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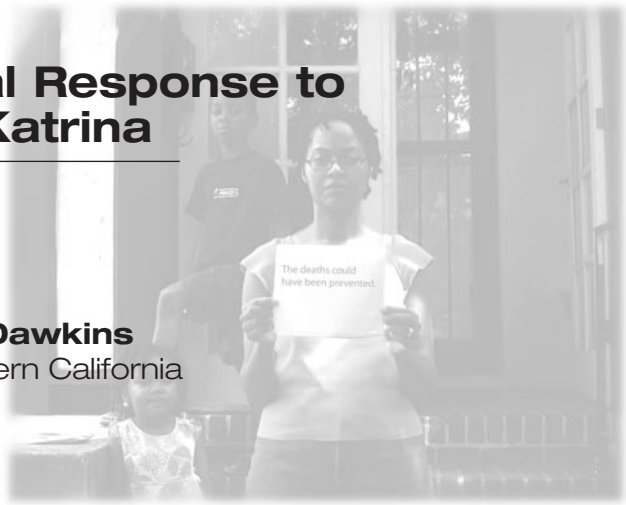
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A Rhetorical Response to Hurricane Katrina

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This essay is a rhetorical response to Hurricane Katrina. It begins with a reaction to the initial depictions of Katrina, continues with a discussion of the use of symbols to socially construct its aftermath, and concludes with key questions that the strengths of rhetorical theory allow the critic to ask and answer.

Keywords: *New Orleans; Hurricane Katrina; rhetoric; symbolism; communication*

When I read that “the description of a terrific storm is Symbolically charged” I felt a shock, as though Kenneth Burke (1968) had been reading the newspaper over my shoulder (p. 165). The scene being the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the form is a combined “qualitative” and “repetitive” progression of horror (p. 124). From all accounts, we hear despair: floods, hellfire and brimstone, corpses in rigor mortis, cannibalism, disease, crime, corruption, abandonment, fear, injustice, shame. It sounds like a scene out of *Night of the Living Dead*. The latest reports count “the official death toll at 294, but it is expected to rise dramatically towards a figure of up to 10,000” (“Cheney Tours,” 2005). Further reports add that “the full extent of horrors will not be unleashed until the disease-ridden flood waters are fully drained, leaving behind a toxic slick of rubbish, oil and dead bodies” (“Cheney Tours,” 2005). “Officials said there was no choice but to abandon the city devastated by Katrina, perhaps for months....This recovery will take years” (McFadden & Blumenthal, 2005, p. A1).

I got to thinking about psychologies of information and form, why the “Katrina Horror Story” takes such epic and macabre proportions. In *Counter-Statement*, Burke (1931) provides a few reasons. For one, the aesthetic that informs those who describe the scene is of necessity linked to the mood and environment of Katrina’s victims, survivors, and audiences. As a result, these scary symbols and images can prompt us into a heightened state of awareness, in which we can recognize and learn about patterns of experience that have been literally and figuratively submerged by our cultural conditioning. This explains why we now wonder how such “Third World” states of af-

fairs could be the United States. Or why it is only now that we notice that the poorest and predominantly Black and Latin Ninth Ward of New Orleans was closest to the levee and most devastated. In other words, these symbols point to existent patterns behind chaotic scenes. Symbols can also be arranged to transform illicit behaviors such as “looting” for food into appropriate or even virtuous “findings.” We can ask questions about variations in ideology: Is this just about class or about how race and class intersect in people’s lives? Who is “better off” as a result of Katrina’s ravages: the now homeless victims, who according to Barbara Bush “were underprivileged anyway,” or the oil companies (“Barbara Bush,” 2005)? Which is the bigger disaster: Hurricane Katrina or the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s response?

The haunting point to all of this is that symbols are the tools of social construction and reconstruction. The question in this case is whether the effective use of symbols can lead to physical reconstruction and rehabilitation of the Gulf Coast. Emergent discourses surrounding Hurricane Katrina can be probed as prime instances of rhetoric in action to answer key questions, such as (a) How do catastrophic and ineffable events, whether considered acts of God or acts of man, become controversies contested on the symbolic level? (b) How can rhetoric be mobilized to persuade disparate communities and audiences to act according to a shared vision of the common good? and (c) How is humanity argued for in a contentious climate? Rhetorical theory allows us to go about an exploration of the dialectical tensions that arise among conflicting rhetors and audiences as they argue from their own linguistic and symbolic systems. It can reveal the very real costs of resisting or identifying with competing notions of universality and community as they are used to argue for humanity. We can learn to reconsider the effects of submerged particularities within unifying terms which have been historically deployed in national and international rhetorics of reconstruction.

Ultimately, a look at Hurricane Katrina through the lens of rhetoric reveals that its theoretical shortcomings also constitute rhetoric’s areas of strengths: that symbols can be used to state and to counterstate, to create suspense and surprise, to reveal more than one or even two sides to any story, any poem, any song. This ebb and flow is what makes symbols perfectly imperfect, and this is why they can be found at the heart of human descriptions of nature and in the form of all art, all literature, all rhetoric, and all of life’s raw edges.

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