

# 'new ways to frame the mammoth horror'

*Media First Responders and the Katrina Event*

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This article explores the state of emergency of 'the Katrina event'<sup>1</sup> with reference to the role of media 'first responders'. While the hyper-productivity of the media could be said to have had a dilatory effect (its recirculation of highly racialised rumour deepening the social panic attendant to the evacuation of the city, complicating matters for the evacuees, and for their would-be benefactors), it also demonstrated a logistical and affective responsiveness to the crisis at a point when little else was being done. Even the media's capacity to 'get it wrong' functions as a demonstration of its productivity; its reach instantiating referred belief—those half-credences about which cultural theorist Mark Seltzer writes.<sup>2</sup> I argue below that the performance of the media throughout the Katrina event—its mediation of panic, and of the state of emergency—worked as a mechanism of technical re-mastery in the face of systemic breakdown.

Panic is frequently conceived as pure reaction; in social terms, as infectious unreason. But, as George Bernard Shaw observes in *Maxim for Revolutionists*, 'The reasonable man adapts himself to the world: the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man'. The Katrina event became an exemplary moment for the unreasonable 'man'. The frustrated outbursts of citizens (stranded both by the high water of flood and by a low tide of confidence in a beneficent state) were amplified by public lapses of screen etiquette as news anchors and media stars covering the relief effort gave vent to their own umbrage. This rebounding shock of disappointment at the system's failure was, however, a peculiar progress, for it became the tool for discursive (if not material) reconstruction.

— EVACUATION IS SOMETHING NEW

A hurricane about to make landfall near home refines the business of social agency. As one resident of New Orleans put it, 'when the hurricanes come, we have responsibilities, as a citizen, a neighbor, and a man. Your responsibility isn't really evacuation. Evacuation is something new.'<sup>3</sup> For people like Harold Baquet, the tradition had been 'recovery activity'. One rode 'out the storm, reacting moment to moment to the loss of electricity, then phone, then the window or ceiling, leaking rainwater'.<sup>4</sup> But the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina put paid to that. Katrina was all about evacuation. There was a literal evacuation that came too late. There was a moral vacuum in the Whitehouse and a logistical vacuum in FEMA. And there were the faux-levees, 'Disney World stage props': the concrete that isn't.<sup>5</sup> Calling Hurricane Katrina 'a big reset switch ...' for the poor of New Orleans,<sup>6</sup> Baquet provides a metaphor for the broader impact of the storm. A system reset implies a precipitating crash: kernel panic; extension conflict; inappropriate shutdown protocol.

That 'reset' was not just for the poor of New Orleans. One of the signal themes in all the blogs, lists and postings, and in the hardy frontline cover of the first days, is the simmering panic of a single idea: *not in America, this doesn't happen here*. It is very difficult to imagine the 'this doesn't happen here formula' holding the imagination of the citizens of any other major world power. Where was the first nation's logistical and technological prowess when it was needed? Part of the lost ground—the evacuated territory—of Katrina, therefore, was America as effectual nation, land of *doers*.

— BREAKDOWN

In New Orleans that late August, preparedness had been much on people's minds. After the winds subsided, Henry Armstrong Jr conferred with a friend in one of the parish pumping stations, about the 'little lightweight flood'<sup>7</sup> they hoped was all they had coming. But, says Armstrong, 'Katrina didn't turn out to be that. Because it got to the ankles, then it got to the calves, you know, and then it got up to the knees, and then nightfall came.'<sup>8</sup>

Night brought a dark so absolute that people could only find each other by following the sound of a voice. Cell phone networks were down, and landlines gone, and there was no power throughout the city. Even before that, when the winds hit, one of the most critical comfort technologies for a tropical city had gone. Stepping out onto a breezeway, one man saw 'the wind was just taking air conditioners, everything. Just pulling them out, Lord, and I'm not talking about small, I'm talking about large air conditioners ... *zoom zoom*'.<sup>9</sup> When, days or weeks later, citizens returned to their homes, one of the first things they did was to dump their refrigerator out on the street.<sup>10</sup> In homes that flooded, white goods had been stirred about and upended and, in districts that stayed dry, the contents of

unpowered refrigerators rotted. As one New Orleans resident put it, ‘those spent refrigerators became part of the post-Katrina iconography, a leitmotif in the lives of so many of us now’.<sup>11</sup> The defeat of air conditioners and refrigerators was, if you like, a refiguring of the heavy weather of disaster. But this wasn’t grand weather of the sort tracked by Doppler radar technologies (as the Weather Channel had tracked Katrina prior to landfall), this was domestic weather, and kitchen weather: this was inside weather.

Communications in the city had also suffered a blow—even backup and emergency systems. Police radio was down, and officers had to switch to walkie-talkie; local and state police all sharing the same channel, so that many messages went nowhere. One officer told how it might take half an hour to raise someone at the other end of a call and ‘[b]y that time, you’ve either turned your radio off or just figured they couldn’t answer’.<sup>12</sup> Military first responders also suffered, critically, from the lack of interoperability of their systems. The commander of the National Guard forces in New Orleans later admitted to a Senate Armed Services Committee subcommittee that the first forty-eight hours after the hurricane saw ‘the Guard literally using boats and helicopters to communicate’.<sup>13</sup> Here we have the ultimate in systems failure and confusion: transport standing in for communications at a point when transport systems were themselves out. In the flooded districts the fortunate had runabouts; the rest had to make do with air mattresses or plastic tubs or beer kegs. Even those with a mode of ground transport (more properly, water transport) had no route to utilise it: the roads and bridges of New Orleans weren’t taking anyone anywhere.

In the downed city, nightfall lasted even after the sun rose:

What was most shocking in the destroyed Ninth Ward is this: the lack of life around you. There were no dogs, no birds—just brown and gray flatness. As you know, pre-Katrina New Orleans was not brown and gray.<sup>14</sup>

There were no people. There were no animals ... At that point, everything was covered in a sheet of mud—all of the cars and all of the grass. There was no green. Everything was black.<sup>15</sup>

In this context of a world in all the wrong colours, consider the progress of the signifier ‘black’ throughout the recovery of the city. A year after the storm, one returning resident told how ‘there were no other black people in [the local restaurants]—no black people waiting tables, no black busboys, no black food, no black customers’.<sup>16</sup>

It was just this sort of inversion and re-inversion of the recognisable New Orleans that prompted Andrei Codrescu to observe the hollowness, and the venality, of ‘expectations of renewal’<sup>17</sup> for the city. After all, he writes, ‘[w]hen the people left, they took New Orleans with them’. For Codrescu reconstruction proceeds along the lines of the restoration of the city’s “culture” in quotes ... the packaged, faked, and de-sacralised Carnival marketed to tourists’.<sup>18</sup> The renovation of the city entails the layering of an absence over a site of

evacuation: the restoration of the simulacra branded as New Orleans. For Codrescu, the real work of New Orleans—its ‘culture without quotes’—goes on in Houston, and New York, and in those other American cities that have become home to the diaspora of the storm. To follow Codrescu’s logic, then, is to see the dimensions of the disaster, but following his logic also demonstrates the infinite capacities of the downed system for its restoration: not that it makes itself up out of itself, but that (and Baudrillard would likely appreciate this) it does not need to—it is there in its reflections, in its mimetic doubling. While this does not defray the impact of the disaster, nor the extent of the system’s unravelling, it does suggest the imperative subtending such disaster: ‘we must rise from the ashes as quickly as possible and cure our wounds in forty-eight minutes, not including commercials’.<sup>19</sup> So too does it suggest the system for disaster’s ministration: the media.

Let us at this point consider typologies of disaster as they apply to ‘the Katrina event’. Hurricane Katrina was a natural disaster, but so too was it a technological catastrophe. Let us also be clear—given that context—about the dimension of the disaster: what failed, during the flood, was a ‘system’, not a levee. Given the complex imbrications of eco- and techno-systems termed by cultural theorist Mark Seltzer the ‘body-machine complex’,<sup>20</sup> and given the sequestration of nature, eruptions of natural violence can be likened, discursively, to that now largely redundant usage of the word trauma. That is, as precipitating action (that is, as traumatic blow) in a discursive figuring where the stress rests upon witnessing to the wound; its ministration, and its scars (psychical or otherwise). This is a discursive figuring preoccupied with the blow’s lingering effect. What Seltzer calls—in mapping the relays between violence, media and modernity in ‘wound culture’<sup>21</sup>—‘the intensified turn of interiors, bodies, and acts into communication (the media a priori)’<sup>22</sup> becomes, in this instance, a strategy for technical mastery in the face of systemic breakdown. That technical mastery takes its utilitarian form of the mediation of the disaster, but so too does it consist of the logistical responsiveness—the being seen to be there-ness—of the media in what otherwise was ‘an authority vacuum’.<sup>23</sup> The media a priori is property and basis of ‘a modernity that includes the self-reflection of its reality as part of its reality ... That is, a reality bound up through and through with the reality of the mass media.’<sup>24</sup> Under the sign of such logic, there is nothing that can be bracketed from the act of comprehension. The media a priori is a ‘self-observing world of observers’,<sup>25</sup> ‘the unconscious of the unconscious’.<sup>26</sup> Always referenced, and self-referencing, it is both firmament and ground for human experience in modernity (so high you can’t get over it, so low you can’t get under it, and so on). In the mobilising of the media after the levees broke in New Orleans it is possible to see in operation something that does not operate, but that simply and unavoidably is—something too *given* to register: the media a priori. Considered thus, it is possible to see that even the media’s controversial failures around Katrina extends its mastery (*no news is bad news*). If television

anchors got the situation in the flooded city flagrantly and hysterically wrong, or networks lost control of their spokes-martyrs, such mistakes themselves signal a kind of psycho-technical mastery of a situation 'out of control', in the sense that the media's loss of control itself asserts a form of control, and of authority, through the proper registration of trauma: suffering, confusion, shock.

Seltzer's comments on the 'relays between [crime] fact and fiction' can be usefully re-mobilised here. The 'sheer banality and utter conventionality of the genre's self-deconstruction' that Seltzer notes of true crime—the self-organization and self-reflection of its own plausibility<sup>27</sup>—can also be applied to the response of the media to its own excesses. All media error is self-corrected. It's worth bearing in mind here that—prior to the debunking of the wildest of the Katrina rumours<sup>28</sup>—the reputation of the press was enhanced by its response to the storm.<sup>29</sup> Particularly enhanced was the reputation and craft of news anchors and journalists—those frontline actors 'let off their leashes by their mogul owners'.<sup>30</sup> While some commentators upbraided the media for its 'hyperbolic reporting'<sup>31</sup> and incitement of race panic, race hatred and stereotyping,<sup>32</sup> others could not help but express pride in this awakening of the conscience and political combativeness of American print and television journalism. For these latter commentators, the error of unsubstantiated rumour (about gangs of black youths raping babies, or rooftop snipers) was a natural by-product of a moribund system come to explosive life.

— 'A CORPSE LIES ON UNION STREET ...'<sup>33</sup>

Reading the interviews and oral histories of people stranded in New Orleans the impact of the storm seems to register as referred experience, in the reflexive mode of the suffering witness: the disaster as reflected *inward* at those who'd suffered it, and *outward* at those avid to witness to their own shock at it. Jason Berry weathered the storm in a suburb of New Orleans that had not flooded. Only when he heard the 'wrenching' stress in the voices of the radio announcers of WWL-AM and 'descriptions ... [of] a world going down in dirty water' did he start to see the extent of the thing.<sup>34</sup> When Berry and his wife saw television coverage of what was going on inside the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center and the Louisiana Superdome 'the totality finally hit'. Up to that point they'd been without television. 'It's one thing to hear radio reports, but [another] when you see pictures of the people in those public spaces ...'<sup>35</sup> Public spaces define the good order of the social—of civic and commercial life, and of leisure. But here they'd become unrecognisable—not destroyed, as the World Trade Center had been, but undone by a reversal of purpose.

Firstly, emergency had invoked the role of the Convention Center and Superdome as 'refuges of last resort', but the destruction of the city and its laggardly relief saw the state of exception become rule. As the status of those defining spaces of public life changed in the

heightening panic of disaster so too did that which they defined: the city and its citizens. Even after the restoration of some form of order, those public spaces, once so useful to the neo-liberal city, had been tainted by the trajectory of emergency: as one writer put it, no longer was 'the convention center ... a site of innovation and progress but a dumping ground for housing a group of displaced subjects, or "body objects"'.<sup>36</sup> Henry Giroux (after Zygmunt Bauman) notes, with some acerbity, the close etymological roots of the words 'refuge' and 'refuse', and the confluence of the usage of both terms during in the Katrina event: 'Black bodies, it seems, can simply be relegated to the status of human waste, outside of the protective services of the state, outside of the moral compass of justice, reduced to rotting along with the houses destroyed by the flood'.<sup>37</sup> In the narratives around the horror of the Convention Center and the Superdome (and, during the evacuation, New Orleans International Airport) the spaces of refuge and the bodies of the dispossessed merge: not just to the end of the 'elimination' of the spaces in which 'democracy is produced',<sup>38</sup> but the transformation of the public spaces of a major city into trauma architecture: space as wound, or as decaying corpse:

A body that had been found on a dry stretch of Union Street in the downtown New Orleans remained on the street for four days, 'locked in rigor mortis and flanked by traffic cones. [It quickly] became a downtown landmark—as in, turn left at the corpse ...'<sup>39</sup>

One resident of downtown New Orleans interviewed just after the flood told how the television coverage of the changed city no longer moved him:

I'm getting a little sick of the news. Three days of the news is enough. I already—okay, I've seen all the dead people floatin' in the water, I've seen the buildings all collapsed, the fires, and the levee broke, I've seen all of that. And it's like continuously.<sup>40</sup>

The word 'continuously' seems to refer to the constant re-running of news highlights, but also to a greater continuity, the fires and corpses and flooded buildings seen as one. For 'E.B.', and many others, it was Oprah's special coverage of Hurricane Katrina that broke into comprehensible parts the scene and scenery of suffering.<sup>41</sup> As one media commentator put it, Oprah had 'found new ways to frame the mammoth horror'—overcoming the compassion fatigue of her viewers by managing to represent the disaster in a 'freshly overwhelming manner'.<sup>42</sup> 'E.B.' told his interviewer:

Course, Oprah had me, I almost started crying when I saw Oprah, yesterday and today. I don't even like Oprah Winfrey all that much, but I watched her both times. And I'm telling you, I been through a lot and I've never been choked up like that before.<sup>43</sup>

For this viewer, 'continuous' news coverage doesn't touch the emotional sides, but the affective power and the moral authority of the celebrity spokes-victim overwhelms. Celebrity

suffering—however authentic—is automatically hyperbolic in its affect. There meets the personal and the public; there converge two kinds of extremity that do not comfortably coexist: celebrity and disaster. In disaster, the conditions for celebrity *seem* to disappear—Sean Penn was ‘just another guy’ to his fellow first responders, the Wildlife and Fisheries workers with whom he rescued dozens of people from their flooded homes. Oprah’s ‘letting go’ therefore enacted a very particular kind of ‘public invigilation of private emotion’,<sup>44</sup> one that brought to its perfect conclusion her day-to-day styling of herself, and her talkshow, as improving and enriching the personal lives of Americans.<sup>45</sup> Her public performance of feeling gave a strategic—and respectable—face to panic, but did so with all of the ironically intimate distance of celebrity. Oprah’s ‘losing it’ in the convention centre was not, and could never be, the same as any one of the corralled citizens ‘losing it’ on-screen. Battered by what she’d heard from the mouths of Police Chief Eddie Compass (rumour # 1: *babies being raped in the convention centre*) and Mayor Ray Nagin (rumour # 2: *babies dying like flies in the convention centre*) Oprah despaired—as did other black women around her, those ‘unknown’ sufferers. Her embodiment of their frustration made her an honorary sufferer, while her celebrity elevated her power of witness to that of the spokes-victim. But, in terms of the social dimensions of panic, the celebrity spokes-martyr offers a muted challenge to order, precisely because the attention gained is to the person of the speaker, as much as it is to the ‘issue’ spoken. The affective power registered here is a result of the long cultural reach of television, of the cult of celebrity and the power of the victim witness in wound culture. But so too does it come from the novel role (if anything can be said to be novel where the media are concerned) played by the media more generally as actors in the ‘Katrina event’.

#### — FIRST RESPONDERS

Katrina’s first responders are usually identified as those who manned the flotilla of four hundred or so flat bottom boats put onto the streets by the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, or the coast guard with their helicopters, or the New Orleans police. But the other first responders—despite their never being so designated—were the media. The news vans and anchor staff had come in to track the build-up to the weather event of a hurricane slated as Category 5, so that when the levees subsequently broke ‘camera crews arrived long before first responders and governmental agencies’.<sup>46</sup> Given the meteoric rise in the last ten years of the interest in, and popularity of, weather news, this wasn’t unusual.<sup>47</sup>

The fact that the occasion for the media’s appearance was extreme weather, combined with the warm opinion of the public for the weather channel’s roving news teams,<sup>48</sup> lent all who’d come to cover the storm a greater authority, a more agreeable nature, than might otherwise have been the case. So too did the media neatly perform action in a period of inaction—showing, over the five days of deepening disaster, greater get-about powers than any other

group on the ground. Lt. Gen H. Steven Blum, officer commanding the responding units of National Guard, admitted that his own military 'sit-reps' were founded on coverage from the media responders in the flooded parishes and embattled high ground areas (like the Wal-Mart parking lot on Tchoupitoulas, or the Claiborne overpass). Blum admitted that they had focused 'assets and resources based on situational awareness provided to us by the media'. Then, he'd snippily added, 'the media failed in their responsibility to get it right ... we sent forces and capabilities to places that didn't need to go there in numbers that were far in excess of what was required, because they kept running the same B roll over and over'. To an 'intel'-starved National Guard, 'the impression ... was that the condition did not change. But the conditions were continually changing'.<sup>49</sup>

This disappointment of a high-ranking military officer at the media 'not getting it right' tells of a relationship between the military and the media very changed from that of the recent Gulf wars. During the second war in Iraq, military strategy and intelligence and political spin kept the media on a very short leash. During Katrina, however, the media took on some of the defining characteristics of a technologically sophisticated and professional military force: resilience, perseverance, tactical mobility, prioritisation of line communications and an overall strategic responsiveness (that is to say, the higher ranks of editors, publishers, cable owners deferring to judgments made by their subalterns on the front lines—anchor staff, journalists). In this way, the media embodied the transformation of energy into purpose: that 'imperative of keeping things and bodies in directed motion' so central to, and defining of, machine culture.<sup>50</sup> The military's reliance on the media for their 'intel'<sup>51</sup> may suggest one wayward side-effect of the increased reliance of military strategists on scenario modelling systems, those complex 'war games' played out on the non-networked mainframes of computers at the Pentagon.<sup>52</sup> But, more signally, the military reliance on media 'intel' in the wake of Hurricane Katrina evidences the power of the media not just to represent, but to deploy: precisely that capacity lacking in the US federal government response to the domestic crisis. Before the 'militarization of New Orleans',<sup>53</sup> came the *mediatisation* of New Orleans. People manufactured fake press passes so as to be able to move freely around the city, toting cameras to support the ruse. 'Even the Blackwater Security mercenaries get fooled by that,' said one French Quarter resident.<sup>54</sup> Imitation—the sincerest form of flattery.

The media's capacity to physically deploy during the 'Katrina event' was complimented by encouragement of that operation crucial to the commiserating sociality of a pathological public sphere: witnessing. One resident told how '[w]e started [the day after the hurricane came through] to get reports on an [local] AM radio call-in show, which was the only outside communication we had'.<sup>55</sup> On 1 September, Mayor Ray Nagin called WWL-AM talk-show host Garland Robinette, to make a live on-air appeal for aid, calling the event a 'national disaster' and asking—impolitically—that the forces of relief 'get their asses to New Orleans'.<sup>56</sup>



Spike Lee styles that broadcast as the whistle that finally brought the dogs of government running. It was meaningful noise in otherwise empty air—the momentarily fallen empire of the ‘network’ of landlines, optic fibre, mobile tower, and police radiotelephony. The motivating power of unvarnished public speech can’t be underestimated, and neither can the ontological power of the voice in the wilderness, crying.

The shock value of intemperate, or *pro tem*, speech is a characteristic signifier of ‘first response’ mediation of contemporary disasters (as, for instance, throughout the initial coverage of 9/11). But during the Katrina event it was more than usually resonant. ‘[W]hat we witnessed,’ says Baquet, ‘was the standing-down of civilization, the end of government, the end of the church, the school, academia, every organization, every social and civil structure that you’ve depended on or invested a nickel of your money or a moment of your time to.’<sup>57</sup> The last ‘man’ standing to represent civil authority, then, was the news anchor.

The Brookings Institution (a centrist think-tank) indirectly acknowledged as much during a hastily convened post-disaster briefing. Amy Liu, deputy director of the institution’s metropolitan policy program, fielded a thorny closing question on the ‘racial aspect’ of the crisis. Could Katrina ‘reshape Americans sense of community’?<sup>58</sup> Considering, Ms Liu spoke of the ‘one of the most compelling civic lessons’ of the crisis—that ‘the general public, the political leadership have been given a twenty-four-hour classroom tutorial’ through ‘the television set ... about the fact that really deeply entrenched poverty and particularly that black poverty still persists in many of our older cities today’.<sup>59</sup> Syntactically (if we can be so unkind as to take hard grammatical sense from spoken English), this sentence suggests that the principle ‘civic lesson’ is that television has pedagogical power. It is the reach of media emphasised here, not its bad tidings.

#### — GEORGE BUSH DOESN’T CARE ABOUT BLACK PEOPLE

What had occasioned the final question at the Brookings Institution briefing was the notoriety of a segment of live television just aired: rapper Kanye West’s attack on the Bush administration. West had departed from his teleprompter script during the 2 September live broadcast on NBC of a celebrity concert fundraising for the relief of New Orleans. ‘NBC’s levee broke and Kanye West flooded through with a tear’, wrote one commentator, so intent on her metaphor that she missed the mark—Kanye West had been dry-eyed as he delivered his stumbling but apposite attack, live on the East Coast feed.<sup>60</sup>

West had stood shoulder-to-shoulder beneath a television screen with Mike Myers while the latter delivered a teleprompt-toned bite about the landscape of New Orleans having changed ‘dramatically, tragically and perhaps irreversibly’—the script emoting but the delivery bland, as if Myers still needed convincing. When the lead passed to West, the rapper said, ‘I hate the way they portray us in the media—’ and the camera pulled in, as if on auto-tide,

rolling the screen banner '1-800-HELP NOW' up the chest of his sweatshirt. '—if you see a black family, it says they're looting, if you see a white family it says they're looking for food and you know its been five days because most of the people are black.' He hesitatingly rambled back to himself for a moment, upbraiding himself for shopping—as had Condoleeza Rice—while the poor of New Orleans drowned. 'Now I'm calling my business manager, right now, to see what's the biggest amount I can give,' said West, example-setting just as a telethon anchor should.

West had turned his role inside out: even before the camera, declaring for those who have—in the context of the concert—been extras and props, the muted window dressing of disaster framed in the LCD screen. 'Those are my people down there,' said West, 'with the set-up, the way America is set-up to help the poor, the black people, the uh ... less well off, as slow as possible ...' The LCD screen showed, at that point, a clutch of short-hulled pleasure yachts piled atop one another, and long shots of tree-lined avenues underwater. Not one of the poorer parishes. 'Red Cross is doing everything it can.' As if rapping to the image (a monitor shows the presenters what the viewers see on the LCD), West then said, 'a lot of the people that could help are at war right now, fighting another way, and they've given them permission to go down there and shoot us.' And there on the LCD: a military helicopter, belly-hopping the waters. After an on-script banality or two from Myers, West uttered his clincher: 'President Bush doesn't care about black people'.

At this point the network cut away from the studio presenters altogether, and when the telethon went out on delayed feed for the West Coast, Kanye West's outburst had been cut. That excision didn't stop the sequence circulating. It was soon available for torrent download in mpeg format, captured from the live-cast by viewers using TiVo. 'Oh my god,' wrote one viewer to the Haloscan discussion list, 'something real and unscripted happened on television. And it wasn't a car chase!'<sup>61</sup> 'Almost as bad as Janet's boob', chimed in another post, the writer's tongue firmly in cheek.<sup>62</sup> While some accused West of panic-mongering (talk about race seen, by this logic, as essentially inflammatory and divisive, and as 'missing the point' about the universality of human suffering), postings such as these considered the etiquette of West's outburst in the broader context of live media events (the slow-speed chase of OJ's car; Justin Timberlake ripping Janet Jackson's dress during the halftime show for the 2006 Superbowl). On-screen etiquette for live broadcast seemed an issue almost as exercising as the question of whether the rapper had his facts straight. But for most the latter gazumped the former: if West had got it right then there was no gaffe—if he'd said 'what needed saying' (or 'what everyone was thinking' in the context of pressing political events),<sup>63</sup> then his departure from script—literal and social—ought to be commended.

The context to Kanye West's insurgent spot looms large—it is unlikely to be glossed or forgotten (as had other political hijackings of the live event, like the unacceptance speech of

Marlon Brando delivered by a proxy during the 1973 Academy Awards).<sup>64</sup> Such indelibility of context comes from the re-mediation of the clip made possible by digital technologies and from visual brands like the overlaid 1-800 number and the images on the LCD monitor. Given such strong contextual markers, viewers could make easy comparisons with other commentary on the crisis—particularly with the unvarnished opinion of politicians, municipal officials, or celebrities visibly or audibly moved by the situation of the citizens of New Orleans. Kanye West’s outburst is therefore just one of a number of key performances of affect to present the crisis in—as Oprah’s reviewer put it—‘a freshly overwhelming manner’. In West’s telethon segment, with its deadpan reproof, what ‘freshly overwhelmed’ was not the anger and frustrated sense of umbrage in the speech (its affect) but its breaking with network etiquette. The departure from script assured its own authority by the terms of this breach (‘it must be true!’). The departure from script also pushed the moment into an imagined ‘real’: the place where people say real things, and do real things—where they *feel* things, without money changing hands. In effect, this place could be imagined as somewhere above the firmament or below the ground of the media a priori: the suppositious real constituted by the violence of an act of televisual disobedience.

This is why West’s outburst packed a greater punch than Oprah’s (granted, too, it was a balder statement and one more tailored to the sound-bite, as if the rapper was scripting a hostile campaign ad for the democrats). The sequence arguably made a larger—and longer lasting—impact than other controversial celebrity responses to the crisis, like that of the popular cable Fox News anchors Shephard Smith and Geraldo Rivera.<sup>65</sup> Reporting from inside the convention centre, Geraldo had held a baby up to the cameras, exhorting the viewers to ‘look in the face of the baby’. ‘Take a look, I want everyone in the world to see’, he’d said, shaking it for emphasis, ‘there are so many babies here.’<sup>66</sup> What might be an invocation of Levinasian ethics instead played out as a pitch to the tele-electorate of the Nielsen polls; a hystericised resetting of a familiar scene—campaign trail baby-kissing. Geraldo got so carried away that one viewer likened him to the ‘frightened heroine in an oldtime western’ who needed a good slap.<sup>67</sup> But others took his emotional excess as a sign of his honesty, and of the truth of witness:

It’s a long time coming that we finally see the TRUE emotions of those in the public light! From West to Anderson Cooper and from Koppel to Zahn. The media figures are FINALLY letting loose and DEMANDING answers to tough questions that we, as Americans, would only ask ourselves if given the opportunity.<sup>68</sup>

America owed thanks to its ‘news heroes’ Rivera and Smith for delivering a dose of reality. On the same Hannity and Colmes show in which the Geraldo segment ran, Smith had reported in baffled contempt that the authorities were stopping people getting off the I-10

overpass. This was the ‘fresh air’ of America’s conscience awakened—made visible. But, as befits a culture steeped in conspiracy theory, some viewers thought a still more inaccessible truth undergirded these valiant reports: ‘[w]hen a network like Fox can’t prevent its reporters from speaking the truth, you have to know the situation is so much worse than we’ve been told’.<sup>69</sup>

Taken in this context—an indicative truth (the tip of the iceberg)—Kanye West’s act of televisual disobedience outranks its rivals. His tag line—*George Bush doesn’t care about black people*—packs a wallop, in part because it’s amazing that Myers passed back to West after the latter’s rambling first attack.<sup>70</sup> West had bested the content control mechanisms of the network and, by co-opting its power, had shown-up the moribund style of the scripted live event. His rogue segment was not so much unfiltered as wrongly filtered, as the NBC worker auditing the live broadcast, with its two-second delay, had been tasked to cut off anyone who swore, not to catch a segue from script into political monologue.<sup>71</sup> By lucking his way through the network’s filtering protocols, West demonstrated how obsessed the networks were with form and how blind they were to content.

What seems to be at stake in West’s segment is the perfect imperfection of the media’s reach, its logistical power. The rapper had used that power by seeming to turn it on its head—pivoting on the power of his celebrity status while rhetorically eradicating it. His rambling, unprepared comments and deadpan delivery made him look as shocked, helpless, and pole-axed angry, as the black residents of New Orleans who’d been appearing on camera since the flood coverage first began. In this way, the segment has something in common with Oprah’s coverage of the Convention Center. But unlike Oprah, whose public persona already revolved around the embodiment and championing of ‘victims’ of a wide variety of social, sexual and racial wrongs, West gave polish to a very different style of celebrity: one that cast a cold eye on the Oprahfication of the disaster. His break with screen etiquette was infinitely more challenging than Oprah’s screened umbrage. The lyrics of The Game’s *outré* to a Kanye West track limn the distinction well:

I’m sittin back watchin Kanye video  
And I see the same bitch that was in the homeboy Busta Rhymes video  
Then I flip the muh’fuckin channel  
Checkin out my uncle Snoop Dogg video  
And I see the same BITCH, that was in my video! ...  
And then y’knahmsayin, to make that even mo’ fucked up  
I’m watchin Oprah cover Hurricane Katrina  
I see the same bitch on Oprah,  
floatin away on the hood of a Camry

That was in the nigga Lil Weezy video!  
I mean DAMN! Everywhere I look  
Everywhere I go I see the same hoes...<sup>72</sup>

This objection to ‘the same bitch’ takes in Oprah, and much else besides. The ‘hoe’ on high repetition may be the focus of the satire, but the words ‘everywhere I look, everywhere I go’ gesture to a frustration with, and a fealty to, a media that’s something more than the procession of simulacra. The media a priori makes for contradiction and error, and makes something of contradiction and error. The self-deprecating celebrity relies upon his fame to make self-chastisement work. The general watches news feeds ‘running the same B roll over and over’,<sup>73</sup> and sends materiel to the wrong insertion point. Katrina was a crisis of failed systems, processes and technologies, but when other systems failed, or were slow to respond, the media mobilised logistically and affectively—and as it did (and from the relief at its doing so) we can see the subtending presence of the media a priori rise suddenly into view. As with the case of the Freudian slip, when the media got it wrong it did so productively, the outcome being that—consistent with Seltzer’s theory of the media a priori—it never lost purchase on events. What might otherwise be seen as a lapse of control can actually be taken as indicating a system in the pink of health; a system infinitely responsive and reliable; a system affective, as well as technological; a system that allows us to ‘rise from the ashes ... and cure our wounds in forty-eight minutes, not including commercials’.<sup>74</sup> In the collapse of the system, the system reigns supreme.

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1. Here I extend Nicole Fleetwood’s usage of the term ‘Katrina event’. See ‘Failing Narratives, Initiating Technologies: Hurricane Katrina and the Production of a Weather Media Event’, *American Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 3, 2006. While Fleetwood mobilises the word ‘event’ to take in ‘the material and social impact of the storm, as well as the complex set of social, technological, and economic narratives and processes reported by the news media and through governmental reports’ (p. 768), I’d suggest that the term should also adumbrate the discursive dimensions of the disaster.
  2. In considering the media’s propagation of rumour throughout the aftermath of Katrina, it is worth

thinking of the media’s auspicing of public speculation and rumour during the Atlanta child killings. Toni Cade Bambara, in *Those Bones are Not my Child*, Vintage, New York, 2000, catalogues the referred beliefs then in play:

White cops taking license in Black neighborhoods again? The Klan and other Nazi thugs on the rampage again? Diabolical scientists experimenting on Third World people again? Demonic cultists engaging in human sacrifices? A ‘Nam vet unable to make the transition? UFO aliens conducting exploratory surgery? Whites avenging Dewey Baugus, a white youth beaten to death in spring ‘79, allegedly by Black youths? Parents

- of a raped child running amok with 'justice'? Porno filmmakers doing snuff flicks for entertainment? A band of child molesters covering their tracks? New drug forces killing the young (unwitting?) couriers of the old in a bid for turf? Unreconstructed peckerwoods trying to topple the Black administration? Plantation kidnappers of slave labor issuing the ultimate pink slip? White mercenaries using Black targets to train death squadrons for overseas jobs and for domestic wars to come?
3. Charles H. Rowell, Interview with Harold Baquet, *Callaloo*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2006, p. 1154.
  4. Rowell, Interview with Harold Baquet, p. 1154.
  5. Rowell, Interview with Harold Baquet, p. 1155.
  6. Rowell, Interview with Harold Baquet, p. 1156.
  7. Nicole Eugene, Interview with Henry Armstrong and Dorothy Griffin, *Callaloo*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2006, p. 1515.
  8. Eugene, p. 1515.
  9. Eugene, p. 1515.
  10. Charles H. Rowell, Interview with Louise Edwards, *Callaloo*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2006, p. 1304; Charles H. Rowell, Interview with Jason Berry, *Callaloo*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2006, p. 1245.
  11. Rowell, Interview with Jason Berry, p. 1245.
  12. Michael S. Collins, Interview with Officer Sabrina Richardson, *Callaloo*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2006, p. 1361.
  13. Lt. Gen. Steven H. Blum, 'Statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Emerging Threats', Second Session 109th Congress, 10 March 2006, p. 9.
  14. Charles H. Rowell, Interview with Louise Edwards, p. 1305.
  15. Bianka Lebeouf Smith, quoted in Charles H. Rowell, Interview with Stephen Smith and Bianka Lebeouf Smith, *Callaloo*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2006, p. 1469.
  16. Bianka Lebeouf Smith, quoted in Rowell, Interview with Stephen Smith and Bianka Lebeouf Smith, p. 1470.
  17. Andrei Codrescu, 'A Lecture', *Callaloo*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2006, p. 1099.
  18. Codrescu, p. 1099.
  19. Codrescu, p. 1098.
  20. On the body-machine complex and modernity, see Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, Routledge, New York, 1992; and for his extension of that critique to 'reflexive' modernity see his *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*, Routledge, New York, 1998, particularly pp. 63–88.
  21. Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, pp. 254–62.
  22. Mark Seltzer, *True Crime: Observations on Violence and Modernity*, Routledge, New York, 2007, p. 7.
  - Seltzer's working of the media a priori draws heavily on the media theory of Friedrich Kittler.
  23. Codrescu, p. 1100.
  24. Seltzer, *True Crime*, pp. 16–17.
  25. Seltzer, *True Crime*, p. 3.
  26. Seltzer, *True Crime*, p. 6.
  27. Seltzer, *True Crime*, p. 18.
  28. Susannah Rosenblatt and James Rainey, 'Katrina Rumors', *LA Times*, 27 September 2005; Jennifer Harper, 'Media, Blushing, takes a Second Look at Katrina', *The Washington Times*, 28 September 2005, <<http://www.washtimes.com/functions/print.php?StoryID=200509>>.
  29. Matt Wells, 'Viewpoint: Has Katrina saved US Media?' 5 September 2005, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/americas/4214516.stm>>; see also CNN's *Showbiz Tonight*, aired 21 Sept 2005, on how 'Katrina has changed news business'. <<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/050921/sbt.01.html>>.
  30. Nikki Finke, 'They Shoot News Anchors, Don't They?', *LA Weekly*, 8 September 2005, <<http://www.laweekly.com/general/deadline-hollywood/they-shoot-news-anchors-dont-they/8165/>>.
  31. See Harper on the media's 'fanciful accounts of mayhem', also Rosenblatt and Rainey, 'Katrina Rumors'.
  32. 'Heidi', 'Lies and Distortions: MSM Made a Mess of Katrina Coverage', *Blogcritics*, 29 September 2005, <<http://blogcritics.org/archives/2005/09/27/173834.php>>.
  33. 'That a corpse lies on Union Street may not shock ... What is remarkable is that on a downtown street in a major American city, a corpse can decompose for days, like a carrion, and that is acceptable.' Dan Barry, quoted in Henry A. Giroux, *Stormy Weather: Hurricane Katrina and the Politics of Disposability*, Paradigm, Boulder, 2006, p. 8.
  34. Rowell, Interview with Jason Berry, p. 1241.
  35. Rowell, Interview with Jason Berry, p. 1241.
  36. Fleetwood, p. 769.
  37. Giroux, *Stormy Weather*, p. 44, and discussion pp. 26–31.
  38. See Giroux's analysis of the ordinary workings of the biopolitics which subtends the neo-liberal state, *Stormy Weather*, p. 25.
  39. Barry, quoted in Giroux, *Stormy Weather*, p. 8.
  40. E.B., interviewed in downtown New Orleans 7 September 2005, 'Alive in Truth' Oral History Project, <<http://nzd1.sadl.uleth.ca/cgi-bin/library?e=q-00000-00—0aliveint—00-1—0-10-0—0—0prompt-10-TX—4——-0-11—11-en-50—20-about-oprah—00-1-1-00-11-1-0utfZz-800&a=d&c=aliveint&cl=search&d=HASH01949e972fec333ac40eaa29>>.

41. For her daytime talk-show slots of 6–7 September 2005.
42. Ed Martin, 'Oprah Winfrey's Coverage of the Disaster Holds Nothing Back', <<http://www.mediavillage.com/jmentr/2005/09/07/jmer-09-07-05/>>. Among the coverage from Oprah's 'Angel Network' was her interview with Police Chief Eddie Compass, in which he stutteringly told of babies raped inside the Convention Center—'news' (not much later debunked as panicked rumour) prompting Oprah to scream 'No! No! No!' Then Mayor Ray Nagin broke down as he told Oprah about people in the Convention Center who'd kept trying to give him and his staff 'babies that were dying' (quoted in Martin). Once again, Oprah was overwhelmed.
43. E.B.
44. See Tony Walter, Jane Littlewood, and Michael Pickering, 'Death in the News: The Public Invigilation of Private Emotion', *Sociology*, vol. 29, no. 4, November 1995, pp. 579–96.
45. Oprah's Book Club is perhaps the best evidence of this. See Mark Hall, 'The Oprahfication of Literacy: Reading Oprah's Book Club', *College English*, vol. 65, no. 6, July 2003, pp. 646–67.
46. Fleetwood, p. 770.
47. That success can be measured by, and apace with, the growth of the Weather Channel, a privately owned channel, packaged in by national cable carriers, with sophisticated processes for delivering local and regional weather 'news' and forecasting. Its weather-chasing news teams have likewise produced a viewing audience of weather chasers, both vicarious and amateur. For a succinct analysis of this rise of weather news (written, importantly, before 9/11) see John Seabrook, 'Selling the Weather', *The New Yorker*, 3 April 2000.
48. As one weather channel executive puts it (pre-Katrina), 'People trust us ... because we're doing the weather, not the disaster'. Steven Schiffman, quoted in Seabrook.
49. Lt. Gen. Steven H. Blum, quoted in Nicole Fleetwood, 'Failing Narratives', p. 774.
50. Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, p. 166.
51. This lack of intelligence was also notable in the case of the FEMA response. CNN anchor Soledad O'Brien interviewed FEMA's Michael Brown live on the fourth day after the flood, and he told her that the government had 'not known they were using the Convention Center as a staging center'. Amazed, she'd responded 'and why are you discovering this now?' In the second part of Spike Lee's four-part documentary, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (Canada/Finland, Forty Acres and a Mule Filmworks, 2006) O'Brien recalls how amazed she'd been, asking Brown 'How could we have better intel than you have?' This was one of the 'more baffling interviews' of her career, because 'they [FEMA] seemed so out of touch with the reality that I think a lot of people had been watching day after day after day'.
52. See Seltzer, *True Crime*, pp. 169–70.
53. Giroux, *Stormy Weather*, p. 62.
54. Ty Watford, quoted in Rod Amis, *Katrina and The Lost City of New Orleans*, G21/Lulu Press, Wendell, North Carolina, 2005, p. 172.
55. Katy Reckdahl, quoted in Amis, p. 179.
56. Interview with Ray Nagin, *When the Levees Broke*, part 2.
57. Rowell, Interview with Harold Baquet, p. 1160.
58. Scott Harold, quoted in 'Hurricane Katrina: Where Do We Go To From Here?', transcript of a Briefing in the Brookings Institute, 8 September 2005, Washington, DC, p. 69.
59. Amy Liu, quoted in 'Hurricane Katrina: Where Do We Go To From Here?', p. 70.
60. Lisa de Moraes, 'Kanye West's Torrent of Criticism', *Washington Post*, 3 September 2005. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2005/09/03/AR2005090300165.html>>.
61. 'MJS', HaloScan.com—comments, 3 September 2005, 5.07 pm, HaloScan.com—comments <<http://www.haloscan.com/comments.php?user=crooks&comment=4771>>.
62. RLG, HaloScan.com—comments, 3 September 2005, 5.17 pm, HaloScan.com—comments.
63. 'Me', 3 September 2005, 4.43 pm; 'Marie', 5 September 2005, 8.28 am, HaloScan.com—comments.
64. Someone with a memory too long for the context of a presentist media culture ('Deb', HaloScan—comments, 5 September 2005, 2.09 pm) compared West's comments to those made by 'Miss Littlefeather' in the 1973 Oscar ceremony, when she took the stage on Marlon Brando's behalf to give his 'unacceptance' speech. There, too, a live event had been hijacked to make a political statement. But in the elapse of time since 1973, the specific context of Brando's speech has disappeared from view. Few Americans now would remember the crisis precipitating it: the occupation of Wounded Knee by activists in the American Indian movement, and the subsequent FBI siege and battle. 'If we are not our brother's keeper,' wrote Brando, in the expectation that the awards night audience would hear him, 'at least let us not be his executioner.' <<http://www.nativevillage.org/Message%20from%20the%20People/Marlon%20Brando's%20unfinished%20Oscar%20Speech.htm>>. Brando's unacceptance speech may still be remembered as 'political', but

as generically so. Now it finds its context as awards trivia (that Littlefeather turned out to be a B-grade actress of Latina descent, not Native American), or celebrity myth (part of the Brando family saga of egomania and misfortune).

65. Shephard Smith has been host of the *Fox Report* (Fox News) since 1996. His newcast is one of the most popular programs carried by cable television, with 1.5 million viewers for a 7 pm timeslot that is in direct competition with CNN news (hosted by Anderson Cooper). In 2004 the ratio of viewers of Smith to Cooper was 3:1. See Warren Saint John, 'News Reports for Ultra-Short Attentions', *New York Times*, 28 March 2004. Rivera left his well-known daytime talkshow for cable news, from CNBC's number one rated *Rivera Live* to the still more popular (in 2001) Fox News team.
66. 'Sobbing Geraldo: Let the People Go!', WorldNetDaily, Web posting, 2 September 2005, <[http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE\\_ID=46131](http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=46131)>.
67. Anonymous, quoted in 'Sobbing Geraldo'.
68. 'American Beauty', 4 September 2005, 1.02 pm. HaloScan.com—comments.
69. 'Jeralyn', 'News Heroes', Web posting, 2 September 2005, 9.12 pm, <<http://www.talkleft.com/story/2005/09/02/633/73183>>.
70. Despite the fact that a CBS news poll had, for some years, been asking a question much like it: 'how much does [President] Bush care about needs and problems of black people?' With his definitive answer to that question, West may have given CBS its phrasing for the late September 2005 and February 2006 iterations of the poll. See the 'Hurricane Katrina: Six Months Later' poll (released 27 February 2006) showed more than a 10 per cent spike in the number of respondents surveyed in September 2005 answering 'not much/none' (76 per cent as compared to 63 per cent in 2003, and 61 per cent in 2001).
71. de Moraes.
72. Lyrics excerpted from *The Game, You Wouldn't Get Far*. See the discussion at 'What do Hoes have to do with Hurricane Katrina?', <<http://khoward.wordpress.com/2007/02/16/surprising-find/>>.
73. Blum, quoted in Fleetwood, 'Failing Narratives', p. 774.
74. Codrescu, p. 1098.