University of New Orleans

From the Selected Works of Michael Mizell-Nelson

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Not Since the 1930s: The Documentary Impulse post-Katrina

Michael Mizell-Nelson, University of New Orleans

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The New Public Scholarship encourages alliances between scholars and communities by publishing writing that emerges from publicly engaged and intellectually consequential cultural work. The series is designed to attract serious readers who are invested in both creating and thinking about public culture and public life. Under the rubric of "public scholar," we embrace campus-based artists, humanists, cultural critics, and engaged artists working in the public, nonprofit, or private sector. The editors seek useful work growing out of engaged practices in cultural and educational arenas. We are also interested in books that offer new paradigms for doing and theorizing public scholarship itself. Indeed, validating public scholarship through an evolving set of concepts and arguments is central to The New Public Scholarship.

The universe of potential contributors and readers is growing rapidly. We are teaching a generation of students for whom civic education and community service learning are quite normative. The civic turn in art and design has affected educational and cultural institutions of many kinds. In light of these developments, we feel that The New Public Scholarship offers a timely innovation in serious publishing.

Civic Engagement

IN THE Wake OF Katrina

Amy Koritz and George J. Sanchez
EDITORS

The University of Michigan Press
and The University of Michigan Library
Ann Arbor
in Beltway (a neighborhood in Chicago), groups can form across racial and ethnic lines. And the ability to see that “coincidence of interest,” the book suggests, is perhaps the city’s best hope: “Cities need leaders who can somehow persuade middle- and low-income residents of the metropolitan region to make common cause, to realize that their lives inevitably intersect.” We who work in community building are challenged to maintain this hope in part by maintaining both balance of mind and quickness of sympathy, what the poet Wilfred Owen called during the First World War “the eternal reciprocity of tears.” Perhaps this is the work required of “civic engagement after Katrina.”

NOTES


Not Since the Great Depression
THE DOCUMENTARY IMPULSE POST-KATRINA

Michael Mizell-Nelson

Shortly before Katrina grazed New Orleans and touched off the levee failures that ruined the city, my wife and I hosted a small party for two couples with infants. Other families had provided our kids with a good deal of outgrown clothes and books, so we wanted to pass along these hand-me-downs, too. Following the flooding, one of those families left the city permanently even though their jobs and apartment had survived. The other couple, Helen Hill and Paul Gailiunas, lost their home and one of their jobs, but they returned in fall 2006 despite Paul’s misgivings. Someone shot Helen to death early in January 2007 in a home invasion. The news spread internationally because she was a talented white filmmaker with friends throughout the world. Several days before her murder, Helen had spent more than one hour engaging our ten-year-old daughter in a discussion about vegetarianism and veganism. Everything reported about Helen’s welcoming nature, creativity, and childlike artistry was true.1

This open-ended unnatural disaster and the many terrifying ways it continues to spool out can exhaust the most grounded of people. At times, Katrina’s half-life seems eternal. In assembling the content for an online database project regarding hurricanes Katrina and Rita called the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, I regularly measure personal and community losses throughout the Gulf Coast.2 Obviously, New Orleans serves as this catastrophe’s ground zero. Similarly, each individual’s piece in the immense
debris field stretching across the Gulf Coast from Texas to Alabama complicates the larger picture.

**Flood Bowl Refugees and the Gray Area Epitomized**

As flood bowl refugees, my family has lost and gained much. We lost all of our material possessions downstairs in our rented townhouse across from the Seventeenth Street Canal. However, we had evacuated with almost all of our photographs and videotapes. If ever I begin to consider our family as unfortunate, I need only glance at the three plastic tubs of our family history, intact and safe, and think of our former neighbor’s photographs, water-soaked and mildewed, scattered across their lawn in an attempt to salvage some shred from thirty years of history.

Obviously, our personal losses were relatively limited. The second floor did not flood, so our rented townhouse can be interpreted as having been either half full of floodwater or half empty depending on how the day is going. “Well, you’re lucky,” more than one person told us after they heard that we had only rented the townhouse, so these conversations often ended on this chipper note. Yes, we knew the neighborhood was a flood zone, and we couldn’t afford to purchase a home anyway, so we had remained renters. Our kids understood it to be home, however, so this sense of being lucky was lost on them. We were fortunate that we could simply move, but that’s when our Katrina crises began. Our status as renters means we are not eligible for the federally funded homeowner bailout, ill managed though it may be.

Although my wife and I continue in our careers, rapidly escalating credit card debt is needed to rebuild and cover our monthly bills. Since we lacked flood insurance, we received $2,500 from our renter’s policy before State Farm dropped us. (The appeal process remains unsuccessful.) The payout barely covered our hotel and travel expenses before we were able to benefit from the kindness of family and friends. The Red Cross had proved unwilling to help us on several different occasions, so we ended up relying on both sets of our retired parents for immediate financial support. In returning to the city in late 2005, we had felt relieved, understanding that the rent subsidy program of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) would shield us from the full impact of post-Katrina rents for as long as eighteen months. Accustomed to paying $1,100 in rent per month in August 2005, four months later we began to pay $2,000 for a dilapidated house without heat. After providing two rental assistance payments, yet another federal agency failed us, much as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ levee system had. After FEMA continually denied our appeals and letters from the landlord, we absorbed the inflated rent without government aid.

Unfortunately, we had to turn once again to parents, who helped us to get together a down payment for a house. Our family’s recovery is based on the retirement savings of two octogenarian couples whose childhoods were marked by the Great Depression. (While some retirement plans allowed Katrina survivors to borrow funds without penalty, ours did not.) A Small Business Administration (SBA) loan helped to some extent, and their below-market interest rates are greatly appreciated as we experience the monthly usury shock each time our credit card bills arrive. While finishing this essay, I learned that we now must pay an additional $350 per month toward our mortgage since our insurance and property tax rates have increased again. While the details of my family’s story may suggest otherwise, I remain certain that we truly are among the fortunate. The story of a Honduran laborer who spent three weeks in an Orleans Parish prison on a bogus charge is another reminder that other people are much worse off. The prison booking agent had misinterpreted the first letter of his surname. The man’s family had witnessed his arrest, but prison officials told them many times over that he had not been imprisoned. The family’s hired attorney made no progress. While also an example of misfortune, he was lucky enough to have rented from a bilingual, compassionate landlord who intervened with parish prison officials. One can only guess how much longer he might have remained imprisoned. The charges were dropped.

Such personal details are salient because in collecting information related to hurricanes Katrina and Rita, it is typically difficult to convince people that their Katrina stories, though not dramatic, are worth recording. It’s especially hard to persuade residents from the middle and upper-middle classes that such details need to be preserved. The documentary gaze is fixed on New Orleans, 2005’s ground zero, and the emphasis is typically on either dramatic stories of death, survival, and first responders or on criminal behavior, at street level rather than corporate. Extra effort must be made to record both the continuing impact of the 2005 hurricanes and the majority of stories that fall between the extremes of heroism and hooliganism. The mundane signs of life and struggle in post-Katrina New Orleans and Gulfport, Mississippi, as well as post-Rita Lake Charles, must survive if we are to create a more representative record. Nevertheless, far too many affected people describe their stories as “not worth recording.”
Stories of battles with insurance companies, multiple tires flattened by stray roofing nails, and overtaxed roads and city services throughout the Gulf South must be preserved.7

Concerned about the scale of the disaster, as well as the vast number of stories to be recorded, historians at the University of New Orleans and the Center for History and New Media began planning the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank (http://www.hurricanearchive.org) a couple of weeks after the flooding. The resulting project is the most broad-based, open-access, searchable hurricane research database yet to be developed. Most of the other hurricane documentation efforts intend to create new material, usually audiotaped or videotaped oral histories and, maybe, transcriptions. Our initial area of focus is to make important documentation work available to as many people as possible. The project also seeks to preserve the vast array of materials “born digital” but unlikely to be saved. Online since early November 2005, the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank now houses about fifty thousand objects related to Katrina and Rita and their aftermaths. Most of these are accounts e-mailed to friends and family, digital photographs, audio and video footage, text messages, blog postings, and scholarly and student work. Writing created by high school, community college, and other students provides entry to the experiences of those less likely to have access to the Internet. These are some of the most detailed and valuable objects in the collection. Long-term preservation via servers in both Louisiana and Washington, DC, is an essential part of the plan.8

Flooding the City to Save It, or, an Embarrassment of Riches

The media has covered the plight of medical professionals and other white-collar workers in the wake of the great population upheavals along the Gulf Coast fairly well. However, many different professionals have benefited from the flooding, especially academicians and others connected to the world of nonprofit foundations. One might say that those connected to the realm of storytellers in a broad sense—journalists (not just Anderson Cooper), film documentarians, historians, sociologists, and so on—have reaped professional gains. Gulf Coast residents obviously tally these gains against their professional and personal losses. While not comparable to the fortunes of insurance industry professionals who experienced record profits in 2005, these career advances are significant nonetheless. The same week my wife and I learned of the jarring mortgage payment increase also brought news of a significant honor awarded to the online database project. Many scholars, journalists, nonprofit heads, and others whose city and professional lives have been affected by a natural and unnatural disaster have hit a cruel jackpot of sorts. “Before Katrina, I could not get funding to do A, B, or C. Now, I have funds to do all of that and more” is a theme of many conversations I have had recently with longtime nonprofit heads in the city. Those people whose sustenance depends on the world of nonprofits reported with delight whenever the Rockefeller Foundation’s representative in New Orleans—another post-Katrina development—expressed interest in learning more about their programs. My experience is similar. While I could not secure funds for an online New Orleans history database beforehand, the aftermath of Katrina brought funding for the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, which has led to another, pre-Katrina, New Orleans history database.9 To paraphrase Woody Allen, those of us vested in the collecting and telling of stories might say that 80 percent of a project’s success is having a disaster show up.

My work with the database project has provided excellent views of resident and visiting scavengers as we feed on the carcass of New Orleans. It’s also a good perch for noting the improved fortunes of many other professions tied to the gathering of stories. Just the honorific awards dispensed in the aftermath of Katrina, considered as a group, should cause one to ask whether there is a tipping point when these accolades lose some of their meaning, and can we trust ourselves to recognize when we reach it? The New Orleans Times-Picayune newspaper received Pulitzer awards for public service and breaking news reporting, maybe the grandest example of the accolades washed in by the storm. (The public service award was also presented to Biloxi-Gulfport’s Sun Herald.)

A Times-Picayune editor recently boasted that the widespread leveling effect of the flooding afforded newspaper staffers much closer connections to New Orleanians.10 He claimed that he could meet with a Gentilly neighborhood resident, mention that he lived in adjacent Lakeview, and enjoy immediate rapport. Both neighborhoods were inundated, but Gentilly is far less affluent and white than Lakeview. Unless this imagined Gentilly resident received some professional accolades for the flooding of his house, I doubt that he would see their situations as being equal.

The paper’s media critic—also a Lakeview resident—earlier had chas-tised Spike Lee’s documentary When the Levees Broke for excluding Lakeview and thus too much of the white person’s experience.
The tragic story of black New Orleans trapped in Katrina’s path has found a supreme chronicler, but the flooded-out residents of Lakeview or Old Metairie who attend tonight’s sold-out premiere at New Orleans Arena will spend all night sitting on a hard plastic chair and then wonder: “Where am I in this?”

This became a theme for many white New Orleanians’ reactions to a fine film. Lee presented the stories of black residents of Gentilly along with those of white residents of St. Bernard Parish and Uptown, but according to the critics, this was not enough. The Times-Picayune’s critic praised much of Lee’s film, but his divisive comments—“Levees tells only half the story. Or, rather, 67.3 percent of it.”—alluded to the African American majority population and demonstrated little of the post-Katrina rapport across neighborhood and racial boundaries. Both the editor and the media critic share in two Pulitzer prizes awarded to the Times-Picayune because the newspaper’s staff did its job well under horrendous conditions. If we are to believe these Times-Picayune employees, there is some imagined common ground in post-Katrina suffering that white journalists apparently identify when it is convenient but black documentary filmmakers ignore.

Another Times-Picayune employee found a problem with Oprah Winfrey, one of the nation’s most powerful media figures; Columnist Chris Rose made himself over post-Katrina from an ironic celebrity chaser and New Orleans nightlife denizen to the voice of middle-class white New Orleanians angst. Fueled by the individual stories his readers sent him, Rose’s columns resonated with his audience, especially as the hopeful feelings of the first several months of rebuilding disappeared. During a dramatic admission of his experience with post-Katrina depression, Rose wrote:

I was receiving thousands of e-mails in reaction to my stories in the paper, and most of them were more accounts of death, destruction and desperation by people from around south Louisiana. I am pretty sure I possess the largest archive of personal Katrina stories, little histories that would break your heart. I guess they broke mine.

After reading Rose’s similar comments in a Chicago Reader interview during one of his book tours, I decided to take the bait and see if he would be willing to use the mass e-mailing system he used for book promotions to let these readers know that their stories would be welcome in the Hurricane

Digital Memory Bank. Rose’s repeated observations about the “largest archive of personal Katrina stories” could be interpreted as suggesting that his readers had entrusted him with precious, horrible documents and he did not know what to do with them. Not surprisingly, some willingness to place such material in a noncommercial archive was not how I should have interpreted those remarks. Rose’s self-published collection of newspaper columns proved so successful that Simon and Schuster contracted with him to release an updated version in time for Katrina’s second anniversary. Maybe those reader stories are awaiting publication in Rose’s next book. He complained in his second anniversary column that Oprah’s producers wanted to focus on the story of his depression and refused to allow him to mention his book. Their plans ran dead against Rose’s desire to use the Oprah appearance to promote the book. It is difficult to discern where irony begins and ends in Rose’s account of his dealings with Oprah’s staff. Nevertheless, when one commemorates the second anniversary of a national tragedy by complaining about being denied a book plug on a show that has made many authors wealthy one of those tipping points may have been reached.

The Times-Picayune’s nola.com Web presence assumed unprecedented prominence in the days immediately following Katrina. Instead of the less than 500,000 page views the newspaper attracted in the weeks before the hurricane, nola.com received 32 million page views in the week immediately after the flooding. Since then the paper has caught up with other daily papers and incorporated even more of the world of online journalism and bloggers. It has also caught up in another regard. After almost two years of providing free access to its newspaper archive, the Times-Picayune needed to cover its costs. Access to archived news stories now costs $3.95 per article. The publishers certainly need to stay in business, but since the disaster and its economic ramifications are nowhere near an endpoint, it would be good if the Newhouse parent company would hold off on the charges until its customer base is on a sounder footing.

The Times-Picayune sometimes exhibits a sense of ownership of the Katrina story that can irk the many groups seeking to document their pieces of this epoch. This is most evident among local bloggers who early on perceived themselves as helping to steer the New Orleans recovery via their online pulpits and efforts at wired activism. A large part of this work involved identifying errors of omission committed by the daily paper as well as problems with its online content. In the first year following Katrina, the bloggers shared a sense of collective joy over their work as cybercitizens.
few years into the troubled recovery, they now share more collective outrage over the daily chaos. Too often the bloggers’ realm is a closed circle of online friends speaking to one another. Some of the coarsest but most insightful exchanges regarding race and class in New Orleans are found in the work of neither the bloggers nor the Picayune’s print journalists but in the raw, often racialized comments posted by citizens throughout the various nola.com forums.17

Documenting the Documentary Impulse

Not since the Great Depression has the impulse to document recent history been as evident and widespread as along the Gulf Coast in the years following Katrina. Arguably, not even 9/11 generated as much documentary interest. Oral history projects, documentary films, social science and hard science research studies, Web sites, commercially published and self-published books, blogs, and ceaseless media coverage are only some of the efforts that allow people to tell their stories. Before the flooding, few outsiders expressed interest in the history and well-being of New Orleans. Following Katrina, disaster researchers, various media workers, and many others began to inundate New Orleans, mining the city for purposes that may simultaneously be selfless and self-serving. Newcomers and natives share the desire to document New Orleans’ man-made tragedy as well as the natural disasters that devastated vast areas east and west of the city.

Ironically, those Louisiana and Mississippi public historians, oral historians, and anthropologists best prepared to document the effects of Katrina on the communities they have been working with for decades are too often on the periphery. Their carefully planned, regionwide oral history proposal went unfunded. Meanwhile, arts organizations whose interviewers have limited backgrounds in oral history are much more likely to have been funded. For example, arts groups accustomed to using oral history as their primary source for interpreting the culture of a neighborhood or other group have been anointed by their funding agencies to document for the sake of posterity rather than performance. Several of the professional oral historians in the region are resigned to the situation when they should be collaborating with the newcomers.18

While the arts organizations recognize the importance of oral history interviews, FEMA deliberately sought to avoid the difficulty of including “the human element” among its documentation efforts. Shortly after the disaster, a New Orleans–based social scientist met with a FEMA official who agreed that oral history interviews should be part of the agency’s documentation program. A higher official quashed these plans because it was felt that including the human element would complicate things. Instead, FEMA subcontracted a great deal of this work through the same national public history firms that have worked for years with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. This documentation work centers on creating yet another property database to join those maintained by insurers, realtors, property tax assessors, and others. Teams combed through neighborhoods to assess which homes were damaged enough to warrant FEMA demolition funds. These groups also assessed and documented the state of buildings in National Register Historic Districts. The least experienced members of these teams earned twenty dollars per hour while the senior members earned thirty plus a fifty-five-dollar per diem. The status of the area’s infrastructure will soon be palpable via yet another database, but the experiences of the residents and former residents of these neighborhoods remain the concern of oral historians with far fewer resources.

Another serious issue arises once material is gathered. The urge to document often overrides the question of how people might locate these invaluable resources in the future. Preservation and access to such materials should be at the center of such projects, but too often they are afterthoughts. Traditional archives will preserve some of the material, but only scholars and journalists can readily use such resources. “We’ll put it on the Web” is a typical response to questions of access. Internet postings allow visibility, but every individual organization that decides to place materials on a Web site without plans to make the material searchable via one or more databases adds yet another site that must be consulted for even basic research.

Many people assume that material placed on the Internet will be preserved for all time. This belief is frustratingly common among the general public and even among the newest recruits to the Grand Army of the Documentation. A related problem is that once a person has been interviewed in any form—by a newspaper reporter, academic researcher, and so on—he or she often believes history has been served. When I speak with such people about posting their stories or e-mails to the online database, they often say it’s unnecessary because they have already been interviewed, although it’s evident that most have no sense of where or when their stories will be made available for others to read—never mind themselves.19
Online Collecting Democratizes History

Many take comfort in knowing that their stories have been recorded, not unlike those who have enjoyed preparing a time capsule and then burying the material for one hundred years or so. Despite the evidence that such time capsules stand limited chances of being retrieved as planned, they remain quite popular. In an effort to build upon the general understanding of time capsules, at times I cast the memory bank as a "timeless" capsule. One may file and forget the information, but one can also revisit the database and provide updates. Two of the best examples of the promise that online collecting and archiving offers can be seen in the regularly updated postings of New Orleans author and publisher Mary Gehman and special needs activist Courtney Giarrusso.

The Hurricane Digital Memory Bank also seeks to document the regional, national, and international scope of what quickly developed into a national crisis. Coast Guard and National Guard units from throughout the United States spent more of September 2005 in the city than did most residents. The experiences of these and other nonresidents must be added to the documentary record. Outreach efforts have already resulted in the development of special collections, such as that of the 102nd Military History Detachment of the Kansas Army National Guard, as well as postings by individual National Guard members. Likewise, the stories of friends, relatives, churches, and entire communities that helped Gulf Coast evacuees must also be collected. Collection building and outreach present a staggering task that could seemingly reach no end.

Extraordinary efforts are required to record the accounts of those without access to the Internet, so people may submit their stories via our project’s voice mail system (504-208-3883). Following Delfeayo Marsalis’s welcome message and brief instructions, one can record a message for as long as ten minutes. As with Internet contributions, one may choose to remain anonymous. The memory bank is distributing tens of thousands of postcards so people can record short statements regarding their status during the prolonged recovery. After they mail their handwritten responses, postage paid, to the History Department at the University of New Orleans, their statements are scanned and added to the database.

New Media and New Documentarians

Most impressive is the creativity that individuals bring to this online archive project in using a new medium to express themselves.

Fig. 6. Mr. Ramsey’s suit for Mardi Gras 2006 commemorated the lost history of the Corner Bar. The names of all the old bars that no longer exist post-Katrina are listed on his suit. (From Courtney Egan, “Mr. Ramsey’s New Suit.” Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, object 28422, June 8, 2007, 4:58 p.m., http://www.hurricanearchive.org/object/28422.)
Fig. 7. The caption for this entry in the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank reads, "One of the most grievous losses after Katrina was the family collection of photographs. The London Ave. levee breach let in an awful collection of yuck which obliterated all photos, amazingly except for Polaroids. I found this one of my son stuck in the buckled wood flooring of mama and daddy's house. We all cried because in 2002 at 24 he died of an asthma attack. Losing all his photos was like losing him again, until God led us to this lone survivor. Amen." (From Kathleen DesHotel, "Online Image Contribution, Hurricane Digital Memory Bank." Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, object 1853, February 18, 2006, 12:07 a.m., http://www.hurricanearchive.org/object/1853.)

The photograph reproduced in figure 7 led one visitor to the database to post her own story of similar loss. Flooding in the same Gentilly neighborhood had destroyed her home and all of her mementos regarding her deceased son. The women have never met, but their parallel stories unfolded only blocks away from one another's homes. The second entry turns on the fact that not one item memorializing her deceased son survived the flooding.23

For those not directly affected by the hurricanes, digital technology has allowed observers to document the losses of others and then share their work via the memory bank. It is striking how thoughtfully one amateur documentarian represented a Mississippi couple's story without photographing them or sacrificing their dignity. The caption to the image in figure 8 reads:

Fig. 8. Bill Sullivan, "Online Image Contribution, Hurricane Digital Memory Bank," object 2166.

I will never forget this day at the American Red Cross shelter in Citronelle, Alabama. An elderly couple that was staying at the shelter went to their home to see the damage. They returned with a small box of jewelry and these photos on the cot, that was all that was left of the couple's home. The poor couple couldn't even remember the name of their insurance company.24

Collaboration Needed

One theme expressed by New Orleans academics and other locals has been the lack of the positive, collaborative relationships one finds in the dirty work of house gutting and house raising. Unlike the thousands of church and student groups that reach out to locals, gauge their needs, and travel to the city to work side by side with them, too many academics and cultural
workers maintain their individualism and even compete among themselves. I asked one biologist how much support he had received from researchers outside the area. None, he replied. He had been so busy rebuilding his life and home that he had had no time to write grant proposals and had received no offers of collaboration from colleagues outside New Orleans. His experience underscores a somewhat obvious corollary: those professionals affected by Katrina least directly, meaning those who did not lose their homes, spend more time writing about, analyzing, documenting, and ultimately benefiting from the tragedy. The theme of excluding locals from the troughs in our own backyards is found in a variety of professions.

The producers of a New Orleans documentary that aired on public television’s American Experience provide an excellent example. The production originated with the grand premise of featuring the pre-Katrina New Orleans story with a few breaks from the historical narrative during which viewers could enjoy short visits with colorful representative figures. This conceit had been well received when employed in earlier productions regarding notable American cities, so it would be adapted to their New Orleans project. When it is assumed from the outset that two hours of New Orleans history will be boring, the production is flawed. The production process itself remained closed to talented local documentary producers. When one of the New York City producers complained to me about a hurried production schedule and a tight budget, it irked me to think of one of New Orleans’ best documentary producers who remained exiled in Ohio more than a year after Katrina. The New Yorkers apparently never considered saving time and money by hiring local talent or helping a fellow filmmaker return home. New Orleans has long attracted producers with national reputations and budgets to match, making it even more difficult to complete projects in one’s own community. The same New Orleans independent producer devastated by the flood had earlier castigated the Louisiana state government for having donated one million dollars to Ken Burns’s Jazz when local independent filmmakers were struggling for funding. When American Experience came to town, more than one local producer received overtures suggesting that he or she might be hired to help capture the colorful interludes, but even that role was handed to a staff member.

Grousing without some notion of how things might be rectified is not helpful. Collaboration might include outside producers working with local independent filmmakers long familiar with the city. Instead of merely watching the documentaries created by local producers and lifting their ideas, the circle of creativity could be broadened to include local producers. The exiled filmmaker and his family have returned to their flooded Gentilly neighborhood, where he has spent many months editing for-hire jobs in his FEMA trailer. Great documentaries are being produced along with the bad, but even the best ones could be improved by widening the circle to include local independent producers in the production process. Ironically, well-funded documentary and television news producers regularly loan cameras to children and others to capture their perspectives.

Some may dismiss these criticisms as coming from one who simply disdains outsiders, but it’s the competitive and noncooperative outsiders and insiders I target. A compassionate and insightful journalist such as the New Yorker’s Dan Baum advances his career while maintaining a holistic sense of his research topic and the people in the city he writes about. Many of the Common Ground volunteers, dedicated Vietnamese college graduates, and others contribute much good to the area’s recovery. Alan Gutierrez, a relative newcomer to the city, is not simply a blogger. He offered training and assistance on behalf of New Orleans and its residents via several online projects. The “voluntourism” organized by universities and religious groups exemplifies how outsiders can collaborate with local homeowners and nonprofits. They have responded to community and individual needs first rather than just showing up to collect data. Unfortunately, too many academics visit the city to build their curriculum vitae instead of building houses.

Even the best intentions can have unforeseen effects. One popular feel-good story covered in many media concerns a musician and piano tuner from Oregon who has dedicated several years of his life to helping New Orleans in memory of his deceased musician son. The father secures and donates musical instruments and tunes pianos for free. He also plans to develop free music camps and hopes to train a couple of New Orleanians to tune and repair pianos. Who could complain about such a situation and the dedication of a compassionate, grieving father who offers so much? How about one of the area’s few piano repair and tuning specialists, the father of three kids, who, with his customer base scattered to Houston and Atlanta, is struggling to earn a living and has to compete against free services? Given the positive spin of this story, he and the few others in his trade do not complain, but it does make their rebuilding tougher. Assisting established local tradesmen, or at least contacting their organization to assess their needs, would have helped.
The other couple attending our party just before the flood lost neither jobs nor their apartment, but they opted not to deal with the possibility of evacuating the city every year with a child. They relocated to the West Coast. Their first year of resettlement was rough, and I ended phone conversations with my friend feeling guilty about my family's relatively quick return to normalcy. Following Helen Hill's murder, those conversations now end with a sense of relief on his end.

Helen's murder occurred while we were out of town, so only after returning did we discover its impact on the local and international communities. Many people took their children to the several memorial services and demonstrations against crime. We decided not to mention the murder to our five- and ten-year-old kids, who had just become accustomed to life post-Katrina and the relative permanence of a home. If our daughter asks, and she hasn't yet, we'll tell her that Paul and Helen no longer live in New Orleans. Such explanations are so commonplace that she likely will inquire no further. We will delay the full answer until she is older and better able to handle the truth of violence and how unfair life in New Orleans can be.

NOTES

1. A memorial and archive of Helen Hill's works can be found at www.helenhill.org.
2. The most viable venue for making 2005 hurricane research materials more accessible to both Web surfers and scholars stems from the database project developed in partnership between George Mason University's Center for History and New Media and the University of New Orleans. See the project's Web site, http://www.hurricanearchive.org.
3. I use the term flood bowl refugee to evoke the scale of the dislocation that followed the dust bowl crisis of the 1930s. Among the many other issues confronting the nation following Katrina, some groups and media debated the use of the term refugee versus evacuees. This led Massachusetts and other states to designate hurricane and flood victims transported to their military bases as "guests." Also worth exploring would be such nomenclature as Minnesota's Operation Northern Comfort. Some of these programs devolved into plans to transplant homeless Gulf Coast guests to economically desperate sections of Minnesota. In other words, parts of the state that had been economically crippled by the loss of their native sons and daughters to the Twin Cities and other prospering areas of the Upper Midwest were to be repopulated by people from an economically depressed part of the nation recently traumatized by Katrina.
4. The exception was some of our wedding gifts, which had been tucked into a crawl space beneath the stairs. The saturated walls gave way like wet tissue paper and provided access to many of these items. Still sheathed in bubble wrap, plates and glasses had to be sucked like oysters stewed in toxic sewage. Future houseguests may want to bring their own plates and glassware.
5. Several months after vacating the rented house, a tornado, rare in New Orleans, ripped apart the second-story bedroom windows and did enough additional damage to warrant a photo of the house in an insurance company ad regarding postdisaster cleanup. Once again, our family's good fortune is quite apparent.
7. One entry to the database captures the anxious concern of a New Orleans resident in Lakeweight one year after the flooding. This brief entry depicts the fear and hope found among those who rebuilt their homes and returned to their neighborhoods only to find themselves surrounded by the vacant homes and lots of their former neighbors. See Anonymous, untitled entry, Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, object 11424, September 20, 2006, 9:13 a.m., http://www.hurricanearchive.org/object/11424.
8. This project's sister database, the 9/11 Digital Archive, was the first electronic archive to be accepted by the Library of Congress. We hope the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank will follow the same path. According to a library press release, "The September 11 Digital Archive and its interactive Web site, 'Contribute Your Story,' was formally accepted into the Library's collections on September 10, 2003, thereby marking the Library's first major digital acquisition of 9/11 materials" (December 15, 2003). The full text is available at http://www.loc.gov/today/pr/2003/03-207.html.
9. See http://www.doyouknowwhatitmeans.org. "Do You Know What It Means?" is part of the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank. This collection was developed by the chair of the Master of Fine Arts Photography, Video, and Related Media department at the School of Visual Arts in New York in partnership with several New Orleans organizations. Their mission is "to collect the untold stories of the people of New Orleans by chronicling and preserving them in an accessible and public digital archive comprised of collected photographs, videos, family histories, interviews and other artifacts." Their mission statement can be read in full via the following web link: http://www.doyouknowwhatitmeans.org/about.html.
12. Ibid.
13. Chris Rose, "Hell and Back: A Chronical of the Storm Is Crushed by Its Sorrows," Times-Picayune, October 22, 2006. The observation was made as part of columnist's description of his experience with depression owing to his focus on post-Katrina stories.

16. The Times-Picayune uses Proquest Archiver to provide access to news articles two weeks after the date of print publication. For the price structure, see http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/timespicayune/offers.html. Nola.com is described as an “affiliate” of the Times-Picayune.

17. Thinknola.com provides a good entry point into the realm of bloggers and technologists who are using their talents to help rebuild New Orleans. The blogger community’s series of Rising Tide conferences are archived at http://thinknola.com/wiki/Rising_Tide_Conference. See www.nola.com/forums for the full listing of forum topics.

18. These observations are not intended to ridicule individual arts projects integrating oral history but to highlight the general problem. Those public historians and others with a wealth of experience in conducting oral history interview programs in the affected communities have been relegated to the background. One of the more outspoken of these professionals has argued that as a group they should no longer cooperate when out-of-state disaster specialists and other funded researchers ask for a couple of books or articles that might help them to understand the region.

19. This is especially true when the person has been interviewed as one of the anonymous sources for an article to be published in a relatively obscure academic journal. Often such people were interviewed by local media in other parts of the country.

20. Chuck Jones produced one of the most poignant criticisms of time capsules in the Warner Brothers cartoon that introduced Michigan J. Frog, “One Froggy Evening.” He depicts the two greatest problems with time capsules: thievery and losing track of their locations. Every organization thinking of investing in a time capsule should view this cartoon.

21. Mary Gehman has provided updates along with her journal entries in a subcollection housed within the New Orleans Writers Collection. Courtney Garbars has also updated her collection by submitting photographs and essays. Both writers’ work and photographs can be found either by using their last names as search terms in the online archive or by browsing the New Orleans Writers Collection at http://www.hurricanearchive.org/browse/?collection=159.

22. For example, see Jeremy Tuman, untitled entry, Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, object 11514, September 25, 2006, 3:27 p.m., http://www.hurricanearchive.org/object/11514.

23. “Had the levees not breached I would still have my deceased son’s books. Photos and family heirlooms are now gone. Grief and anger are not new to me, but this was so completely unnecessary.” For the entire essay, see Anonymous, untitled entry, Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, object 2444, August 4, 2006, 4:59 p.m., http://www.hurricanearchive.org/object/2444.


25. “This was no token or in-kind dollop of support, either, but 1 million crisp dollar bills—a medium-sized fortune in the world of independent film. (As usual, we get it backwards—didn’t anyone stop to think that perhaps Burns should have paid us a million bucks for the privilege of appropriating our cultural history?)” Steve Tyler, “Way Too Much Money, No Manners at All,” letter to the editor, Times-Picayune, January 16, 2001, A4.


27. See http://thinknola.com/ for Gutierrez’s community activism portal and http://blogometer.com/ for his blog. Multifaceted assistance efforts provided for individuals and families throughout the Gulf Coast are directed by Common Ground Relief; these include free legal assistance and volunteers to help families in the process of rebuilding their homes. The collective is based in the Lower Ninth Ward, and their various projects are described in detail on their website: http://www.commongroundrelief.org/. A related effort to provide free health care services in New Orleans is the mission of the Common Ground Health Clinic: http://www.commongroundclinic.org/.