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Queering Katrina: Gay Discourses of the Disaster in New Orleans

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Within certain conservative narratives imposed upon the events of 2005, New Orleans has been demonized as a site promoting gay licentiousness and therefore meriting divine retribution. In queer narratives, New Orleans has been valorized as promoting that same licentiousness but lamented for having those hedonistic excesses tempered by the widespread destruction of the city. Especially in the latter scenario, there is a significant degree of nostalgia, an element that also marks other queer understandings of the city that focus not so much on the hedonism as on the day-to-day warp and woof of pre-hurricane gay communities. The main focus of this essay is on how, as gay communities have been reconfigured in the aftermath of the hurricane by temporary and permanent evacuations, job relocations, and other alterations, gay responses have continued to evince a range of emotions, including anger, bitterness, resignation, and optimism. This essay focusses on gay literary production responding directly to the hurricane to examine essays and poems published as *Love, Bourbon Street: Reflections of New Orleans* (2006) and *Blanche Survives Katrina in FEMA Trailer Named Desire*, Mark Sam Rosenthal's off-Broadway show structured around a parody of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* that, as a result of this structure, faced legal action instigated by the University of the South, owner of the intellectual rights to Williams's literary production. The collection and the play are sustained queer responses to Katrina's flooding of the city that showcase both the energizing and problematic aspects of these responses.

Before, during, and especially after the arrival of Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast of Mississippi and Louisiana, discourses surrounding this ostensibly preternatural phenomenon centralized and continue to centralize class and race – and rightly so. For all the horrific results of the storm, it momentarily galvanized a meaningful – albeit tendentious – discussion of class- and race-based injustice in the United States, although the scope and sustainability of this discussion seem to be curtailed with each passing month. While not minimizing the importance of these discursive circulations, I want to suggest that in significant ways, sexuality – and gay male

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sexuality in particular – has also informed these discourses. If only in a preliminary and highly selective fashion, this essay seeks to survey some modes in which various gay elements have helped to structure the components and manifold narratives specifically associated with the breaching of the levee system, the subsequent flooding of approximately 80 percent of New Orleans immediately after the hurricane, the attendant evacuations and returns, and the five years spent negotiating a post-Katrina Crescent City.

Although my critical approaches do not typically center on autobiography, a brief sketch of my own physical, emotional, and historical positions within these events and discourses may be in order simply to provide context for my subsequent discussion. At the time of Hurricane Katrina, I had been living in New Orleans and teaching at the University of New Orleans in the Department of English since 1997. I owned a house in the Lakeview neighborhood in relatively close proximity to what would eventually be designated the Seventeenth Street Canal breach along the northwestern boundary of Orleans Parish where it abuts Jefferson Parish just below Lake Pontchartrain. Like many other locals, I had not planned to evacuate for Katrina, which had initially been anticipated as a category three storm, but, in light of reports of its increased strength, I left the city on Sunday, 28 August, the day before the catastrophic second and third landfalls, and traveled to Lake Charles, Louisiana to stay temporarily with friends. When news came that the levees had broken and the city was flooded, I relocated to north-central Texas, staying there with members of my family for just over a month until the first week of October. I returned to New Orleans to one of the heavily flooded areas and to a house that had been submerged in five feet of water within the structure and approximately eight feet in the street. While salvaging the few reclaimable items from the wreckage, I lived with friends in areas that had not flooded, or had done so with minimal damage: first Uptown, then in the French Quarter, and finally in the Bayou St. John neighborhood. Concerned with reconfigured social patterns of both the broader city and my immediate circles of friends and colleagues, as well as skeptical about the economic future of the University of New Orleans and the city itself, I sold my flooded property in February of 2007 and remained in relative limbo until May of 2008, when I relocated to take my current teaching position in Virginia. I do not offer this abbreviated and admittedly sterilized narrative as a means of validating the authority of experience and therefore implicitly questioning the articulations of those persons removed from the immediate lived experiences of these events. Rather, I offer the account to acknowledge that I stand always intimately within these discourses and espouse assessments that have been invariably impacted by these

events as by my personal decisions. My feelings about New Orleans remain conflicted, although I hasten to add that they were conflicted before the storm too.

As I consider the proliferation of discourses around the hurricane through the particularizing lenses of my tenure in New Orleans, I think the first way that specifically male homosexuality became intertwined with Katrina was within narratives promulgated by some conservative Christians and others who demonized New Orleans as a modern Sodom, a site promoting and profiting from gay licentiousness and therefore meriting divine retribution. Such rhetoric was not new. Mardi Gras and Southern Decadence, the annual gay (predominantly male) street festival founded in 1972 that spans the Labor Day weekend and, according to gay promotional websites, brings into the New Orleans economy $100 million annually, had long been characterized by certain Christian groups – often fairly – as rife with promiscuity, public sex, and the consumption of drugs and alcohol. Both festivals were therefore targeted for religious protests, usually on Bourbon Street, the supposed epicenter of perversion, or, after tensions surrounding verbal assaults escalated, on the fringes of the French Quarter.[1] For some, however, Katrina's arrival only days before Southern Decadence 2005 augured that specifically gay transgression was being singled out for divine punishment, and, via increasingly sophisticated and influential use of the Internet as well as other media outlets, narratives delineating this retribution proliferated. On repentamerica.com, for example, in a feature that ominously concluded with Nahum 1:3 ("The LORD is slow to anger, and great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked: the LORD hath his way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet"), Michael Marcavage offered in telling past tenses:

> Although the loss of lives is deeply saddening, this act of God destroyed a wicked city … From "Girls Gone Wild" to "Southern Decadence," New Orleans was a city that had its doors wide open to the public celebration of sin. From the devastation may a city full of righteousness emerge.

Marcavage advocated help and prayer for those "ravaged by this disaster," but warned,

> Let us not forget that the citizens of New Orleans tolerated and welcomed the wickedness in their city for so long … May this act of God cause us all to think

[1] For details about the history and current manifestations of Southern Decadence see John T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 96–106, 273; www.southerndecadence.net.

about what we tolerate in our city limits, and bring us trembling before the throne of Almighty God.[2]

Similarly, in 2006, John Hagee, senior pastor of San Antonio's charismatic Cornerstone Church, in conversation with Terry Gross on National Public Radio, maintained, "All hurricanes are acts of God because God controls the heavens. I believe that New Orleans had a level of sin that was offensive to God and they were recipients of the judgment of God for that." Hagee subsequently clarified for conservative talk radio host Dennis Prager that, "In the case of New Orleans, their plan to have that homosexual rally was sin. But it never happened. The rally never happened." When pressed by Prager – "you do feel that God's hand was in it because of a sinful city?" – Hagee adamantly replied, "That it was a city that was planning a sinful conduct, yes."[3]

Although the homophobia of these narratives is striking, it is perhaps no less so than the self-centeredness that marked some gay responses the weekend before Katrina hit. As the events planned for Southern Decadence began to be canceled, and city officials warned tourists with increasing stridency either to leave the city or to cancel their arrivals, numerous gay men eagerly set for a weekend of camaraderie and debauchery, carped about their disrupted plans, lost deposits, and curtailed promiscuity. While some local gays shared their disappointment, the most vocal were primarily out-of-towners, men for whom New Orleans, much like Las Vegas, was largely scripted as a site of sexual excess and not as a mundane sustained community, albeit one now anxiously negotiating the threat of potential destruction.[4] In this sense, then, those Christians identifying a vengeful destructive God and the decadent gay men against whom that anger was directed ironically shared a common characterization of New Orleans as a city reduced almost exclusively to its deviant sexual practices. Whereas Marcavage and Hagee found grim solace in the temporary eradication of those practices, and some gay men lamented the loss of hedonistic excesses,

[2] Michael Marcavage quoted in "Hurricane Katrina Destroys New Orleans Days before 'Southern Decadence,'" *Repent America*, 31 Dec. 2005, at www.repentamerica.com/pr_hurricanekatrina.html, accessed 29 Sept. 2009.

[3] Hagee quoted in Matt Corley, "Hagee Says Hurricane Katrina Struck New Orleans Because It Was 'Planning A Sinful' 'Homosexual Rally,'" *Think Progress*, 23 April 2008, at http://thinkprogress.org/2008/04/23/hagee-katrina-mccain/, accessed 29 Sept. 2009. See also Terry Gross, "Pastor John Hagee on Christian Zionism, Katrina," *NPR*, 18 Sept. 2006.

[4] Understandings of New Orleans as a site of (homo)sexual license and licentiousness have a lengthy history, as discussed by, among others, John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 14, 15.

in both cases the broader New Orleans community, not primarily defined by sexuality but inclusive of gay and lesbian presences, among other sexual identities, is elided, excluded, and dismissed.

This is not to say that mundane New Orleanians, homosexual and otherwise, were without their own sexual indulgences. Media coverage of the city's devastated landscape tended to focus on the shocking scope of the destruction, the heroic narratives of rescue, or the missteps or perceived missteps of various levels of government, but something of an open secret also received coverage as the floodwaters receded. Invasive waters had, among many other things, forcefully exposed the range of New Orleanians' sexual appetites by literalizing "closetedness." When Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick theorized this vicinity two decades ago in *Epistemology of the Closet*, she focused primarily on the performative aspects of texts and speech acts in relation to "the closet – the relations of the known and the unknown, the explicit and the inexplicit around homo/heterosexual definition – [that] have the potential for being particularly revealing."[5] Implicit within Sedgwick's focus on this metaphysical space is an agency, vexed and limited though it may be, for persons negotiating closetedness. In contrast, Katrina eradicated much individual agency when the hurricane concretized "the closet" and indiscriminately put on display for others – not only strangers, such as rescue workers, news crews, insurance inspectors, contractors, and curious tourists, but also family members and neighbors – thousands of individual caches of pornography, sex toys, and other sexual accoutrements that had not been taken with evacuees. (Anecdotes abounded after the storm about the struggles over which sexual accoutrements were deemed necessary to take during evacuations.) A heterosexual professor at the University of New Orleans, for instance, recounted how his vintage pornographic magazines, stored in his girlfriend's basement garage, eddied about the space in the floodwaters before eventually drying on the cement floor, creating in the process a massive pornographic papier mâché. Stories circulated about the panoply of dildos and butt plugs and the assortment of bottled lubricants and amyl nitrite that haphazardly washed away and then ashore, and persons anxiously sought to determine whether flooded sex toys could be reclaimed with the omnipresent bleach and a little scrubbing that worked effectively on porcelain, glass, and hard plastic. And how, people asked, part in jest and part in dead seriousness, does one itemize this particular loss on insurance claims? Comedic though these exposed elements of private lives may be in

[5] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 3.

hindsight, these uncontrolled "outings" of a range of sexualities and sexual practices added to the anxieties of persons, gay and otherwise, who evacuated and returned to the city.

While some evacuees never returned, there were also substantial numbers of new persons who arrived as part of the assessment and recovery processes, and this populace, if only subtly, altered the sexual practices of the city. Perhaps the most significant within circulations of male same-sex interactions was the influx of Latino workers, primarily Mexicans, who made up over an estimated half of all recovery workers. Jennifer Liberto, exploring the "mini-boom in Latinos" for CNNMoney.com, asserted that, according to 2008 census surveys, New Orleans's Latino population had gone from a pre-Katrina 3 percent to 4.5 percent and continued to grow.[6] (Some estimates place this figure as high as 15 percent) Although predominantly identifying as heterosexual, some Latino men, usually in the absences of their families, some of whom have now joined the recovery workers, nevertheless turned on occasion to situational homosexuality to gratify sexual needs and desires, opting to frequent the city's two bathhouses, the Club New Orleans and Midtown Spa, establishments that significantly did not flood, being located in the French Quarter and the Central Business District respectively, and that reopened almost at once. Largely acculturated not to have their masculinity or heterosexuality called into question by same-sex acts so long as these persons remained the inserting partners, some Latinos (as well as other ethnicities of men who share these internalized understandings of gender and sexuality) could participate in both oral and anal sex with other men. The bathhouses evinced significantly increased Latino presences after Katrina. These men were not, however, the only ones altering the populations in the baths and bars; the majority of people associated with the recovery efforts who were present after the reopening of the city were men, straight, gay, and bisexual, who were there without wives, partners, or other potentially restricting family members, the profile of men most apt to indulge in the easily secured same-sex activities of baths and bars.

Just as Katrina's long-term effects on permanent and semi-permanent self-identifying gay populations of the city (much less those of men having sex

[6] Jennifer Liberto, "Latinos Flock to New Orleans," *CNNMoney.com*, Cable News Network, 19 Aug. 2009, at money.cnn.com/2009/08/19/news/economy/…/index.htm, accessed 20 Sept. 2009. See also Elizabeth Fussell, "Hurricane Chasers in New Orleans," *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 31 (2009), 375–94; Laurel E. Fletcher, Phuong Pham, Eric Stover, and Patrick Vinck, "Rebuilding after Katrina: A Population-Based Study of Labor and Human Rights in New Orleans," University of California, Berkeley, Jun. 2006, at papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1448373, accessed 20 Sept. 2009.

with other men but not self-identifying as gay) remain indeterminate, so too do the hurricane's effects on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) tourists. Both statistics and casual observations suggest, however, that the city's lure for these travelers has not returned to pre-Katrina levels. According to Emilie Bahr, writing in *New Orleans CityBusiness*, even the city's "accepting attitude, diverse population and penchant for parades and revelry" have not been able to check the trend that GLBT tourists are seeking other US vacation spots over New Orleans.[7] In 2008, according to gay market research firm Community Marketing Inc., the city, which had usually taken a position midway in the top-twenty list pre-Katrina and just within the list immediately post-Katrina, slipped from the list altogether, being edged out not only by standard GLBT destinations such as San Francisco and New York but also by other southern locales such Atlanta and Key West. The economic downturn of the late 2000s is, of course, a key factor in these shifting travel preferences, but other elements, including ones in play before the hurricane, remain. According to David Paisley, a senior research analyst with Community Marketing,

> crime and questions related to the status of storm recovery, along with a general trend during tighter economic times toward destinations within easy drives or train rides of other gay population centers, have contributed to the decline in New Orleans' appeal as a gay travel destination.[8]

Declining numbers of GLBT tourists become all the more significant since part of the appeal to many travelers is the sheer number of similar persons in one locale and the social, romantic, and sexual opportunities supposedly inherent within these numbers. Visitors who encounter diminished numbers of other GLBT tourists are therefore often less apt to return to the city and thus further augment the declining tourist population.

For those who were permanent residents of areas affected by Katrina, it frequently seemed that, even amid evacuations, returns, and renovations, these persons had little time to engage in any activities except for the recording of their experiences during and after the hurricane, and the trickle of stories initially relayed over phones, in diaries, or on the Web soon burst into a torrent of Katrina narratives that is only now abating five years on. This outpouring of narratives had and continues to have many benefits, not least of which are the therapeutic expressing of emotion and the fixing of detail before the fading of memory; moreover, with each new account, there is the potential to showcase an ever-widening range of experiences and the varied

[7] Emilie Bahr, "City's Gay Vacation Appeal Drops," *New Orleans CityBusiness*, 19 Jan. 2009, n.p. [8] David Paisley quoted in Bahr.

responses to those experiences associated with the flooding of the city. Certainly multiple gay voices have enhanced this process, as they recount diverse queer reactions to Katrina's aftermath – temporary and permanent evacuations, job relocations, threats of new levee breaches, the encroachment of the contemporary economic collapse on recovery efforts, and so forth – with anger, bitterness, resignation, optimism, and, perhaps most rarely, as addressed subsequently, humor.

Within this range, however, problematic patterns have emerged, and gay-centered Katrina narratives often evince the same issues as other articulations within this subgenre, even as these gay narratives also feature unique disturbing elements. One such work that seems ultimately as troubling as it is – or, perhaps more accurately, was – energizing is the somewhat haphazard series of primarily gay- and lesbian-authored essays and poems published as *Love, Bourbon Street: Reflections of New Orleans*, edited by gay mystery writer Greg Herren and his partner, Paul J. Willis, and released by GLBT-focussed Alyson Books in 2006, roughly on the first anniversary of Katrina. The pieces collected here are often inspiring, especially within their immediately post-Katrina context, and twenty contributors have the potential to foreground diverse perspectives and genres. However, what also emerges from a somewhat cliquish group of writers, as intimated in the acknowledgments and intertextual references among the essays, is a shared sustained nostalgia that pervades so many Katrina narratives, a nostalgia for a city that existed in only the most tenuous manifestations.

This is not to say that some essays and poems do not work diligently against such nostalgia to offer candid assessments of the city and its accompanying identities. Consider, for instance, Poppy Z. Brite's moment of critical self-examination in her autobiographical sketch "Cocksucker Suit." Sounding momentarily less like herself and more like Ellen Gilchrist, historically one of the most waspish of Uptown New Orleans's writers and critics, Brite scrutinizes that part of her pre-Katrina personality "that had become a hidebound old Uptown doyen, worshipping Rex, chowing down at Commander's Palace and Clancy's, muttering dire imprecations against the newfound trendiness of the Lower Ninth Ward." She confesses, "I don't like to indulge that part of my personality too much," thus implicating the distastefulness of that former identity.[9] Shifting from the "personalities" of New Orleans to the physical city itself, the opening of Karissa Kary's "Café

[9] Poppy Z. Brite, "Cocksucker Suit," in Greg Herren and Paul J. Willis, eds., *Love, Bourbon Street: Reflections of New Orleans* (New York: Alyson, 2006), 17.

Reflections Out of the Blue" meditates on a post-Katrina news report of the Quarter as "pristine":

> No one who ever set foot inside the Quarter before, during *or* after the storm, would describe it as pristine. The twisted street signs, broken glass, worn-down buildings, streets littered with garbage and donkey [*sic*] manure from carriages carrying well-dressed and well-fed tourists – all a matter of form. And of course there is the unforgettable bouquet of vomit that drifts off of Bourbon Street on particularly hot days.[10]

Other essays, such as Victoria Brownworth's, acknowledge counterimages to a romanticized past, even if they are ultimately minimized. "I have bad memories of New Orleans," she asserts. "No one lives anywhere without accruing some bad memories; no place is perfect. But there's balance when a place has your heart as New Orleans had mine and so the good memories always win, always displace the bad."[11]

Many of the essays in *Love, Bourbon Street: Reflections of New Orleans*, however, idealize not only New Orleans in general but gay New Orleans in particular. Although Toni Amato and Amie Evans's essay documents the near-fatal Quarter gay-bashing of editor Paul Willis – "Several young men with bats jumped from a van and beat [him] so severely that he lost the sight of one of his eyes" – Willis himself offers in the collection's Introduction that "New Orleans was a beacon of light in a conservative region for many queers, who fled their birthplaces for her welcoming arms," while Patricia Nell Warren overstates, in her foreword, "In a very real way, the deepest roots of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered life and liberty in the United States must be looked for not in New York or San Francisco, but in N'Awlins."[12] Indeed, the collection rarely includes any negative critique of the city's queer enclaves, whether before, during, or after the hurricane, and, as in the rhetoric of Warren, an auxiliary effect is the devaluing of other locales central to gay and lesbian history and to the formation of modern homosexual identity.[13]

[10] Karissa Kary, "Café Reflections Out of the Blue," in *Love, Bourbon Street*, 27, original emphasis.

[11] Victoria A. Brownworth, "Living in Desire: A New Orleans Memory," in *Love, Bourbon Street*, 53.

[12] Toni Amato and Amie M. Evans, "A Home Away from Home," in *Love, Bourbon* Street, 132; Greg Herren and Paul J. Willis, Introduction, in *Love, Bourbon Street*, xv; Patricia Nell Warren, "A Westerner Ponders New Orleans," in *Love, Bourbon Street*, xxiv.

[13] Classic texts within this scholarship include George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970*, 2nd edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Martin Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York: Dutton, 1993); Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight*

But other potential problems emerge from the collection. Like both the Christian and gay narratives cited earlier, the essays and poems often reduce New Orleans exclusively to the hedonism of Bourbon Street, as documented most forcefully by the title of the collection, at the expense of the city's diversity of neighborhoods, especially the surrounding communities in Jefferson, Plaquemines, and St. Bernard Parishes that make up metropolitan New Orleans. With this move, the collection thus participates in the broader troubling trends of New Orleans writing – literary production that has long privileged the French Quarter and the Garden District to the exclusion of other locales, as evinced, for example, in depictions of the city by such canonical southern writers as William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams. (Some persons now maintain that the Lower Ninth Ward has entered into this highly selective and thus reductive figuring of the post-Katrina city.) Within this set of geographically circumscribed representations, at least for Willis, whose essay centers on a public sexual encounter with a stranger during Mardi Gras of 2006, there is also an overt conflation in which the city, the French Quarter, and promiscuous gay sex are set up as mutually constitutive:

> We stayed connected for quite some time, oblivious to our surroundings – kissing deep, rubbing skin, pinching on nipples. For me, all the stress and tension that had been brewing over the last six months just dropped away. It was the first time since the landscape had been altered that I had felt any type of passion.

In conclusion Willis observes, "I was glad to be wearing my fur chaps," and continues, "I was glad to be home again."[14] This conflation is perhaps not surprising from an editor whose pornographic collections such as *Sex Buddies: Erotic Stories about Sex without Strings*, *View to a Thrill*, and *Kink: Tales of the Sexual Adventures* have worked diligently and usefully not to closet queer sexual activity from mainstream gay publishing. However, Willis's essay, like these anthologies, nevertheless risks implying that sexual activity is the only aspect of gay identity worthy of representation, a move that some persons find to be as reductive about gay identity as of New Orleans itself.

The essays also feature a propagandistic insistence on the city's resiliency that, while not surprising given the temporal proximity to the hurricane,

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Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America (New York: Penguin, 1992); *idem*, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow, 1981); Howard; and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993). For pointed fictional critiques of New Orleans gay communities see, for instance, Poppy Z. Brite, *Exquisite Corpse* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996); and Jim Grimsley, *Boulevard* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2002).

[14] Paul J. Willis, "Fur Chaps and the Candyman," in *Love, Bourbon Street*, 148, 149.

nevertheless grows wearisome in its unsophisticated repetition. Willis characterizes that first post-Katrina Mardi Gras as "celebrating a resilient spirit that is New Orleans," while Herren cites his online journal from 1 September 2005: "We will return. We will rebuild. And we will revive that unexplainable magic that New Orleans has always had."[15] Here and in the next day's log Herren succumbs to a highly romanticized version of the city – "New Orleans will once again be the jewel of the South; the shining diamond in the tiara that is the United States. It is a great city, it will become a greater city" – and thus virtually rehearses the multicultural apotheosis established by Warren in her foreword:

> The Spirit of New Orleans might be called a *loa* or a goddess, and given different names, depending on whom you talk to. She is tinged with the colors of many peoples, black, brown, and white … Her toga may be draped in the same European neoclassic style that inspired her older buildings, but it's an African textile. Her necklace is Mardi Gras beads. Her shield luminesces with fish scales.[16]

Finally, as Herren's and Warren's essays, among others, document, the prose of the pieces, like that of so many texts within the torrent of Katrina narratives, has a distinctly purple tinge, yet strains – often unsuccessfully – to establish its literariness. Another passage from Herren deliberately echoes the collection's gloss on Tennessee Williams identifying New Orleans as his "spiritual home." Reflecting on his own relocation to the city, Herren offers, "I heard the siren song of the crescent city in my heart and made it my physical home as well as my spiritual," adding a few pages later, "*You belong here*, the city seemed to be whispering to me in the dulcet tones of a practiced seductress. *Join me and all of your dreams will come true … I will make you happier than you ever imagined in your wildest dreams, and I will show you how to live and enjoy your life. I will teach you how to dance.*"[17] Not only do clichés amass, unclear referents abound, trite images proliferate, and unselfconscious parodies emerge, but Herren's subsequent defensiveness about formalist dexterity throws these same elements into sharp relief: "As I've said before, I don't give a rat's ass what critics think of my work, what the pretentious literary queens with their martini glasses think, and whether I win awards or not. I don't."[18] Herren is, of course, correct in intimating the ideological, political, and personal significance of a text such as his, but that importance does not fully negate, especially once the text has been broadly disseminated under the marketing designation of "literary essay," that it stands justifiably open to rigorous formalist analysis. As George Levine and other theorists of

[15] Willis, 145; Herren, "I Haven't Stopped Dancing Yet," in *Love, Bourbon Street*, 166.
[16] Herren, 169; Warren, xxii. [17] Herren, 152, 154. [18] Ibid., 183.

aesthetics have cautioned, despite the textual democracy that flourishes especially in the contemporary Internet era, for many critical readers an appropriately valorized text is that which arises out of "a mode that operates *differently* from others and contributes *in distinct ways* to the possibilities of human fulfillment and connection."[19] Even a critic of Levine such as Michael Bérubé concedes that, while "literature and criticism are inevitably entangled in social, historical, and ideological commitments … contemporary literary criticism stresses this aspect of literature too strongly" and would be well served to retain a preoccupation with aesthetics.[20]

Among the essays in *Love, Bourbon Street* that largely escape these conflations, nostalgias, and formalistic weaknesses is Brite's "Cocksucker Suit." Although one of the shorter pieces in the collection, it provocatively raises the issue of humor and Katrina (or any disaster) and suggests that, even in early published work on the storm, some writers (gay or otherwise) were tentative about broaching the events with the humor that often accompanies tales of survival and resilience. Brite begins by confessing that just before the storm she had grown "almost unbearably tired of doing female drag" and thus had bought a Perlis men's seersucker suit.[21] In her account, she almost immediately opts for humor to negotiate the cultural anxieties surrounding violations of rigid gender conformity, offering even in the title the comic – if slightly homophobic – wordplay she overhears in a local restaurant on *seersucker* and *cocksucker*. This humor proliferates in passages such as this one:

> I finally convince them to sell me a $200 suit by telling them that when my husband saw how good it looked, he'd want to get one too. For whatever reason, "husband" seemed to be the magic word; I guess it was acceptable to sell a suit to a cross-dresser as long as it wasn't an actual *pervert* (though if the man who actually rang up my purchase was heterosexual, I am Shaquille O'Neal).[22]

With delicious understatement, Brite concludes that after Katrina, "Some of my discomfort with female drag has receded – I've had bigger issues to deal with this year than my lifelong gender dysphoria – but I still look forward to putting [the cocksucker suit] back on."[23] This comic articulation, even as it acknowledges the disruptiveness of Katrina, ironically minimizes the hurricane's significance with the anticipated return to playful manipulations of gender.

[19] George Levine, "Reclaiming the Aesthetic," in David H. Richter, ed., *Falling into Theory: Conflicting Views on Reading Literature*, 2nd edn (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000), 379, emphasis added.
[20] Michael Bérubé, "Aesthetics and the Literal Imagination," in Richter, 393.
[21] Brite, 17. [22] Ibid., 17–18, original emphasis. [23] Ibid., 19.

But is Brite's humor here really *about* Katrina? If it is, it is only of the most tentative sort. It seems instead deliberately deployed to quarantine the storm's disruptive elements by focussing attention on the periods before and after the hurricane, the moment when the cocksucker suit could be acquired and the moment when it may be pleasurably worn again. One of the truisms of humor, offers Simon Critchley, is that it "suddenly and explosively lets us see the familiar defamiliarized."[24] This defamiliarization, even if captured in a mode of negative critique, positions extraordinary focus on the humorously treated subject and thus implicitly valorizes it. In Brite's instance, then, what is valorized by being the subject of her humor is any moment *but* that of Katrina, suggesting that she ultimately opts in her essay not to treat the actual catastrophe comically. She and other contributors to the collection do so, of course, out of what is, for many persons, sound reasoning: in early 2006, when these essays and poems were presumably being collected, the events of Katrina were simply too fresh and too painful to be treated with humor, an often cruel device that Sigmund Freud asserted over a century ago is far too prone to evince human preoccupation with the hostile and the obscene.[25]

Although the duration for this period in which humor remains supposedly inappropriate is debated, more recent gay literary expressions that deploy comic devices when negotiating Katrina stand to escape this offensive inappropriateness; nevertheless, these texts often remain problematic in their own right. One example is *Blanche Survives Katrina in a FEMA Trailer Named Desire*, the one-man show written and performed by gay Baton Rouge native Mark Sam Rosenthal that appeared first at the New York International Fringe Festival before running off-Broadway at the SoHo Playhouse in the spring of 2009.[26] Structured around a parody of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, as intimated by the documents and clips available at www.blanchesurviveskatrina.com, the play imagines Blanche DuBois as an evacuee of Katrina, first to the Superdome, then to upstate Louisiana, and eventually into the wider world, but still as dependent as ever "on the kindness of strangers."[27] Dictated in part by this focus, Rosenthal's play veers wildly away from the largely somber and romanticized tributes to New Orleans in *Love, Bourbon Street* and instead traffics in potentially refreshing elements of camp. Its source material is a gay-authored text considered by

[24] Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), 10.

[25] See, in particular, Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York and London: Norton, 1960), 111–37.

[26] For trailers, reviews, and other information associated with the production see www.blanchesurviveskatrina.com.

[27] Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (New York: Signet, 1951), 142.

many to be excessively campy in its own right; the central figure is a female icon of gay culture (Blanche DuBois) famously brought to the screen by another female icon of gay culture (Vivien Leigh); it includes exaggerated performances of already exaggerated performances of gender, including deliberately unconvincing drag for the hirsute Rosenthal; and its transgressive humor consistently violates race- and class-based taboos. Moreover, unlike Brite's tentative humor of 2006, Rosenthal's comedic consideration raucously centers on Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, forcing audience members to reflect squarely upon these events to imagine contrasting scenarios in which the disaster might have been more deftly handled. Rosenthal is, in terms again offered by Critchley, deploying humor for its messianic power, since "laughter lets us see the folly of the world in order to imagine a better world in its place, and to change the situation in which we find ourselves."[28]

For all the play's laughter and its potentially valuable social ends, however, *Blanche Survives Katrina* ultimately seems as problematic as the pieces in *Love, Bourbon Street*. Some critics and other playgoers, for instance, indicted the show's formalist simplicity, with Anita Gates concluding her review in the *New York Times*, "'Blanche Survives Katrina,' which aspires to be something more than a drag sketch, never fully takes shape … [I]t has an affably nutty festival aura, but the core is missing."[29] Even more disturbing for Gates, though, was what she identified as the play's overt racism, although she neglects to tease out how Blanche's racism may be differently inflected from Rosenthal's. When Blanche drawls of her time in the Superdome, "Every woman there appeared to be somebody's maid, and yet the place was filthy," Gates counters, "So is 'Blanche Survives Katrina,' written and performed by a white Southern male, racist? It certainly flirts with offense, ridiculing black characters' names and being flippant about poverty and violence."[30] For others, such as the University of the South, owner of the intellectual rights to Williams's literary production, Rosenthal's parodic appropriations of *A Streetcar Named Desire* constituted infringement of legal rights, and the university unsuccessfully sought to shutter the play.[31] Others wondered about the efficacy of parody in general, suggesting that if audience members

[28] Critchley, 17.

[29] Anita Gates, "No Kindness from Strangers at the Superdome? Tsk, Tsk," *New York Times*, 29 Jan. 2009, at theater.nytimes.com/2009/01/29/theater/reviews/29blan.html.

[30] Ibid.

[31] See Patrick Healy, "One Man's Blanche Is a University's Infringement," *New York Times*, 4 Feb. 2009.

do not have intimate knowledge of Williams's text, as many did not the night that I attended the performance, the savvy of Rosenthal's reworking of the 1947 play is undetectable.

But, in light of the play's negotiations of Katrina, the temporal and geographic elements of the staging may have presented the greatest hurdles. If the close temporal proximity to Katrina fostered an overwhelmingly reverential nostalgia in *Love, Bourbon Street*, the lag time after Katrina weakened much of the humor in *Blanche Survives Katrina*. The details of the storm that Rosenthal has woven into the fabric of the play were simply too distant from mainstream New Yorkers' memories, thus disarming many of the play's comic allusions. And yet, for people like myself with that catalog of New Orleans references still fresh, and an openness to comic treatments of the crisis, Rosenthal ultimately, like Brite, reined in the humor, framing Blanche's comic moments with the serious context of a returning evacuee excavating his flooded house. A hint of this sobriety marks Rosenthal's "Author's Note" from the New York playbill:

> Although I live in Brooklyn now, I am a seventh-generation Louisianian; I still refer to the place as "home." Hurricane Katrina displaced close members of my family, to say nothing of what happened to the countless strangers I saw trapped on roofs and in the Superdome. And so many are still trapped someplace that isn't home due in large part to a colossally bungled governmental response. How did we allow this to happen, and how can so many of us so quickly forget to care about The City that Care Forgot? In a society that allows its most vulnerable citizens to drown and starve and then go homeless, can the fragile parts inside any of us be safe? Since I have no answers, I wrote a show in which my favorite literary character grapples with the questions. Blanche DuBois and New Orleans are both fragile, and both are eternally unforgettable. And both are deserving of a rescue that has come too little too late.

Like the somber framing device, this articulation suggests that, even though temporally displaced from Katrina and adept in the comic discourses of gay camp, writers such as Rosenthal have refused to use humor as an exclusive mode within which to negotiate the hurricane. As a result, then, "Katrina humor" has been painfully scarce, with perhaps the most potent moments being limited to the affected community immediately after the storm: Halloween revelers in the French Quarter were dressed as the flooded victims of St. Rita's Nursing Home or refrigerators filled with rotting food; Mardi Gras costumes were made of the omnipresent blue tarps of wind-damaged roofs; the same tarps were added to the miniature neighborhoods within the holiday train display at Metairie's Lakeside Mall; holiday letters with the lyrics of *Les Misérables* were rewritten to address the suffering associated with Katrina.

In sum, while the gay-authored and gay-focussed texts such as the comic *Blanche Survives Katrina* and the nostalgic pieces collected as *Love, Bourbon Street* are historically significant in articulating certain queer understandings of Katrina-era New Orleans, these literary manifestations evince problematic negotiations of both form and content. They inevitably fail to record a sense of the range of queer responses to the historical and cultural moment, ones alluded to in the opening sections of this essay, and they suggest how queer narratives – like virtually all Katrina narratives – continue to be read according to cultural hierarchies. Nevertheless, it should be clear that, within understandings of Katrina that remain justly dominated by discussions of race and class, discourses impacted by male homosexuality also continue to circulate with insistent, provocative, and often complex effects and remind us of the inescapability of sexuality.