

# Narrating the Storm



Narrating the Storm:  
Sociological Stories of Hurricane Katrina

Edited by

Danielle A. Hidalgo and Kristen Barber



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Narrating the Storm: Sociological Stories of Hurricane Katrina, Edited by Danielle A. Hidalgo  
and Kristen Barber

This book first published 2007 by

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

15 Angerton Gardens, Newcastle, NE5 2JA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2007 by Danielle A. Hidalgo and Kristen Barber  
and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system,  
or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or  
otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-84718-362-X, ISBN (13): 9781847183620

This book is dedicated to the people of the Gulf Coast whose lives were forever changed by Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Images.....	x
Acknowledgements .....	xi
Introduction Storytelling Sociology Danielle Antoinette Hidalgo.....	1
<b>Part I: Experiencing Race and Class In and Through Disaster</b>	
Filler Up Please: Coping With Racial Stigmas after Hurricane Katrina Andrea M. Wilbon.....	10
How I Spent My Hurricane Vacation Carl L. Bankston III.....	19
Cataclysm in New Orleans: Story of a Black Single Mother Ruth S. Idakula.....	33
Volunteering on Galveston Island: How Poverty Shaped My Response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita Deanna Meyler.....	47
Subverting Social Vulnerabilities and Inequality in Disaster Survival R. L. Stockard, Russell L. Stockard, Jr., and M. Belinda Tucker.....	62
<b>Part II: The Managed Self: Identities, Emotions, and the Treatment of the Hurricane “Other”</b>	
The Emotional Management of a Stranger: Negotiating Class Privilege and Masculine Academics as a Hurricane Katrina Evacuee Kristen Barber .....	78

On Managing Spoiled Identity: The Escape from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita Stan C. Weeber.....	90
Volunteer Voices: Making Sense of Our Trip to the Mississippi Gulf Coast After Katrina Jeffrey T. Jackson and Kirsten A. Dellinger.....	104
<b>Part III:</b>	
<b>(Ir)Rationality as a Tool for Making Disaster-Related Decisions</b>	
Disaster and the Irrationality of “Rational” Bureaucracy: Daily Life and the Continuing Struggles in the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina Timothy J. Haney .....	128
My Aunt Po: Collective Memories Shaping Collective Responses Sarah Stohlman.....	139
Using Simmel to Survive: The Blasé Attitude as a Disaster Reaction and Response Jessica W. Pardee .....	151
The First Major U.S. Urban Evacuation: Houston and the Social Construction of Risk Pamela Behan.....	169
<b>Part IV:</b>	
<b>After the Storm: Navigating New Meanings of Self and City</b>	
Trauma Written in Flesh: Tattoos as Memorials and Stories Glenn W. Gentry and Derek H. Alderman .....	184
A Bricolage of Loss Donna Maria Bonner .....	198
Hurricane Katrina: A Turning Point for Families Nicole Buras.....	210
Isn't New Orleans Back to Normal? A Dramaturgical Analysis of Post-Katrina New Orleans Carolyn Corrado and Tamara L. Smith .....	221

Contributors.....	236
Index.....	244

## LIST OF IMAGES

- 4-1 Author sorts donations at The Jesse tree
- 13-1 Andrea Garland displays her tattoo that reads “9th Ward RIP Lower 9”
- 13-2 Steve Soule gets a tattoo shaped like a hurricane graphic
- 13-3 Tom’s memorial “rescue X” tattoo
- 13-4 House in the 9th Ward bearing the ubiquitous “X”
- 13-5 Brock’s crawfish and fleur-de-lis evacuation tattoo
- 14-1 Author returns to her New Orleans home after the floods
- 14-2 A New Orleans Art Car
- 14-3 Carnival Costume built on a bicycle
- 14-4 Post-disaster view of the Haney backyard
- 15-1 Boothville-Venice following Hurricane Katrina
- 16-1 “It’s OK to drink on the streets”
- 16-2 St. Louis Cathedral
- 16-3 Complete destruction seen seventeen months after Katrina

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

These are the stories of people directly affected by Hurricane Katrina. We owe a great amount of gratitude to them for being open and honest about their experiences, and for completing their stories, no matter how difficult and emotional the process was. While these stories represent only a fraction of those caught up in Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, this book is dedicated to all those who suffered as a result of a government whose priorities laid elsewhere. There are a plethora of unsung heroes and victims to which we dedicate this book.

We would like to thank a number of people for their interest in and support of this project, particularly Carl Bankston, Mike Messner, and Beth Schneider who helped us navigate the publication process, who were always willing to share their expertise, and who are, without a doubt, fabulous mentors. Also, we would like to acknowledge April Brayfield for her early interest in and support for this project. Many thanks are due to all those who participated in and supported the Southern Sociological Society panel from which the idea for this book first emerged. Following the presentation, a number of scholars encouraged us to turn our storytelling into a book project so that they would have the opportunity to share our sociological stories with their students and colleagues. Gratitude is due to Dr. Bob, who graciously donated his time and talent to provide our book with beautiful and politically charged cover art. Also, we thank Cambridge Scholars Publishing for believing in our book and for providing us with the space to tell our stories. We would especially like to thank Amanda Millar for her patience and guidance throughout this process.

We also thank our families and close friends for their unwavering support, which has been invaluable throughout the editing of this book. Danielle would like to thank Denise Baggiani, Philip Hidalgo, June Baggiani, Rich Hidalgo, Ray Parres, Laureen Heinz/Hidalgo, Rocky and Buzz Hidalgo, and, especially, Daniel Gutiérrez for always pushing her to do work that resonates with those outside the academy. If our friends and family can pick up our book and find meaning and new ideas in it, then we have accomplished our goal. Kristen thanks Elaine Barber, Bill Barber, and Tommy O'Connell for their unwavering love and encouragement as she moves forward with her life in academics. Finally, we owe a special

thanks to our partners who lived with this project more than anyone else; they are the ones who lived with us through both exciting and frustrating moments, who listened to us as we worked through ideas and concepts, who gave us invaluable feedback regarding every step of the process, and who loved and supported us: to Damien Ricklis and Teresa, thank you.

# INTRODUCTION

## STORYTELLING SOCIOLOGY

DANIELLE ANTOINETTE HIDALGO,  
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

“Society runs through our blood. We are not separate from it”  
—Ronald J. Berger and Richard Quinney, 2005.

We were alone. During the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, many of us were alone—some literally and others figuratively. We were separated from our homes and forced to reflect on our current situations and potential futures. While I sat in my family’s kitchen, frantically watching every news channel covering the disaster, Kristen spent hours on the road, eventually finding a temporary home in Corpus Christi, Texas. Months, and now years, after the storm, the contributors to this book, Kristen, and I continue to deal with the after-effects of Katrina. Whether we were directly impacted by the storm, conducted research on the impact, engaged in volunteer work on the Gulf Coast, or had loved ones missing in the chaos of the aftermath, we all have been deeply affected by the events that took place in late August of 2005. For many of us, our lives have suffered irreparable damage. Yet, a great lesson emerged from our experiences: our stories and the telling of our stories are important sources of data that allow us and our audience to better understand how our “personal” troubles are shaped by larger public issues (Mills 1967 [1959]).

In the fall of 2005, New Orleans was in a state of disrepair. Many New Orleanians were not allowed to return until months after the storm. As a resident of New Orleans and a graduate student, I remained out of the city conducting fieldwork in Thailand. Nonetheless, I was keenly aware of and frightened for the complicated future of the city in which I lived. I mourned for my city. In order to get through the more difficult days, I read a lot. One day, I read Ronald J. Berger and Richard Quinney’s (2005) *Storytelling Sociology: Narrative as Social Inquiry* and was drawn to their “new” methodological approach for understanding how our personal

experiences are not so personal, but are, in fact, reflections of larger social patterns of race, class, gender, sexuality, age, and so on. They discuss the healing process of storytelling and its undeniable connection to sociology. What could we learn by taking this approach seriously in sociology? What could we gain from pushing some methodological boundaries through creative storytelling? I pondered these questions as I reflected on my own complicated and frustrating story with Katrina, and as I reflected on the story of the city of New Orleans. I also pondered these questions as I remained in contact with friends from New Orleans; I remember telling a good friend of mine to keep a journal as she was having so many new, daunting, and unique experiences as she returned to New Orleans. We remained in contact throughout the diaspora, and as I thought about her story as well as the stories of other friends and colleagues, I decided they should be shared with others.

In the spring following Katrina, I worked as the Chair of Local Arrangements for the Southern Sociological Society's (SSS) Annual Conference, which was scheduled in New Orleans. Immediately after Katrina, Judith Blau, then president of the society, and I discussed whether or not it was feasible to remain in New Orleans for the upcoming conference. Although I had many doubts, she thought we could do it. After much planning, we made it happen—although not without the occasional roadblock along the way. One of the conference events that I was determined to organize was a special session titled *After Hurricane Katrina: Storytelling Sociology*. In order to prepare the panelists for the session, I sent my own short story to them, describing my experiences during Hurricane Katrina, and asked them to think about and write their own. I wanted them to use their sociological imaginations (Mills 1967 [1959]) to make sense of their experiences, and to simultaneously tell their stories and reflect on the sociological implications of their hurricane experiences. Using one's sociological imagination entails understanding how one's "personal" experiences are shaped by and reflect larger social phenomena. I knew that using storytelling sociology could be an important part of the healing process for all of us; however, I had no idea that the panel would be as well received as it was. Our stories had all of the ingredients of a compelling narrative, yet they were also sufficiently sociological. The next step seemed obvious; I had to make this a book project and I had to use my sociological imagination to see it through.

## Using Our Sociological Imaginations

In C. Wright Mills' (1967 [1959]) pivotal book, *The Sociological Imagination*, he cogently outlines his approach to "doing sociology." How, he asks, does one effectively begin, work through, and complete a sociological study? How do we go about our daily lives as sociologists? How do those in the everyday world act as sociologists? And, how can we begin to understand how and why people act as they do? Mills insists that the sociological imagination allows sociologists to understand and see both the enabling and constraining aspects of sociological phenomena. The sociological imagination:

enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and external career of a variety of individuals. It enables him [*sic*] to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions. Within that welter, the framework of modern society is sought, and within that framework the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated. By such means the personal uneasiness of individuals is focused upon explicit troubles and indifference of publics into involvement with public issues (Mills 1967 [1959], 5).

Mills (1967 [1959]) continues by asserting, as we have seen in the work of Anthony Giddens (1984), that we as individuals, create, at the same time that we are created by, structure:

By the fact of his living he contributes, however minutely, to the shaping of this society and to the course of its history, *even as he is made by society and by its historical push and shove* (6; emphasis added).

With a sociological imagination, one analyzes and theorizes about the whole of society, and acknowledges and accepts the inevitability that "everything" is not explained within *one* study. Rather, the sociological imagination "consists of the capacity to shift from one perspective to another, and in the process to build an adequate view of a total society and of its components" (Mills 1967 [1959], 211). In this book, the contributors, Kristen, and I put our sociological imaginations to the test as we analyze critically and sociologically how our personal troubles with Hurricane Katrina were and continue to be connected to larger public issues. Further, we tease out how those connections between personal troubles and public issues emerged in a particular time and place, and with a particular set of actors.

In order to make our own contributions to the debates surrounding Katrina, each contributor analyzes and discusses their own sociological story. The telling of one's experience with loss and disaster is an extremely emotional process and, as Kristen notes in her sociological story, all of the contributors to this book managed their emotions (as sociologists) at the same time that they aimed to share and expose their emotions (as human beings). While this process seems obvious and quite simple, it was extremely difficult in its practical deployment. Further, all of the contributors to this volume *do* sociology, whether they identify as sociologists or not. As people read our stories, they will see that many of us are located in positions of relative privilege. However, we believe it is important to reflect on the workings of privilege, as well as disadvantage, in order to better understand how inequality shaped options, choices, and experiences of Hurricane Katrina.

### **Becoming Storytelling Sociologists**

I began the very early stages of this project with Tulane University sociologist April Brayfield. However, another graduate student and close friend, Kristen Barber, and I decided that together we had the energy and the emotional strength to see the project through. After our panel discussion at the SSS Conference, Kristen and I put out a call for papers on a wide range of listservs. We were interested in working with contributors who were comfortable writing about their narratives in a personal *and* sociological way. As we worked on the book's various stages, we experienced both the rewarding and the difficult effects of storytelling. For many of our contributors, storytelling came naturally. While the subject of Hurricane Katrina is not immediately lively or fun, our writers managed to deliver their stories with humor *and* honesty, exposing the good and the bad of their experiences. For other contributors, the act of writing their personal stories and simultaneously reflecting on those stories in a measured and sociological way was extremely difficult. For some who dropped out of the project, the process of healing is many months or years away.

By using Sociological Storytelling as a methodological approach to understand our experiences with Hurricanes Katrina, Kristen and I have some main goals for this book: 1) in the Mills tradition, each contributor connects their "personal" experiences to larger public issues in a compelling and sociologically significant way; 2) building upon feminist methodology, instead of privileging the researcher's often disconnected, "authoritative voice of reason," we aim to tell our "own" stories with

emotion and honesty; 3) we go beyond Berger and Quinney's storytelling sociology approach by relying on social theory more heavily to make sense of our experiences. Instead of simply telling their stories or presenting their "data," the contributors to this book step back and reflect on why their stories are important, and they use theory to better illuminate how their "personal" stories are not entirely personal, as they are *always* connected to larger social phenomena. Although the contributors come from a variety of different backgrounds, in this book they are all storytelling sociologists. Each story illuminates another aspect of the social phenomenon that is Hurricane Katrina, the largest (not so) natural disaster to impact the United States to date. Storytelling "humanizes" the disaster, and helps us answer the questions: Why should we care about Hurricane Katrina? And, what can the stories of those who experienced Katrina teach us about our social world?

### **Emerging Themes: Doing Sociology**

This book is divided into four parts: Part I) Experiencing Race and Class In and Through Disaster; Part II) The Managed Self: Identities, Emotions, and the Treatment of the Hurricane "Other;" Part III) (Ir)Rationality as a Tool for Making Disaster-Related Decisions; and Part IV) After the Storm: Navigating New Meanings of Self and City. Instead of recounting similar experiences of evacuation, diaspora, and new normality (see Barber et. al forthcoming), or of the process of dealing with the after-effects of Hurricane Katrina, each author offers unique theoretical perspectives that are weaved throughout their varied stories. For example, in Part I Andrea Wilbon and Carl Bankston both discuss their experiences with evacuation, but approach their narratives from different sociological perspectives; while Wilbon queries how racialization impacted her experience, Bankston critically analyzes how his privileged class position shaped his evacuation options and positioned him as an evacuee "on vacation." In the next chapter, Ruth Idakula tells her emotional narrative of being a Black single mother in New Orleans before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina. In this piece, we are faced with a very different story: one in which race, class, and gender undeniably intersect as Idakula maneuvers from her flooded home to the Superdome, out of the city, and then back again. Deanna Meyler illuminates the emotional experiences of volunteering and evacuating during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, a smaller, but no less destructive storm that followed immediately on the heels of Katrina. Part I end's with

R. L. Stockard's harrowing experiences during Katrina and his untimely transition out of New Orleans.

Part II begins with Kristen Barber's managed emotions as she tells us how she negotiated her emotional and academic selves, as well as her class privilege as both a Michigander and a New Orleanian graduate student. Building upon the work of Georg Simmel and Arlie Hochschild, Barber shows us how social theory illuminates experiences that are often difficult to recount and understand. Stan Weeber addresses identity as it is tied up with attachment to place. Weeber discusses how he came to better understand the shifting identities of New Orleans Katrina evacuees when he, himself, was forced to evacuate his hometown during Hurricane Rita. Part II ends with a socio-psychological portrait of the experiences of two Gulf Coast volunteers. In their essay, Jeffrey Jackson and Kirsten Dellinger tell an incredibly honest narrative of how their particular positions impacted, both positively and negatively, the people they assisted after Katrina. Their portrayal of the complicated practice of volunteer work opens up space for future discussions regarding how to best respond to similar disasters.

In Part III, contributors recount their experiences with Hurricane Katrina while remaining focused on the rational and irrational consequences of Katrina, and the "logic" that shaped their actions and experiences. Tim Haney locates how rationality and irrationality played out in his various interactions with Post-Katrina bureaucracy. In the next chapter, Sarah Stohlman shows us how past experiences with hurricanes shaped the decisions and experiences of her Aunt Po. Stohlman reflects on and complicates her Aunt's assumed "irrational" decision to remain in New Orleans, reminding us that while there is no easy explanation for her Aunt's attachment to New Orleans, there is a stark and sad explanation for the poor government response to Katrina. Jessica Pardee's deeply moving piece utilizes Georg Simmel's blasé attitude to analyze how her experiences were shaped by social processes that were often out of her control. She shows us how she maneuvered through and attempted to both challenge and resist the inequalities that she experienced as an evacuee. Pamela Behan ends Part III with a reflection on how she and her students assessed risk during Hurricane Rita. Reflecting on the frustrating process of actually evacuating, she challenges us to rethink how evacuation is actually accomplished and to consider how to make it more effective.

In our concluding section, Part IV, Glenn Gentry and Derek Alderman share the narratives of tattoo artists and clients who were deeply impacted by Katrina. They show how these actors used their bodies to convey their deep emotions regarding their attachment to New Orleans and their

personal experiences with Katrina. Next, Donna Bonner reflects on the unique culture of New Orleans, and how the symbolic and material milieu of the city has shifted post-Katrina. Nicole Buras shares four deeply moving narratives, showing how family, gender, and age, shaped both the experiences of women who were impacted by Katrina and these women's decision-making power post-storm. We end our book with a dramaturgical analysis of Post-Katrina New Orleans from the uncompromising yet complex perspective of two New Orleans tourists, Carolyn Corrado and Tamara Smith. Their story gives us a glimpse into how non-New Orleanians who visit Post-Katrina New Orleans might see the city and understand its need for help in the rebuilding process.

## Conclusion

We began this project with one goal in mind: to provide people who were impacted by Hurricane Katrina with a space where they could share their voice and, we hope, educate all of us on what it means to have experienced disaster. We aimed to create a space for debating the issues, and for challenging assumed notions of how and why events unfolded as they did. I hope we accomplished this goal.

## References

- Barber, Kristen, Danielle A. Hidalgo, Timothy J. Haney, Stan C. Weeber, Jessica Pardee, and Jennifer Day. forthcoming. Narrating the storm: Storytelling sociology as a methodological approach to understanding Hurricane Katrina. *Journal of Public Management & Social Policy, Special Issue: Voices of Katrina* 13.
- Berger, J. Ronald and Richard Quinney. 2005. *Storytelling sociology: Narrative as social inquiry*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.
- Clawson, Dan, Robert Zussman, Joya Misra, Naomi Gerstel, Randall Stokes, Douglas L. Anderson, and Michael Burawoy, eds. 2007. *Public sociology: Fifteen eminent sociologists debate politics and the profession in the twenty-first century*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1984. *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Mills, C. Wright. 1967 [1959]. *The sociological imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.



## Part I

# Experiencing Race and Class In and Through Disaster

# FILLER UP PLEASE: COPING WITH RACIAL STIGMAS AFTER HURRICANE KATRINA

ANDREA M. WILBON,  
TULANE UNIVERSITY

Waking early Sunday morning from a restless sleep, I looked to my left to see the time. Straining to decipher the clock's dim green numbers, I realized it was 4:30am. The ghostly darkness of my apartment was met with the flickering light of a small television set, which gave the corner of my bedroom a slight glow. To my right, on the nightstand, were my glasses. I quickly slid them on, but waited to look at the television for a few moments while my eyes adjusted to the darkness. I directed my attention to the meteorology report being broadcasted on the screen. From the weather report, it was evident that Hurricane Katrina was strengthening and my precious city, New Orleans, was in harm's way. I had decided to evacuate the Saturday night before, but had held out in case the hurricane made a drastic turn that would spare New Orleans altogether. However, I soon realized that in order to dodge this bullet an evacuation was pertinent. By 6:00am that morning, August 28, 2005, my friend, Douglas, and I were on the road. The two of us headed for safety to my Aunt Cleo and Uncle JC's farm in Marion County, Mississippi. My car's headlights cut through the darkness of the city surrounding us, eerily foreshadowing the events that were about to unfold: events that would leave the city in total darkness for many weeks.

Both the trunk and the backseat of my car were crammed with our belongings for the 2½ hour trip to the family farm. Being a graduate student, my most precious belongings included not only photo albums and important documents like my driver's license and passport, but also my computer, a hard copy of my thesis I wrote for completion of my Masters Degree, and several out-of-print books I had accumulated over the years. Douglas and I nervously listened to weather updates on FM 88.9, and alternated the news updates with tunes from the CD player. Memories have somewhat faded as to what CDs were in my player, but I believe Johnny Cash's sorrowful yet redemptive tunes filled the air as we headed

east on I-10. The sun began to rise and the light that it provided was a welcome contrast to the darkness we had left behind. Optimistic that Hurricane Katrina would weaken, we anticipated a quick return home. I was under the assumption that we would be homeward bound by the end of the week. Two hours into our drive, the Louisiana landscape already far behind us, we exited the freeway in Mississippi and, as a precaution, pulled into a Shell Station to fill up my gas tank—we were scared that we would run out of gas after leaving the farm once the hurricane passed.

The farm has been in my family's possession since my great-grandmother Molly Watts was alive. Molly raised seventeen children including my grandmother, Lucille Jackson—who raised four children of her own, my mother, Vertia, included. Cotton has grown in the fields since my grandmother was a young girl. The land is spacious, and long dirt roads connect distant neighbors. On our property, there are two homes side by side. One home is the original house that my great-grandmother Molly owned and grandmother Lucille grew up in with all of her brothers and sisters. It was the home in which my mother had spent the earliest years of her life before moving to California. Uncle JC and his son, my cousin Tony, both care for the property where they raise cows, hogs, and chickens, and grow sugar cane, greens, black-eyed peas, and green beans. Knowing that prior hurricanes had left the farm untouched, it was to this rural community that Douglas and I evacuated. We arrived on the farm just after 9:00am and immediately felt a sense of safety. Aunt Cleo and Uncle JC welcomed us with open arms and encouraged us to make ourselves at home. It was here that we waited.

The next morning, August 29, Hurricane Katrina crept in. We awoke to radio reports advising listeners that Hurricane Katrina had unexpectedly “bobbled” approximately twenty miles east; they advised people along the Gulf of Mississippi to begin taking cover. Although eastward movements meant a lesser chance that the eye of the storm would hit New Orleans, it also meant that the storm was moving closer and closer to us in Mississippi, something we did not expect when planning our evacuation. Prior to the eastward bobble, we had expected Hurricane Katrina's outer bands to impact Mississippi, but only slightly. Knowing that with each passing moment the hurricane was quickly approaching landfall, the knot in my stomach grew tighter. I feared the worst for my great-grandmother's home as the roughly 100mph winds thrashed into the old farm house.

I stood at the window in my pajamas, watching the wind and rain rip through the farm. Roofing pieces tore away and were tossed into the fields; I watched as some roofing shreds blew clear across the yard, coming to a rest near the barn. In the distance, I could see that the support

beams holding up the barn had already given out and completely collapsed. Despite knowing that I should stay away from windows, I could not help but stare out of them, watching Mother Nature batter my family's farm. The sky was gray and dark, and the trees thrashed violently around in the wind. The rough winds picked up my uncle's Ford F-150 on two wheels so that all of the weight of the truck rested on the passenger side; I thought for sure that the truck would topple over. The windows around us rattled, and it reminded me of the 1989 earthquake I had experienced while living in Northern California, where I was born. My aunt, uncle, Douglas, and I sat together awaiting Katrina's passing. For hours, the wind and rain ripped through the farm with a vengeance.

As the eye of Katrina passed over us, an eerie calm fell over the farm. My uncle seized this opportunity to go outside and clean up articles of debris such as small pieces of wood that could soon turn into projectiles. I stepped outside for a moment and stood in Katrina's stillness. I looked over my shoulder to see that a white plastic swing-set designed for small children had collapsed onto a silver sedan. Yet, the sky was bluer than it had been all day—as if a hurricane had not passed over us at all. It was as blue as any other southern spring day. I had heard stories about how an eye of a hurricane is still as it passes over you, but it was eerie to watch birds flying through the still air. The cows slowly come out to graze, but were not out long before blackened clouds crept over our heads and the winds began to pick up, again. Knowing that it was time to retreat, the cows formed a single file line and walked calmly off into the distance. I looked to my uncle with a confused grin, shocked at the sense of danger the cows were predicting. JC turned to me and said, "The cows know when it's time to go. They know when it's bad weather." Part two of Hurricane Katrina was beginning to approach.

## **After the Storm: Race Relations in Small-town Mississippi**

Katrina finished her assault, leaving us without electricity and without running water. I would have given anything to make some dark roast coffee, maybe some scrambled eggs fried soft and maple thick-cut bacon for breakfast, and to turn on the television to see the images of the storm's aftermath. Some of our neighbors had generators and were able to watch the news immediately following the storm. One neighbor had borrowed our generator, so we were left with only a battery-operated radio—and the batteries were running low. The radio transmitted tales of devastation, but wanting to see the damage for ourselves, my cousin Tony and I toured the community via 4-wheelers.

We drove over downed power lines and dodged fallen branches. Along the way, we stopped and talked with people who were standing, dazed on their porches, assessing the damage to their homes. Surprisingly, many of the people were smiling. Large, mature trees had crashed into their homes and branches were blocking their driveways, yet they were smiling. I saw residents in the community working together—chainsaws in hand—to clear debris from roads and from their homes. My family picked up their own chainsaws and cleared roads and bridges of tree debris. As a 4-wheeler sociologist, I noticed racially mixed groups conversing, coming together, and sharing their first-hand experiences of the sights and sounds of the storm. However, such interactions were few and far between. My knowledge of historical race relations encourages me to pay attention to how mechanisms of informal social control shape people's interactions, or the lack thereof. I noticed such interactions as I quickly rode by on the 4-wheeler, and I thought about bell hooks' historical accounts of race relations since slavery in *Ain't I a Woman* (1999). Likewise, I thought about W.E.B Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folk* (1995 [1903]) and what it means to be a "problem race" as he cautions readers that, "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line" (54). I was a long way from the urban environment of New Orleans and was not prepared for the hurricane's impact on Black and white race relations in this small rural community.

Some days later, Tony left on the 4-wheeler to go to the only gas station in the area that had not been sucked dry because of the panic surrounding the storm. It was a very small gas station with only one pump. Initially, Douglas and I stayed behind on the farm while Tony drove off to the station. Tony did not have far to travel to get to the station, but when he returned nearly two hours later, we assumed he had purchased gas. Considering the station is no more than a fifteen minute drive, he quickly told us that he had not bought any gas because the line was incredibly long—two hours long. Tony returned from the station to get more money after thinking of other items he needed to purchase. "Someone is saving my spot," he told us. I asked if I could join him on his trip back to the gas station; I thought that another ride on the 4-wheeler would be a fun break from the monotony of post-storm life on the farm.

We arrived at the station and pulled into line. Friends and relatives from New Orleans who had also evacuated to our family farm had saved Tony's spot, so we were able to get right back into the approximately 150-person line. Tony resumed conversation with the strangers in the car ahead of us and with those in cars behind us. Since Tony was in line for several hours prior to his return, the strangers waiting for gas had quickly become

acquaintances. I was nervous about the two of us re-entering the line, but noticed others, who happened to be white, re-enter the line at various points. My fears were allayed as everyone welcomed us back into the line with open arms and smiles. The people around us commented on how the heat made the wait for gas seem much longer than it was. After shutting off the engine, my cousin and I went inside the store. The electricity was out, so the only light in the store was the natural sunlight streaming through the dusty, foggy windows. Without air conditioning, the stuffy heat of the store was suffocating. The shelves were almost bare, so we purchased the few items that were left, including chips and pretzels. After paying for the items, we returned to the gas line outside.

Another thirty minutes passed—a hot thirty minutes. As we sat there sweating profusely in the heat, waiting for the line to move, a middle-aged white gas station attendant, not more than 5’9” tall, approached us. He said that someone had reported us, telling him Tony had cut in line. My cousin calmly explained that he had not cut in line, but that he had been in line for hours prior. Other customers waiting in front of and behind us quickly substantiated our story and explained that my cousin had been patiently waiting to purchase gas for the past few hours. Despite customers corroborating our story, the gas station attendant went back into the store to request assistance from his brother and father, as this was a small, family-owned business. He wanted his family’s assistance, presumably to intimidate us into voluntarily removing ourselves from the line. But in his absence, my cousin and I remained. “I will not get out of this line. This is ridiculous. I’ve been here waiting just like everyone else,” Tony exclaimed to those around us, but loud enough so that the attendant could hear him.

Within minutes, the attendant returned with his brother and father, and demanded that we get out of line. The father added that if we didn’t, he would call the police. Despite threats, we remained in line and continued to explain that we had not taken cuts. I began to feel nervous; I felt butterflies in my stomach as tempers began to boil over. Before we knew it, we were all engaged in a shouting match. We accused the attendant of not listening to our story and not listening to the truth. “We’ve been told that you cut in line,” one of the sons shouted. “No I did not!” Tony exclaimed. They accused us of cutting in line and declared that they did not have to listen to our side of the story. It became more heated as my cousin rightfully accused the owners of discrimination. Tony kept his distance from the father and two sons at which point Tony yelled, “You let those white people get in and out of line, and they still got their gas.” Tony was pointing in the direction of other white customers ahead of us who

were not refused service, who had gotten gas, and who were in the process of leaving. "I didn't get any complaints about them. I have to go off of what my source told me," the owner responded as he pointed to his chest. Tony and I were aware that our race was apparently discrediting our account of the events. People ahead of and behind us looked confused. One unknown person commented, "This is ridiculous...I don't know man. You should get your gas." It was as if people around us wished they could help us more, but were simultaneously afraid to jeopardize their only chance at getting gas.

Erving Goffman (1959) argues that the information we possess prior to meeting others is extremely crucial in shaping how we interact with people once we meet them:

We can appreciate the crucial importance of the information the individual initially possesses or acquires concerning his fellow participants, for it is on the basis of this initial information that the individual starts to define the situation and starts to build up lines of responsive action (10).

What the gas station attendant was supposedly told by his "informant" overshadowed all other information Tony and I gave him. The attendant had no reason to believe us, although he should have. Further, as Goffman notes, in the event that we have no information prior to the meeting, it is common to look for clues to identify the person's personality. These clues determine our interactions and are commonly based on previous experiences with others bearing similar qualities. These first impressions are very important in everyday life, but judging by my experience, they can be distorted and misused.

The gas station attendant never pointed out who had reported us for supposedly cutting in line; I suspect that this informant did not actually exist. Although neither Tony nor I thought to ask to speak with this "informant," it is interesting that the attendant ignored several patrons who supported our account of the events. The nearly ten patrons in front and behind us were mostly black, but white patrons also came to our aid. Each and every one of them discredited the informant's account of the situation. As the patrons came to our aid, the attendant and his brother and father kept their backs to them, staring at us. When it was evident that we were not going to get out of line, the attendant's only recourse was to call the police.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus helps us make sense of what happened between the white gas station attendant and the two of us. Bourdieu suggests that people's practices and habits are a result of their cultural history, making up their habitus. Habitus integrates "past

experiences, [it] functions at every moment as a *matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions* and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks” (Bourdieu 1977, 83: italics in original). Using this concept, we can understand the attendant’s actions to be the result of his own internationalization of historic race relations. He perhaps internalized racist stereotypes of African Americans, believing Tony and I to be only liars and deceivers, and reacted to us as such. Relying on these stereotypes, he could not take our account of the situation as reliable. The only “credible” people at the station then, were the attendant, his brother, his father, and the “informant” with whom he potentially shared a habitus. Our anger stemmed from our feelings of being targeted by the attendant because of our race. Our position and frustration were primarily due to having witnessed white patrons getting in and out of line with impunity. After the attendant walked away, our tempers calmed, but we still refused to get out of line—we were not to be moved. Well, I take that back; we didn’t move until the sheriff arrived on the scene.

The sheriff arrived; he was a black man in his mid-thirties to early forties, was about 6’ tall, and had a slender build. I initially expected that there would be some sort of racial loyalty: I was fairly certain that as a black man living in the south, the sheriff would understand that what was happening was unfair as it was racially charged and motivated. However, he immediately ordered us to leave, “You need to get out of line or I’ll have to arrest you.” My jaw dropped and I felt a sinking feeling in my stomach. I was prepared to deal with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, but completely unprepared to be taken to jail in Mississippi. We told the sheriff our side of the story; he nodded along and acted disinterested in what we were saying. We pleaded with the sheriff, telling him we did nothing wrong and we needed the gas—as there was no gas for miles around—but he just shrugged his shoulders. He could not let us stay in line, and if we did he would have to forcibly remove us. Defeated and deflated, Tony and I got back onto the 4-wheeler and left the line. As we sped away, without our gas, the words *the customer is always right* sounded in my head. The attendant, his brother, his father, and the sheriff watched with keen eyes and aggressive stances as Tony parked across the street. The officer and the attendants looked to us with their heads raised; they had obviously won the battle. Refusing to be denied service, Tony again, approached them offering to solve the problem by getting at the end of the line and re-waiting for gas over the next several hours, taking the risk that there would be no gas by the time he got to the front of the line. With hands on hips, the gas station attendant still refused Tony service. A mile from the gas station, our 4-wheeler ran out of gas.

It was not until about four days after the storm that our neighbor returned our generator to the farm. For those four days, we had only limited electricity in the house. Finally, at night break we were able to sit down and turn on the television to watch the news. The rest of the house was pitch black as Douglas, my aunt and uncle, and I huddled around the small television set. For the first time, we saw the extent of the devastation that both Mississippi and Louisiana had accrued: floodwaters reaching up at least 6', but higher in some neighborhoods such as the lower 9<sup>th</sup> ward; houses that, like our barn, had crumbled to the ground under the pressure of wind and water; and cities completely deserted. I realized I would not return home anytime soon.

### **Packing Up and Shipping Out of Mississippi**

After seeing the images of destruction on television, I knew it was time to leave Mississippi. Desperate to continue with my schoolwork, I moved temporarily to New York City to attend graduate classes in Sociology at Columbia University. During exile, I watched the news fervently and saw race as a salient aspect shaping people's hurricane and post-hurricane experiences. Already existing racial tensions in the south were unveiled and racialized relationships between Blacks and whites were reinforced. There were images of black New Orleans residents stranded in the Superdome, images of dozens upon dozens of black residents stranded at the Convention Center, and reports of black residents walking across the Crescent City Connection to dry land where they were denied entry into Algiers by armed police officers. These reports claimed that police officers used belittling and racist language and gunfire to force black evacuees back into New Orleans to take their chances with the floodwaters. Race can illicit empowerment for some, like the gas station attendant who was allowed to deny service to black patrons. Race can also illicit disenfranchisement for others, as we saw when the Superdome filled with a disproportionate number of black residents.

Four months after the storm, I returned to New Orleans and immediately noticed the change in the racial composition of the city. In what used to be a predominately black city, New Orleans was now predominately white and Latino, as a number of immigrant laborers from South and Central America were recruited to rebuild the city. In the time since my return, I can say that the city has undergone much recovery and rebuilding, although this has been a begrudgingly slow process. Everyday is a battle, everyday is a fight. However, there are many aspects of life in New Orleans that are in need of much more recovery, including

interpersonal relationships across racial lines. The predominately black residents of the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward have yet to see drastic improvements to their destroyed neighborhood. Additionally, you cannot read the local newspaper or watch the local evening news without being bombarded by crime-related stories that overwhelmingly show black faces as perpetrators. The news neglects to show how black youth are helping to rebuild the city, and instead depicts them as the criminals of New Orleans and responsible for the city's continuing demise. Katrina may have ripped through the Gulf Coast and torn away the facades of homes and shredded family and friendship networks, but it has also effectively unveiled the hidden racial tensions that have historically permeated the city of New Orleans and shaped people's experiences of everyday life, both before and after Katrina.

## References

- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. 1995 [1903]. *Souls of Black folk*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books.
- . 1974. *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers.
- hooks, bell. 1999. *Ain't I a woman*. Boston: South End Press.
- Jensen, Leif. 2006. At the razor's edge: Building hope for America's rural poor. *Rural Realities* 1. <http://ruralsociology.org/pubs/RuralRealities/Issue1.html> (accessed February 1, 2007).
- Link, Bruce G., and Jo C. Phelan. 2001. Conceptualizing stigma. *Annual Review of Sociology* 27:363-85.
- Simmel, Georg. 1908. The stranger. In *On individuality and social forms*, ed. Donald N. Levine, 143-49. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wilson, James Q., and George L. Kelling. 1996. Broken windows. In *The city reader*, ed. Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout, 267-76. New York: Routledge.