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**SPECIAL SECTION: EMPATHY AND ETHICS**

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**THE "I" OF THE STORM: TEACHING ENGLISH  
AND HELPING STUDENTS AND INSTRUCTORS COPE  
IN POST-KATRINA NEW ORLEANS**

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This essay is entitled “The ‘I’ of the Storm” in order to stress the very personal nature of teaching in the immediate, post-Katrina semester of Fall 2005. The University of New Orleans (UNO) was the only university in the city to open that semester, and many traumatized instructors, myself included, were serving the thousands of traumatized students to the best of our ability, online and in satellite classrooms spread throughout the city, while the storm-ravaged campus was being repaired. I will discuss teaching works that so closely reflect the natural/manmade disaster that so many of us in the online classrooms had recently suffered, which I refer to as “storm lit.” And I will discuss the students’ reaction to such literature and to the course in general. I will also discuss some of the unusual practices that came into play in such a trying semester, such as grade inflation and condensing the workload. This semester came with no teaching manual, and while we educators were displaced or had lost everything, we were constantly reminded that our students had as well.

I will begin with my own storm lit, which details how I survived the levee breach and the ensuing flood.

First of all, I love hurricanes, or did before Katrina, and I am one of those who does not evacuate, nor have I ever had reason to, until August 29, 2005. I live in Midcity in a hundred-year-old house with my partner of eleven years, Bill Lavender, and my dog Renny and cat Kitterz. Since the house is 100 years old and has survived countless hurricanes and because we were dogsitting we decided to stay; that was our pretzel logic, so we called our neighbor Charlie, inviting him to come over for a hurricane party, a common practice in these parts which entails cleaning out the freezer in advance of the inevitable power outage, cooking an elaborate “last

supper,” and drinking lots of wine by candlelight and hurricane lamps. Well, the house did survive Katrina quite well; in fact, Bill was outside at the height of the storm in his motorcycle helmet posing for the video and pictures that I was snapping, and we had the back windows of the house open to let in some much needed breeze, if that's what one calls winds of up to 100 mph. We actually even managed to fall asleep during the storm, but we had to turn off our cell phones to do so, as family and friends from all over were calling nonstop to tell us that “this is the big one; you've got to get out,” hours after any evacuation was even possible. When we awoke, after calling our loved ones to assure them that we were okay, we went outside to assess the damage: a tree on the house, a foot or so of water in the street, limbs down and garbage and debris as far as one could see, the usual. But we wanted to explore further, so we crossed the street and “borrowed” our neighbor's boat to row around the neighborhood, first picking up Charlie to accompany us. By lunchtime, we were back in the house, and oddly enough, the water was a few inches higher than it was when we left. We still didn't think much of it, until it was about 2 and ½ feet deep by sundown. By that time, we were very glad that we'd gotten our neighbor's boat and knew that it was going to be used for more than exploring the neighborhood.

For the next two days, we listened to the radio to find out just why the water was rising and rising and not subsequently receding, as it usually does after a hurricane. We heard our senator tell us that there was a rumor spreading about New Orleans filling up like a bowl but that it was simply untrue, yet that gave me absolutely no consolation, for one, because he's a Republican, and for another, it was becoming obvious that indeed the city, at least Midcity, was filling up like a bowl, albeit very slowly. (We measured and found the water to be rising at a rate of about 1/2” per hour.) We finally had to turn off the radio after hours of listening to two of the city's more prominent radio personalities attack callers who had stayed to ride out the storm but were now in danger of losing their lives and were pleading for rescue. The announcers' typical response was, “What did you think was going to happen?” Well, I for one did not think that the levees would breach and that hundreds of people would die. It still haunts me today that some of these people who called up the radio station drowned and that the last human contact they had was with someone berating them for their decision to remain in their homes, a decision that was often made for them. I have since asked for the transcripts for those days immediately following the storm, but they have been conveniently lost.

We were beginning to become concerned about the gradually rising water levels when it approached within about 8 inches of our raised front porch. Then we measured the level against the top step of the porch, which we had been doing every hour for the last 24, and found it had actually gone down in the preceding hour. After that, we found the water would rise and fall in slight increments throughout the day, and finally realized we were seeing the ebb and flow of the tide; the water had reached sea level, and was in fact, sea water from the Gulf of Mexico , something we would not discover until months later.

We spent the next two days rowing around the neighborhood, gathering and distributing supplies to others who were stranded, and helping rescue those who needed to be moved immediately to higher ground—or what little there was of it—all of this in almost 100 degree weather, with a houseful of pets. The dogs too, had to be rowed to high ground, as they were simply too well trained to do their business, even after Bill himself showed them how to urinate on newspaper on the front porch. The first night was incredible, stars shining more brightly than we'd ever seen within the city limits, water lapping at the front porch steps, and instead of the usual urban night noises of nonstop air-conditioners, sirens, and traffic, all we could hear were frogs singing; it was surreal, and our last peaceful night, as the truth about the levees had finally been disclosed, and early the next day helicopters began their rescue effort.

The next night, we felt the wind from their rotors so close to the house that they roused us from our sleep, and the next day, after the first press conference, we decided to leave.

We packed the dogs, cat, food, water, beer, wine, and our neighbor, Charlie, into the little row-boat and rowed the three miles or so to the Superdome, where we had parked my car. We had helplessly watched Bill's truck flood, parked in front of the house. We had to carefully plot our course, as some folks had already tried to steal our boat, and we had heard stories of people killing for boats, as well as all sorts of other carnage. We had two guns with us, but mine was packed underneath the beer and wine, and like Barney Fife, I had one bullet, so it

was all but useless. In the end, the dogs were scary enough that no one would come within 10 feet of the boat.

At Canal Street we saw a man loading up a kayak at the rear door of a Rite-Aid drug store. Bill asked if there was a sale going on, and the guy replied, "Yeah, a hurricane giveaway." As we turned the corner, we saw an inflatable kiddie pool full of junkies getting high. They'd just robbed the drugstore. Further down Broad Street we saw scores of men on the overpass yelling for us to come help them, which made us row even faster, as they were the prisoners from the nearby Orleans Parish prison, that the city had pretty much left to fend for themselves, or to die. In another few blocks down Canal, a couple told us to watch out for the dead body just ahead hanging like a scarecrow on a stop sign. They said the city was having prisoners hang the corpses on street signs so their bodies wouldn't float away. Further on, we saw twin girls under five holding up a sign begging for us to rescue them. We couldn't look at them or at any of the people we passed; we simply had to row on in silence. By the time we got to the Claiborne overpass, we noticed the hundreds of people stranded on the interstate ramp, and at the foot of Canal, near the river, right near the CEA conference hotel, was a giant fire. By now it looked like the streets of hell. We saw a baby who fell in the toxic water, glimmering in the sun with the iridescent colors of gasoline. When we finally got near the Superdome, we realized that we had a different kind of danger to face. National Guard troops from places like Illinois and South Dakota were herding people away from the already crowded Superdome and to the Convention Center, where, later on TV, we saw people die. They were sending people there whether they wanted to go or not, and they were not allowing pets. We knew we had to get out of there fast, and without the car. We ran out of navigable water and had to ditch the boat that had been our lifeline for so many days. We couldn't give it away, because by this time, people, the New Orleans police included, were stealing cars from Sewell Cadillac, where, ironically, we left the boat.

We then walked four miles Uptown to Bill's ex-wife's house (adversity makes strange bedfellows) but there was no vehicle, so we walked another mile or so to our friends' house, threw a brick through their window, found their keys, and stole their car, but only after cracking open a bottle of Rioja. We drove out of town and across the lake to our fishing camp north of New Orleans, in Ponchatoula, Louisiana, but the off ramp was blocked, as they didn't want any of that New Orleans riff-raff in their little rural haven, but we were safe and out of town without being arrested and without our pets being confiscated or, even worse, killed.

Two weeks later, we found ourselves evacuating again. Hurricane Rita was approaching the Louisiana coast, and we weren't going to chance it. We were getting out of town early for this one for a two-week vacation. Upon our return, around the beginning of October, the UNO English department contacted us and told us we'd be teaching beginning in ten days. I was surprised, and not altogether pleasantly. I had yet to get through an entire day without breaking down, and I was going to have to teach! We couldn't yet return to our home in New Orleans—no gas, electricity, water—and the UNO campus was a wreck also, so I'd be teaching online.

For the first week in my American literature survey course, we did nothing but share our hurricane stories, and mine was by no means the most remarkable. Students had lost their entire homes; some even lost family members and friends. We all knew people who were still missing since the flood. But we had to get to work. It's just that Anne Bradstreet and Washington Irving seemed so remote, almost inaccessible. Students were having trouble concentrating; so was I. A month after the semester began, I had three new students show up in the class, and this was only a two-month semester. I told them that they had to drop. They had either been in New Orleans gutting their or their loved ones' homes, or trying to salvage what they could, or trying their best to relocate, or were just too traumatized to log on to class earlier; but with half of the semester behind us, I told them that it wasn't fair to the students who had been participating for them to pop in now. For the most part, they understood, except one woman who cursed me out, accused me of being cold-hearted, and told me that I didn't understand what she had been through. Normally I would have agreed with the last accusation, but I assured her that all of us in the class had suffered, even those who evacuated in a timely manner and whose houses did not flood. After all, we'd pretty much lost the city we loved.

My New Orleans literature course was going a little better; I think because every day we got to read and discuss New Orleans. It actually brought us closer to the city, even if we were reading centuries-old literature by George Washington Cable, Armand Lanusse, and Grace King. And when we got to the contemporary works, the storm

lit, like Sheila Bosworth's *Almost Innocent* and Fatima Shaik's (who contacted me after the storm to see if I was okay) *Climbing Monkey Hill* we all became much more engaged. Bosworth's novel culminates with a confusing death scene in the middle of the hurricane, and we all understood the loss and confusion that little Clay-Lee was feeling. And in Shaik's novella, the young, black protagonist understands for the first time the serious consequences of Hurricane Betsy in 1965, when the black community was convinced that the levees were blown up down river to protect wealthy, white Uptown. Many folks still believe that, and our online class discussion was lively, to say the least. But about halfway through it, I discovered that we were no longer talking about Betsy, but about Katrina, and the discussion divided the class along racial lines. The black folks thought that the levees were tampered with again, just like during Betsy, in order to save wealthier, white neighborhoods—again, Uptown remained relatively unscathed, and many of us still refer to it as the Isle of Denial. Most of the white students offered evidence of the wealthy Lakeview and Lakefront communities also being destroyed in the flood, but that argument did little to convince the folks who saw racist history repeating itself. Some friends of mine at nolafugees.com even wrote a song called “C. Ray, what the fuck?” pleading with Mayor Nagin about the levee breach that wiped out the Lower 9. “C. Ray what the fuck, why you blow our levees up?” So the suspicion went way beyond my classroom. Finally, the often very heated discussion came to some sort of a resolution: it didn't matter whether or not the levees were blown up in either storm; just the fact that black residents believe that the city would take such measures was destructive enough.

Shaik's description of life in New Orleans after Betsy eerily captures the goings-on in the city after Katrina as well: “People sat on their porches more than usual for the next week while the telephones were out. Daily came news, less about dead people now, more than pet cats were bloated and found in back yards when the water receded, or new furniture was ruined with no insurance to pay for it, and of permanent water marks near the ceilings of houses” (72). Water lines, furniture or houses or the demolition of houses or dead pets or second line funerals for dead pets, all were (and still are) constant topics of conversation in and out of our class when we weren't discussing literature.

Finally, we limped along to close out the semester on a lighter note with John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*, and now term papers were due and online final exams were coming up. That semester, for the first time, I actively inflated grades. If the students just completed the bare minimum, they passed the class. I was not concerned with quality but with quantity. If they participated in the class discussions, turned in a term paper, and completed the final exam, no matter how inferior the quality of their work, they got rewarded with a C in the class. If they simply persevered up to the end of the semester, they were rewarded, much like the students in the failing New Orleans public school system, where, as described by Darran Simon in his New Orleans *Times-Picayune* article, “The New Math: Failing=Passing, “mathematically, it would be nearly impossible to design an easier standard” (A1). As in my class, the New Orleans Recovery School District is “trying to give [students] an opportunity to have some form of success given all they have gone through” (Simon A20). Also like the Recovery School District, my policy was temporary, but the question remains: Was it ethical?

Many other questions remain as well: Should UNO have opened that semester? Did I and many of my colleagues do my students a disservice by inflating grades? Was I too traumatized to teach? Should I have allowed students to enter the online classroom at any time during the semester, in light of what they had suffered? Some of these questions will remain rhetorical, but the most surprising thing is that the students, administrators, and teachers at UNO have all been transformed by the shared experience of the flood that followed Hurricane Katrina and by the slow response of our federal government to the disaster. The English department alone has lost about one third of its faculty, and many more, including me, are thinking about leaving. The area around the university was all but wiped out and still causes psychic damage on the way to and from school, and for the resident students the sorrow is inescapable. Am I proud to say that UNO never closed? Kinda. But if I had to advise other universities or professors what to do in such dire circumstances, I would probably suggest taking the semester off in order to heal and deal with the chaos and the post-traumatic stress disorder that so many New Orleanians suffered. Even though it was at times a comfort to communicate with other New Orleanians in the online classroom, teaching did not really add a sense of normalcy to my life at the time. It often complicated my already fragile existence and that of many of my colleagues and students.

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Return to [Table of Contents](#)