Moving Testimonies and the Geography of Suffering: Perils and Fantasies of Belonging after Katrina

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Theorizing trauma as a psychic structure of experience for which violent acts and physical settings are of passing importance, Cathy Caruth has famously developed the psychoanalytic concept of “belatedness.” “The impact of a traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness,” she has written, “in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time,” or “in connection with another place and time.” Indeed, Caruth’s influential work has inspired a rich debate about psychic temporality and the historical truths and enigmas that traumatic experience arguably renders – but significantly less attention to its spatial aspects.

Focusing here as much or more on place as on time -- changing up the variables by substituting the who and where for the who and what – this presentation will respond to the Interrogating Trauma call to articulate “strategies for moving ‘beyond’…trauma” by exploring the site-specific perorations and perambulations of situated testimony both as a proliferating strategy of the documentary film and, with reference to Caruth’s work on trauma, as a contemporary geography of suffering.

Documentaries from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina will comprise a case study of relevant issues of displacement, belonging, and right of return in a post-disaster context. “That china cabinet doesn’t have no business being over here,” exclaims a grief-stricken Wilhelmina Blanchard, inspecting her destroyed home for the first time since having evacuated. As Spike Lee comments on commentary track of the epic documentary in which Blanchard appears, “The foundation is not there. Your feet are not on solid ground.” The geography of the terrain -- from its furnishings to its urban architecture to its ecology to its economic and racial relations -- was massively altered such that the ways and means of rehabilitation and bioremediation are an open question. And yet the bodily presence of returning residents describes a strong and tangible connection to place, community, neighborhood, and home; an affective geography that is established and transitory, solid and imaginative.

Focusing on Lee’s When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts; Tia Lessen’s and Carl Deal’s Trouble the Water; and a one and a half minute short, New Orleans for Sale, by Brandan Odums and Nik Richard with the group 2-cent, I will show how these compelling documentaries respect the importance of community while at the same time contesting a racially and topographically concretized mapping of post-Katrina New Orleans.

Following Caruth’s hints about the “belatedness” -- or, better, the unassimilability of place – into the conceptual space of critical human geography, we may discover an “unhomed geography,” in Irit Rogoff’s term, that is transformative with regard to rites/rights of return and porous in its ethnic, racial, generational, and economic contours. The film and media works under study and others like them, I will argue, are collocutors in a conversation not only about the social ecology of Katrina, but also about how we as arts and media scholars and practitioners might rethink and even possibly reshape the physical as well as the social and psychic topographies of traumatic experience through a new mode of practicing space.