

Katlin McNeil

Dr. Beth McCoy

ENGL 468-01

March 10th, 2023

“Violence is the Performance of Waste”

Throughout the course thus far there has been a lot of conversation around the idea of what does memory truly mean and how does one perform within a society? These words might seem extremely basic but when examined it's quite the opposite because you begin to unpack the true concept of memory and how each individual fully feels and uses memories to move forward within themselves and the future. When it comes to Hurricane Katrina there are many usages of memory and performance being demonstrated that capture the true idea of how violence is the performance of waste. In Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead* Circum Atlantic Performance "Echoes in the Bone" he states the quote “violence is the performance of waste” to the tragedy of what was Hurricane Katrina and the aftermath that the people of New Orleans faced.

This idea of violence is the performance of waste isn't something many would think of through these contexts of people but rather through natural disasters or objects. When it comes to Hurricane Katrina the aftermath and the events leading up to the levees breaking the idea of violence being used as the performance of waste shows very prominently. When it comes to the people of New Orleans this is shown very clearly where people have treated violence because they are seen as being the ‘waste’ of our society. People within the United States are put into sections that make others higher than others, there is a status of hierarchy within society that distinguishes someone based on their background, race, education, etc. This system makes people defend themselves like no other, the system pins people against each other. This is

institutional segregation. When the idea of race is brought into these contexts people within the system look at nonwhite individuals as the needy and people who always need government resources, but never act upon them. What happens when human beings are constructed themselves as waste? Well, oftentimes people who are seen as waste within society are seen as the lower classes causing others to use their social barriers between themselves. There is this line put in between the two groups.

When it comes to Hurricane Katrina this social barrier was set upon the people of New Orleans straight from the beginning, even before the hurricane hit landfall. The United States government set the people of New Orleans to fail from the moment they knew the levees were not sustainable to withstand the duration of a hurricane, especially that of a level three hurricane. The people of New Orleans knew the concerns of the levees even before the hurricane occurred, but realized the full extent until after the levees broke during the hurricane. The documentary, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* directed by Spike Lee showcases the realities of these fears that the people of New Orleans went through. In the documentary one of the people affected by the hurricane was Phyllis Montana LeBlanc, she is a mom, daughter, and sister who was born and raised in New Orleans. LeBlanc shares her thoughts and opinions about the effects of Katrina on her family and the people of New Orleans, she shares that her family and knew about the problem of the levees beforehand that the people of New Orleans had complained about the problem to both the state of Louisiana, the city, and to the FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency). Each of these groups of government agencies who knew these problems ignored the problem until the problem had to be addressed until the levees broke causing catastrophic damage.

The people of New Orleans were the product of waste by the United States government, and as result acted with means of violence because they themselves knew they were waste within the government's eyes based on the lack of resources and help given to the people affected by Katerina. The feelings of the people of New Orleans are dictated by Patricia Smith in the collection of poems, "Blood Dazzler", and in the poem *Looking for Bodies*, "slowly push the door open with your foot because wood that has been wet for so long gives touch, imitates flesh. Do not kick the door open, no matter how weirdly your heart drums. There may be something all wrong behind it" (Smith 60). This poem shows what many families had to face once they decided to return to their homes in New Orleans, they had to face the realities of finding their loved ones who might have not made it out of the storm, but rather been the tragedy of the flood set upon the fact that the levees broke due to the improper built of the levees by FEMA. FEMA was the who were supposed to check the houses of the Katenria victims but didn't fully check or the process wasn't well done throughout causing many families to find their loved ones dead thrown around within the rubble of the flood. The people of New Orleans who were most affected by the levees breaking were in the lower Ninth Ward, the people living in the Ninth Ward of the city were marginalized people who were devastated the most by the floor. The people of the Ninth Ward were seen as expendable and replaceable since they didn't meet the wants and expectations of the landowners and the United States Government, they were targeted straight from the beginning. The people of the Ninth Ward and the people of New Orleans recognized this starting to take action through means of violence against the government and institutions that were against them.

When it comes to the FEMA and the United States government there are very few resources and help that they offered to the people of New Orleans, they instead took their time to

help those in direr need. FEMA both came late to the aftermath and the responses from the government showed they didn't care at all. In the documentary, Terence Oliver Blanchard who was a resident of the city of New Orleans talked about the realities of what FEMA did and didn't do. FEMA showed up weeks later to collect the damage and debris around the city, showed up late to help the people of the city, and did little effort to make sure the people of New Orleans were taken care of and brought back to their homes only being given one-way tickets out of the city but nothing to return back to (Lee). So in return, the citizens of New Orleans acted out in violence through means of vandalism, fighting, anger, and any means possible to show that they themselves mattered even if the government thought otherwise.

Violence is the last resort for most people when brought through the most tremendous things in their lives. People only act on violence when pushed to their limits. The people of New Orleans who were put into this position were treated less than human but seen as 'something' that is expendable to the government. But through all this violence and how the united states government treated the people of New Orleans as waste the people of New Orleans helped rebuild their city, they were the ones who put back together their lives after the hurricane. This is what many New Orleans citizens saw, they recognized the loss and grief and decided to celebrate the life and joys that were and to come. They did what they do best, representing their own traditions through the first and second lines within New Orleans funeral traditions. They grieved like that within the first line and recognized their celebration in the fact that they were the people of New Orleans, that they themselves survived the storm. The second line is still happening since so much tragedy occurred, but the people of New Orelans know that they are expendable and waste, but rather humans with souls who make up the city of New Orelans. They are the people of New Orleans. The poem *Voodoo VIII: Spiritual Cleansing & Blessing* sums up best how the

people of New Orleans left, “then His eyes are dry, threaded with lightning and hurt, and we are reminded, again, just what He’s capable of” (Smith 77).

Works Cited

Smith, Patricia. *Blood Dazzler: Poems*. Coffee House Press, 2008.

“When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts.” *IMDb*, IMDb.com, 21 Aug. 2006,

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0783612/>.