's argument for affect to displace pain is literally demonstrated as what used to be a vehicle window became an aesthetic frame to see my personal devastation story. It was a sort of mini-escape that I did not know was possible at that point—that I could feel anything *but* pain driving in my neighborhood. Pearson's understanding of de Certeau's relationship of space and story as a "reveal" of polyvalence rather than an "essential truth" of a place is honed in this journey of *LakeviewS*.

At each stop there were multiple ways the itinerary invited stories: through crafted spots of the devastation, the bus recording of oral testimonies, sights of ongoing recovery/devastation through the bus window in motion, the others I talked to in the space of the two and a half hours. The direct and indirect invitation of story and space of *LakeviewS* demonstrate the flexibility and muscle of story as the "vehicle" that transforms a site of devastation and reclaims what it means to the community gathered around it. This very active, open acknowledgement of polyvalence and possibility of transformation of place and space created a powerful relationship between the participant/spectator throughout the journey of the performance event *LakeviewS*.

Our first stop was the overlooked space of Holt Cemetery, a pauper's graveyard owned by the City of New Orleans. African American performer Maritza Mercado Narcisse performed in the role as "The Suited Man" who wandered through the cemetery in a dark pantsuit with what seemed to be a question mark tattooed on her forehead. She narrated a story I could only catch in pieces due to contending outside noise, but I grasped her story of generations of black fatherhood and her missing father. Our bus load scattered throughout the small lawn of overgrown grass and unmarked graves. Although I must have driven by this graveyard an untold

number of times during my lifetime, I was completely ignorant of its existence and had never stepped onto its grounds. Not far from it is the active Greenwood Cemetery with burials dating back to 1840.<sup>31</sup> Founded in 1879 and owned and operated by the City of New Orleans, Holt Cemetery is the only completely buried below-ground cemetery in New Orleans and is where families laid loved ones to rest who could not afford burials elsewhere. Mercado Narcisse, one of two artists of color presenting in *LakeviewS* in what is a predominantly Caucasian neighborhood, was a haunting presence in the graveyard and later at other performance sites. I grasped from her text that the Holt Cemetery was a site where people of color were hastily buried without tombstone markers. Her story remained a mystery to me as were the unknown stories of the unmarked graves. The question mark left on me of this site and this piece destabilized what I thought I knew about the neighborhood I thought I had known so thoroughly.<sup>32</sup> As paupers buried underground in swampy land, rather than above ground in a family crypt, none of the dead buried in Holt Cemetery would presumably still be under our feet, making the uncovering of their histories as elusive as their names and even their bones.

The stop at the Holt Cemetery captures Roach's sense of the term perform in the sense of "to bring forth, to make manifest, and to transmit" (3). The stop at the Holt Cemetery, an overlooked and nearly erased space of people of color in a devastated, predominately white neighborhood, disrupts nostalgic notions of a known, superior past as it lays unsettling ground to envision a future. Roach aptly articulates this in describing how performances holds in itself both the past and future: "identification of amnesia as the inspiration to imagine the future"

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<sup>31</sup> New Orleanian playwright and graveyard tour guide Rob Florence brings groups to Holt Cemetery for "haunted" tours.

<sup>32</sup> In the 1970s road workers were working alongside this cemetery and unintentionally recovered bodies of yellow fever victims (1853 or 1878?) that had floated underground for at least a century.

where performance *like memory* “operates as both quotation and invention, an improvisation on borrowed themes” with claims on the future as well as the past (33). *LakeviewS* stop at Holt Cemetery identifies and arrests the amnesiac race of what Roach calls the telos of “perfect closure” (33) and its “relentless search for the purity of origins” which Roach describes as a voyage not of discovery but of *erasure* (6).

The unsettling performance at Holt Cemetery which was hard to hear and communicated stories of people of color buried and floated underground over a century ago, galvanized memory where Roach takes up Connerton’s term of an “incorporating practice of memory” with his own term *kinesthetic imagination* (26). Taylor offers a distinguishing detail of embodied memory in her articulation of the repertoire in that it requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by “being there” being a part of the transmission” as the repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning” (20). Together, Narcisse’s character and *LakeviewS* passengers examined and resist the gap of forgetting as we ponder the bones that have floated under our feet. *LakeviewS* stop at the Holt Cemetery, a faulty lieux de mémoire as the lives and deaths that should be recorded were not wealthy enough to make their mark in the archive, is transformed into a living space of memory (millieux de mémoire) and into a space that resisted forgetting. For a community on the verge of recovery, this was significant as offered a different perspective on the past that could reframe the present moment (Roach 1-2).

<sup>33</sup> Narcisse’s haunt at Holt Cemetery destabilizes a notion of community with a “shared memory” (3) and invited the participants to acknowledge buried stories of race in this formerly comfortable neighborhood. Narcisse’s presence performed an absence and unearthed questions

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<sup>33</sup> Lakeview collaborators of Home NOLA? continue to explore race and class in this neighborhood with ArtSpot Production’s production of Jan Villarubia play *Turning of the Bones*.

in her wake of whose stories were forgotten. We were only left with the ability to point towards the question with a deliberate act of “identification” of amnesia of an erased story of race and class in Lakeview: a deliberate and uneasy foundation to begin a voyage of reclamation and restoration. This performance site of *LakeviewS* showed the gaps in community memory that created the relational ethic Rollet argues for in representing catastrophe to enable a transformation of the spectator/bystander role into that of witness.

The second arranged stop of the tour was at the gutted and in process of renovation Lakeview Baptist Church on Canal Blvd. *LakeviewS* collaborative artist Kathy Randels enlisted both her parents and eight returning elder church members she had known all her life for the piece “Coming Forward.” It was the only piece with trained performers performing alongside citizen actors, reflecting, an emphasis of the value of the “whole person” over participants’ individual “artistic proclivities” (Cohen-Cruz 365).

In lieu of the flooded wooden pews that had been discarded, fold-up chairs were set up in rows for the represented congregation with huge gaps for the church members who did not survive or who were not yet able to return. Participating elders of the church that had returned sat scattered amongst empty chairs. Michna describes the presence of Randels’ character *The Black Lady* and Narcisse’s *The Suited Man* in the sanctuary as “mediums that enabled a cross-connection of the sanctuary into a participatory art space” as well as mediators between the performer-church members and the audience “enabling the audience to both ‘perform’ as congregation members without having to participate in the worship practices as congregation members (358). I appreciate that idea of the characters functioning as a bridge between the multiple functions of the space in flux. My sense was that Lakeview Baptist Church, in a precarious state missing most of its congregation, did not *erase* itself in order to become a

*theater*; but rather made its own story central to the performance. The invitation to be in this space as a church struggling to come back and as a space where community art was shared emphasized the effort of *return* and hope for this specific community on Canal Blvd. and allied communities in this area of devastated New Orleans.

Randels co-created and rehearsed with eight church elders a short piece where they spoke their memories. Each church elder held an object of the church and spoke of who was missing from their circle. The elders questioned each other as to where they thought the others might *be* and where the missing members of the congregation were staying, and finally the big question that passed every Lakeview residents mind and or lips since 2005: *Were they going to come back?* The empty chairs, the sparseness of the gathered congregation, told so much of the story of Lakeview, particularly in terms of the elderly. Vivian Patraka in her essay on “Spectacular Suffering” writes about the performance of absence in her critique of a holocaust museum. Patraka describes how the artifact of piles of shoes of murdered victims were more than a metonym for the missing but “as objects” were made to perform an “absent subjectivity” and were an instance of performativity. Patraka explains that the detail of the pile of shoes “buttresses the specificity of who has been lost” while the viewers “performatively enact the trajectory of memory in relation to them” (159). Patrarka’s description of performance of absence and the relational demands it sets on spectators is in alignment with Rollet’s conceptualization of witnessing through the representation of gaps in catastrophe. The empty chairs set for the missing congregation, many elderly, some deceased at Lakeview Baptist Church operated similarly to the shoes Partrarka describes. Patraka cites Peggy Phelan to make an important distinction between representation and this performative act of memory where Patraka claims the shoes do “not reproduce” what is lost, but rather help us “to restage and

restate the effort to remember what is lost” (Phelan 147, Patraka 159). The performativity of the shoes, or in the case of *LakeviewS* the empty church chairs “rehearses and repeats the disappearance of the subject” (Phelan 147). In this piece the empty chairs produced a *digeisis* rather than a *mimesis* of the missing elderly church members. The impact of this performance of absence extended and evoked the loss in communities beyond Lakeview Baptist Church. In every neighborhood of New Orleans in 2007 at the time of this performance, returning residents experienced the total loss or the scanty return of every aspect of former community groups and associations. Although the missing chairs marked and evoked my own sense of loss of community, I felt *in* community with these elders and the audience participants in this moment of acknowledging that we miss. We all shared the commonality of loss in our own unique constellations of the missing. The moment played by the church elders of coming together, coming forward despite the losses resisted total surrender as it enacted a vision of community in the present moment and activated hope for the future.

*Coming Forward* inserted a dynamic exchange with memory, space and vision of the future with the creation of a temporary community of the remaining congregation along with the witnesses of fellow residents, church members, and New Orleanians. This action-oriented aspect of memory as adopted in *LakeviewS* is consistent with de Certeau’s claim that memory is more of a response than a record in stasis. For de Certeau, each recall alters memory and tends towards multiplicity as memory evokes memory” (88). At this site the memories of the church members and the visible layers of the church are laid bare as they are in process of re-layering and re-storying itself. The freedom for audience participants to walk around, engage with the space and with each other opened up possibilities for other stories and memories to be shared.



The creative artists of *LakeviewS* nurtured this appreciation of story by crafting the space, time, and community opportunity for participants to construct their own experience, share their stories evoked by the sites or to honor them held silently within. How memory evokes memory is beautifully demonstrated with the parings of the double stops of Jan Gilbert's installation *Story of a House* and Kathy Randels' performance *Spaces in Between*. Pearson writes how story plays a transformative role revealing the interdependent relationship of place and people mutually constructed through story (12). Literally located within walking distance of each other, the childhood homes of each artist explored themes of interiority/exteriority of personal space and family in what became a dynamic *duet*. Both artists in very different aesthetic approaches as survivors of the disaster are tuned in to representational ethics of trauma and devastation. Each artist created a zone of safety for audience participants to come closer into the deeply personal stories of both artists as well as allow for audience participants to engage with both presentations/installations on their own terms with the freedom to be silent, to talk, to walk away, walk around, or to question. Randels exploited a particular connection with performance and memory—and performance as reinvention—with *Spaces in Between* and a character from her personal repertoire *The Black Lady*<sup>34</sup>.

Randels dressed in long black clothing and a large brimmed black hat pipee a tune, wordlessly inviting the crowd off of the bus and eventually into her gutted childhood home. Except for the crowd and Randels' figure, there was nothing remarkable about the driveway of this devastated home on General Diaz. Just one of so many in eighty percent of New Orleanian residences. Randels took a stick in her hand and gestured for the group to come inside like the witch in Hansel and Gretel. A few of the audience participants opted not to go inside the home,

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<sup>34</sup> Randels created *The Black Lady* in a former collaboration with Dah Teatre in Serbia and subsequently remounted the character for multiple political protests.

perhaps due to the known health risks. The unforgettable odor of mold and rancid chemicals lingered. The house was gutted and its entire insides were exposed for all to see. There were spots outside and inside the “shell” of the house where Randels had placed eggs and eggshells at different locations. Randels’ amplified voice created a ghostlike-out of body effect. It was possible to hear her whispers no matter what part of the house you chose to be in. Randels began a long monologue as she flitted from room to room, alternately spooking and charming her “guests.”

Although participants were free to wander wherever they chose in the home, Randels officially began by traditionally greeting us in what was once the parlor. She had set up a pitcher of water and Dixie paper cups on a silver platter and like a “true Southern lady” hospitably offered us a drink of water. The stench of the flood permeated the gutted home and no one took her up on her offer for a drink. Randels moved throughout the skeletal rooms telling stories of the youngest Randels’ childhood fears, which siblings lived with which wallpaper layers, scary childhood games evoking ghosts, adolescent secrets, unexpected death and kisses. The *Black Lady* is the ghost young Randels feared, the confidante, the all-seeing “Angel Mother” she prayed to and sought to escape from, the one left to *tell* the story. Throughout the monologue Randels slipped in and out of the role of teller and *told* as she wove a tale of a family growing up within its walls where one by one they escaped from the “nest.” Concluding the monologue Randels as a younger “self” snuck out of what was once the bedroom window and invites us to meet her at the front door:

This is the door that lets you out of her realm and back into your own, you are free now as you’ve always been, but now you carry a piece of her history with you, inside you it is as precious as your own, because it has been named and shared.

This house, before unremarkable in its devastation had now been transformed into a shared reclaimed space with its many missing layers of wall paper and stories. It became partly ours because we had lent our imagination to its secrets during this guided haunt.

The contextual-specificity of *Spaces in Between* is evident. Nowhere and no *when* else would this tour *mean* in this way. Most New Orleanians at this point were all too familiar with gutted houses, either from their own or those of friends and family. Randels' invitation into the shell of her former home evoked our own lost houses with their own layers of stories. Randels' *The Black Lady* inserted a dimension of an eerie yet playful distance from the personal tragedy of such loss through the medium of her character. If there was some hesitation by a few of the audience participants to feel external safety in entering the gutted home, I felt Randels' character constructed an internal space of safety for us to visit the lost house and be reminded of our own losses.

Randels' play with memory honed Pearson's description of place as a "layered location" (22-23) where stories intersect and reveal what Pearson calls a "rich, woven fabric of space" (10). Randels constructed layers of memory for us, unveiled them, then covered them up again as a teller. We were never able to stabilize *who* she was or which stories were real as Randels evoked the instability of memory itself.

As we left through the front door, *The Black Lady* beckoned for us to join her at the next destination: a house kitty-corner down the street on Vicksburg Street and just a few blocks down from the same street where I lost my home. *Biography of a House* was an installation created on the exterior of Jan Gilbert's childhood home. Gilbert's installation, with sound design by her (nephew) William Gilbert, featured family photographs forming a ribbon along the flood line which settled at eight feet. Ongoing recording of family life, recorded over decades by Gilbert's

deceased father were played over a loudspeaker. The flood line embraced the entire home and I found myself looking at the snapshots and listening to the sound snippets of past moments in this home from all angles. Although these frozen moments of memory were hung on a flood line, they resisted being reduced to it. As I engaged with the pictures and listened carefully to the recordings, the flood line momentarily disappeared for me as I alternated from the past to the present. Gilbert's use of the flood line to share the house's memory of catastrophe also draws us into its story outside of the disaster. The installation insisted on a relationship to memory as in movement. Peering into the window I could see the extended ladder in the kitchen area, ready to be of use for the multiple tasks of renovation. The biography of this house was not over: it would have new stories with other residents. It was a hopeful house in the all too vacant neighborhood of Lakeview. Unlike the Gentilly site for *Godot* where the production team went to extremes to cover up the recovery effort in the neighborhood in order to better *fit Godot's* metaphor of stasis, this home showed itself as in process and moving forward into a future time outside of disaster and into restoration.

The atmosphere towards the front yard of the home was animated with audience/tourists, now better acquainted, slapping at the mosquitoes and engaged in conversations as the sun began to set. Gilbert's former home was a living space that held the feel of a lawn party on a warm summer evening. It felt...almost normal.

Gilbert states that it was vital to her own recovery to do this work. The process of working on *LakeviewS* affirmed her long-term commitment to making memory central in her art. She viewed this installation as a ritual for her family and to other residents to help bring closure so that individuals could move on. It was also an intentional gift of healing for her mother who was living in the home before the storm which displaced her into an elderly facility.

The second night of the event Gilbert's mother returned to the home for the first time. She hadn't felt able to endure seeing the destruction of the home emotionally before then and she was physically challenged. Gibert reported that her mother sat on a chair on the front lawn and enjoyed talking with all her "guests". Jan said it was an affirming experience for her as an artist that "investigating closure, bringing it to the fore" was "healing ultimately." Gilbert described how the festive element of *Lakeviews* was the best way for her mother to come home for the first time. It gave her mother the courage and a purpose to come home when she previously couldn't face it. The gift of hearing the sounds of the recording from her life, receiving all the attention from the busloads of participants, and telling them, created a more joyful process of closure for her (Gilbert Personal Interview). Gilbert's installation valued the beauty of renewal and the passing on of stories as the house started to build new stories with a new family.

As a participant whose own home flooded just one block over, I had a lot of emotional charge coming into Lakeview neighborhood. *Biography of a House* enabled me to construct my own experience: to walk closer, walk away, speak or remain silent, share or keep to myself. It was empowering for me to navigate on my own terms a subject area so personal.

We boarded the bus for the last time for the final stop of the former site of Bruning's Restaurant. Before the sky completely darkened, Randels' character returned with a cheerier aspect to invite the audience to walk to the tables set up for us to participate in a communal feast with live music offered by Christopher Trapani. Although the mosquitoes were biting more fiercely now, it was an extreme pleasure to sit again with friends as the sun set over Lake Pontchartrain. We were together because we loved this place even though no walls were standing and no one knew when or if any of the Seafood restaurants would ever be back. Many of us didn't even know if we were coming back. We were there together remembering Brunings

Restaurant which served deep-fried seafood to us for over a hundred years, where my family celebrated our birthday dinners, where so many stories happened. Because it was the tombstone of Brunings, I believe those gathered were perhaps like myself, more drawn to relish the moment and the company as we had learned how suddenly it all could be taken away.

Sonia Kuftinec in her study of community-based theatre talks about how the physical space of performance contributes to the sense that the community has a stake in the artistic product as well as “recontextualizing the familiar” where the memories associated with a site add to the emotional resonance of the piece (78). The site of Brunings and so many other elements of “home” were brought together in *LakeviewS* to cultivate this sense of community, ownership and reclamation. It was an unexpected “gift” of participating in *LakeviewS* for me. The ability to reclaim Brunings Restaurant as a community by sharing the night air and feasting together near its scarred, tiled slab became a celebration. *LakeviewS* signified points of reference by which a temporary community could be formed through the recovery of personal stories and reclamation of spaces. *LakeviewS* not only presented stories and hinted at the multitude of untold stories at each performance site, it provided ample physical and temporal space for the audience participants to share their own stories with each other and to reflect silently. More than anything at this point in 2007, the ability to experience my devastated neighborhood with this group, with my own thoughts, with friends and strangers, was the *food* I needed more than any other. *LakeviewS* inserted an aesthetic perspective into my devastated neighborhood and displaced the overwhelming emotional depression I usually encountered there since the levee breaks. It gave me a respite and gave me the personal courage to enter into a devastated part of my neighborhood that I had not yet been able to face. It allowed me a glimpse of a vision of

personal recovery that up to that point I felt was completely out of my grasp. I was simply *home* again and I was not alone.

## COMPARISONS OF SPATIAL PRACTICES

The two site-specific performances around the second anniversary of the levee break disaster in New Orleans: Paul Chan/Creative Time's *Waiting for Godot* and Home NOLA? *LakeviewS: A Sunset Bus Tour* both faced similar issues of access in that only five hundred audience members were allowed into the *Godot* gates for each performance held over two weekends and there was limited seating on the busses for *LakeviewS* for the single weekend of its performance. Both pieces employed tourism tropes: *LakeviewS*, ironically mimicked aspects of the already popular "devastation" bus tours that led large busloads of tourists through Lakeview and other sites of devastated New Orleans. *Godot's Field Guide* adopts the touristic theme in its positioning as an authoritative guide on how to travel to devastated areas and bring art to devastated communities successfully. The very successful national marketing campaign of *Godot* also literally attracted New York tourists into New Orleans for this unique performance event where a shattered neighborhood becomes a charged backdrop for a classic play.

Within the context of disaster, the aesthetics of a production and the ethics grounding the process of the production are inseparable as the value of one inevitably shapes the other as demonstrated in the productions of *LakeviewS* and *Godot*. I have very intentionally brought these two performance events together and I turn once again to Kuftinec's four questions to help articulate how these two performance pieces operate ethically and aesthetically with space, memory, and community in this very unique post-disaster context. Kuftinec first questions the extent to which a performance event "succeeds at animating and including community participants (17). I will more finely tune Kuftinec's first question to identify how these projects

engage community spaces as well as individuals of the communities themselves. *LakeviewS*, created by community artists alongside community residents created a specific *Lakeview* response in conversation with other neighborhood Home NOLA? performances and art projects held in other neighborhoods throughout the city. *LakeviewS* employed a spatial practice which highlighted participants' relationship with spaces, the individuality of stories evoked in those spaces, and enabled a collective celebration where participants could share other stories, food, music and a beautiful lake view of a sunset as a temporary recovered community. The feast enabled a performative possibility for audience participants to remember and envision together a "comeback" of this neighborhood.<sup>35</sup> *Godot*, also employed a celebration that opened each performance event with free New Orleanian gumbo and live music to kick-off the performance; however it came on the heels of turning away hundreds of people at the entry gates. The pre-show food and music in *Godot* unintentionally reified the whitening of New Orleans as mostly white audience members performed African American cultural traditions in a devastated and mostly vacant African American neighborhood. The great failing never the production team never really addressed was the lack of original community members who were able to see the play, much less be part of the process. The part of Lucky and the minor roles of the messenger boys were cast in New Orleans while the New York-based production team benefited greatly from the volunteerism of returnee New Orleanians and national volunteers in the neighborhoods. Creative Time/Paul Chan's methodology of coming into New Orleans neighborhoods employed a different spatial practice that erased the specificity of their sites and co-opted their ruinous beauty in order to serve Chan's artistic vision of Beckett's *Godot*. There was no space

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<sup>35</sup> Although other parts of the neighborhood have come back remarkably well with openings of new restaurants, the line of Seafood restaurants overlooking Lake Pontchartrain is a piece of New Orleans' past as not a single restaurant has returned.



constructed within the *Field Guide* or within the performance event of *Godot* for Chan or his team to reflect on the missing, the gaps. Instead, Chan and his team filled and invested every gap with Beckett's metaphor.

Kuftinec's second question concerns the necessity for an "appropriate representation of traumatic events" (17). For *LakeviewS* what was presented were sites *as they were* in whatever stage of recovery with an investment in their *whole* story, *not just their disaster story*. There was a focus on performing as in bringing forth in thought through our collective imaginations *what was missing*, creating an active audience position that Rollet terms transforms bystanders or in this case "passengers" into *witnesses*. *LakeviewS*, shows the missing gaps: the unmarked graves at Holt cemetery, the layers of wallpaper we cannot see in Randels' gutted childhood home, the empty chairs of a mostly missing congregation, the disembodied voice recordings in Jan Gilbert's home, a feast at the site of a missing strip of Seafood restaurants. The reality of the disaster and the impact of the disaster was omnipresent in June of 2007; the performance of *LakeviewS*, which emphasized pre-disaster life of spaces and community and anticipated community visions for restoration and life *once again* outside of disaster. In *LakeviewS* the movement of memory is tied to the movement of recovery over the *stasis* of *waiting* in Chan's metaphor for New Orleans.

In the next chapters I focus on the ethical pitfalls of realistically enacting realistically traumatic events. This performance of *Godot* makes apparent to me another aspect of Kuftinec's question of appropriate representation of traumatic events. The complete erasure of violent death due to the levee breaks is as dubious ethically as the attempt to realistically enact them as in the man rowing with a dead baby scene in *The Breach*. For the *Godot* team, in divesting in the

spatial stories of their space in order to transforming it into a crafted *backdrop* for Beckett's play is ethically problematic.

Kuftinec's third question challenges the presenting institutions relationship to power as they present work in a community (17). This is perhaps the most vital piece connecting the narratives of national funding to "response performance" in traumatized communities, especially in "othered" regions such as the Gulf Coast. *LakeviewS*, a production of Home Nola?, a rooted network of local artists and arts organizations across four neighborhoods and three universities in New Orleans was in direct competition with a digital artist with a global reputation to attract Creative Time's funding for performance events that engage community in devastated neighborhoods (Gilbert Personal Interview). The afterlife of these projects differ greatly as well in that Creative Time had the resources to not only capture the attention of international media for their production in New Orleans, but the ability to publish a book on its production and set themselves up as a model of artistic engagement with communities in crisis. The failure of the *Field Guide* to admit its pitfalls omit the possibility for positive growth and perpetuates national strategies of art response to disaster that support high-profile artist projects over empowerment models of network-rich local artist response. This is particularly problematic for New Orleans as a city that has experienced a constant drain of corporate funding that could otherwise provide *alternate* sources of funding in a "flat broke" city struggling to provide basic health and community resources.

Kuftinec's final question relates to me as a critic of the work, a task she states is better accomplished in relation *with* than in opposition to community-based practitioners. She challenges the critic to respect the expressed goals, assert the responsibilities of the critic to express indignation and attend to the voices of community participants (17). I was born and

grew up in Lakeview and I was beginning my own family in Lakeview when the disaster took my home, my mother's home and our community. I knew that going to see a performance *about* Lakeview would be very sensitive for me. *LakeviewS* was one of the most significant events in my post-disaster experience that helped to get me moving towards a personal recovery. It also provided me with the sense of closure Gilbert had hoped to find for her mother with the project. I didn't get to say good-bye to Lakeview or my life there. My participation in *LakeviewS* was the only commemorative or celebratory activity I had in my former neighborhood. *LakeviewS* allowed a space for me to be in what was still a place of pain for in 2007 and experience the "displacement" James Thompson argues for through aesthetic affect without engaging in the pitfalls of representing the horrors of the disaster events and without erasing them. By embracing the *whole* space, not just its disaster, as well as the holes and silence of the spaces; I could reclaim a space outside of disaster *with* others.

For *Godot*, everyone I speak with who saw the show or *tried* to see the shows speaks mostly about the experience of getting inside the gates. After that, there is no argument that it was wonderfully acted and directed. Alongside my pleasure of this beautiful performance piece comes issues of complicity and culpability of whiteness and privilege. Goldilocks gets to second line to her seat while the real residents of this neighborhood were not able to return and not able to get inside the *Godot* gates. I enjoyed my bowl of gumbo and I enjoyed my theater seat immensely. I walked away from seeing this wonderful performance of *Godot* and to this very day, I feel like a thief.

**CHAPTER THREE**  
**RECLAIMING, REMEMBERING, RESISTING: SWIMMING UPSTREAM SOURCES**  
**IN THE SUPERDOME AND SPILLS INTO THE NEW ORLEANS DIASPORA<sup>36</sup>**

*Tears are running down my face--uncontrollably, as in a cathartic release. On my television screen, U2 and Green Day are singing their collaborative hit honoring New Orleanians: "The Saints are Coming." I love Bono. I love Billie Joe. The Saints are about to play New Orleans' number one rival team, the Atlanta Falcons in their first home game in the Superdome since the disaster. It's September 25, 2006. Tears are running down my face and I don't even like football. Tears are running down my face and I feel betrayed by them. My television screen reveals sea of white faces in the Superdome's newly restored, expensive seats cheering for our home team. The last footage I saw of the Superdome was of the stadium filled with African American New Orleanians languishing in inhumane conditions and despair for days in the extreme heat with no release. There has been no return to balance in our city, no purgation of the evil that allowed the Superdome to become an emblem of misery just the year before. Tears are running down my face but I see no commemoration of what happened there last year, only a whitewashing race to look forward and forget.*

At the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina in August 2006, New Orleanians were still waiting for the big, national chain stores and restaurants to come back to our malls and neighborhoods while local businesses were doing their best to keep afloat. Cultural theorist Helen Taylor writes how Katrina became an international signifier of U.S. disgrace and class and racial divisions (483). I would extend that symbolic claim to the single structure of the Louisiana Superdome, which became an icon of misery and failure of the government to respond

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<sup>36</sup> Parts of this chapter previously appeared as Fox, Anne-Liese, *Reclaiming, Remembering, Resisting: Swimming Upstream Flows from the Superdome into the New Orleans Diaspora*. *TDR: The Drama Review* 57:1. 2013. It is reprinted by permission of NYU and MIT Press—see letter of publication agreement.

to crisis. The televised Monday Night football game was uplifting: the Saints won. When so much else had yet to return to the New Orleans that first year, it was significant to us all to have the Saints home again. And yet, I was disturbed by the ease of my relief. A story of “restoration” of New Orleans was fabricated and to some degree successfully sold through a media-assisted overwriting and erasure of the atrocities that occurred in the Superdome to predominantly African-American U.S. citizens with all the glitz and excitement of a winning home game.

Four months after the Superdome’s re-opening, a group of New Orleanian women met with Eve Ensler of V-Day International at Ashé Cultural Arts Center in Central City New Orleans to begin a completely different post-disaster process in the Superdome--one that would lead to the “occupation” and transformation of the Superdome into what the organizers called “SuperLove.” V-Day International, a global activist movement to stopping violence against women and girls, originated with and continues from Ensler’s well-known play *The Vagina Monologues*. Ten percent of the proceeds from all *Monologues* performances go towards V-Day’s Spotlight Campaign, while the rest of the funds go towards local organizations serving women and girls.<sup>37</sup> Female celebrity support and involvement with performances of *The Vagina Monologues* and other V-Day activities lend media magnetism to V-Day. For its tenth anniversary in April of 2008, V-Day International selected the women of the Gulf Coast for its Spotlight Campaign, with an ambitious two-day celebration featuring the premiere of *Swimming Upstream* in the Superdome and a celebrity performance of *The Vagina Monologues* in the

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<sup>37</sup> In 2010, over 5,400 V-Day benefit events took place produced by volunteer activists in the U.S. and around the world. College and community activists raise an annual average of \$4 million for local groups such as domestic violence shelters and rape crises centers. Over the last two years, over \$500,000 has been raised for V-Day's Spotlight Campaign and ongoing work in the Congo. (<http://www.vday.org/spotlight+history>).

neighboring arena. *Swimming Upstream* is a multi-disciplinary performance piece about surviving the disaster, written by seventeen New Orleanian women; Ensler served as dramaturge and coproduced the piece with Carol Bebelles of Ashé Cultural Arts Center in New Orleans. *Swimming Upstream* was specifically devised to premiere in the Superdome as a performative act of resistance, recovery, and celebration of resilience. The plan was to perform the piece in other cities to raise awareness, focus, and care for the Gulf Coast. Half a year after the premiere of *Swimming Upstream* in the Superdome, *SU* opened the season for Atlanta's True Colors Theatre at the 14<sup>th</sup> Street Playhouse for a two-week run and then returned home to New Orleans and performed at another site of disaster near the Morial Convention Center in the fall of 2008. Two years later, in September of 2010, the play was remounted in New Orleans at the Mahalia Jackson Performing Arts Centre and at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem, New York, to honor the fifth anniversary of the Katrina levee breaks disaster. The final performances to date of *SU* were in the spring of 2011 in the New Orleanian diasporic cities of Baton Rouge and Houston (at the Alley Theatre), and at an important V-Day circuit theatre, the Lensic Theatre in Santa Fe. My analysis of *Swimming Upstream* traces the differential properties of the play's premiere and subsequent revivals.

#### PLACE, PERSONAL STORY, MEMORY

Designed to premiere in the iconic space of the Katrina levee breaks disaster in the Superdome and destined to visit other significant sites of the disaster in cities of the diaspora, *Swimming Upstream* resists master narratives of the Katrina experience and resists our culture's tendency to forget. A performance of primarily African American New Orleanian women's narratives about surviving the disaster, the production celebrates nuanced forms of "telling" as it

activates a process of recovery for New Orleanians and a community in solidarity with the people of New Orleans.

In this chapter, I track how the performative possibilities of *Swimming Upstream* alter as it travels from significant sites of collective memory in New Orleans to traditional theaters in other cities. In following the nuances of *Swimming Upstream*'s performative spectrum from site to site, I draw heavily on James Thompson's theory of performance affects and on Paul Connerton's conceptualization of collective memory and counter-memories. I examine with the home and travel performances of *SU* how community is stimulated and even activated through remembering.

I begin with a discussion of the various stages in the lifespan of *Swimming Upstream* from its inception, the premiere, the revival for the fifth anniversary and tours to other cities in the New Orleanian diaspora. As *Swimming Upstream* emerged out of V-Day International's anniversary celebration in the Superdome, I use Thompson's ethic of performance affects to contextualize the performance field for *SU* and its premiere. Although *Swimming Upstream* has won unanimous acclaim from reviewers, I want to move beyond the show's success in order to highlight the dangers that can attend post-disaster art. I draw, then, on criticism of Ensler's other work—*The Vagina Monologues*—as well as on Laura Edmonson's penetrating critiques of post-trauma performance in order to frame both the pitfalls and the possibilities of the monologue play format as post-catastrophe response. The criticisms for *SU* have been primarily rave reviews from theatre critics for its value as a moving, aesthetic piece. I draw from criticism of Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* and the critical work of Laura Edmonson to discuss the pitfalls and efficacious possibilities of this format of the monologue play as a way to respond and activate community after catastrophe.

## AFFECT

V-Day International's Tenth Anniversary celebration (V-Day X) in April 2008 in the Superdome was a demonstration of what performance theorist James Thompson calls an ethical intervention for social change of *affect* where "beauty" is the core organizing principle as it places a disturbing joy and beauty in contrast to the context of crisis (140). An alternate course for this event could have placed the pain, suffering, sexual violence and death as central to their project in the Superdome. That ethic of remembering and representation would have had a completely different invitation to volunteers and attendees.

Thompson views beauty through the prism of *affect*, which he describes as "the emotional, often automatic, embodied responses that occur in relation to something else-be it observation, recall of a memory" or provoked by aesthetic experiences (35, 119). Although Thompson acknowledges that there is no inherent "goodness" of beauty as beauty has been used strategically by oppressive regimes to maintain domination (148-150), he insists that beauty *as* contrast to a context of misery offers a space for critique and can energize commitment to social justice issues (125, 128). The V-Day X Celebration incorporated this tactic of affective beauty to "unite a group in joy" (103) for their "occupation" (and expensive rental) of the Superdome and its transformation: where "beauty" was placed at its center rather than the misery of 2005 or its erasure.

Approximately 800 V-Day volunteers worked for months to transform the Superdome into the massive art installation and gathering known as SuperLove--including the construction of the gigantic vagina sculpture that all participants in the event passed through to enter the arena. SuperLove was an idea incited and sustained by the many V-Day volunteers and attendees that inhabited the physical space of the Superdome for the two days of the celebration.



The Superdome, so massive in size, was physically set up as a typical conference with a main stage, booths, art installations, with special offerings offered in the suites all along the sides. Off stage left of the main stage was the lush “Red Tent” created by Manhattan-based ABC Home and Carpet. V-Day’s Red Tent was the only structure that physically embodied the comfort and intimacy as a physical expression of the idea of SuperLove. Within the Red Tent were spaces where women could gather and relax on cushions and ottomans as well as reflect in silence. It was in the Red Tent, where my company, NOLA Playback Theatre held a supportive environment to facilitate multiple story-sharing events using Story Circle Process and Playback Theatre for women attendees of V-Day. V-Day attendees and volunteers (there are only four paid staff members of V-Day), Carried the spirit and idea of SuperLove into all the nooks and crannies of the cavernous Superdome as a performative act of occupation. It happened through reflection of what happened in the space in 2005 and it happened through a resistant insertion of an alternate vision for the space in alignment with V-Day’s mission.

Keenly aware of the dangers of excluding or surrogating locals’ presence (as discussed in the previous chapter with Chan’s *Godot* performances), V-Day volunteers strived to ensure that New Orleanian women, would be able to return to New Orleans and be part of the events.<sup>38</sup> V-Day volunteers organized and arranged to bus in, house, and feed nearly 1,500 New Orleanian women who had not yet been able to return home. These women received complimentary tickets to the best seats in the house; they also had access to massage, health screenings, health service referrals, counseling, group support sessions, yoga classes, relaxation classes, and pampering with cosmetic makeovers-all services offered to any women of the Gulf Coast for two days in the suites of the Superdome. The main stage featured a non-stop flow of local, national and

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<sup>38</sup> Joseph Roach describes surrogation as how our culture reproduces and recreates itself in the “cavities” or loss (2).

international spoken word artists, panel discussions, vocalists, gospel choirs, and dancers. Over 30,000 people attended V-Day X. Forty Thousand attendees, many of whom had traveled from out of state and even some from outside the country for the two-day celebration. The event featured 125 speakers, 40 celebrities, and the city of New Orleans itself in its current stage of recovery.

What remains with me about V-Day X is a unique and powerful personal experience of being in the Superdome with more women than I've ever seen in my entire life, all participating in a festival of ideas and offerings focused on ending violence against women. Despite the terrible urgency of V-Day's international mission and the horrific local focus of what happened in the Superdome in August and September of 2005, V-Day X was not a festival of pain nor a monument to suffering. It did not fetishize the horrors of what had happened in that space by showing photographs or voyeuristic replays of media interviews of traumatized residents. It was a celebration in the face of horrible, overwhelming oppression. The reveling with V-Day X was also about revealing what had happened there. Where the Saints triumphant return to the Superdome involved a distancing, forgetting and speedily moving past the tragedy haunting the space, V-Day X acknowledged and grappled with the Superdome's dark past. V-Day X cultivated a spirit of celebration, artfulness, humor, and joy that Thompson argues is a tactic to keep a campaign for social justice motivated in the face of overwhelming and even crushing struggle (170). In the recruitment of this former site of horror in the Superdome, V-Day employed affective tactics to emphasize the possibility within the present moment in a spirit of celebration of V-Day's vision.

Affect, according to Thompson, offers a *contrast* to a site of suffering that gives beauty a "critically comparative edge" and becomes a "call to what is absent" as a source of inspiration

(151,153) for the desire to participate in making a better world (140, 145). I do not know that I would have seized the significance of Thompson's assertion here had I not been in the middle of such a deep crisis, and yet it makes good sense intuitively. Part of my greatest efforts as a mother during our prolonged disaster experience was to find ways to give my three-year-old and baby a good day or at least one good part of a day as I dragged them from long line to long line and we lived in the middle of loss. I put my efforts into making our "trailer" life a safe home and an adventure and tried to rebuild a sense of community for my toddler by connecting with the people that were around us since we could not reconnect with the people my toddler knew. Even for myself as a grown woman, the *last* thing I needed would be to use my free time to enter an aesthetically crafted installation or performance event where there were attempts to recreate the aura of the horrors of the suffering. Why pave a road out of an experience of hell with faded, incomplete, interpretations of someone's vision of that hellish experience? Even *if* they did have their own experience of it and had at least an authentic experience to draw from. Of all the disaster response performances that have been created locally, I have yet to see one that tried to recreate or represent the horrific details of traumatic experiences. That dramatic/representational impulse seems to be one of outsiders to the disaster. How much more powerful and useful to create an invitation to participate in an aesthetic experience that emphasizes a world outside of catastrophe, which was V-Day X's intention. Blog writer Rebecca Traister describes this aspect of V-Day of "affect as contrast" in her account of V-Day X in the Superdome: "And it was undeniably moving that all this was happening in the Superdome, a building so imposing and creepy that the bathrooms still terrified me, even when packed with ladies wearing 'My other car is a vagina' T-shirts" (Traister). Traister as an attendee writes of this interplay of how the

repaired and cleaned up Superdome still resonates its horrific memories while she can simultaneously experience V-Day's active insertion of defiant humor.

A gathering of such magnitude in any environment would have a contagious excitement about it, but in the Superdome, there was an added sense of defiance determined to rebel against the horror. SuperLove openly invited multiple responses and offerings from international, national, regional, and local volunteers and attendees who created a celebratory, flirty, outraged, reflective, celebrity-studded, insightful, articulate, passionate space to assert an alternate vision for the Superdome horrors of 2005 and the amnesia haunting it ever since. This was accomplished with story sharing in the Red Tent with NOLA Playback Theatre, with multiple art installations, with panel discussions, with group talks, with group singing, with emergent altars, and with services throughout the Superdome. In terms of material effects of V-Day X, the Spotlight campaign of this V-Day celebration raised \$7000,000 that V-Day donated to groups in the Gulf Coast region that were working to end violence against women and girls. They gave \$400,000 in "leadership awards" to 45 New Orleanian women and three organizations selected by a local committee (Vday.org 2012).

#### STRUCTURE OF LOCAL INVESTMENT

It was with this spirit of invitation and solidarity that *Swimming Upstream* took its first strokes in preparation for and within the V-Day X celebration. The development of *SU* represents a long-term investment of funds, time, and resources in New Orleanian women artists, and makes a deep local and multivocal contribution to the rebuilding of New Orleans by supporting its culture-bearers.

However, *Swimming Upstream* very nearly swam an alternate course. On one of her initial visits to New Orleans, Ensler was introduced to Carol Bebel, cofounder and artistic

director of Ashé Cultural Arts Center. For over a decade, Ashé's mission has been to celebrate the arts of the African diaspora and provide a center for cultural exchange. Located in the heart of Central City, Ashé's space was spared flood damage during the levee breaks and was well-placed to serve as a hub for members of the African American community seeking to restore the city through art and culture. Ensler asked Bebelles to connect her with women of the New Orleans community in order to hear their stories so she could create a theatre piece using much the same process as she did in constructing *The Vagina Monologues*. Bebelles countered with another vision: nurture a performance piece written by New Orleanian women artists with Ensler acting as dramaturge and producer. As Bebelles often recounts in post-show talks, "Eve didn't blink an eye," and *Swimming Upstream* shifted lanes into collaboration *with* New Orleanian women rather than simply being *for* or *about* New Orelanians (Bebelle *MJPAC*).

Bebelle writes that the Katrina-related flood disaster contemporized for New Orleanians of African descent, the "horrific ancestral and historical memory" of the African slave experience: the threat of sudden danger, the imagery of boats in rising water and groups of people "huddled together in fear" with families torn apart (27). Bebelles saw the possibility of a collaboration of V-Day with Ashé in New Orleans to help a community represented by a "life-wrecked, heartbroken ensemble of women" engage their "anger and indignation" and convert trauma and pain into energies for "spiritual renewal, transformation, and power" (27).

The initial funding for the *Swimming Upstream* project came from V-Day international with an additional \$300,000 raised within the first year by the Women's Donor Network. V-Day paid the New Orleanian writers, Ensler's travel expenses, and basic production costs of the staged reading. The writers are compensated for each remounting of the (as yet unpublished) work.

For the writing group, Bebelles assembled a diverse array of New Orleanian culture-bearers associated with Ashé. Most of the women, aged 16 to 70, were not “re-settled” back in New Orleans so many had to make long trips to the city for the monthly writing sessions with Ensler at Ashé. The writing group consisted of primarily African American women in different stages of their artistic careers: a jazz musician, a gospel musical director, a spoken-word artist, a museum curator, theatre and performance artists, a storyteller, a visual artist, and Mardi Gras Indian Queens. I am a white performance artist of Creole heritage. I had been working with Ashé in a long-term community outreach project for undoing racism in New Orleans with my company NOLA Playback Theatre when I was invited to join the writing group for *SU*. Ensler’s acceptance speech for the Isabelle Stevenson Tony Award in 2011 epitomizes the values guiding our creative process: “when you say what you’re not supposed to say, when you share your secrets, when you tell the truth, the world changes...” (Ensler 2011).

Ensler’s core value—speaking one’s truth in order to make theatre for social change—defined the ground upon which we sat in our circle at Ashé for the writing sessions. Ensler led our meeting with provocative questions and we responded by suggesting directions for our ongoing work. The writing process for *Swimming Upstream* not only gave me needed extra income, but was part of my personal healing process. After Katrina flooded my Lakeview home, I resettled 50 miles north. Driving to meet with these women once a month was a rare opportunity to come *home*, to feel part of a community. My flood stories, which had been stuffed inside me, not only had a place to be heard in the writing circle of other women going through their own versions of the disaster, but a place where I was expected as an artist to challenge myself to collaboratively shape the stories into something we could perform. I carried the writing circle within me like a dry spot in my ongoing flooded life; a small island where I

could be authentic, where I could begin to bridge my pre-and post-disaster selves. Bebelle, who is a contributing writer as well as producer of *SU*, writes similarly of the writing process as a “monthly sisterhood”, a “safe harbor” and a path to our “new sacred place of home” (Bebelle *Swimming* 28-29).

After a year and a half generating material, Ensler spent weeks selecting the pieces that would be the performance text. She arranged the stories into “before,” “during,” and “after” (the storm), following an emotional curve: shock, isolation, despair, rage, acceptance, hope, gratitude, reconstruction. But still *SU* resists neat resolution. Ensler left each piece intact, which makes for a polyphonous, temporally unfolding collage in which each individual section comes in its own form as a call and response to another, united into an emotional progression by the original music by jazz singer and actor Troi Bechet working in collaboration with the Atlanta-based musician J. Michael. As we approached the end of the writing process, Ensler enlisted African American director Kenny Leon. Artistic director and cofounder of True Colors Theater in Atlanta, with Broadway and Hollywood directing credits for Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, was an outsider to New Orleans. For the Superdome premiere Leon cast four women from our New Orelanian writing group—Troi Bechet (a jazz singer and actor), Asali Njeri DeVan (a spoken word artist), Karen-Kaia Livers (an actor and theater director), and myself—to perform alongside celebrities Anna Deveare Smith, Shirley Knight, and Kerry Washington. Ensler felt the piece should tour to other cities and that it was necessary to recruit high-profile outside artists if *Swimming Upstream* was to find a national audience.

#### FIRST STROKES: THE PREMIERE

We worked with Ensler and Leon during January 2008 and did not rehearse again until four days before the April premiere. The celebrity performers joined us for rehearsals two and

three days before the premiere. They paid out of pocket for their travel expenses and donated their preparation and performance time (the local performers were compensated generously). As we sat in a circle for our first read-through with the celebrity actors two days before the premiere, I felt a wave of what I call “Katrina disbelief.” As “unreal” as some of the most traumatic moments of the disaster were for me in 2005, in 2008, I felt equally “unreal” reading a script with Anna Deveare Smith and hearing Shirley Knight and Kerry Washington portray some of my own stories. During one of our brief rehearsal breaks, Smith pointed out that Knight won a Tony in 1976 for the monologue *Kennedy’s Children*, adding that Knight had been her mentor. Smith did not mention her own accomplishments as a solo performer<sup>39</sup> but spoke of the importance of Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues* and pointed out the significance of this collaboration for African American theatre: a collaboration featuring theatre director Kenny Leon, whom Smith has named August Wilson’s “artistic heir,” with the artists of Ashé Cultural Arts Center, a cultural beacon for the African American community.<sup>40</sup>

Smith’s motivating speech terrified me. Beyond the usual opening night jitters, Smith’s speech had raised the stakes of this premiere in the Superdome, already high for me, to a historical level. After two and a half years of recovery, I was emotionally resistant to plunging into the freezing, turbulent waters of *Swimming Upstream*. At the end of a rehearsal break, Ensler took me aside and looked me straight in the eyes: “We need you *here*. We need you to tell the truth. We need you to be here and speak from there,” she said, gesturing to my gut.

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<sup>39</sup> *Fires in the Mirror* solo performance where Smith gives perspectives of divisive communities in Crown Heights Brooklyn crisis in 1991 and *Twilight: Los Angeles*

Smith plays multiple characters in the violent riots from the 1992 Rodney King verdicts

<sup>40</sup> Leon had just returned from producing the entire August Wilson cycle at the Kennedy Center and promoting the release of the film version of his Broadway production of Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*



It was not until we had completed reading through the piece at least twice that I began to trust that *Swimming Upstream* would not leave me in the lowest places it took me to. I stopped focusing on my part and my story and focused on listening and letting myself be present with each story as each woman told it. This was dangerous terrain. After all, some of my most horrific, personal experiences of the disaster were being performed onstage: either by myself or by others. Committing to the other women onstage in the present, and extending that commitment to the audience as respectful and even commiserate listeners, gave focus and purpose to the effort. It took all my experience as a performer to overcome my protective resistance.

For the premiere, *Swimming Upstream* was performed as a staged reading with a large screen projecting our performance at stage left. Our scripts were on music stands even though in fact the local performers were completely off book. The staged reading signaled that the performance was still being created; it was under construction and unfinished. The performers dressed in their own black clothing with a pink scarf featuring an ankh and fleur-de-lis motif were seated in a semicircle with the audience figuratively completing the circle. The main stage for V-Day, somewhat dwarfed by the cavernous space of the Dome, employed an enormous backdrop featuring a large pink curtain surrounded by symbol text in brackets and shimmering pin lights, elegantly creating a “talking vagina”:

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Five thousand people, including the 1,500 women who were bussed home for the first time by V-Day volunteers, sat in seats on the floor of the Superdome. The affect of so many thousands of New Orleanians consciously addressing the atrocities that happened within those very walls of the Superdome brought audience responses in huge waves of assent, outrage,

laughter, tears, and shouts of recognition. Free for all, the premiere attracted the largest number of people for a single theatrical event in the history of New Orleans. As a performer, there was a lot to take in. I felt with such intensity the weight of representing. A moment before beginning my piece, I looked up at the repaired ceiling of the Superdome and into the suites where thousands of New Orleanians were so deeply betrayed. It ripped my heart all over again. My words erupted through me and I felt a wave of assent come back to me from the audience as in a call and response.

Bebelle writes of her experience of the premiere in the back of the audience. She describes how the audience was with us from the very beginning with cries and shouts of “‘yeah yah right’” and “‘amen to that’” as they laughed and applauded throughout the performance (*Swimming*, 28). At the end of the performance the audience rose to its feet in a “roaring ovation” while some others “sat and sobbed “ (28).

No one was turned away from this free to all performance. This is a significant feature as other performances discussed in this study, such as *Waiting for Godot* and *LakeviewS: A Sunset Bus Tour* could only accommodate a set number of audience participants and were either underfunded/or unable to provide additional performances and allow more audiences members in. This unintentionally reproduced the frustrating conditions of the disaster itself where there were too few resources for too many people resulting in hours spent waiting in line fruitlessly. The value of inclusiveness and the importance for a community to be made visible to itself in order to invigorate an ongoing mission for social justice was addressed with the incredible effort V-Day made: to create *SU*; to create this occupation/transformation in the most expensive venue in the city; to make V-Day X events and services free for all women and girls of the Gulf Coast; and the stand V-Day volunteers took by organizing, transporting, hosting the return of 1,500

women who had not yet been able to come home to New Orleans. For many of those women who had been trapped in the Superdome during the disaster, this literal return to the Superdome was made in an atmosphere of financial, physical, and emotional support.

The premiere of *Swimming Upstream* staged what Thompson terms a “practice of memory” which he describes as a “difficult return” (101,102) where there is no design to master the past or resolve it into neat acts in the present but where all learn to live with “disquieting remembrance” (101-103). This is exactly the difference between the amnesiac distancing the Superdome management staged with its comeback home game in September 2006 and the event V-Day organized for its tenth anniversary celebration in the Superdome. The Superdome management’s “comeback” show’s intention was to get back to business as soon as possible and distance the venue from the symbolic meanings it absorbed in the flood. This resulted in an unproblematized, televised surrogation where a sea of white faces in paid seats replace the horrific images of African Americans trapped in the stadium without food, water, or shelter from the rain and heat, violence or filth for days. The Superdome’s management strategy trafficked in erasure: national humiliation and failure to respond to emergency were overlaid by a home victory in the Superdome. *Swimming Upstream* in the Superdome deliberately recalls the memory of horror of the space in a “difficult return” without bartering in representation of traumatic events. Paul Connerton explains that for a culture “all beginnings contain an element of recollection” and states that that is particularly true when a social group makes a concerted effort to make a whole new start (6). *Swimming Upstream* brought to the present the horrific past and the ongoing oppressions of the disaster through the live bodies of New Orleanian women performers providing a path for attendees to make the difficult return. It opened an ability to remember in a way that simultaneously honors joy, humor, resilience, without erasing

catastrophe nor realistically representing the graphic details of trauma. Jo-Anna Jones, an oral historian based in Terrebonne Parish, expresses this sense of a difficult return with her response to the premiere performance: “The Superdome was haunted. It’s been cleaned up but it’s haunted. *Swimming Upstream* was like an exorcism” (Jones). New Orleanian playwright Rob Florence commented “It was very complex because it gets into some very dark, disturbing places but ends with joy and hopefulness. It went beyond Katrina and spoke right to the complexity of New Orleans itself.” (Florence 2008)

Although there was not a single mention of the Superdome premiere of *Swimming Upstream* in local media, *The New Orleans Times-Picayune* reviewer spoke to the healing potential of *SU* for the fifth anniversary commemorative performance: “If art is therapeutic, *Swimming Upstream* is a breakthrough”. Referring to the trope of transcendence in trauma narratives which I will problematize later in this chapter, Troll praises *SU* as a “life-affirming journey through the emotional wreckage of hurricane Katrina....of being displaced, disempowered, and determined.” Announcing the future tour of *SU* to the Apollo in New York, Troll concludes: “New Orleanians can rest assured that this is our story, through and through. Although the play is delivered from a distinctly female perspective, these women—mothers, wives, sisters and daughters—are representing the struggles and hopes of us all.”

*Swimming Upstream* in the Superdome and near the Convention Center in 2008, near Congo Square for the fifth year of the disaster in 2010 uses memory, place and personal story in a way that participates performatively in a process for New Orleanians to collectively remember and claim a better future. Jan Cohen-Cruz’s eloquent and simple criteria which distinguishes a strong community production over an “opportunistic display of victimhood” helps distinguish how *SU* avoids some of the ethical pitfalls of representing stories of trauma on stage with what

Cruz calls the appropriate combination of venue, subject, and audience (Cruz 374). In keeping with ethics of James Thompson for applied theater projects, the decision of who decides the “appropriate” combination would be the local participants making the art response for the rest of the community as was the case in the creative process for *Swimming Upstream* where the writers and performers of *SU*, negotiated its development and ongoing performance life over four and a half years.

## NUANCES OF TELLING AND LISTENING

### **Polyphony and Counter-memory**

A counter to the cohesiveness of realism and linear narratives for trauma stories is to break up this notion of an essential truth and opening up to polyphonous ways of approaching catastrophe that shows its gaps and ruptures. Linear narratives following an Aristotelian movement towards closure gives a closed, authoritative, representation of what is presented as an essentialized truth. The polyphony of *SU* disturbs national narratives of how survivor narratives are supposed to be told: through an heroic trope of survival. In her essay “Of Sugarcoating and Hope,” Laura Edmonson challenges theatre practitioners to question the “well-worn tropes” of the “transformational potential of the performing arts” and consider how these same narratives of hope and transformation produce a “particularly insidious form of violence” (9). Edmonson refers to the cultural violence where we push our bias towards stories of transcendence and marginalize stories that do not comply with that theme (9). Edmonson here refers to our cultural obsession and ubiquitous appearance of the “transcendence” trope where the survivors impart some valuable lesson or recuperate the misery for us by showing the hard-earned rewards of suffering. I believe another form of violence is to story the survivor experience and refine it into riveting and triumphantly resolved narrative in any narrative format

for Hollywood or the stage. Taking up Roach's work with counter-memory, discourse analyst and psychologist, Sarah K. Carney in her chapter on counter-narratives in Holocaust survivor stories, also writes of this particular cultural captivation. Carney describes how our culture is fascinated by trauma narratives, as long as they meet the confines of heroic narratives and point towards transcendence. Carney describes the "glut of true-life survival" stories in the media where a "rapt social gaze" anticipates stories of adversity met with strength and defiance. The real harm of this forced mode of telling survivor testimonies is that it upholds societal belief systems that maintain oppression as they glorify and romanticize victims of atrocity (207, 216). Carney explains that we are encouraged into non-action and are moved to either "feel sorry for" or "admire" the victim for their personal traits that led to their transcendence (215). Although victims are not individually responsible for their oppression, Carney states that the "cultural take" on the "healthy survivor" places the individual responsible for their own healing rather than investigating the cultural conditions that created the victimization and removes the "culpability" of the culture of oppression (214). As a result, Carney explains that resistant survivors to the master narrative are pathologized and dis-empowered as their stories are "overwritten, silenced, or disregarded" (202-203, 214). Carney argues for a radical shift from this insidious practice to legitimize counter-stories by first hearing them (211) and allowing them alongside master discourses of resilience to broaden the culture's way of thinking about "survival, health, and recovery" (203, 214, 216). *Swimming Upstream* swims both with and against this dominant discourse for survival with non-heroic testimonies alongside the spirit of uplifting music and singing that celebrate transcendence and provide a sense of community and hope. I do not position either term "transcendent" or "non-heroic testimony" as *good* or *bad*, but wish to distinguish that as *SU* participates in upholding the cultural notion of a transcendent

survivor experience, it also includes alongside with it survivor experience that atypical of dominant cultural survivor discourse. For the rest of this chapter, I speak of both aspects of *SU*. I critically support the way *SU* widens its spectrum of survivor experience to include both.

According to Carney, counter-stories of trauma are even told very differently from dominant heroic stories. She explains that the transcendence trope of survivor stories have a smooth narrative, are structured linearly with a clear beginning, middle, and end, with neat “happy endings” where emotional content is controlled or contained within the telling (206). Counter-stories, she describes, are “marked by silences”, are fractured and have fragmented structures, unresolved emotion, and contain non-heroic messages” (204). The structure of *Swimming Upstream*, which also rejects a linear, heroic narrative in favor of a multi-vocal, polyphonic mode of expression, exemplifies Carney’s description of *how* counter-narratives are told. *Swimming Upstream*, written by mostly African American New Orleanian women, asserts a strikingly different and specific perspective on the disaster than that of master narratives endlessly reproduced in the media. *Swimming Upstream* as an outworking of the V-Day movement, ultimately follows the trope of transcendence as a movement towards uncovering, honoring, and celebrating the resilience of New Orleanian women in surviving the disaster. However, the polyphony expressed in *SU* reveals multiple ways of telling about trauma and survival that diverge from an Aristotelian heroic journey. *Swimming Upstream* is a multi-vocal piece made from the words of Katrina survivor-artists, honed by Ensler’s dramaturgy and negotiated with the writing team over a period of five years. Within *SU* are articulate, passionate, expressions of outrage that the dominant culture would term “pathological” or “disturbing” and decidedly non-heroic. Michna asserts the importance of the stories of *SU* as counter-stories as an important “national statement” that insists upon placing survivors’

collective traumatic memories of the Katrina disaster and “crucial” to the nation’s social and environmental health (Michna *Hearing* 332). It is *SU*’s inclusion of non-heroic alongside heroic survivor experiences that keep up front the political need to make social change. If the experiences expressed in *SU* were *only* resolved, heroic stories; audiences would be left to admire the survivors perhaps but not consider an action on their behalf.

Dramaturge Ensler put a priority on the emotional journey of “swimming upstream” where anger and outrage of the women is given significant space. Profanities, fantasies of violence along with the undercurrent of desperate grief are carried through spoken word rants, jazz singing, and the simple act of telling a story. Rather than offer a cohesive narrative, *Swimming Upstream* offers contradictions. A woman talks about missing her neighbor’s “fine ass” and then about the horrific death of her elderly neighbors. There is a moment of grief as a grandmother shares the senseless loss of her grandchild at gunpoint and at another moment the ensemble explodes into the cannon: “If I had a gun,” spurring a movement of rage expressed differently by each performer through full-bodied cursing; quiet, deadly calm; assassination threats; exasperation and tears. *Swimming Upstream*’s unpredictable course as women portray non-heroic aspects of surviving Katrina opens a space for a cultural critique of *SU*’s own audience. New Orleanian performer Asali Devan Ngieri makes overt sexually seductive gestures to the audience as she speaks to the prurient fascination outsiders had with the disaster: “Say boy. Hey girl, come touch this, touch my disaster.”

Another performer lures the audience into confronting their own assumptions about the violence in New Orleans by complaining about the “mother fuckin’ shootin’” in the city, only to reveal she is talking against the cultural violence enacted upon “the descendants of the enslaved” by the ever-watching, white, patriarchal eye as it shot the New Orleanians with their cameras.



*Swimming Upstream* reveals some of the unlikely perpetrators of violence upon residents, perpetrators who leave Devan Ngieri standing at “Fucking City Hall” to protest one of the multiple ways New Orleans’ own city government cheats its citizens. A New Orleanian evacuee curses out a sweet-voiced FEMA worker in Houston who condescendingly suggests that she stay in Houston to get a better life. An elderly woman grieves the loss of her dog, which was “rescued” by a woman in Ohio who now was refusing to return him to her.

### **Listening as Resistant and Transformative: Lines Into Circles**

For the V-Day audience and the NOLA reviewer that celebrated *SU* as a breakthrough as art that heals *Swimming Upstream* is an unqualified triumph. Yet, as a monologue play with music performed by non-New Orleanian actors, *SU* remains open to some larger criticisms about the performance of survivor stories excised from post-traumatic contexts. Feminist scholar Christine Cooper critiques Eve Ensler’s use of the monologue format in *The Vagina Monologues* as a method for feminist activism. One of Cooper’s arguments is grounded in her belief that the monologue format is a form of speech that “drowns out other voices” and “monopolizes and bars debate” (20). Although I agree that that is a possibility with a performance of monologues, I disagree with Cooper’s blanket statement about this mode of performance. Staging of a performance of monologues is an essential element of performance that may optimize a dialectical exchange: pieces can speak to each other, performers responses are never entirely scripted, and audience participants are never completely silent. In any case, Cooper’s criticism opens an opportunity to describe an important aspect of the performative potential for *SU*, in its structure and aesthetic expression as polyphonic. *Swimming Upstream*’s structure as a performance collage, temporally experienced, very purposefully exposes its ruptures, gaps and

excesses. The fractured, disparate places of the piece offer multiple sites for audience *members* to enter into the issues raised in the stories.

Although much of *Swimming Upstream* is structured as a series of monologues, the individual speeches are in conversation with each other. The overall action onstage comprises a group of women *listening* to each other; the active listening onstage creates a tight rapport with the audience as we mirror each other listening and responding. The performance spins a web of memory between the seated women onstage connecting to the seated audience. *Swimming Upstream* is ultimately not only about what the speakers speak and singers sing, it is also about women helping each other to recover by listening to each other talk, sing, and make art together. It is this overall value of women listening and supporting each other; even when they don't agree that gives *Swimming Upstream* political force as a monologue performance. As noted by New Orleans *Times-Picayune* writer Bradley Troll regarding the fifth anniversary remounting of *SU*, the performance reflects its own creative process and highlights "the theme of friendship and neighbors." Troll continues that the women "give their attention to whomever is speaking but listen actively, mirroring the writer's process in the initial shaping of the play" (Troll n.pag.).

In a poignant section near the close of *Swimming Upstream* a woman talks about the oppressive "lines" of the disaster: the seemingly endless Red Cross and food stamp lines, downed telephone lines, the "X" lines marking every door. The speaker then talks about her vision of those lines becoming "supple" and "curvy" ones, where "a circle of women" dance on the levee with dignity, self-love, and joy. Through this piece I came to understand that when the ends of a line listen and reach towards each other, they form a circle. The healing potential of *Swimming Upstream* for both the creators and for its audiences lies within this radical transformation of lines into circles. The extremes of a line are able to see each other in a circle

and metaphorically, extreme, differing positions are visible to each other as part of the same community. Connerton links this self-reflexive revelation of community as a performative utterance (59). The act of listening in *Swimming Upstream* is transformative and revolutionary in that it begins a process of recovery and resistance and creates a community of care.

### **Affect vs. Realism in Telling**

James Thompson delivers a critique of the disaster industry's uncomplicated reliance on survivor testimony in performance and therapeutic work in war zones and disaster regions. Thompson argues for an ethnographic approach that honors regionally specific multiple performance possibilities (75). Thompson's project is to untangle the diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and the obligatory prescription of "telling one's story" from theatre practice in suffering communities (45). Rather, Thompson encourages our field to focus on the range of cultural practices within the community in order to "validate diverse and culturally specific responses to crises" (45). Thompson's critique is aimed specifically to avoid a western bias from universally being applied to all cultures everywhere as an imperative rather than as a self-directed action (64-65). Thompson's use of "beauty" is determined by what the participants themselves deem beautiful as aesthetic expressions of their own culture. An example of the dynamic Thompson describes is Laura Edmonson's critique of performance and artistic interventions in Uganda at the World Vision Children of War Rehabilitation Centre for former child captives of the Lord's Resistance Army (a militant group infamous for kidnapping young children and drafting them into its armed forces). Shocked at the brutality of the LRA and moved by images of children traumatized by their experiences, the Western world descended into Uganda through NGOs like World Vision ready to provide art as a therapeutic tool to help repair and rejuvenate. Edmonson writes that over other Western artistic and expressive offerings,

the “less-scheduled” traditional Acholi dance and drumming—an event created of, by, and for locals--held the most enthusiasm for the children and was “rich terrain” upon which to begin processes of “worldbuilding” (*Marketing* 470). Edmonson describes the impromptu Acholi dance performance as a display of “enthusiasm and passion for their culture” resisting humanitarian tropes that situate them as “hapless victims” (*Marketing* 470). Edmonson writes that this celebration of shared Acholi identity displaced collectively celebrated their “resilience, performed their cultures, and rebuilt their world” (471).

For Edmonson the passionate engagement in these dances demonstrated the possibilities for cultural tradition to be a resource “for producing new cultural meanings” in this new world they were living in (470). Thompson claims that beauty within a context of suffering and misery is not “frivolous” and “apolitical,” but a motivating force central to the political agenda of critiquing oppressive conditions, offering a respite from suffering, and invigorating a dedication to a better vision of the world (2). In the context of war or disaster, this sense of joy is what keeps participants invested in a future and offers experience outside of catastrophe as respite and critique.

*Swimming Upstream*, conceived by Ensler and Bebelles was borne out of New Orleanian women and avoids the dynamic of cultural dominance Thompson is concerned about in other regions of the world. *Swimming Upstream* is a self-directed process of survivor testimony in performance made by artist-survivors who already had a practice of mining personal story in their own artistic disciplines. The artist participants of *Swimming Upstream* directed, shaped, and negotiated the development of the piece in every stage of its creation and later performances. *Swimming Upstream*’s aesthetic riches lie in the diversity of the artistic disciplines of the creators and performers as well as the fact that all seventeen women are deeply rooted in New Orleans.

The polyphony of *SU* is achieved not only because there are seventeen different women contributing their experience but because there are seventeen different women of different artistic disciplines rooted in New Orleans contributing to *SU*. Another strength of *SU* is that avoids reification of victimization, but rather emphasizes and celebrates resilience and survival.

An important criticism of Ensler's *Monologues* Cooper delivers is of Ensler's Bosnia monologue as a representation of "helplessness and devastation" (16) that Cooper claims is troubling as a way to raise awareness and action to prevent future acts of violence against women (15). The actress in the Bosnia piece in *The Vagina Monologues* "remembers" in a way that the audience's imagination is guided into a representation of trauma as it is re-lived through its representation in the words of the monologue. I agree with Cooper's distaste for an engagement with realistic representation, or graphic re-telling crafted to direct audience imagination into graphic replays of victimization, especially in a context that is to promote social justice. Laura Edmonson similarly writes against realistic representation in performances in war-torn Uganda. Edmonson states that realism in the context of terror is an ideological weapon of dominance in that it "integrates the violence" into a "seamless status quo" that is resistant to social change" (*Marketing* 461). As an ideological weapon it "domesticates and contains" the destruction of the aftermath of violence (*Marketing* 465). In humanitarian discourse, Edmonson writes, the traumatic past is represented as fixed as a "time of unrelenting terror and suffering" (*Marketing* 469). In order to preserve the emotional response required for charitable contributions, linear narratives of trauma are not disrupted by "hints of agency" or resilience (*Marketing* 469). Cooper writes how the Bosnian woman in Ensler's play speaks from a position of permanent loss and "irredeemable" trauma (13). Cooper writes of the artful construction of this monologue, written as in a stream-of-consciousness to give the impression of an "unmediated access to her

truth about violence” that is intended to produce emotional effects and relies on an “orientalist” aesthetic as Ensler “colonizes” the Bosnian woman’s voice (14). Edmonson also links this mode of realistic exchange to colonial (465) that does not permit rupture in the linear narrative as it becomes “entangled” with cultural memory to make the unthinkable “thinkable”. Realistic, linear narrative according to Edmonson, is a way to “remake” the world however “provisional” and “deceptive” (465).

### **No Resolution but Resolve**

Paul Ricoeur describes this need Edmonson describes for historical and fictional narratives to satisfy the demand for peripeteia, the turns of fate where a form of order will finally prevail (25). Ricoeur states how these “fictions lie and deceive” in that they console us (27). I take Ricoeur to mean here that the way we story our disasters and terrible stories in fiction and in history is to work towards the Aristotelian progression through the narrative that will promise a resolved if not “happy” ending. In the context of storying post-disaster experience in New Orleans, this is an ethical issue when there are preventable, actionable manmade issues that can be rectified. A “false” sense of resolution encourages non-action, and apathy in a situation where terrible lived experience of trauma is consumed as riveting drama. The finale of *Swimming Upstream* bridges the physical distance separating the performers from the audience as the performers go into the audience space and invite people to rise and sing along with the refrain that is taught them: “Hold on, be strong, do what you got to do...Make it better; it’s up to me and you.” This newly formed community is completed *with* the audience rather than *for* the audience as the stage is expanded to include the entire room. *SU* invited the audience onto the “front porch we all share” at the beginning of the show and we then expand the porch into the world beyond the performance space in hopes that we will all stand in solidarity through the

finale and beyond the time of the performance. With the physical embodiment of commitment epitomized in the finale fulfills the need for closure without resorting to neat resolution. Michna writes of her experience viewing the fifth anniversary performance at the Apollo Theater in Harlem, which had “audience members clapping, singing, and crying throughout the performance” (*Hearing* 332). After the powerful testimonies, stories, and songs shared throughout the 80 minutes of the performance, and given the celebratory essence of New Orleans, in performance I could feel the performers and audience creating an embodied act of solidarity. In *Swimming Upstream* audience members lend their bodies, voices, and hopefully future actions to “make it better.” Of course the “activism” for women or for people of the Gulf Coast could end there. But it is imprudent to rule out the possibilities that even a “rehearsal” for activism can inspire.

It is with this visible expression of a community in solidarity that *SU* finds closure without reverting to a false sense of ending. Sonja Kuflinec in her book investigating community-based theatre writes about the curtain call as a threshold: “At the same time, the bow recognizes the individual as actor and character, as self and performer. The curtain call concedes, even foregrounds, the role playing of the individual while bringing together various groups as divisions between audience and performers break down” (184-185). For Kuflinec, these post-show moments are valid moments of Victor Turner’s term *communitas*, which she describes as a group feeling resulting from the performance which may be temporary but can enable community in the “social and aesthetic” exchanges that take place (7). Kuflinec describes the closure of the curtain call or post-show talks moreover as a process of opening where the border of the stage break apart and performers and audience members return to their societal roles with hopes that the production may possibly influence those roles “as the impact of

performance” lingers (184). The finale and curtain call of *SU* provides a sense of closure while simultaneously reopening another “terrain of questions” about the very nature of “conclusion” (184). *Swimming Upstream* finds a closure of staging community formation and solidarity in commitment to “make it better” through the singing of the finale song, the *affect* lingers into the post-show communitas where more stories are shared and new connections are formed and deepened.

This community, among the performers and the audience is not fixed. Kuftinec asserts that notions of commonality and difference are both embedded within the very term “community” (9) and that performance has the potential to make visible elements of commonality and difference (68). The individual experience of an audience member of *Swimming Upstream* may fluctuate in identifications throughout the performance. No matter what the more “stable” identification of an audience member may be in position to New Orleans or the disaster, the shape and content of *Swimming Upstream* at times positions the audience as fellow New Orleanians, fellow women, prurient outsiders, opportunistic invaders, New Orleanian advocates. These fluctuating identifications allow for other frames of references around the disaster of 2005 and its aftermath in addition to and contrast with the ubiquitous, authoritative, fixed visual frame offered by the media. This community resists a culture of forgetting as they remember together and resolve together to make it better.

### **Remembering as Resistance**

Theorist Gregory Ulmer attempts in his investigation of memory and the media in the 1980s, describes the growing dependence upon external, electronic devices to bear cultural memory (137). Theorist Barbara Misztal writes of the “electronification” of memory and its role in forming memory to our “image-fed” and overloaded society (24). This dependence Misztal



argues, threatens lived memory as dominant cultural representations decide whose vision of the past and whose memories will survive (24). Much like Nora's rift between memory and history. Misztal then argues as remedy the resistant practice of *counter-memory* through the face to face (oral) tradition of transmission of "our visions of the past and the future" (24). The term counter-memory, part of Paul Connerton's project on collective memory, has also been honed by performance theorist Joseph Roach who defines counter-memory as a remnant of the "disparities" between history as it is orally transmitted and memory as it is "publicly enacted" by the "bodies that bear its consequences" (26). Roach articulates how counter-memory practices are resistant and revolutionary tactics of "empowerment" (34). Returning to Misztal's positioning of oral tradition of transmitting memory as resistant, the experience of performances of *Swimming Upstream* enable the fact to face resistant counter-memory practices to ubiquitous mediatized memory.

As we move further in time away from the Louisiana's multiple sites of devastation,<sup>41</sup> *Swimming Upstream* seizes the moment to re[member] and in doing so performatively creates a continued community of support for the Gulf Coast. Susan Brison, in her work on trauma narratives, states that our culture particularly represses and silences trauma, explaining that this repression reflects not only an "absence of empathy with victims" but also an "active fear of empathizing with those whose terrifying fate forces us to acknowledge that we are not in control of our own" (39, 54).

*SU* offered an opportunity to reclaim lived memories of both physical and temporal sites of the levee breaks disaster for the fifth anniversary of the levee breaks disaster. By consciously and collectively reversing the path of erasure by performing under-and untold narratives of the

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<sup>41</sup> Hurricanes Katrina and Rita followed by the BP Oil Spill and the global economic crisis

disaster in a key disaster site, the community could launch a process of envisioning a better future for the city.

Inside the commemorative performance, time held new status. French philosopher Paul Ricoeur describes the three times engaged in the act of narrating: the time of narrating itself (endurance of the utterance), the time that is narrated (digesis), and finally the time of life (present time) (83). The time of life, the fifth anniversary of the disaster, was the common landmark where audience and performers gathered to commemorate the disaster with the performance of *SU*. Ensler speaks to the significance of presenting *SU* in New Orleans and in New York for the fifth anniversary as a resistant act of remembering: “art has the power to keep generating memory” to “keep history alive, so we don’t repeat what was done in that incredibly cruel and horrible way in New Orleans” (Goodman n.pag.).

For Ensler, remembering through performance is an activist act of resistance that performatively alters the present moment recruiting care and commitment to build a more just future. Ensler speaking to the packed and enthusiastic house following the fifth anniversary performance in New Orleans, pleaded to resist our culture’s amnesia and spoke of this performance as a “re-member-ing” that was an opportunity to welcome back members of our community as we took in their stories (Ensler 2010). *Swimming Upstream* seized the moment to re-member and to create an ongoing community of support for the Gulf Coast. It also accomplished something else that is much more subtle: it created a community that came together to resist forgetting, and that reclaimed the *lost* and *overwritten* spaces of the Superdome, the Convention Center, and the disaster itself. Michna writes that *Swimming Upstream* keeps the “dangerous memories of Katrina” alive in order to “construct a more just national future”

(*Hearing* 332) as it made an important national statement that the stories of African American women are significant and vital to the continued recovery of our city (332).

As *Swimming Upstream* resists forgetting, dominant survivor discourse, and even the structure of such narratives, it also *does* something else that is much more subtle to define: It creates a community that comes together in this resistance, that reclaims the *lost* and *overwritten* spaces of the Superdome, the Convention Center, and the disaster itself. It allows for the audience to identify with the stories from multiple perspectives and in doing so creates an experience of witnessing and community reformation.

V-Day and Ashé, with the help of funding from the Women's Donor Network, produced single performances of *Swimming Upstream* at the Mahalia Jackson Performing Arts Center in New Orleans and at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem. Ensler, in the middle of undergoing chemotherapy for uterine cancer, took over direction with a reduced celebrity cast: Shirley Knight and the star of the original Broadway production of *The Color People*, LaChanze. Ensler had us sit in an approximate semicircle of different chairs and cushions to evoke the "front porch we all share" referred to in the beginning and close of the piece. The cast wore their own everyday clothing in the color scheme of pinks and peach. This shift in staging changed the dynamic of the piece profoundly. No longer a "concert" of voices with each actor playing many women, we were now more or less set as certain characters, each with a specific costume, voice, and journey within the piece. We only had three evenings with Ensler to get the show back on its feet after a two-year hiatus, and had to integrate new cast members, assignment shifts, and altered staging. Despite the brief time to get the play ready, I found that I had much easier emotional access to it than before. Karen-Kaia Livers, another local actor in *Swimming Upstream*, expressed as much in an after-performance talk back in New York for the Ford

Foundation where she spoke of feeling completely “numb” emotionally during the writing process for *SU*, “partially emotionally there” for the first performances, and that it was not until this fifth year of distance from the disaster that she felt she was fully available emotionally as an actor in performance (Livers *Ford*).

I anticipated a similar increase in “readiness” for many New Orleanians for the fifth anniversary revival performance. The 2,000-seat Mahalia Jackson Performing Arts Center auditorium was filled with an incredibly responsive audience. *Swimming Upstream* was told in the narrated time from the perspective of a *challenging present* closer in time to the disaster than the fifth anniversary (time of life). In New Orleans, audience members were each at a unique place in their recovery from the disaster. Even the performance space itself had its own disaster and recovery story, as the venue had been flooded and millions were spent to restore it.<sup>42</sup> Although the MJPAC is also a site of Katrina devastation, it does not lend itself to associations with the disaster in the same way that the Superdome does because it did not play a large role in the media coverage and there was not a lot of publicity about its destruction. The MJPAC also happens to be located at an important historical site for the African American community of New Orleans, [Louis] Armstrong Park next to Congo Square, where New Orleanian slaves and free persons of color were allowed on Sundays to congregate, trade, practice, and pass on their culture through music, dance, and story sharing (Roach 64).<sup>43</sup> While *Swimming Upstream* reclaimed the two previous performance sites in New Orleans as disaster sites, the performance at the reconstructed Mahalia Jackson PAC brought its own rich story as a site for the

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<sup>42</sup> The Mahalia Jackson Performing Arts Center was flooded and closed until the beginning of 2009 after a \$25 million restoration, funded primarily by local tax dollars that the City of New Orleans has asked FEMA to reimburse (Krupa 2009).

<sup>43</sup> Its older neighbor, the New Orleans Municipal Auditorium, which remains closed, was built specifically as a site of segregation, highly contested by the African American Community (Stanonis 222).

preservation of the oral culture of African American New Orleans—a site of both disaster and celebration.

#### NEW WATERS OF MEANING: FROM SITE TO STAGE

*Swimming Upstream* very consciously reclaimed the New Orleanian disaster sites of the Superdome and later the neighborhood of the Convention Center and Congo Square. What happens as *SU* moves into traditional theatre spaces in other cities? In the first out-of-city production in Atlanta in 2008 to the subsequent tours in New York City in 2010, and Baton Rouge, Houston, and Santa Fe in 2011; it altered significantly what each aspect of the show could *mean* as in interpretation or could *do* as a performative.

Wherever it was performed, *SU* received positive write-ups by theatre critics and standing ovations from audiences. The first performance outside of New Orleans was in Atlanta at the 14<sup>th</sup> Street Playhouse Mainstage. The show opened the night after the 2008 presidential election, which brought Barack Obama to the White House. One critic pointed out how the post-election excitement in the theatre related both to the election of the first African American president and to the knowledge that the response to the Katrina disaster was one of the lowest points of the Bush administration (Holman n.pag.). In Atlanta, celebrity actors Phylicia Rashad (*The Cosby Show*) and Jasmine Guy (*A Different World*) joined the ensemble, alternating with Kerry Washington (*Scandal*). Shirley Knight returned to play her role for the entire run. Director Leon decided to keep the staged reading aspect of *Swimming Upstream* intact. The most obvious difference from the premiere at the Superdome was that the performances in Atlanta took place not in the actual disaster site but in a traditional theatre. At the 14<sup>th</sup> Street Playhouse, the stories were no longer a performance of memory that reclaimed a site of disaster. *SU* in Atlanta-and elsewhere on tour-could now be interpreted as a presentation of *signs* pointing toward an

authentic experience. The mix of celebrity actors with visiting New Orleanian actors had a very different read as well. In the context of a V-Day celebration in the Superdome, the celebrity cast members spoke to V-Day's tradition of celebrity solidarity with local and global issues. In the Superdome, the celebrity performers elevated the significance of the piece by lending their media-worthy capital as endorsements in hopes that other outsiders would also act in solidarity with the people of the Gulf Coast. As the season-opener for True Colors Theatre's season in Atlanta, the celebrity cast presence tipped *Swimming Upstream* more into the mode of a representation of something done rather than a *doing*. Each reviewer of the Atlanta run wrote much about the stellar performances of the celebrities. To what degree were the packed houses for *SU* in Atlanta due to the subject of "Katrina"? Or was it the reputation of V-Day and Kenny Leon's True Colors Theatre, or the draw of high-profile African American celebrity performers?

A couple of times I was approached by Atlanta audience members and told "what a wonderful job" I had done, and how I "really seemed to be from New Orleans." Apparently, at the 14<sup>th</sup> Street Playhouse, it was not understood that one could be an actor *and* a survivor from New Orleans. In New York, an audience member told me how much she enjoyed my performance and asked me how long I had been performing. I got the feeling she was disappointed when I told her I had been performing most of my life. The more "uplifting" response would have been that the disaster of Katrina was so intense that the theatrical intervention of rescue had *made* me become a great actor. That story does make for a better play behind the play: the Katrina victim finds her voice through the disaster through V-Day's artistic intervention. Removing *Swimming Upstream* out of New Orleans brings a shoal of unexpected readings. The original performative intentions of *SU* are impacted by the semiotic weight of traditional performance circumstances. And at the same time, if *Swimming Upstream* were not

*virtuosic* as an art object, if it has no aesthetic force or affect, it is pretty clear that there would be little hope of meeting its primary goal of inspiring people to care about and act in solidarity with people of the Gulf Coast.

Rave reviews of *SU* in Atlanta speak to its aesthetic strength and interpretive force. In the theatre world, this is a wonderful thing and considered a great success. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gemblett writes about the inescapable traps of showing/representation where the both the deficits and excesses of representation face the problem of interpretation (55). Kirshenblatt-Gemblett continues that we experience a representation, even when the representers are the people themselves because self-representation is nonetheless representation and the “status of the performer” becomes problematic as people become signs of themselves (55). *Variety* critic Frank Rizzo, praising *Swimming Upstream* in Atlanta writes that the specificity and authenticity of lived experience lends to the poetical force of the play (Rizzo). Are we (New Orleanian performers) reduced to signs of our own artistry upstaged by the aesthetic force of lived our experience? *SU* is praised for its ability to represent, but can it still *perform* in the sense of Austin’s speech act?

The issues raised in *Swimming Upstream* are also *at risk* to be taken as metaphor. The New Orleans *Times-Picayune* review of fifth anniversary performance states how *SU* “takes the Katrina narrative to a new, ethereal plane” (Troll). Atlanta theater critic Curt Holman praises *Swimming Upstream*, writing how “Katrina became both a metaphor and an exaggeration of social ills that have always plagued New Orleans and America’s inner cities” (Holman n.pag.). Holman and Troll’s appreciation for the *artistry* of *Swimming Upstream* walks a problematic edge for performance dedicated to social justice issues. The critics’ framing with the terms “ethereal plane”, “metaphor”, and “exaggeration of social ills” discourage social critique of the

oppressive forces working against the people reeling from disaster as it has been translated into dramatic literary terminology. Does the aesthetic force or *affect* of the piece speak to Thompson's argument of energizing investment in social justice issues? Or, are the very *real* issues people of the Gulf coast face, which *SU* speaks to, which are in the very real hands of national voters, swept into an "ethereal plane" where political action is unnecessary? If the issues raised in *Swimming Upstream* have always "been there"s are metaphorical or "exaggerated," then the audience position could simply be to consume/enjoy these real-life oppressive conditions around the trauma as compelling "drama" and return home satisfied while the cultural conditions surrounding the disaster remain. *Swimming Upstream* is perhaps now placed in a current it cannot resist, the pull of how we are all culturally positioned to semiotically experience a "play" in a theatre.

Paul Ricoeur in his project on historical narrative describes how historical and fictional narrative both share the process of *mimesis* where the only distinguishing operation is the relationship to a *truth claim* (2). As narrative, Ricoeur explains it "lives by its relationship to the story it recounts; as discourse, it lives by its relationship to the narrating that utters it" (82). The stories in *Swimming Upstream* relationship to "real-life" testimonies remain the same at every site. However, the discourse a performance of *SU* can evoke is different as it is performed at different times and at different sites. Ricoeur provides a useful system for viewing the narration process in *Swimming Upstream* as it navigates through disaster sites and traditional performance spaces for its *utterance*. Ricoeur argues the performative potential of a narrative, fictional or historical, as it *adds* to or is capable of having impact on the reader's world, as a process of *opening* and a *doing* (20). If the stories of *SU*, even taken as metaphors, have the ability to add to and impact an audience member's world, there is a space here for positive action for social



justice. One way *SU* achieves this is as a counter-narrative that disrupts authoritative narratives of the disaster through the multiple stories of African American women in New Orleans.

Performatively speaking different cities have their own relationship to New Orleans and the disaster of 2005. For the Spring 2011 remounting of *Swimming Upstream*, two very specific New Orleanian diaspora sites were chosen: Baton Rouge and Houston. The Open Society Foundation, a grant-making organization dedicated to promoting democratic governance and accountability around the world, underwrote the Baton Rouge performance at the large Magnolia Theatre, offering free admission to the almost entirely African American audience. The Baton Rouge audience, 80 miles from New Orleans, felt like a home audience—and in fact many in the audience were resettled New Orleans: they *got* the many specific terms and references to the disaster. In the diaspora cities of Baton Rouge, Houston, and Atlanta, the post-show talk-backs and lobby mingling afforded us the opportunity to meet New Orleanians in exile and hear their evacuation and resettling stories evoked by the stories of *SU*. Our performances brought them *home* again temporarily, allowing them to reflect on what they had been through, what they miss, and celebrate being New Orleanian in their adoptive cities.

At the close of *SU*, with the piece “You Came Through,” each performer, one by one gives thanks for the specific anonymous acts of kindness received from strangers during the storm: “I was in the grocery line and you paid for my sausage biscuit”, “You saw my license plate and left a not on the car and offered help.” This moment of *Swimming Upstream* truly finds its “home” out of town as we speak directly to audience members who showed they cared through clothes, toys, gift cards, money, and prayers sent to hold us up when our government let us down. It is a moment to extend gratitude to the audience members and, by extension, the *audience as world* who invited New Orleanians into their homes and hearts. As grateful as I am

for the moment to stand in the Superdome and unleash my rage for what happened there, I am equally grateful for the moments *Swimming Upstream* gave us to speak to audiences of distant cities and to simply give thanks. After the emotional storm stirred up in the show, *SU* begins to settle and make that dream vision of a circle with this expression of gratitude.

Thompson's work on the revolutionary power of beauty is helpful in describing a positive relationship of aesthetic force in performances in addressing issues of social justice. For Thompson, beauty placed centrally, hones the power of *affect* where people's bodily and emotional responses to performance *are* motivating forces of action to make change (8, 136, 140). Within the comfortable context of a theater, distant from the disaster, Thompson describes his hope for an audience engagement that avoids what he terms as the contagion model of "I feel your pain" in favor of the ethical stance of *besides* where audiences acknowledge the "personal responsibility" evoked through facing another (171). When audience members are *besides* survivor/performers, they might in fact, Thompson explains, "be looking forward, in the same direction but not eye-to-eye" while still being aware of the demands made by "approving of the other's presence" (171). In *Swimming Upstream*, I believe this type of audience engagement in theaters in distant cities is optimized best performed by an all-New Orleanian ensemble, as it is currently performed. Although I miss the incredible talent of our celebrity performers, there is something palpably different about *Swimming Upstream* when it is performed solely by New Orleanians. The fact that every voice is New Orleanian lessens the grip of interpretation. An all New Orleanian ensemble traveling to other cities, stages a literal New Orleanian-outsider engagement where out-of-towners are *besides*, face-to-face and side-by-side New Orleanian women artists in looking at oppressive forces surrounding the disaster and its aftermath.

One of Cooper's critiques of Ensler's *Monologues* that could bear on *Swimming Upstream* is that the monologue format of Ensler's play *The Vagina Monologues* is that it is a "particularly consumable form of feminism and activism" (2). The monologue format is an easy format to stage as well, it is part of the reason we have been able to remount *SU* with new cast members with little rehearsal time. *Swimming Upstream* as a product of V-Day and as a monologue play, if published, would translate very easily into the monologue cannon where anyone anywhere could perform the play. Taking *SU* completely out of New Orleanian speaking and singing subjects and into to the repertoire of actresses everywhere and anywhere is deeply disturbing. The authentic expression of New Orleanian experience and cultural traditions would be reduced to a mimesis. The dark places of *SU* are then consumed for their dramatic value, the conditions surrounding the disaster become riveting drama, the uplifting conclusion is no longer a stand in solidarity *with* New Orleanian women but a call for applause of entertaining performances. This is ethically troubling in that the conflicts of *SU* endure and are far from fictional. They are also actionable. Factoring New Orleanians out of a production of *SU* is another investment in cultural surrogation of New Orleans natives. The last iterations of *SU* at performance sites on tour were with an all-New Orleanian cast. Although co-producer Bebelles expresses the ability for *SU* to continue to speak to people suffering at other sites of crisis throughout the world (Houston), there is no current plan to remount the piece or publish it and for now, that is perhaps for the best.

#### SOUNDING THE FINAL LAP?

The affective, polyphonic site of V-Day X, out of which *Swimming Upstream* emerged in the Superdome was possible because the organization and creative process included hundreds of local and national volunteers. It had to: in 2006-2008, V-Day international had a regular paid

staff of four (Ensler in an unpaid position) ([www.vday.org](http://www.vday.org)). V-Day X avoided pitfalls of other well-intentioned artistic modes of intervention such as Paul Chan/Creative Time's *Waiting for Godot*. V-Day X was created by local organizers, fueled by the administrative support of V-Day and participating New Orleans and national organizations. V-Day X was a catalyst that attracted significant national sponsors and partners and had the ability to open the doors of the Superdome for this process. Hundreds of women networked over two and a half years to make SuperLove happen. The multiple perspectives included in the process brought about outstanding achievements: the range of services provided for free in the Superdome to women of the Gulf Coast, the creation of the play *Swimming Upstream*, the return and support of 1,500 New Orleanian women to be part of the event.

Aesthetically, *SU* whether in a significant site of collective memory in New Orleans or on stages in other cities, shows the ruptures and gaps of the disaster experience with its contradictions and resists our culture's tendencies to either erase these perspectives or to only hear heroic narratives of transcendence. *SU* remembers disaster without graphically engaging in realistic replays of traumatic events. The imagery, spoken word rants, and jazz singing that emerged out of *SU* as an aesthetic, reflects the artistry of the New Orleanian women engaged in the creative process and invites New Orleanian audiences to celebrate their culture and resilience and invites non-New Orleanian audiences to stand in solidarity with us.

According to Carol Bebelles in Houston's post-show discussion (Bebelle Alley Theater) ten thousand people have seen *Swimming Upstream* and there is hope that it will continue to build and reach more audiences. Live performances of *Swimming Upstream* where personal narrative and evocative memory sites commingle offer countermemory on many fronts: ubiquitous electronic mass memory; our culture's insistence on trauma narratives following a

linear, heroic model; our culture's amnesia for trauma and avoidance of the issues weighing on oppression. *Swimming Upstream* allows for multiple identifications as it enables a multifaceted expression of community. *Swimming Upstream* creates communities of care as it *performs* and demonstrates the value of listening as it re[member]s and visions recovery for New Orleans.

At a special panel hosted by the Open Society in New York City following the commemorative performance of *Swimming Upstream* for the fifth anniversary of Katrina at the Apollo Theater in Harlem, Bebelle emphasized that the struggle presented in *Swimming Upstream* connects to the story of women around the world and moves beyond the specificity of the New Orleanian levee breaks of 2005 (Ford). Taking Bebelle's use of a term *extension* as opposed to theatre critics' previous use of the term *metaphor*, I believe *Swimming Upstream* has the potential to create communities of care and energize commitment to social justice across contexts. It is the desire for the producers of *Swimming Upstream* to follow a non-commercial path into communities around the U.S. through foundation support in order to make ticket prices more accessible to audiences, especially for New Orleanians in the diaspora. Part of that mission began with the tour of *SU* in the spring of 2011 to Baton Rouge, Santa Fe, and Houston with the support of the foundation Open Society, and there is hope that more audiences will experience this piece in the future.

Writing and performing *Swimming Upstream*, which ironically required me to go back deeply into my own disaster story, also inserted an affective and aesthetic relationship to my disaster that moved me further along in my own personal recovery process. Paul Ricoeur describes the very act of narration as already distanced: "to narrated a story is already to 'reflect upon' the event narrated" (61). This act of distancing also carried with it the capacity for distancing itself from its own production and in this way dividing itself into two: "utterance and

statement” (61). It is through the utterance of *SU* that I furthered my own recovery from the disaster and through which performances of *Swimming Upstream* could act as an agent of recovery addressing social injustice. Diamond writes about the ability for performance to mark out a “unique temporal space that nevertheless contains traces of other now-absent performances, other now-disappeared scenes” (1). Each time I reenter *SU* as a performer in a new location with a new audience and a new ensemble constellation, an additional layer of encounter touches my performance. In a moment of rage in an autobiographical piece, I first flash back to the bottomless emotional pit of despair I experienced as I saw from the television screen the gashed ceiling on the Superdome, with thousands stranded inside, during the first evacuation in September of 2005; then to giving that despair a lonely and full-voiced wail during the evacuation in to the Mississippi Delta starless sky; the dark, cavernous repaired ceiling of the Superdome during the *SU* premiere in April 2008; the dark theatres with only the gleam of an exit sign in Atlanta and Baton Rouge, Houston, Santa Fe, and New York where I unleashed that rage again and again. Once a story has been shared, it takes on a life of its own as it enters the bodies and hearts of the tellers and listeners and is passed on, silently as it is recalled in their memories, or retold again where listeners become tellers. Each time we bring *Swimming Upstream* back home or to another place, the narratives resonate with the continued story of the play’s own utterance: its tellings, and its listenings.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **REBUILDING NEW ORLEANS ONE STORY AT A TIME: PERSONAL NARRATIVES AND PERFORMANCE IN POST-KATRINA NEW ORLEANS MICRO-COMMUNITIES**

A little over seven months after the disaster and two months into the life of our company, NOLA Playback Theatre performed at a popular New Orleans theatre Festival celebrating its thirteenth year, called *Dramarama*. Typically thirty or more *Dramarama* performances are held throughout the building and grounds of the Contemporary Arts Center over the course of a single evening. New Orleans had celebrated Mardi Gras just a couple of weeks before and there was a determination at this first *Dramarama* since the storm to keep its usual celebratory flair of years past. NPT is part of an international movement of improvisational theatre companies that take audience personal stories and play them back for the audience as a process for social justice.

I opened by asking for a show of hands as to who was back in their homes and who was still living out of a FEMA trailer or somewhere else. Most of the room was still displaced but did not seem eager to talk about it. As we began, there were some offerings of audience members sharing how stressed out they felt, using very comedic metaphors that the ensemble spiritedly picked up in their enactments. A young African American woman, named Ashley, shared the first longer story of the evening about how her family car had hit a New Orleanian pothole and was broken (New Orleans streets are notoriously treacherous) and how difficult and terrible her life had become since hitting the pothole. She spoke of her “happy pre-pothole life” and how her “post-pothole life” was nothing but hassle, headache, and frustration. The teller, the ensemble, and the audience all enjoyed our complicity in playing back the story of Ashley’s car hitting the pothole. Her “real life” experience, playfully spoke to our pre-Katrina and post-Katrina lives without ever having to actually talk about *it*. The pothole story was a tactical evasion that allowed for the culture of festival to continue as it always had, to reclaim a moment

of fun and stubbornly resist that this also be taken away by the disaster that had inalterably changed all of our lives. This was a “light” story at a “light” event. But what significance does this *lightness* bear in the context of a performance event where most of the people in the room are still displaced from their homes in a city in the thrall of disaster aftermath? Applied Theatre scholar James Thompson writes that in the context of crisis “hedonism is a bunker” (2).

#### MEMORY, SITE, PERSONAL STORY

In this chapter I look at the work of NOLA Playback Theatre at different community sites throughout New Orleans. NPT uses story-sharing techniques in performance such as Playback improvisation and story circle method for community process. In these set of performances audience stories are overtly shared, interpreted and performed on the spot.

The set of performances in this chapter differ from those described in preceding chapters in that NOLA Playback Theatre relies completely on an audience’s spontaneously shared personal stories to build its presentation. As a form of performance response to disaster in New Orleans that is a *performative* working with memory, site, and personal story; NOLA Playback rarely performs on traditional stages, preferring instead active sites of communities. Unlike the lost spaces of a devastated neighborhood or the covered-over space of the Superdome, the places where NPT performs are either newly built (as in PACE Senior Center), rebuilt (as in many of the community spaces for our Youth Outreach), or undamaged community spaces that survived the flood (as in Ashé Cultural Arts Center). In the preceding chapters I address theoretical frames to investigate “singular” productions with multiple presentations at significant performance sites in New Orleans. For this chapter, I cover a range of representative NPT performances from the beginning of 2006 to present time that particularly resonate different



aspects that reveal performative potential of the work. Since its inception in February of 2006, NPT has performed hundreds of Playback events and hosted a score of story circles.

Although I provide supportive arguments for Playback, as a response to crisis, it is beyond the scope of this study to assess whether or not Playback *should* be used in other contexts of crisis or in other regions. For the most part, I restrict my investigation to studying how Playback has helped this New Orleanian company in serving New Orleanian communities from the early period following the disaster up to the present time in spaces that are significant to community members.

I begin this chapter with a discussion of how NPT was formed and information about Playback Theatre. I discuss aspects of Playback practice that are “built-in” to the technique that help to promote a safer environment for performance of personal stories in public places. I relate Playback practice to performative claims I made with *Swimming Upstream* and *LakeviewS* as counter-memory. I will then look at discourse on personal story and trauma. I look more closely at three performative aspects of Playback Theatre practice in the context of communities in crisis: affect, openness, and community activation. For this part of the discussion I depend on James Thompson’s theory of performance affects, theater scholar Nick Rowe’s articulation of Playback’s openness, and Dwight Conquergood’s theory of co-performative witnessing. I give examples of different Playback performances to articulate these performative aspects of Playback. I conclude this chapter by sharing an account of a Playback event that went awry and use analytical tools to examine how the wreck could have been prevented. I then conclude with an overall summary of risks and benefits of Playback process in the context of disaster.

Dwight Conquergood describes in his 1988 article about performance in a Hmong refugee camp how refugees lived in a “liminal zone” that was “betwixt and between worlds,

suspended between past and future.” In the camp, residents worked to “regroup and salvage what is left of their lives” after their lives had been completely shattered (180). Conquergood writes how performance in the refugee camp participated in the re-creation of self and society as performance allowed refugees to reflect on their situation, gain self-knowledge and then better cope (180). I do not wish to participate in the labeling of 2005 New Orleanian evacuees as “refugee”;<sup>44</sup> however, Conquergood’s description of the liminal zone of the refugee camp resonates with the experience of what life was like for returning and displaced New Orleans in the first years after the disaster. In line with Conquergood’s arguments about community performance among Hmong refugees, NPT offered post-disaster New Orleans communities an opportunity to re-create self and community through our story-sharing events.

Forming and developing NOLA Playback Theatre during this difficult, in-between place and time was my personal response to the disaster I made in collaboration with the numerous performers, community partners, and audience members who took part in NOLA Playback Theatre performances from the beginning of 2006 to the present time. Playback Theatre, performed worldwide and founded by Jonathan Fox with Jo Salas in the 1970s, is improvisational performance form where a trained ensemble performs audience personal stories. Playback encompasses a variety of narrative and non-narrative techniques. Playback improvisation uses movement, music, voice, dialogue, and visual play to enact a teller’s story collaboratively and spontaneously. Alongside its open invitation for “any story,” Playback’s core value is a deep respect for the power of personal stories. Playback’s effort to create safe spaces for sharing personal stories in community spaces is part of Playback’s vision of building a

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<sup>44</sup> There was much contention in early media coverage of levee breaks disaster calling New Orleans Katrina victims “refugees”. For more discussion on this see Gilbert in *TDR*

culture of remembrance, inclusiveness and engaged communities<sup>45</sup>. My choice to begin a Playback theater company in New Orleans, the first in our area, was based on my sense of the benefits of Playback from my experience of it in San Francisco as a founding member of Pacific Playback Theatre, and in my own sense as a survivor of what could be a benefit to other survivors of this disaster as they struggled with the ongoing effects of disaster.

## PLAYBACK THEATRE BRIEF HISTORY AND PROCESS

Playback has developed around the world and is currently practiced in over sixty countries ([www.playbackcentre.org](http://www.playbackcentre.org)). Playback companies consist of trained practitioners coming from diverse artistic disciplines and work with a musician who offers music and soundscape to the enactments. A Playback conductor, or facilitator, convenes the event in either a theater or non-traditional performance setting, invites offerings from the audience, and calls out specific Playback Theatre improvisation forms that the ensemble then plays back. In Playback a teller tells their *own* experience and not that of someone else's. Playback actors do not speak or plan out their enactments with each other or with a director, and they only use cloths of differing textures, colors, and lengths and a few boxes to create the characters and world of the teller's story.

Shorter Playback improvisation forms often express the teller's current feelings inhabiting them, which are enacted while the teller remains in their seat among the audience. The longer story form in Playback has the teller come up to the stage beside the conductor who guides the teller through an interview while the ensemble is lined up on the stage for the teller to "cast" in various parts of their story for the enactment. The conductor negotiates with the teller

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<sup>45</sup> I was recently appointed to the international board for the Centre for Playback Theatre and was a co-author for the revision of its mission statement. The value I outlined above is part of CPT's vision.

important aspects of the story that the teller would like to see in the enactment and may even create with the teller a “title” for the story. In this way, the teller is not just offering their story for artists to play with, but is actively part of the dramaturgical process for the ensuing enactment. At the same time, the teller becomes a subject for spectatorship as the audience watches the teller observe the enactment of their story. A Playback story could be a simple moment, a complex feeling, a significant event or an epic personal journey, a memory, or even a dream. After every enactment, the conductor returns to the teller for an exchange of what it was like for them to see the interpretation of their experience. A typical performance may last just under an hour to two hours during which time the company may hear and enact two to six longer stories with several shorter offerings shared and enacted.

What distinguishes Playback improvisation from other improvisational forms is that Playback was intentionally formed, developed, and is practiced to promote social justice. Fox and Salas’ years of refining Playback with the original company has shaped conventions of Playback that provide an aesthetic and ethical focus for the enactments of audience stories in Playback events. Playback Theatre is aligned with applied theater practices such as story circle method and Theatre of the Oppressed, both of which were also created as community processes for social justice in the early 1970s (Boal, Michna *Performance* 51). What distinguishes Playback Theatre from Story Circle Process or Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) is that Playback is a “show” performed by trained Playback performers performing for an audience of people who may or may not be familiar with Playback. Playback enactments typically place emphasis on the affective experience of the teller rather than on any attempt to realistically “re-enact” the event.

Fox stresses that TO is a process that looks for solutions, whereas Playback is a process that enables “deep dialogue that does not demand an answer” (J. Fox 3). Playback is a non-

didactic, aesthetic, social process that can open up a teller's story and can reveal the social context impacting a subjective experience. Through hearing and experiencing the embodiment of a range of personal stories, Playback Theatre creates an opportunity for community members to identify, to explore, to deepen knowledge, and to encounter diverse positions of community issues. Fox continues that Playback does not make an assumption of what a particular audience's "oppression" might be but rather entrusts audience members to raise issues important to them through sharing personal stories inviting stories that express joy as well as suffering (3).

When a teller wishes to speak directly about their painful experiences of disaster, something that can happen at any Playback event in New Orleans, issues of representation arise. Much of NPT's development and training has been centered on securing our footing on the ethical edges of representation in stories of trauma in order that our enactments be efficacious for our audiences rather than re-traumatizing. I received a lot of guidance on how to negotiate these difficult edges of representation through my colleague Paul McIsaac of Playback NYC who mentored me in forming NPT. McIsaac came to New Orleans at his own expense to offer a five-day long training in Playback Theatre in February of 2006 at Ashé Cultural Arts Center to help launch our efforts. Within our first year, NPT received additional special trainings from other leaders of the Playback community with a special focus on performing stories of trauma and working with class and race.<sup>46</sup> The Centre for Playback Theatre, committed to sustainable support of NOLA Playback Theatre, offered complete scholarships to NPT members for Centre trainings for over five years in Playback. I mention this to emphasize that preparation and

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<sup>46</sup> Pamela Freeman and Sarah Halley, co-founders of Philadelphia Playback for Change; founder of Playback Jonathan Fox; and Artistic Director of Pacific Playback Theatre, Nan Crawford offered NPT trainings.

special training for performing Playback in this context was something Playback community leaders and NPT took as a primary value in order to build an ethical practice in New Orleans. Playback as a tool for social justice, just like any tool, if used inappropriately or in unintended ways can harm. A hammer is an excellent tool unless it smashes a bone instead of a nail. Playback founder Jonathan Fox articulates this double edge of Playback practice in the most current issue of the Centre for Playback Theatre's newsletter where he compares Playback process to reticulation of a leaf to describe how skilled Playback can increase the flow of stories within a community event and an unskilled performance could perhaps trigger a blockage (*A New n.pag.*).

Rowe states that in playing with personal stories in public spaces risk can only be “reduced, not eradicated” (Nash and Rowe 7). In terms of “safety” for practitioners of Playback who are bringing this invitation to share personal stories, it is easier to define safety negatively in terms of what we wish to avoid. Playback conductors do not “screen” stories, there is no confidentiality clause for tellers, and the notion of “safe environment” for trauma stories as in a therapeutic environment is not associated with a Playback event. A teller may tell a story they are not psychologically or emotionally ready to tell and suffer negative consequences as a result.<sup>47</sup>

However, there is considerable support to promote more attentive, sensitive, and skilled Playback worldwide through the refinement of the form itself over four decades, the vigor of the Playback community in terms of exchanging and sharing information, and the opportunities for continued training and education in doing Playback in these contexts through the Centre for

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<sup>47</sup> For our Red Tent activities during V-Day X we anticipated that there would be women who might share stories of sexual violence they endured. We recruited volunteer therapists and social workers to be present for our events and scheduled space and time after our events to support tellers.

Playback Theatre and affiliated international schools ([www.playbackcentre.org](http://www.playbackcentre.org)). Rowe writes how Playback's features of the ensemble and the conductor help to build safety in Playback practice (Nash and Rowe 8).

Typically practitioners of Playback Theatre are community members performing for their own communities and practice in the context of a "sustained company life." For Rowe this is a crucial feature in protecting both the players and the teller from the "excess of an improvised form" (28) where the ensemble can act as a "brake" on an individual performer's exhibitionism or encourage actors "to be less timid and tentative" (138) while building a key feature of "collaborative emergence" in Playback (136). Playback company members typically train and perform over years together to build performance skills as well as develop sensitivity and acuity as social justice activists. NOLA Playback's current company has members who have been working together for seven and a half years. Very few other traditional performance or applied theater projects have the ability to sustain this sort of effort with the same members over such a long period of time.

Playback founder Fox taking up the metaphor of *narrative reticulation* uses the rhizomatic sense of power structure and building of epistemologies where there are nodes of competencies for Playback practice. Fox identifies seven nodes of competencies that are also aspects of Playback performance : story sense (the ability to seize upon the elements of a teller's story), spontaneity (the ability to accept a "truly open process"), embodiment (the ability to use the body to express the elements and emotions of the story), atmosphere (encouraging trust, empathy, inclusiveness), guidance (promote Playback's "imperative to promote moral elevation and the redressing of injustice"), collaboration (co-creativity of Playback among performers and audience), and finally context (cohesiveness, attention to subgroups) (Fox *A New n.pag.*). These

nodes of competencies discussed briefly here, give an idea of the many areas Playback practitioners concentrate their development and practice. Skills in these nodes of competencies promote safer and more beneficial practice for communities.

Nash and Rowe speak of the importance of the role of the conductor in Playback Theatre, who creates clear boundaries between the performing space, the room of the event, and the “differing frames of the performance” (10).<sup>48</sup> The conductor has many tasks during a Playback performance as the only performer to directly talk to tellers, the audience, and the performers. The conductor tracks “who is telling” and “who has not told” and encourages a range of perspectives in order to build a more inclusive event. Fox describes that aspect of the conductor’s role in terms of the nodes of competence of “atmosphere” and “guidance” (*A New n.pag.*). In terms of “edgy” stories and stories that are risky in the challenge of representation, the conductor can play a great role in containing stories of violence, explicit sexuality, and trauma; thereby avoiding an exchange in our culture’s prurient and violent tendencies in entertainment consumption patterns. As a conductor, I hold the microphone (literally or metaphorically) and can play a big role in shaping the field of the performance.

## PLAYBACK AS PERFORMATIVE

John O’Neal, an elder in the Civil Rights Movement and founder of Free Southern Theater and Junebug Productions in New Orleans, speaks about story circle method and its

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<sup>48</sup> In Playback there is one frame of conversation with a teller, another where the teller is telling their story while casting it for the players and shaping it with the conductor for the enactment. There is yet another frame of the enactment itself where audience members have a split focus of the enactment and the teller watching the enactment, and finally one where the conductor and teller converse about the enactment and the teller is led back to their seat. There is also an overall frame of the performance event where the conductor holds the space of who has told and what kinds of stories have been told over the course of the performance. A conductor may also hold the wider frame of socio-political context for a story/or stories shared over the event.



ability to make visible where personal narratives connect to social narratives.<sup>49 50</sup> Fox similarly describes this connection where Playback is a way to explore issues of identity “within the self, the community, and the culture” and where an enacted personal narrative reflects multiple directions of narrator, listener, society, and historical story (H. Fox, 99). O’Neal claims that stories give us an identity that can resist the omnipresent influence of global culture and hegemonic indoctrination (Michna *Performance*, 56). In a Playback event, groups hear each other’s stories and resist the forgetting of narratives that would otherwise be driven “underground” (Rowe 5, 161). I believe that remembering in Playback is a way to re-member the community, to literally incorporate members by accepting and validating their experiences that would otherwise be erased.<sup>51</sup> In terms of the historical record, founder of Playback Jonathan Fox writes about the powerful personal, social, and political forces “whitewashing” history and “urging us to suppress the real story.” Both Fox and John O’Neal asserts that story-sharing is the key to resisting this suppression. O’Neal states that story-sharing allows us to “construct our collective future” which is at the heart of all storytelling” (56). Jonathon Fox, writes similarly that we need to share our stories to “face the truth of the past” in order to imagine a positive future” (Fox 3).

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<sup>49</sup> Story circle method developed as a way for collaborative performance creation that emerged from cross-racial collaborations between Junebug and Appalachia’s Roadside Productions in the 1970s (Michna *Performance* 51). Story Circle is effective in that it creates a “nurturing, safe space for witnessing and testifying about difficult memories” (Michna *Performance* 51). Similar to Playback Theater, story circle method has structural conventions that help ensure safety in sharing, respect, and equal time-sharing.

<sup>50</sup> NOLA Playback partnered with John O’Neal’s Junebug Productions as well as with the CAC and Ashé Cultural Arts Center for a three-year undoing racism project in different neighborhoods in New Orleans. John O’Neal trained NPT members in story circle method and we found ways to combine short forms of Playback improvisation with story circle method for *Truth Be Told* events.

<sup>51</sup> I described this potential for *Swimming Upstream* in chapter three.

This was exemplified in our collaboration with John O’Neal and Junebug productions (as well as the CAC and Ashé) for an undoing racism project called *Truth Be Told* which featured Playback and story circle method. For me personally, individual stories told at *Truth Be Told* events opened up ways of learning about assumptions I held as a white person. For example, a septuagenarian shared how in New Orleans the streetcars in the 1940s and 1950s had a screen to divide the people of color from the white folks. The teller spoke how the first thing he always did when he got on the streetcar was to pull open the screen. He spoke about how sometimes another white passenger would insist on pulling the screen closed again which at times would escalate in another white passenger pulling the screen open yet again. Through this story I learned more details about the racist heritage in New Orleans and more specifically the ways whites contested this culture of segregation in public through a movable object on streetcars. If story-sharing processes can help a community face its past to envision a more just future, it is imperative that a wide spectrum of people are invited to participate. Playback process can be a forum for marginalized voices to be heard, for tellers to feel validated and less alone in their experience, and for communities to forge more profound bonds.

Yet this is no simple task. The benefits Playback can impart to communities in crises are contingent upon a very careful and informed practice. Even as I highlight Playback’s positive potential for community to bolster restoration, I underscore that sharing personal stories in public spaces is always potentially dangerous in that it can bear negative consequences either to the teller, the performers, or the audience participants. This is especially the case in a context of disaster where people are made more vulnerable due to the long-term impact of a prolonged experience of disaster and due to the extent of loss and trauma many New Orleanians experienced. I encountered pitfalls and potentials firsthand as NOLA Playback began our work

in New Orleans. These risks are also a consideration any time we bring in newer members to NPT as it takes time to develop the skills to uphold a strong practice in Playback and for an ensemble to form and be ready to creatively engage with any story that may come up in the city of New Orleans.

## **Narrative and Trauma**

If personal narratives can be resistant and help shape a more positive future in its ability to shape a more inclusive collective memory of the past, critical theorist Hilary Clark claims that personal narratives are also central to personal healing from trauma. Clark's book *Depression and Narrative: Telling the Dark* provides examples of the ability for written narratives to help someone suffering great loss, illness, or trauma to bridge their past and current selves and trace a consistent self through all the difficult changes and to help "make sense of it all," to cope, and to make change. Clark connects her claim that narratives can make personal healing possible to a wider claim for community with her argument that narrative is central in forming identity and culture (2). Jonathan Fox (founder of Playback) similarly speaks of Playback's ability to use narrative for healing trauma as a tool to transform "traumatic memory into narrative memory" and that one way that works is that Playback has no narrative agenda. Fox explains that the openness of any story for Playback is liberating for tellers (H.Fox, 94-95).

But what if an audience member does not want to share his or her trauma story? Specifically, what if the audience is made up of people displaced from their homes, people tired of hearing the constant refrain of disaster and living the persistent reality of its hazards and frustrations? Is there a space in Playback, which works with personal stories, to be efficacious in a context of disaster without insisting on a personal story about their disaster experience? James Thompson takes to task a Western "default" mode of using narrative processes for healing

trauma as appropriate for all cultures and crises. In his book *Applied Theatre: Bewilderment and Beyond* Thompson specifically brings up his concerns about Playback Theater in non-Western contexts. He worries that Playback imports a Western concept of psychosocial healing that encourages the victim or survivor of trauma to “release distress” by expressing and externalizing the experience through telling their dark (62-63). Thompson also raises the concern that Western Playback can impose colonial notions of aesthetic beauty that elides local participation in the art making, preventing participants from drawing on their own local aesthetic traditions (63).

I take Thompson’s warnings to heart, particularly when considering Playback’s applicability to other cultural contexts. However, typically Playback Theater is not imported to other regions; it has grown around the world because there are practitioners who have formed their own Playback Theater ensembles to perform for their own communities.<sup>52</sup> Playback’s conventions for its improvisational forms are described by performance theorist and Playback practitioner Nick Rowe as a “tight outer frame” that can allow for an “inner frame” (what the performers do within these conventions of Playback) of freedom. s In this way it is the case that Playback companies around the world do incorporate local aesthetic forms of diverse disciplines and aesthetic cultural traditions into their Playback practice. It depends entirely upon the artistry of the performing company, which typically comes out of the community itself, to express and reflect their own cultural expressions. My focus is on Playback practice in the West in the city of New Orleans. Aesthetically, our company draws from cultural traditions specific to New Orleans with members that are jazz singers and spoken word artists. We’re also the only Playback company that also uses story circle method, which originated in New Orleanians.

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<sup>52</sup> It would take incredible funding to launch a sustained effort using Playback Theatre to respond to a crisis in a region where there was formerly no Playback company as it requires an ensemble of at least three to four players, a musician, and a conductor.

I defend Playback from this aspect of Thompson's critique at the same time that I agree with Thompson's concern for a bias towards a default mode of "telling" for healing from trauma. That was my own personal assumption when I first formed NOLA Playback. I now believe that the real value of Playback practice in a context of crisis is not so much for its invitation to tell stories of trauma but because Playback practice is well-suited to support communities enduring crisis because through a grounding in affect. Playback's expressive range in its performance palate can honor other ways for tellers to express themselves around their circumstances and experiences of catastrophe. The abstracted nature of Playback short forms can shift focus from a representation of the trauma event itself to other aspects of the story: the resilience of the teller, the teller's emotional response to the event, the teller's own metaphorical language in describing the event. The non-narrative offerings of Playback Theatre short forms provide fully embodied, vocal, but not necessarily verbal expression of what is often called the "unspeakable" experience of catastrophe.

This approach towards representation of traumatic experiences provides dignity and respect to the survivors of disaster as it emphasizes the personal qualities and resources of the teller that aid him or her out of the horrors of their story and into recovery. In my own work with NPT, I concur with Thompson that in terms of serving community towards a path *out* of the experience of disaster, I have attuned our practice to our own tellers' impulses to share other aspects of their lives outside of the crisis and to honor our tellers' own creative approaches to telling their difficult stories.

Thompson defines affect as the bodily sensation that is "sustained and provoked" by aesthetic experiences and the "force" that "emerges from attention to pleasure, astonishment, joy, and beauty" (135). In Playback Theater the question "how did that/do you feel?" has as much

weight or more than the minutiae of “what happened?” in a story. The adopt Thompson’s sensibility of aesthetic force over his use of beauty because my understanding of Thompson’s use of the term has more to do with the affective experience of the aesthetic engagement—as beautiful because it comes out of the participation in artistic expression—rather than be beautiful or grotesque. Playback’s emphasis in affect is described by Jonathan Fox’s description of Playback’s reliance far less on words but rather on strategies of affect such as “image, sound, and rhythm” (3). Playback Theater *adds* performing bodies who encounter the teller’s narrative which Rowe explains “offer the teller and spectator glimpses of that which cannot be represented in narrative form” (69). In terms of approaching the un-representable in extremes of joy or horror, the performing body in collaboration with music and other bodies on the stage offer an expression of what words cannot. This participates in a value of an embodied “faculty” of memory that Joseph Roach takes up from Connerton’s notion of incorporating practice of memory (26) and articulates as *kinesthetic imagination* to express the way the body can join memory and imagination as a way to express what is otherwise “unspeakable” (38). As Playback emphasizes the emotional realm of audience experience through the performing body, it also strives to provide this aesthetic experience of “well-crafted” aesthetic enactments that embody a full range of offerings of lived experience.

For example, in a Playback performance in New Orleans just seven months after the disaster a nine-year old girl at Audubon Montessori School shared her story of flying in a helicopter when she was air-lifted to safety after two days on her rooftop with her mother and grandfather with no food, water or shelter from the sun. For the little girl, part of the story she emphasized the most was her ride in the helicopter. One of our players was formerly a professional dancer with MOMIX and lifted the teller’s actor for this beautiful moment of

suspension as she flew over trouble. The girl's face was enraptured while watching the enactment. Rather than emphasize her abandonment, near death experience or victim status; the Playback enactment emphasized her joy of *flying* in front of her peers. This example outlines a dual use of Thompson's grounding in affect: the aesthetic experience of beauty from the poetic interpretation of the flight, as well as the way that the girls' own framing of the flight took precedence over the horrific experience on the rooftop.

One of our other youth shows early on in our work was for a Boy Scout camp in a flooded part of nearby Metairie just months after the storm. The camp was held in a newly renovated school gym with FEMA trailers lining the streets. Most of the campers had lost their homes and had had an entire school year disrupted. The boys aged 6 to 10 wanted to talk about all the fun they had had at camp: archery, bb guns, cook-outs, a field trip to a water slide in Baton Rouge, and Mummy art projects. I realized during that show that for those young boys, emphasizing and playing back the "normalcy of fun" and the "exceptionality of fun" in the context of disaster, was a greater service to them than a performance of extended evacuation and misery would have been. We were able to use our Playback process to emphasize how this camp was an oasis for them in the middle of the space/time of ruin.

Thompson defines such *affective* resistances as political through de Certeau's distinction of tactical resistance over strategic maneuvers, which Thompson applies to theater projects. Thompson explains that in the tactical realm citizens do not in actuality have the power, resources, or ability to change their circumstances (35). The tactical realm, Thompson states, may seem more modest for participatory theatre projects, but is in fact more realistic, politically

necessary, and more ethically responsible (35, 37).<sup>53</sup> The modest claim of tactical resistance for participatory theatre projects help participants resist the worst of a context” (36) even when they are not equipped to transcend it or structurally alter it and provides a space for evasion to “counter” but not “confront” the wider realm of strategic politics (37).<sup>54</sup> For Thompson, an affective experience of beauty (159) experienced within the broader campaign for social justice helps to “temper despair” at the size of the political task and help to energize and sustain commitment.” (171) In post-disaster New Orleans, NPT’s enactments provided one way to temper despair, helping audiences see themselves not merely as suffering in isolation but as surviving and thriving in community.

As so many of the aspects of recovery for New Orleanians were *outside* of our control, Thompson’s nuance of tactical resistance is appropriate for Playback projects in New Orleans. For example, NPT collaborated over four years with the New Orleans headquarters of an international organization, Fourth World Movement, which is dedicated to serving families struggling with poverty. NPT supported their book project of a collection of oral testimonies of the families Fourth World Movement served that was directed by these families themselves. NPT helped to facilitate retreats and special gathering centering on the project. served. The contributors of the book gathered halfway through the process to vision next steps and to give each other tours of their homes and neighborhoods and tell stories of their pre-disaster lives. We then regrouped for a Playback event to process the day at Trinity Church. Tiny, an elder in the group, shared a different kind of home story back at the church about her life on Soraparu Street

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<sup>53</sup> De Certeau’s “tactics” is determined by an *absence of power* whereas strategy is achieved through the “postulation of power” (de Certeau 38, Thompson 35). Thompson argues that holding to a “strategic vision” in certain contexts of war may raise “dangerous expectations” that could lead to harm or death of participants. (37).

<sup>54</sup> Thompson cites de Certeau’s claim that whatever is won by a tactic, it cannot keep (37).



and her struggle to get her home back. She cast an actor to play herself and another actor to be her home. After the enactment Tiny said with excitement. “We’ve been dreaming it. I claim it. Today I feel I already have my house back.” In no way did the show make claim to physically or financially make her able to get back home, but the process of sharing her feelings about the day with the rest of the Fourth World Movement community, recovered a feeling of home for her and I believe bolstered her struggle to recover her home.

In this tactical moment of affect, I locate along with Thompson a resistant politics that Playback can make possible. Carol Bebelle of Ashé Cultural Arts Center and important community partner of NOLA Playback Theatre in *Truth Be Told* states that the affective experience of art and celebration are imperative in the context of disaster to “nurture our tendency to yearn, to hope and to reach for the possibility of something more and something better.” For Bebelle, art’s position in culture is about unburdening people from “layers of hopelessness” and validating that it is as important to celebrate as it is important to mourn as it as celebration fuels the “reserve of spirit” that people need to draw from in difficult times (Michna *Performance* 60).

The possibility to hold a space/time outside of ruin for audience participants is part of a core ethic I hold in my practice to avoid actors representing trauma realistically onstage. I do not wish to participate in continuing further torture, abuse, violence or dehumanization of human bodies through stage imagery. Thompson also argues against a “theatre of injury” (156) which relies on “drawing pain from a body” as part of a process of “exhibition or (exploitation)” that he finds all too prevalent in communities in crisis (149).

A way that NPT has sought to avoid this fetishism of pain and suffering due to trauma is to literally replace the human body with found objects for a puppet Playback form. The objects

are spontaneously collected from the audience and in the event room and the teller casts objects to play him or her as well as people and elements of the story. Tellers usually on their own, provide their own dramaturgical reasoning behind their casting choices which NPT founding member Bridget Erin suggests helps to build a sense that the teller and the ensemble are co-creating the enactment together (Erin). My sense is that the objects provide a remove from the human body an insert an aesthetic distance. The object/puppet provides a layer of cushion that absorbs the terrible emotional weight of the traumatic event the teller has chosen to share, and allows for other aspects of the story to be seen.

An example of a performance where we used found object puppets was for the seniors attending the newly built Pace senior day facility in 2008. An octogenarian woman told a very difficult story about the recent murder of her friend's young granddaughter by a stray bullet in New Orleans. Before her murder, the teen girl had been a regular visitor at the senior home and was an "adopted granddaughter" to all who lived there. Our teller told of this heartbreaking loss and of the teen's memorial service at her high school McMain Magnet, where they planted a tree in her memory. The teller cast an audience member's cell phone to play the teenager because the girl was always on her phone. She cast a box of tissues to play herself because "she cried so much when she found out she was gone." The objects open up other possibilities for enactments that can hold silence, stillness, and hold emotional space for intense stories such as this one without implicating actors into realistic enactments of violence, and immeasurable grief and loss. In this enactment a water bottle created a container of tears that was planted and grew into a tree in the deceased girl's honor. Our ensemble gave this moment of the tree great importance in the enactment and did not, even with objects, re-enact the horrible moment of the young girl's violent death.

## Openness and Co-Performative Witnessing

As NPT navigates personal story, memory at the community sites of New Orleans in the time of the disaster aftermath, Playback can act as a performative towards the process of recovery due to three aspects: an emphasis on affect, its openness, and its ability to foster community through this opening. In order to articulate Playback's aspect of openness and catalyst for community formation I apply Dwight Conquergood's term co-performative witnessing as an extension of the relational ethic that Sylvie Rollet's work with documentary film opened in discussions of *LakeviewS*. Performance scholar and former student and colleague of Conquergood Soyini articulates co-performative witnessing as a deep investment in the relational ethic between performer and audience participant as a witness engaged in a *doing*. Applying co-performative witnessing to Playback, is its underlying value of polyphony; permeability of the roles of performer and audience participant in that both impact each other; and co-evalness where physical, temporal, and material stakes are shared amongst all involved in Playback events.

Playback's openness is on many levels: as a metanarrative activity, as an opening of personal story into multiple interpretations, as an openness a range of expressive choices, its ability to open up stories that may be shut down or silenced in a community or within a person, as well as Playback's open invitation for any story on any subject. It is this aspect of Playback that most resembles Conquergood's concept of co-performative value of polyphony. Conquergood's co-performative witnessing stakes a claim for cultural performances as a "venue" for public discussion of vital issues that concern the community. Playback can be a forum for these issues as well as be an arena for a community to be made visible to itself and "stage their identity" (Madison 829). Rowe ties this sense of transitive relationship between audience and

teller to Playback Theater's potential for opening an individual narrative to multiple perspectives (90). This opening and loosening of some of the particulars Rowe states is possible since the story has already been verbally told by the teller and places emphasis then on *how* it will be told. In Playback events, the enactments are further impacted by audience response during the teller's sharing and in the enactments. The phenomenon of how one teller's offering will call up another story is evidence of how the entire Playback event is co-created by those in the room as the stories silently held within and the stories publicly told are evoked when listening to another's story.

The act of listening to a story, according to John O'Neal, is also a creative act as O-Neal describes a dialectic between the listener and the speaker where all three elements: the story, the storyteller, and the listener are all involved in the co-creative process of imagining or "composing" the story imaginatively as it is told (Michna *Performance* 53). Playback's invitational structure creates opportunities for polyvocal, community dialogue where cross-sections of small groups of community can hear similar and differing perspectives on issues facing New Orleanians in their ongoing struggle to reclaim their lives and communities. Playback provides an opportunity for social and political contexts of stories to be made more visible and introduces multiple perspectives on a singular narrative that Rowe states allows tellers, audience participants, and performers insight into the "changeable" ways we "story" our experience (Rowe 161).

Playback performs its own showiness in the way it presents tellings and retellings of personal narratives. It's openness and its overt way of telling stories create a base of engagement with personal narratives that avoid an authoritative singularity and incorporate and magnify a teller's own way of storying their experience. Barbara Babcock writes of the communication

term, metanarration as discourse that makes obvious the act of narrating as part of its storytelling technique (Babcock 67). Babcock describes how this aspect of awareness to the act of telling as well to the story itself can open up different perspectives of the same event (72) and in so doing resists participation in an authoritative truth.

This destabilization of authority in personal narrative is replicated in Playback performance when the direction of the audience spectator/participant's gaze has two objects in view during enactments as they watch the teller watching their story enacted. Rowe states that the complexity of the spectator's gaze undermines authoritative position and reveals that how we make meaning out of our experiences are "mutable and contingent" (168). Opening personal narratives through Playback open an opportunity for insight into the story in ways that can make evident how we tell our stories and how we *see* our stories. Rowe states that we can be "trapped" as well as "validated" by our own stories. For Rowe, effective Playback lies in its potential of opening and loosening "the ties" of the story to open up other possible interpretations of how "we make sense of our experience" (183). The way a teller's story is opened to multiple perspectives and altered in the enactment frees the teller from a notion of their story as "fixed" and "unchangeable." The emergent quality of Playback performance as improvisation emphasizes this capacity for change and makes it visible to community.

In the first years of our work in New Orleans with NOLA Playback Theatre our stories of struggle, loss, uncertainty, frustration, and grief were offered alongside stories and experiences of what was *still* joyful as our New Orleanian audiences sought to express, affirm, remember and envision their lives and communities outside of crisis. This creates not only an example of an emphasis of affective beauty on the part of the tellers, but also an expression of polyphony

within the community where differing perspectives can be expressed about a group within the Playback event.

An example of this is with many of our youth outreach shows. In one of our multiple Playback events at Walker High School located on the West Bank of New Orleans a year and a half after the disaster, a sophomore girl expressed how disappointed she was to return to Walker after waiting an entire year, only to find that *no one else* was back: the entire faculty and staff had either been fired or reassigned and very few of the former students had been able to return. In response to this girl's deep disappointment of the persistence of the loss of her world, a sophomore boy followed her story with one expressing the fun he had over the weekend on Super Sunday. Super Sunday is a West Bank Mardi Gras Indian celebration where leaders dance-off and display their costumes. It was significant for this youth to have the opportunity to express to his community the consistency of this aspect of African American culture in New Orleans when so much else had changed for each and every one of these students.

In NPT's youth outreach events, "Katrina" stories always came up, but almost always as a "side" item of another story the student wanted to share as was the case for the little girl's helicopter ride. NPT's performance in the spring of 2007 for high school students at Frederick Douglass in the 7<sup>th</sup> Ward of New Orleans was held in a particularly foreboding environment. There were armed guards at the entrance, a thorough search of all of us and our items before entering the building, and the halls were bleak- devoid of any art work, educational materials, and even at times operating light bulbs. We made our way to the second floor library where we performed for Junior and Sophomore language classes. Most of these students were just entering high school when the disaster hit. A sophomore student shared the story of the "funny thing that happened when her friend's hair piece fell out." Through typical interview questions of placing

when, and where, and what happened before that moment, the teller related how she journeyed by bus alone after the storm at age 13 with her little sister age 11 to Houston to stay with her half-sister she did not know very well. No one knew whether or not her mother was alive. While she was evacuated in Houston she was reunited with her friend Donna from New Orleans. She and Donna were hanging around the bus stop in the rain waiting for the public bus to take them home after school when Donna's hair-extension fell off into a puddle. The teller then described how she and Donna laughed and walked home a long way together with Donna holding the wet ponytail extension in her hand and how embarrassing it was when they ran into some boys from school. The teller was so tickled while telling her story that it came out during bursts of her laughter. We performed her story using found puppets from the room. Our teller cast a plastic tube of hand-sanitizing wipe as her friend Donna as we had the ability with that object to make the wipe be her ponytail extension. This was her story. However, what was also included in her telling as "back story" to build up to the hairpiece moment were the surrounding events of her personal disaster. Rather than re-frame her story to emphasize the horrors of being alone and thirteen in charge of a little sister on a bus journey to an estranged close relative in Houston, we played that difficulty back and reflected the teller's weight in importance of the comical school bus story during her evacuation. Both bus stories were in the enactment: the bus ride to Houston, as well as the bus ride home from school. In our enactment we reached or the teller's own framing of her *real* story. We sought to honor her own humor and resilience while evacuated in Houston that got her through that time of ruin. The whole room was in stitches with the teller when the Clorox wipe *fell off* and the puppet "Donna's" reaction to it. This is one example of so many stories where I was stunned by how New Orleanian youth so resiliently put their focus on the now, on the present, on what was *fun* and *funny*. It is incredibly empowering

and forward moving to honor joy and laughter in terrible times. This story of Donna's hairpiece while evacuated in Texas unlocked the "floodgates" of Katrina levee break stories for the room as teller after teller told their Texan evacuation experiences including Moniques: "I was evacuated in I don't even want to know the name, Texas." Monique said it was awful and she did not want her story played back because it was NOT funny at all. We played back through a short form how much she hated "I don't even want to know the name, Texas" for her. Monique responded to it by standing up and saying "Right On!" We were able to play back her unwillingness to have anything from that time played back. That opened up a space where other students also shared their "I hated Texas, too" evacuation experiences.

This spontaneous, improvisational dynamic of Playback makes audience members' positions and experiences visible to each other. At Frederick Douglas and Walker High Schools, Playback enabled a more conscious reflection of community; different from what they knew before, but nevertheless bound by the commonality of displacement and the struggle to return and still have fun as teenagers. In the context of post-disaster New Orleans, one of the most traumatic ongoing aspects of the levee breaks disaster was the loss of community. Processes, such as Playback Theater events, that help reform, identify, and build community are a *doing* in that it offers a valuable resource of a sense of belonging, a sense of connection, a sense of care for others in community.

At Ashé Cultural Arts Center we performed Playback for the fitness program that uses African diasporic dance called, "Sistah's Making a Change." The women of this program were eager for us to play back for them how being part of that program both before and after the disaster was what got them through. Similarly, our performance at the newly constructed Pace Senior Center had a bulk of our performance playing back for audience members their deep



appreciation for this newly formed community center and how it had filled a terrible void and sense of isolation in the aftermath of the disaster. Many at PACE shared how they had lost most of the people in their circles before the storm and how after the disaster they had also lost their mobility. Through playing back these stories of appreciation for this incredible resource called community, NPT affirms, invigorates, and makes visible the resources present and the joy found in the moment. It creates community by allowing an embodied and visible appreciation for the differences and commonalities, the consistencies and the newly formed communities that gathered in the post-disaster landscape of New Orleans to vision recovery.

### **Re-Storying Disaster**

As a form of storytelling that makes obvious its way of telling and retelling stories, Playback can emphasize in their enactment the way a teller stories his or her experience. Some tellers use metaphors, jokes, or just a physical gesture that a Playback actor can take up and magnify in some way. One of our youth tellers at Walker High School gave us an elaborate story where during the first week of the levee breaks his Mexican American friend trapped in New Orleans swam across the Mississippi River to the West Bank with guns shooting at him. In his tale, our young teller says his friend made it safely across. His story was complete fantasy. Our fifteen-year-old teller was very aware, as were we all, of the infamous GNO bridge incident where police officers on the West Bank from Jefferson Parish shot at crowds attempting by foot to cross the GNO bridge out of hell's toxic flood waters. The respect we gave his story with a long dark cloth that threatened to drown his friend as he attempted to escape bullets allowed for this West Bank community of youth to imaginatively reflect on that incident.

Playback Theater's non-didactic emphasis necessitates that "happy endings" are never imposed in Playback enactments. However, by opening up the story it can open up the story to

*insights* that can be incredibly useful to the teller or to other participants of the community.<sup>55</sup> At the *Dramarama* performance described at the top of this chapter a young woman spoke of her difficulty of finding employment and a place to live with the hiked up rates of “dry” homes and the slow return of businesses in the city. She spoke of her current living situation with a “horrible” and “disgusting” male roommate that she found incredibly disagreeable as well as filthy in his living habits. This repugnant roommate showed up at her place of work where she was employed as an exotic dancer and ordered a lap dance from her. She spoke of her repulsion, anger and resentment as she complied and gave her roommate the lap dance. I called for a Playback short form that can aid in constraining and breaking up the narrative in what we call “three part story” (three actors individually and one at a time offer an enactment of any aspect of the story then freeze). The “lap dance” part of the teller’s story was taken up by a female company member who simply stood still center stage and repeatedly ask the question “Why do I have to do this?” She altered her phrasing in such a way the repeated phrase reflected multiple levels of the teller’s experience. The fact the teller’s actor chose *not to* realistically give a lap dance to another actor but had an *alternate* representation of that moment through a physically static inner monologue already provided an *alternative* to the teller’s experience. The teller enthusiastically received the enactment and I feel we had validated her experience. Yet, on another level I hope that we pried open a space for this teller to question her assumption that she had *no other choice but to give this person she detested a lap dance* through the teller’s actor repetition of that very question. Playback does not explicitly offer alternative actions for issues as a TO process would. Rowe states that by introducing the multiple interpretations of a teller’s

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<sup>55</sup> For Thompson, this sort of tactic relates to de Certeau’s notion of “La perruque” (25) which allows people in applied theater projects to tactically draw the unexpected from their situations’(de certeau IIbid.,p25) Thompson 38) as a form of resistance that is free, creative, and safe (38).

story, we already impose *alternate* possibilities into that story merely through the artistic revisions of it.<sup>56</sup> Playback challenges a single, authoritative experience of a story through multiple interpretations that Rowe states can invite expansion, investigation and “playful restructuring” (Rowe 32, 39). In our enactment of our teller’s story we reframed her “freedom” to question, or refuse her roommate in a way that Rowe describes as liberating for both the teller and spectator from the “tyranny of the closed fixed viewpoint” (39). For Rowe, Playback is more of a “re-figuring of the past to release us from its power to control the present and the future” as Rowe states it opens new possibilities of making sense of our experience (98). I take this aspect of Playback’s openness as potent for social change as it can insert a critique, awareness, as well as other perspectives that can enrich a teller’s experience of how they see their story. This is important because I believe that how we experience our past determines choices we make in the present that impact our future.

Similarly, as an aspect of co-performative witnessing where the performing ensemble opens up the teller’s story and may allow their own identifications and responses to the story inform their artistic response, Playback opens up a space for inserting or reframing a perspective that can be more humanizing or empowering to tellers. Not all tellers are *aware* or are concerned of their own participation in oppression or suffering of others in their community. In these instances, Playback Theater’s openness can invite reflexivity from the audience and the ensemble to bring more empathy and inclusion into a teller’s story as a way to implicate more care and kindness, humanity, in a world we revision together. For one of our Youth Outreach events in the spring of 2007 at McMain High School, a sophomore boy told a story that came off

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<sup>56</sup> In TO, audience participants would take up our teller’s dilemma of having to do a lap dance for her roommate and have participants stage alternative actions that the group could then assess and evaluate.

as a “brag” about stealing a wheelchair from a handicapped elder. He came up to the teller’s chair with his hood covering most of his face. His voice was almost inaudible and he was almost lying down on the teller’s chair. He told the story how he, his friend, and his cousins the same age came across a stereo out on a man’s front porch along with a wheelchair and how they took the items. The boy described with more observable enthusiasm the exciting “thrill” of running down the street when suddenly another man came out of the house and started yelling at them and running after them. They thought the man might “kill” them so they returned the wheelchair but kept the stereo. Wayne described his pride in giving his older brother a stereo that he had wanted. NPT performer Nick Lopez, a few years older than our teller, conducted this story and I as an “unassigned actor” cast myself as the handicapped man who needed the wheelchair. Crossing gender, race, age and ability I inserted into the teller’s story the perspective of the handicapped man: “I need that wheelchair. It’s not cheap. It took me a LONG time to get that wheelchair. How am I supposed to get my groceries? How can I leave my house without this? What did I do to them? I could call the police!” The value of co-performative witnessing enables me to assert my world-view into his story. Because this *is* Playback there is no “moral” lesson to impart on the anti-social, and even vicious behavior of the teen. However, his attempt to “brag” in front of his peers through his story of adventure and “near death” is complicated by the subjectivity inserted of the handicapped man who previously had no voice in the teen’s telling of the story. Playback’s openness allows me to preserve and assert my own subjective experience to counter the teller’s easy dismissal of the handicapped man. This can be articulated by an aspect of co-performative witnessing, which Madison describes as dialogic-subjectivity. This aspect of co-performative witnessing is where performer and audience are “permeable” and impact each other. Madison states it is where we meet others in a reciprocal engagement and an

“inter-animation of response and address” (829). Madison describes this as a positive aspect for community as this counterbalance of subjectivities is a “political act” where the mutual encounter can encourage personal growth and understanding (Madison 829). I can attest to the fact that my position confronted our teller’s framing of his story. Madison’s more hopeful statement that this encounter deepens and helps subjectivities grow through the mutual encounter is meant for longer engagement in the field, not a one-time performance event. After the enactment the boy was sitting actively in his chair with a very animated face. He seemed to enjoy immensely a performance of himself in this story. Nick did not probe further into what he thought about “my” character as the handicapped man so I do not know what his thoughts on that may have been. Although I can make no claim that our young teller had acknowledged this other perspective in his story, we did insert advocacy for the handicapped man to the community present. Staging the teen’s story without recognizing the position of the handicapped man would have been negligent and reinforced an ideology that his actions only matter to himself and that no one else’s part in the story matters to the community present. Through co-performative witnessing we can establish for the community present in the event that while maintaining respect for the teller, Playback Theater can publicly invite a critique into their “storied” experience and re-frame it with more respect for all those involved. Had we not given more respect to the handicapped man in this story we would have been complicit in his victimization and only served to boost our teller’s ego in front of his peers.

Madison stresses the point that in this exchange of artists live and act with others inside the “materiality of their struggles and consequences” through an aspect of co-performative witnessing she names co-evalness (829). I feel this aspect of co-evalness relates to NPT’s relationships with its communities and community partners. NPT members were and are New

Orleanians also impacted by the disaster and struggling to reclaim our lives. Our long-term commitment to engage our bodies “on the line” with our audiences over years at multiple events helped to create a performing “with and “for” relation over a performing “to” model.

The *spaces* NOLA Playback has performed in over seven years to returning New Orleanians are in places convenient, familiar, and congruent with the communities we serve. In many ways the locations of NPT shows are a way the communities identify themselves as a community: community resource tents in devastated St. Bernard Parish, under reconstruction neighborhood centers, living rooms, restored church meeting halls, restaurants, outside on the Mississippi levee, Congo Square, bar room, Senior Center, School libraries and gyms, makeshift meeting spaces for grassroots organizations, and occasionally theater stages. The fact we place our events in their living spaces reflect this aspect of co-evalness, which Madison also articulates as co-temporal (828). NPT members maintain long-term relationships with the various community sites we have lived in and performed for over the years. For example, at the seventh anniversary of the levee breaks disaster, NPT’s community partner, Fourth World Movement launched the release of their book at the African American Museum in Treme where NPT held an hour-long Playback performance for project participants and the community. NPT had been involved in the development of the book project over its four years of development and had performed Playback for several of the events for the project and for other organizational events. We were in tune with the rhythms of Fourth World Movements community outreach yearlong cycle as well as with the many people of all ages involved with and served by Fourth World Movement.

I have so far made an argument for how Playback can participate as a performative for communities in crisis as a way of enabling an experience of affective beauty to displace suffering

and in its openness that permits multiple perspectives on personal stories that can enable social critique, empower individuals and affirm community.

But as I stressed at the beginning of this chapter, Playback is a form that engages in a risky business where tellers share personal stories in public places with the implied invitation for the Playback ensemble to interpret their stories and reenact them. I had some painful lessons along the way as director and primary conductor of NPT. Thanks to the support of the Centre for Playback Theatre with ongoing training for NPT members, and the guidance of Playback mentors like Jonathan Fox, Pamela Freeman (Philadelphia Playback for Change), Paul McIsaac (Playback NYC), and Nan Crawford (Pacific Playback Theatre), the learning curves were less “brutal” as I found better ways to navigate our growth, our internal company life, and our work in New Orleans. Many of our learning experiences came out of a performance experience of connection with our audiences and a sense of achievement. However, great teachers can come in all forms.

#### THE EDGE OF PLAYBACK PRACTICE

*We are performing in the middle of Congo Square on the edge of Rampart Street the edge of the French Quarter. It is a very hot summer and our first “outdoor” show with our collaborators for Truth Be Told to engage dialogue on race and racism. We are ending the day with a Playback Show. The sound equipment can’t plug in because the electrical outlets in the park nearest our area have not yet been repaired. There is a lot of coming and going and wandering in and out of passerby pedestrians. I realize that I have made a huge mistake. There is no way to hold this space. I announce to the cast my concern and tell them that I will focus on the “Freedom Riders” journey to the U.S. Social Justice Forum and try to restrict the event to*

*the feelings surrounding the upcoming event in Atlanta*<sup>57</sup>. A nun raises her hand and says she can't go to the forum but just wants to tell her story. I welcome her to the teller's chair. Sister Mary explains how she is a volunteer with Fourth World Movement<sup>58</sup> and had become close to the X family whom she had lost contact with during Katrina. She went on to say that her story is about her joy of being reunited with them and as a matter of fact they were with here that day in the audience. I made a quick acknowledgement of a couple and Mrs. X's sister sitting in the audience. They also cheered how happy they were to see Sister Mary again and the audience makes a murmur of pleasure about this reunion. Satisfied that we would have a fantastic story to play, I encouraged Sister Mary to tell me about how she met the family X. Sister Mary immediately jumped in with the information that she had found them after months of looking during Katrina and how just after finding them their baby died and they couldn't afford to bury the child. Fourth World Movement arranged for the baby's funeral but unfortunately the parents couldn't be present. It slid out of her tongue so easily, the horrifying story of this family sitting right there, identified in the audience. I was caught so completely unawares, that I didn't interrupt the moment she "outed" the death of the baby. Seriously concerned for the family, I did finally interrupt Sister Mary and suggest that we try to play back part of the story. I reminded her (as I had done at the top of the show) that Playback is about her own personal experience and that when she came up she really seemed filled with the sense of reunion with this family. I suggested we play that back and Sister Mary agreed. I looked back at the actors who were looking back at me with big eyes and I made what I would call an "emergency move" of

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<sup>57</sup> Early on in our collaboration for *Truth Be Told* was the event held at the significant site of Congo Square for African American culture in New Orleans to greet the Freedom Riders for the caravan stop in New Orleans on its way to Atlanta for the U.S. Forum for Social Justice.

<sup>58</sup> An International volunteer organization dedicated to the eradication of poverty based in Paris with a presence in New Orleans that spans two decades



*dictating exactly what we would see as an attempt to contain this story. I suggested a short narrative form (three part story) that employs only three performers and is good for containment of difficult stories. I very deliberately dictated exactly which parts they would play back: Sister Mary's connection to the family, Sister's Mary's loss and search for them, and the reunion of Sister Mary and the family. Our newest member, an African-American social worker, former cop and beginning performer, did not heed my directions or attempts to contain the story and broke the conventions of the form to run on stage and play the part of the mother who lost her baby with full-on realistic dramatic acting crying: "My baby! My baby!"*

Well there it was. The other two performer actors picked up the pieces as best they could but the form was broken, the "contract" I had made with the teller and the audience about what we would see played back was discarded, and all anyone could think of was of the poor family pointed out in the audience and a "dead baby." Somehow we got through the end of that story and through the rest of the show. I was able to have a long talk with the family afterwards. They loved Sister Mary so much that they seemed to take it the way Sister Mary meant it as a favor. I can only imagine what they did not express to me. As a company we had an immediate process after the show (which we don't usually do) to talk about what happened and we worked through the event in rehearsals.

At this point NPT was five months old. Despite our preparation, our knowledge that there is danger in representation of trauma, and even despite my attempts to contain the situation through overt, explicit directions and a Playback short form chosen specifically for its ability to "contain," the unsafe nature of the space problematic for even "simple" offerings invited chaos where a problematic teller, a rogue player, and an inexperienced conductor made for a truly horrific combination. If we "knew" of the potential for harm in Playback before Congo Square,

afterwards I knew it so painfully well that it significantly changed my practice. There will be newer performers in our ensemble from time to time, and that always creates instability in the equation of spontaneous performance that only rehearsal, training, and the rest of the ensemble can temper. The MJPAC Performing Arts Center near Congo Square, extremely fitting for the prepared telling of narratives of African American women in *Swimming Upstream*, was also an excellent site of significance for New Orleanians and Freedom Riders in celebration of the upcoming U.S. Forum for Social Justice. However, as a director I did not sufficiently alter the environment in Congo Square for our Playback to become an *appropriate venue* for sharing personal stories in this very public, very busy and open space. It was not a good fit of earlier cited Cruz's criteria of an appropriate fit of "subject-venue-audience" (374).

I was so accustomed to following the primary rule of improvisation for our improvisational company "yes...and..." the first months of our company life, especially to my collaborating community partners, that I realized I needed to begin saying "yes...and I need...." NPT purchased a 40x40 tent shortly after Congo Square in order to help build a safer, more focused space for Playback in outdoor events. We worked with a similar, more elaborately tent constructed and designed by ABC Carpet in NYC In the Superdome for our Red Tent story-sharing events for the V-Day X celebration. Inside the cavernous space of the Superdome and all the activity with the crowds of the V-Day X, we were able to support an intimate space for women to share stories and reflect on what happened in the Superdome in 2005 and focus on V-Day's mission to end violence against women and girls. An elderly woman approached me shortly after one of our Red Tent events in the Superdome and told me how grateful she was for that experience and how she had waited over fifty years to tell her story, but that it wasn't until this invitation in the Red Tent that she ever felt she *could* tell her story.

I've chosen to close this chapter with a story of an NPT Playback miscarriage to emphasize the risks involved, the elements that can be altered to mitigate risk and maximize benefits of playing back stories in public spaces. Lessons learned have helped to improve and deepen our practice. Our ability to continue to do our work, to improve, to grow and make better choices to serve our communities is due to the powerful community processes we use, Playback and story circle method; due to the dedication and commitment of our company; due to our community partners ability to involve us in well-organized, fun and impactful events; and due to the post-Katrina surge of activity and energy following the disaster. How will it be sustained now that the Katrina bubble of concern has bust?

I now have seven and a half years of directing and performing in NPT in New Orleans. I find this form of telling, listening, and reframing of personal narratives to be performative. Although Playback is representational in that we offer interpretations of a teller's experience of story, it is also performative. Playback process is crafted with a relational ethic, where meaning is negotiated by the teller, the Playback ensemble, as well as the audience. Audience participants co-create a Playback event and in so doing, support an audience relation as *witness to* rather than consumer of personal stories. Playback telling and enactments connect memory to the present moment of performance and opens personal stories in a way that disturbs master narratives, resists the national tendency to forget (to forget especially undesirable narratives), and incorporates marginalized voices to engage in the re-creation in New Orleans. In NPT Playback performances audience members take an active role in recreating their world as they creatively collaborate with the performers in sharing personal narratives, listening and making meaning of them. In this way, Playback Theatre as a creative process collaboratively emerging in the present *with* ensemble members and audience participants takes part in Conquergood's claim of

performance's ability in the Hmong refugee camp to "re-create" self and society. I believe Playback opens up the possibility for a more informed and invigorated community to embark upon or enrich their ongoing commitment to the tasks of creating constructive change

Unlike TO story circle method discussed earlier where a minimum of one skilled facilitator is needed to carry on the process successfully with a gathered group; Playback Theatre is more costly in that it requires a number of artists dedicated to take the time to train to improve their individual skills as well as to form an ensemble. In the context of communities in crisis, Playback Theater practitioners should invest even further in their preparation to address difficult stories in order to provide care and consideration to all participants. Playback has an ability to reach large and small groups in micro-community settings on a traditional stage or in active spaces belonging to community members. A Playback event may have an admission ticket price, but more often there is no financial cost to audience participants. The material simplicity and flexibility of the form itself make it extremely accessible to community members. It is not a practice that audience members can pick up and practice themselves without training.

Founder of Playback, Jonathan Fox, writes in the current Playback Centre newsletter, that logistically, it is very difficult to launch a consistent, sustainable, ethical response to crises in areas that don't already have Playback (Fox n.pag.). Unless there is an ability to sustain an effort with Playback Theater to work with communities consistently over time, I do not think it is worth the organization and cost to launch a short-term effort. My arguments for Playback as a positive, performative force for recovery after disaster is in the context of a local effort with aid and support from the wider Playback community, as was the case in New Orleans. Because of the attention given to the Gulf Coast in the immediate period following the disaster, NPT received a major boost most Playback companies wouldn't receive under more regular

conditions. Our long-term connection to local partners Ashé Cultural Arts Center, Fourth World Movement, and the 7<sup>th</sup> Ward Neighborhood Center made it possible for us to focus on the quality of our work and eased the time-consuming labor of community organizing. Our relationship to our community partners: reciprocal, flexible, grounded in enduring, personal connection, reflect the values of co-performative witnessing and reap the benefits of such an alignment.

This chapter straddles an argument in support of Playback Theatre as powerful community tool to respond to communities in crisis at the same that I wrap caution tape around this argument, especially when dealing with communities in crisis or stories of trauma. The performative aspects of Playback I discuss in this context: affect, openness, and community activation; are contingent upon a careful, informed practice and adherence to rules of playback. Improvisation is a dangerous horse to ride, but it also bears gifts that can be a support in terrible times. I argue for a local response to be made at micro-community levels with the value of affect and co-performative witnessing to engage an ethical and performative artistic response that uses personal story, place, and memory.

We recently passed the eighth anniversary of the levee breaks disaster. My desire to “help” New Orleanians have an outlet for their personal stories of disaster to be heard in the beginning of 2006 was also my incredible personal need to be with other New Orleanians who *knew* what it was to lose your city and want it back more than anything. I wanted to hear other New Orleanians express what it was to miss New Orleans.

Playback Theatre and story circle method, which are both employed by NPT in our work in New Orleans, offer a rare occasion for smaller groups of community members to gather around issues they face and listen to each other. Even in small gatherings of very like-minded, single-purpose driven groups, dominant voices tend to dominate, often at the expense of minority

voices and opinions. Even a small family dinner table can become a monologic takeover. With the structure of Playback and story circle method, there is an ability to include a wider range of voices and connect personal experience to community concerns. Founder of Playback Theatre Jonathan Fox recently described the benefit of Playback process to communities as *narrative reticulation*, which emphasizes the flow of stories within a community to all parts of the community to promote a healthy and vigorous network of awareness and support for community issues (Fox 2013, *A New*).

In addition to the opening of the flow of stories within a community, the embodied, interpretative, spontaneous work of Playback Theatre gives groups an opportunity to *affectively* experience an interpretation of the story they heard. The images, sounds, dialogue, movements created spontaneously by the ensemble within Playback enactments lingers with participants imaginatively and opens up alternate ways to listen to each other and collectively remember. It is an active, co-creative process that opens up spaces for community members to learn more about each other and to recreate together new stories for a *New New Orleans* through performances of memory inside living community sites. In these tellings and retellings of our performed responses, we “construct our collective future” together as we remember together. I believe Playback opens up the possibility for a more informed and invigorated community to embark upon or enrich their ongoing commitment to the tasks of creating constructive change. Visions, inspirations, information that construct social change are literally built on the “ephemeral” mode of exchange and enactments of personal stories within the community. The transience of this exchange in performance is made more overt at the end of a Playback performance. I often chose a closing called “Once there was...” where each performer recalls one moment of one story with a phrase or word and a gesture which the ensemble repeats in a

chorus. With this closing, individual moments of stories are recalled as well as a re-enactment of Playback's emphasis on listening with the repetition of the chorus. The Playback event in this way finds satisfaction in closure, through an emphasis of listening and remembering. In this way, NPT participates in a process of recovery long even before the material conditions for recovery are present and literally participate in rebuilding New Orleans "one story at a time" through the overall value of listening.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION: AND TIME

*I'm in one of Southern Repertory's rented spaces for the final installation of Lakeview playwright John Biguenet's "Katrina" trilogy Mold. My throat tightens as the two main characters make their first walk-through the home of the main character Trey's deceased parents who perished in the flood. It's been nearly eight years for us in the audience but only a year for the characters since the levees broke. There is no rank smell coming from the set pieces otherwise made to resemble the mangle of personal objects and furniture inside the character's boarded up and moldy family home. It's a scene all too familiar. As we hear Trey later engage in dialogue with an insurance agent we know too well how his expectations of recuperation for the damaged home is hopeless.*

There is terrible loss in Biguenet's play, represented by a staircase up to the attic that the young man Trey gazes up into-- an attic similar to the one the couple of Biguenet's first play would have drowned in. The gesture of terrible memory held in that pull-down staircase is balanced by the young couple's love for each other and her pregnancy. It's not all death and destruction. I found the play difficult to watch because I must passively observe the young couple slowly make realizations about post-disaster life that I don't personally wish to relive. My former co-worker, who lost her home in Lakeview, had to leave after the first few minutes of the first scene even though our former student was performing the lead role of the wife. Informed, compelling, and sensitive, Biguenet's play is authored from a New Orleanian perspective and anchored in a love for New Orleans. I appreciate the way Biguenet finds closure in each of the plays of his trilogy without resorting to neat narrative resolutions. In this way Biguenet emphasizes the big questions New Orleanians faced in the early aftermath of the disaster without making totalizing statements of the disaster experience. And yet the play is still



very risky business emotionally for audience members who lived through this disaster eight years ago. I was able to stay in my seat, but the specificity of the play evoked crystal clear memories that are extremely unpleasant. Biguenet is very careful with representation of trauma onstage. The moment that was so hard to take, that had my colleague leave the theater, was the opening of the front door, which revealed to the characters the innards of Trey's flooded family home that had been boarded up for months. The drowning of his parents is referred to indirectly when actors look up towards the attic stair. Compared to many out-of-region's tendencies to represent disaster trauma, Biguenet's method for evoking the tragedy by busting open a door or gesturing to a stairway is restrained. For example Southern Repertory's production of *The Breach* contained not one, but two drowning scenes and a dead baby. However, Biguenet's play is so viscerally rooted in lived experience that is a minefield of evocative painful stories and memories that so many people of New Orleans share. This brings me back to performance of disaster and its relation to time. For many New Orleanians, it is still perhaps best to keep the door closed against the flood of those memories. This is especially so in a context of theater when there is no audience process beyond the moment of the play from the audience seat and the applause at the curtain call as the spectator rises to leave the performance space.

I've mentioned the eighth anniversary of the levee breaks disaster more than once in this study but truthfully, I forgot to mark its passing. I was wrapped up in the many activities of a normal day. I want my daughter who was born four years after the levee breaks and has never lived in New Orleans to remember the disaster. Ironically, during the time of the disaster I did all I could to help my toddler son living through the experience to forget he was in the middle of it. Because he did live through it and was deeply troubled by the devastation of his known world I still do not have an inclination to preserve the memory of his disaster experience for him. I am

grateful for the distance that time has put between him and the disaster and his lack of memory of that time. Within my own family eight years after the disaster are differing needs and desires for remembering and forgetting the disaster. What may be an appropriate time for a theater or performance event to remember catastrophe in the communities that lived through it is as multiple as the disaster experience itself as New Orleanians eight years and onwards after the event of the levee breaks continue to negotiate their own returned or resettled lives.

In this study, I discuss how performance can empower participants' agency in remembering around the disaster. I discuss the ethics of mounting performance responses to the levee breaks disaster in New Orleans. I investigate the aesthetic organizational frame of how the focus performances of this study engage personal story, place and memory. In *LakeviewS*, *Swimming Upstream*, and events of NOLA Playback Theatre, participants negotiate their own process of remembering as part of a group in the performance event through the specificity of their temporal and physical sites. With *LakeviewS* a year and a half after the levee breaks event, the place of the devastated neighborhood was conceived as in flux and in motion through a bus tour. Each site of the performance revealed personal story and spatial story in differing ways depending on the artistic discipline or proclivity of the contributing artist who was also a resident of Lakeview. The performances invited the participants to engage with these offerings and with each other as an affirmation of community. *Swimming Upstream* with the leverage of the international organization of V-Day was able to open the doors of the Superdome for a performative and collective act of resistance to remember the events of the disaster at the iconic site and affirm an alternate vision of community and listening. As it traveled to other shores, I had the ability to notice how the performance operated as a performative in these other sites of the New Orleanian diaspora. NOLA Playback Theater uses places that are active community

sites to perform personal and community stories. The stories and active remembering that emerge in Playback events are connected to group identity, which is in part defined by the space itself. The way all three of the focus performances maneuver through sites in post-disaster New Orleans reveal and open personal and spatial stories. The focus performances are processes of remembering with shared stakes among performers and participants in spaces that matter in the overall struggle to return to New Orleans.

My analysis of the efficacy and ethical engagement of the focus performances in their sites in New Orleans and how they serve their communities is framed by issues of representation outlined by Elin Diamond and by community-based theater scholars Jan Cohen Cruz and Sonia Kuftinec. Diamond's ethical questions of representation and Jan Cohen-Cruz' articulation of an appropriate fit of subject-venue- audience provide very specific questions that interrogate issues of response and representation. Cinema scholar Sylvie Rollet and performance scholar Dwight Conquergood provide articulation and theory for a relational ethic in making response performances that can enlarge and create supportive community through building witnesses.

This study also greatly relies on James Thompson's relational ethic and argument for centering projects in crisis contexts on an affective experience of beauty as defined by the participating community. Thompson does not argue an inherent goodness in beauty but rather makes a compelling argument for the value of aesthetic force in a context of crisis that I believe is supported by this study. The ability for the affective experience of beauty to displace pain, invigorate ongoing struggle, and provide a critique in its contrast to suffering are powerful tactics of these performances in post-disaster New Orleans. The focus performances employed this value of affect in aesthetic force that is locally defined, in the way they engaged with place, personal story and memory. For *Swimming Upstream* Thompson's articulation of performance

affects was expressed through the V-Day X celebration in the Superdome and the non-linear emphasis of the piece. For *LakeviewS*, the celebratory feast at Lake Pontchartrain, as well as the tactile engagement with the sites of the bus tour uphold this value of affect in a context of loss and destruction. For NOLA Playback Theatre events throughout the city, the ability for tellers to navigate their own telling of stories place emphasis on affective experiences of resilience and humor. Playback's non-linear cannon of performance possibilities underscore a value in affective experience to express and represent the struggle to overcome the tedium, the horrors, and the ongoing battles New Orleanians faced as they made their return home.

Although the aesthetic frame defining the focus performances of personal story, memory and place is not an ethical framework for making disaster response performance, these concepts build a strong, generative foundation to begin to create and respond when a world is lost and a community struggles to rebuild a new one they can live in. Engaging with personal story and place opens memory in a way that builds community, a most valuable resource in the context of a dispersed, displaced, and struggling to return population. When ethical considerations are in alignment, engagement with personal story, place and memory contribute to a promising performance practice in a post-disaster context. When these elements are opened, rather than shut down, and when they are opened through thoughtfully crafted invitations in environments where stories of spaces and personal experiences can be *heard* the performances can perform as acts of recovery and restoration. The attributes of these New Orleanian post-disaster performance projects are of benefit to a worldwide conversation about the possibilities of performance to participate in recovery efforts after catastrophe.

I realize that in truth, at least for the immediate concerns of theater, there is already a major reduction in the number of "Katrina" art proposals going to national funders to bring their

works down to New Orleans or to perform elsewhere. For the rest of the nation and the world, the desire to bring a theater of rescue will be at another location for another catastrophe. It will be the legacy left behind by the “Katrina” performances and plays that are published, circulated, and marked in the archives that will guide future funding decisions for response works in other areas in crisis. To this date, Chan/Creative Time’s *Waiting for Godot* holds the most significance for performance response to the levee breaks disaster in New Orleans. The *Godot* project employed as a foil in the second chapter, demonstrates a manipulation of place and story rather than engagement with them. The result was an unintentional act of sublimation of African American experience rooted in the disaster of the neighborhood in order to support Paul Chan’s masterful vision and his own political critique through metaphor. It also resulted in a great production of a classic play. I challenge Kroeber’s statement in the *Field Guide* that in this context, the play justifies the means. By betraying their own sense of what is ethical in monetizing city assistance and volunteer labor to benefit their production, they ended up serving more upper and middle class white New Yorker and New Orleanians who were able to maneuver through the *Godot* gates.

Although I do not relish watching Biguenet’s plays because they evoke my own horrible experiences from the passive place of a theater seat, I am glad Biguenet’s plays are there. My daughter, who was born outside of New Orleans four years after the storm, has no idea of our earlier family story. Biguenet’s *Mold* is a text that she can read or encounter as a way to learn about the experience when she’s older. Despite the fact that in the disaster aftermath and even eight years after, the mode of realistic drama has not been so much what I have been drawn to as a theatre artist or as a survivor as a way to grapple with my own disaster experience, I turn now to the specificity, accuracy, and endurance of Biguenet’s text to participate in the archives of

memory as one way for my daughter to remember the disaster years from now. The other end of that promise for the written text of a play to stand as record is of course problematic with poorly written, careless, or downright inaccurate representations of the disaster experience. I am concerned about the sheer number of “Katrina plays” that had a moment around the nation in the first months and years after the disaster that have absolutely no grounding in New Orleans yet stand nationally as a record to remember the levee breaks disaster elsewhere referred solely as Hurricane Katrina.<sup>59</sup> One of the most vital issues I have witnessed in terms of performance navigating ethical issues of representation of the disaster experience in New Orleans is that risk is not removed but is alleviated when there is deep investment in local artists or performance is created by artists who are deeply rooted in the communities the performances serve.

In the spring of 2006, I was invited to sit on a panel for a national art foundation based in New York City. The deadline for the grant application was in November of 2005, a time when the Gulf Coast was still in an urgent phase of the disasters caused by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in August, and September of 2005. That year there were a surprising number of performance proposals for “Katrina performances” by New Orleanian artists competing with out-of-region artists for the same funding to create performance response to the levee breaks disaster. One of my fellow national grant panelists asked me if New Orleanians needed catharsis, as one Brooklyn dance company promised to provide to New Orleanians with their creation. Without weighing the implications of speaking for an entire region, I instantly replied that we didn’t need catharsis, we needed funding.

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<sup>59</sup> An example of misrepresentation is Manhattan’s Flea Theater’s production of *Lower Ninth* by Beau Williamson set on a rooftop in New Orleans during the flood (Kendt n.pag.). It received many poor reviews in New York, but I have selected this play out of the many plays that took the stage in theaters everywhere *but* New Orleans because the title is a misnomer. In New Orleans we say “Lower Nine” or “The Lower Ninth Ward.”

A value in local investment in the arts for the rebuilding efforts in New Orleans and other areas of the Gulf Coast inspired legislative action with the Gulf Coast Civic Works Act, introduced into the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress in May 2009. The proposed bill calls for legislative action for sustainable economic recovery of the Gulf Coast including in the arts by filling contracts with Gulf Coast Residents and taking regional advisement for federal investment. The bill also provides for a Commission to provide grants for artists of the Gulf Coast for “artistic and cultural projects that reflect or preserve the history and culture of the Gulf Coast region; and projects that chronicle the story of Hurricane Katrina and Rita” (U.S. Cong.). Unfortunately no further movement on this bill has been made. The writers and endorsers of this bill see the logic in strengthening the Gulf Coast Region through its greatest resource: its own people and talent. Artists of the Gulf Coast are able to reach deeply into their communities and will remain and reinvest in their communities.

It is my hope to emphasize the potential for deep, positive impact performance can make in broken communities reeling from catastrophe. I also wish to emphasize the dangers of offending and harming these communities further through ill-conceived yet well-intentioned performance projects. Out-of-Region artists not personally impacted by the disaster in the first long months were better positioned to apply for arts funding for their artistic responses to the disaster. New Orleans playwright and author of the play *Katrina's Path* Rob Florence stated that New Orleanian theatre artists those first months after the disaster “had to deal with the first order of Maslow’s needs...not just for themselves, but possibly for everyone--everyone in their family” (Florence). The focus performances of this study model the possibilities of outside artist extension of support to local artists in producing and creating disaster response performances. The performance project *LakeviewS*, *Swimming Upstream*, and the initial support of NOLA

Playback Theatre are examples of partnership between artists of New York city and state with New Orleans. This model of partnership and support for artists of the Gulf Coast I hope will be taken up in future scenarios in other disaster regions over what I consider to be opportunistic models of artistic engagement with disaster zones that elide investment in local artists.

National funders should be very aware that a New York-based or California-residing artist that seeks to make disaster response art for the people of New Orleans without forging partnership with New Orleanian artists or New Orleanian organizations...no matter how well-intentioned are setting up a poor situation that is not sustainable where they are the ones most likely to receive the most benefit. I have made an argument throughout this study about national resources being aimed at local arts organizations and artists to respond to their own disaster and serve the communities they serve. I believe this. And I also know from experience that not all local responses are progressive acts of recovery.

The funding pitfalls for both imported and local works I witnessed in New Orleans with the CAC's NEA-funded *7 Days of Paradise*, and Paul Chan's *Godot*, had the funders sifted their decisions through the ethical frameworks of Diamond, Kuflinec or Cohen-Cruz, wiser funding choices could have been made--decisions that could have for example, extended performances of *LakeviewS* so that more New Orleanians could have seen it or that similar projects could have been mounted in one of the other participating neighborhoods of the collective Home NOLA? *LakeviewS* supported by New York University-based artist scholars Richard Schechner and Jan Cohen Cruz were able to leverage national funding and premiered in June 2007. *Swimming Upstream*, monetized through influential connections of New York based Eve Ensler of V-Day with grassroots strength of Carol Bebel and Ashé Cultural Arts Center had its premiere in April 2008. The activities of NOLA Playback Theatre, supported generously by New York based



Playback practitioner Paul McIsaac of Playback NYC and New York state-based the Centre for Playback Theatre, began in February of 2006 and are ongoing as we just passed the eighth anniversary of the levee breaks disaster in August 2013.

As the focus performances of this study are tied to space, they are equally tied to time and its inherent sense of movement and change. It may be possible to remount *LakeviewS* in 2014, with and without the physical spaces of the performance event of 2007, but it would no longer hold the same meaning or impact to Lakeview residents. Similarly, any enactment of a Playback story disappears as it is incorporated into the bodies that perform and witness them. Although our work with Playback continues in New Orleans working with many of the same community partners as we did several years ago, time changes the nature and impact of the tellings and enactments. Not only are the stories and spaces changing but the significance of remembering the disaster change as well over time.

Of the focus performances of this study that can stand as a text, I can offer my daughter *Swimming Upstream* to relate to that part of our family history. As a text with music, *SU* does have a future possibility of publication (although there are no plans to do so) and with that comes the dual possibility for it to move into the realm of interpretation as a monologue play for actresses everywhere. As a text it also holds the possibility to claim its place in the archives and stand as testimony for another generation of New Orleanians as well as a risk to be taken up as riveting drama rather than as a testimony and call to action. In any case, what I can never recreate for my daughter is what I love best about *Swimming Upstream*, the way it blew through the Superdome in 2008 with five thousand people making noise as loud as a hurricane. Performance is as tied to time as it is to space in New Orleans as well as in other disaster regions.

If the “Katrina” moment is passed for national theater and performance makers as we approach a decade since the breaks, it is ongoing for artists and residents in the Gulf Coast. The enduring issues of coastal loss, the struggle to challenge national ignorance of, ignoring of the actionable circumstances that impact our environmental, economic, cultural health will have to overcome national stories that frame our predicament as natural and inevitable in film and television.<sup>60</sup> The latest collaboration of ArtSpot Productions and MondoBizarro of *Cry You One* about the interconnection of coastal and cultural loss has been generously supported by a MapFund grant. An estimated 1,000 Louisiana residents over five weekends traveled to Violet, LA. in St. Bernard Parish in October and November 2013 to witness firsthand the death of the trees due to salt water intrusion and engage in crafted experiences of coastal and cultural loss at separate sites in a walking procession of over two miles (Randels 2013). The roving spectacle emphasized the struggle for finding solutions to Louisiana’s disappearing coast, a celebration of our land and culture, as well as a sense of mourning for what has been lost and we continue to lose every day of our land and culture in South Louisiana. Nationally supported performance events such as this can oppose national narratives and offer its own counter-narratives as well as participate in creating positive change as performative acts of resistance and sites of community affirmation.

I am acutely aware of the disappearance of the focus performances and greatly heartened by the ongoing collaborative and creative work in performance that is very much alive in New Orleans despite lack of venues and typically funding. As so little is written about New Orleanian performance response to disaster I would like to see other scholars take up the project to discuss

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<sup>60</sup> 2013 Oscar’s favorite *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, an American fantasy drama written and directed by the New Yorker Benh Zeitlin, is about a girl in a coastal community of Southern Louisiana. The film stages this theme most elegantly with the trope of an extinct animal of the Ice Age with the inevitable and “natural” disappearance of her fishing community.

across disciplines how NOLA artists respond. I think it is worthy to compare/contrast how national and international artists have responded as well connect that conversation with the international endeavors in the visual art scene with *Prospect 1 and 1.2*. Another mode of inquiry that I think valuable would be to compare the focus performances of my study and perhaps cast a wider net to include some of the local plays written about the disaster to compare with the film and television representations of the disaster.<sup>61</sup> The focus performances of this study are carried within the bodies of those who witnessed them. How they will be transmitted, how they can continue to perform is tied to the enduring and ephemeral phenomena of embodied memory through time.

My journey through this study included an unexpected struggles to find my own monologic, scholarly voice in an attempt to write about polyphony in community expression; to write about memory as embodied and enduring with performances that disappear; to interrogate thoroughly my own work as a survivor/artist and as a survivor/scholar. Along the way have been surprising found objects and unexpected encounters: an interview on France Culture internet radio in French with Sylvie Rollet on the way to the grocery, a chance meeting with Soyini Madison at a Playback Workshop I gave, a meeting at an ArtSpot story circle event in Lakeview with Catherine Michna, a phone call from Jan Gilbert inviting me to write an article on post-disaster performance in New Orleans. These encounters opened up performances I thought I *knew* about a disaster I experienced and most importantly reinforced what I value most in performance-- its ability to question and open epistemologies. This is what I will carry with me in my continued work as an artist and educator and in my continued life beyond disaster.

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<sup>61</sup> Already two television series have emerged with Fox network's *K-Vile* and HBO's *Treme*.

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Tisch School of the Arts New York University  
665 Broadway, 6th floor, New York, NY 10012  
(212) 998-1626 Fax: (212) 995-4844 E-mail: tdr@nyu.edu

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## **VITA**

Anne-Liese Juge Fox, a native of New Orleans, received her BFA in theatre at Tisch School of the Arts, New York University. She furthered her training in theatre at the International School of Theatre Jacques Lecoq in Paris, France and worked in theatre and performance for many years in Paris and San Francisco before returning to New Orleans where she received an MEd in Human Performance and Health Promotion at the University of New Orleans. Anne-Liese was a collaborating artist of New Orleans-based ArtSpot Productions and was teaching theatre at Loyola and Tulane universities in New Orleans when the levee break disaster impacted her life. She founded NOLA Playback Theatre at the top of 2006 and continues to serve as its artistic director for community work in New Orleans. She intends to continue creating work and teaching theatre and performance upon completion of her doctoral degree.