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Doreen M. Piano
University of New Orleans, dpiano@uno.edu

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Writing in the the Cone of Uncertainty: An Argument for Sheltering in Place

Doreen Piano

*This City will rise again
This Big (Un)Easy, this neglected treasure.*
—Niyi Osundari, *This City Will Not Die*

In August 2012, with Hurricane Isaac bearing down on New Orleans, Mayor Mitch Landrieu declared that residents “shelter in place,” a public warning that assumes those in proximity to disaster will undertake the necessary preparations to survive. As a metaphor for my career trajectory, *shelter in place* implies an ethical imperative not only to stay put during times of crisis, but to utilize these critical moments of uncertainty for pedagogical purposes.

Before I moved to New Orleans, I easily fit Eric Zencey’s description of a “rootless professor,” a term he uses to capture the embedded, rarely interrogated, privilege of mobility that marks many academic careers. This rootlessness, as Zencey reminds us, leaves us “woefully ignorant of the values of connectedness to place” and willfully ready to pick up and leave when we don’t like where we’ve landed. I had moved to the Crescent City, not like other creative/professional types wanting to escape “the perceived homogeneity of the rest of America,” a phrase New Orleans geographer Richard Campanella uses to describe the city’s allure, but because I had been offered a tenure-track job. Not long after I accepted the job offer, I developed a naive longing to call New Orleans home. For most of my adult life, I had left one state for the next, worked abroad for a few years, and moved in with family or friends during transitional periods.

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My late-bloomer academic trajectory only served to justify what had become, by the time I turned forty, pathological. Factor in my contingent professional life as a non-tenured instructor teaching and tutoring at varied campuses and institutions for nearly ten years, and New Orleans held a welcome respite from economic and geographic instability.

However, no sooner had I arrived in New Orleans in August 2005, when I was forced to evacuate, my fanciful ideas of home literally washed away by the levee breaches. Mid-September found me continuing my evacuation in Tucson, living with a friend and teaching online during the university's "Katrina semester," an adumbrated, online semester that began in early October. Because I was an alumna of the University of Arizona, my evacuation was cushioned by the familiarity of place, the comfort of being among old friends, and the graciousness of faculty in the English Department who offered institutional support and collegiality. That fall I taught two online classes: a graduate seminar in rhetorical theory and a sophomore writing class I hastily redesigned, calling it Writing Hurricane Katrina: Natural Disaster and the American Psyche. The course asked students not only to write about places they knew—all of them were from the region—but also to research and write about the city's ongoing social, environmental, and political issues. Whereas I don't see these goals as fundamentally pernicious, within the context of that semester, the expectations of this pedagogy now appear untenable and unattainable—in other words, there was a disconnect between what I was teaching and to whom.

The course included local content such as op-eds and essays by New Orleans writers as well as articles and images from the *Times-Picayune*, but the assignments presumed that students *could* interrogate political and social issues at a time when their emails to me revealed insurmountable obstacles as they adapted to being displaced. More often than not, these psychic and material struggles spilled into their assignments, especially their posts and comments on a class blog I developed "to act as both a collective research hub . . . and a public memorial for all those affected by the hurricane." Rather than address an imagined public, students used the blog to exchange their feelings of dislocation and loss with each other by sharing personal anecdotes through comments and posting links that resonated among them. I soon learned from their postings where the Saints were practicing and that local radio station WWOZ was back on the air. The blog became what student Kenneth Cooper described as "our classroom away from class."

Challenged by dislocation and loss, students rallied to meet my expectations while reworking the assignments to suit their own needs. As I steered

them toward analyzing representations of place in various texts, their “speaking back” communicated a critical relationship to the city that was indelibly bound up with an emotional connection, one that had been broken, suddenly and violently. At the end of her critique of John McPhee’s “The Sunken City,” Cynthia asked: “His evidence may be factual but has he no love or compassion for New Orleans? What place does he call home?” In her response to their first blog prompt, to write an introduction/evacuation narrative, Olga wrote: “Was I just supposed to drop everything I had ever known and leave the place that I call home? My whole life was here, in Louisiana.” And at the end of her essay about returning to her grandmother’s house, destroyed by floodwaters, Brandi pleaded: “I pray that everyone eventually finds their way in this crazy, winding path of life, but most importantly can find their home. . . . When this city rebuilds, hopefully it will become a safe haven for the thousands of disrupted lives, and . . . home again for those who now are lost.”

My lifelong inability to define home, conceptually or geographically, clearly was not the case for these students. Their writing articulated what I had not yet felt: the right to call a place home. As a recent transplant, I lacked the intimate knowledge of New Orleans that my students had, but by reading their writing that semester, I had begun that journey. Because I had exported my ideas about place-based teaching, carrying them like a pedagogical bag of tricks from one institution to another, I hadn’t taken into account a point Deborah Tall makes in her essay “Dwelling: Making Peace with Space and Place,” when she writes: “Home is where we know—and are known—through accumulated experience.” In this respect, perhaps home, and not place, is the starting point for writing from a certain location during a time of crisis.

Doreen Piano

Doreen Piano teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in writing, rhetoric, nonfiction literature, and gender/women’s studies at the University of New Orleans.