

Book review: *Consuming Katrina: Public disaster and personal narrative*, Kate Parker Horrigan

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Parker Horrigan's slim but densely layered volume presents multiple viewpoints of narratives that emerged from citizen's experiences during Hurricane Katrina. Echoing the methodologies deployed in recent socio-hydrology and/or flood studies, notably *Surviving Katrina and Rita in Houston (SKRH)* and *When They Blew the Levee*, the book's interrogation of these narratives suggests 'a more ethical approach' to circulating and understanding survivor experiences.

The book is structured around four domains drawing on survivor experiences, starting with the most direct testimonies collected as part of the SKRH project. These interviews – a most precious resource in themselves – collected by and with survivors make a sharp contrast to the later narratives, which incrementally increase in abstraction from the immediate experiences of those who experienced the hurricane's aftermath. Hence the testimonies collected as part of SKRH foreground narratives allow survivors to contradict mainstream news media depictions of New Orleans' black communities as both helpless and unhelpable.

While Dave Egger's *Zeitoun* is not part of that mainstream news media depiction, the story of its protagonist demonstrates that the complex process of circulation and recirculation so well-studied in relation to oral narratives equally well applies to web-based media. From an original blog posted in late 2005, *Zeitoun's* account of his experiences after the hurricane were made and remade in secondary accounts of the disaster. With each re-telling, the original narrative's evaluative elements become less and less visible. *Zeitoun's* remarkable account of struggle, challenge and hardship during the floods become instead a metonym for the innately altruistic nature of humanity: as Parker Horrigan notes 'one subtext of *Zeitoun*, then, might be an insidiously comforting message that Katrina's victims did not need others' help, because they were their own heroes.'

The substitution of emblematic values for complex social realities is also evident in the graphic novel *A.D.: New Orleans after the Deluge*. Parker Horrigan's careful dissection of this work's intertextual and semiotic characteristics presents a critically engaged understanding of the problematic nature of easy demographic shortcuts: they both promote unjust social structures, and reduce the specificity of the experiential reality survivors. Of note here is that Parker Horrigan distinguishes between online and printed versions of the graphic novel: the online version remained dialogic and dynamic whereas the printed version presents a 'neat and tidy narrative' which has edited out 'the messiness of identity and of experience in postdisaster lives'.

Parker Horrigan next considers the 'unsettling filming' of *Trouble the Water*. This documentary combines survivor observation and standard documentary content, raising important questions about co-production, participatory methods, and the possibility of reciprocity as an ethnographic ethic. The bystander footage begs some difficult questions: how do we as scholars respond to suffering that is being widely broadcast but not alleviated without become complicit in the problem? Despite the project's potential, Parker Horrigan identifies shortcomings that arise from the film's overall direction. Clearly, the directors felt compelled to honour public expectations of how a film should end: they bring things together in what Parker Horrigan feels is a too-reassuring conclusion. It seems likely, however, that had the film not conformed to some public expectations it would not have achieved such wide acceptance and thus brought the uncomfortable truths it shows to a wider audience.

Least satisfactory, although still thoughtful and insightful, the final chapter considers remembrance events surrounding Katrina's 10th anniversary and the slogan-concept 'resilience'. This could have included a more

thorough interrogation of the problems inherent with 'resilience': Parker Horrigan does not directly address the issue of whose resilience is used as the benchmark of success, but perhaps the interrogation of discourses of 'resilience' was too extensive a topic to consider in such a tightly focussed book.

Parker Horrigan's book consistently reflects the interdisciplinary nature of her subject but occasionally lacks historicity. For example, as scholar currently working directly on flooding, climate change and resilience I would have appreciated some consideration of how Zeitoun (and other) flood narratives relate to other historical narratives of flood, for example, from the Red River flooding in the 1990s.

What does emerge in Parker Horrigan's analysis is the significance of folklore studies' methodologies for better understanding disaster resilience. The work that folklorists do serves frequently to complicate things: 'disrupting [the] fixity [of public memory], and reintroducing complexity, is critical for more ethical commemoration of past disaster and more effective responses to current and future ones.' As the impact of climate change begins to bite, presenting challenges at all scales of human community, (re-) introducing this complexity feels like a vital contribution that folklorists can make.

To make that contribution happen, we need more books like this; we need more voices, more perspectives, more analytical frameworks to enrich growing the scholarship on environmental humanities. This book will take a rightful place on my shelves and my own work will be the better for having read it.