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## KATRINA AND THE PRIVILEGE OF DESPAIR: WELCH'S MODEL OF CONNECTION IN TEACHING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

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On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast of the United States, flooding towns and cities, killing more than 1,800 people, displacing hundreds of thousands, and leaving countless numbers homeless, penniless, hungry, exhausted, and terrified. Leveled in many respects, New Orleans, Biloxi, and other communities along the coast and within tens of miles inland were left barren when the water subsided. In the time since Katrina, the deluge of ignorance and apathy seems still to submerge the cries of torment, terror, and rage that many of the inhabitants of the Gulf Coast area continue to bellow. In light of particular instances of apathy in relation to Katrina expressed in teacher education classes, examples which we describe below, the cultural levees appear to be as strong and sturdy as they have ever been, confining the movements of those who would challenge culturally embedded inequities that continue to crash against us.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, we are concerned with what these cultural levees mean for us as justice-oriented educators. How might we find ways to foster in our students connections of empathy and solidarity with those experiencing these inequities? How do we work to overcome the apathy, fear, and resistance many of our students exhibit when faced with challenging issues of social and racial justice?

As justice-oriented educators we are committed both to naming and transforming, alongside our students, the power dynamics that exist within our classrooms and are reflective of the larger culture that serve to compartmentalize social groups and affect their equitable access to dialogues, resources, mobility, and social change. When students and educators engage in conversations about power dynamics, compartmentalization, and access—significant aspects of the learning process—these controversial issues often engender fear, despair, and resistance in both students and educators. In particular, we are concerned here with the fear, despair, and resistance that emerge with particular vigor when classroom dialogues engage issues of *race* and various manifestations of *racism*.

In response to the second anniversary of Katrina, Julie posed to her teacher education students her curiosity about the incongruity regarding the reconstruction efforts of the Southern Delta post-Katrina and the state of the lower ninth ward of New Orleans, as compared with the French Quarter. These were some of the responses:

“Why are we talking about this? That place is so far away. It has nothing to do with what I can do in my classroom.”

“How can we possibly relate to someone who doesn’t have a home, let alone someone with a different skin color?”

“What does this have to do with education?”

“I’m so sick of talking about what happened *down there*” (emphasis added).

In light of the struggles of these particular students to engage with the experiences of Katrina survivors, in this essay we interpret their feelings and acknowledgements of resistance as examples of fear and despair rooted in privilege. We position fear and despair as nevertheless vital to and inspiring of empathic and transformative dialogue in the professional education classroom. We present Julie’s class and her students’ discussion and reactions to issues of racial injustice surrounding the effects of Katrina as an example of how we as educators may struggle to bring a sense of connection into our pedagogy for professional education. In this way, we highlight the obstacles of fear, despair, and resistance our students encounter in engaging issues of racial injustice and begin to explore pathways toward empathy and solidarity with those who face these inequities.

Drawing on the feminist philosopher and theologian Sharon Welch, we frame our students’ attitudes as instances of double privilege: inaction that comes from the combination of comfort regarding one’s own life circumstances and despair regarding the circumstances of others. Additionally, we apply Welch’s model of connection in social justice reform to the classroom setting in which issues of racial justice are introduced and discussed.<sup>2</sup> Welch suggests a model of connection within the social justice movement for what she terms the “white liberal class” who work with racially marginalized groups who face social injustice. She discusses the fear, despair, and resistance that this white liberal class faces and explores ways instead to foster risk, empathy, and the eventual goal of solidarity in the struggle for justice.

We conclude with a discussion of Welch’s presentation of solidarity, drawing from African American women’s literature to present the historical struggle of African Americans for empowerment, resistance, and renewal. Welch suggests that the white liberal middle class consider the African American struggle as a form of self-critique to explore pathways toward connection in a common struggle for social justice. Similarly we will draw examples from Julie’s use of an excerpt from Zora Neale Hurston’s text *Their Eyes Were Watching God*<sup>3</sup> as entrée for her students to engage in this connection.

#### APATHY AND DESPAIR IN PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

The day after Hurricane Katrina razed much of the Gulf Coast, Julie entered her class intent on opening a space for her students to share their feelings, thoughts, ideas, and questions about what had happened so many miles away from them. As she probed their thoughts and feelings, some

students shared that they knew someone in the area, that they were concerned about them, and that they felt paralyzed and helpless. Some remained silent. Still others asked “there’s nothing we can do about it, so why worry?” Most of her students, if they made any comment at all, simply mimicked what they had heard on the news or read in mainstream newspapers or magazines, as if the headlines were their original thoughts. They offered what felt to her like simplistic platitudes about what had happened, focusing, for example, on the looters or the people “who didn’t want to leave.” From their standpoints, it seemed that the “real” tragedy was that so many people would “choose” to stay in their homes. Said these students of those who stayed in their homes: “they were the stupid ones.”

Two years later, as illustrated by students’ comments in the introduction, it seems that a similar sense of disconnection and opposition remains in considering the plight of those still reeling from the impact of the initial devastation. In other activities in the class, students viewed a video clip of a television interview between Amy Goodman of *Democracy Now!* and Malik Rahim about the residents of the lower ninth.<sup>4</sup> Students responded with disbelief and distrust of the authenticity of Rahim’s claims. In Julie’s estimation, her students’ responses highlight and reinforce a seeming divergence between the public and private spheres of the American citizenry to the continually unfolding tragedy that has resulted from Katrina. Public issues like natural disasters or environmental crises are often akin to isolated incidents that are not necessarily relevant to the private lives of individual citizens.

It seems then that concern for anything that does not directly bear on or affect the lives of our students is left to intellectuals or politicians. We seem to lack a language (or perhaps the lack of engagement with a language) in professional education for dealing with injustices that happen to others unlike or distant from ourselves. These gaps in language lead to what Patricia Hill Collins calls “public apathy,” and we suggest that acknowledging the gaps in language may make us more compassionate about our students’ struggles to “recognize the manifestation and gravity of racial, class, gendered, and ecological crises in our communities.”<sup>5</sup> Any time issues related to racial injustice arise, there are multiple narratives playing out between our students, ourselves, and the people who live outside the doors of our classrooms. However, it does not alleviate the responsibility for initiating and supporting students’ grappling with these issues and narratives while we work to unpack the implications of them in the classroom. And, it does not allay our own frustration and anger, and most certainly, our own fear that the people with whom we are working are ultimately reinforcing the cultural levees by which they have been protected and isolated from the trials and tribulations of Others.

#### FROM DESPAIR TO CONNECTION

As white and middle-class social theorists and professional educators, the three of us have found Welch’s text, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, productive for

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her ethic of solidarity and difference, drawn from her consideration of feminist, communitarian, and poststructural ethical theory, along with her careful analysis of African American women's literature. In her first edition of this text, Welch uses the context of the Cold War and nuclear arms race between the United States and Soviet Union as an example of the absurdist end of the Western narrative of ultimate control. In her second, mildly updated edition, Welch reframes her ethic for the post-Cold War era. She depicts much of Western ethics as being built upon an unsustainable ethic of control, which ultimately defeats Western foreign policy, but more significantly for our purposes here, leads to despair by activists struggling for social change—particularly those working against nuclear arms proliferation and racism. Activists operating from a position of privilege “sell out,” in Collins' s term, and in Welch's formulation, they despair when victory is not complete. In a typically white middle class position, action that is not guaranteed to transform is not worth taking.

Welch suggests that “the search for guarantees and for single comprehensive solutions is often paralyzing.”<sup>6</sup> In this phrase Welch acknowledges that even by addressing unsettling feelings like anger and fear, discussions about *race* and *racism* can be crippling. Welch goes on to confirm, “We are well aware of the costs of systems of injustice but find it impossible to act against them, because no definitive solutions are in sight” (*FER*, 103), especially in light of what U.S. Americans assume about their altruism and generosity. We know there is injustice in the world, and as educators, we are often loathe to consider how addressing these systems of injustice, beyond identifying, defining, and critically analyzing them, is relevant to our work in the classroom.

It seems that many of us are interested in helping students to master the skills of “seeing” and intellectually challenging these systems of injustice; less often and less likely are we willing to delve more deeply into how that injustice is manifested and reinforced, felt and grappled with beyond the cognitive endeavor. Welch reevaluates the reform-minded perspective of the white liberal class in its struggle for racial and social justice in the United States. While she recognizes that white liberals possess good intentions for transforming society, she sees us, in our reform efforts, holding onto a need to control the process of reform and change and the need to see immediate results to our efforts. And as a result, many of us experience despair or cynicism when the immediate effects of our reform efforts are not made manifest. Welch calls on us then to abandon the cynicism and despair we readily adopt when we grow despondent that we cannot effect immediate change (when we encounter the lack of control the self has in practice). In order to do this, she suggests re-envisioning the role we play in this struggle for reform and the role of our contributions to the struggle.

Specifically, for Welch, this cynicism is the result of a *cultured despair*, characterized by a perceived inability to change the circumstances of injustice

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(*FER*, 104). As we share and often herald a rich and textured history of confronting and assuaging human rights abuses and social and ecological injustices around the globe, it seems inconceivable that such inequality can thrive in our own cultural backyard. And yet it does, possibly because we are not dialoguing with one another, not comprehending and not seeking to resolve the deep and complex dissonance that emerges between cognitive understanding and emotional wrestling during our address of such quandaries. Welch surmises that partially this might be due to humans' "lack of commensuration between our ability to act and our ability to imagine the consequences of our actions" (*FER*, 108). Thus, when our teacher education students seemingly resist the relevance of discussing and exploring how to change the inequities we identify, we surmise that they are, in fact, employing a protective device that helps to shield them from having to wrestle with feelings of despair, discomfort, fear, guilt, or sadness.

This "shield" is about maintaining control in the face of that which threatens us. If teacher education students admit to examining, critiquing, and even feeling the disparity between those who have received monies toward reconstruction post-Katrina and those who have not, for example, they may feel sad, guilty, or fearful. If they consider that the federal government may not be handling the devastation that still lingers around the Gulf Coast, or that the mainstream media is not providing them with the whole picture, then they have to admit that what they have been socialized to believe about the Western self as competent, generous, and controlled is a fiction, a seductive myth, or at the very least, a contentious characterization. Challenging the authenticity of statistics, for example, might best be understood as Welch suggests, a way for students to sustain the power of normalizing forces that have ultimately shaped who they are as Western selves, for to admit otherwise compels them to risk losing the very shroud that protects their identification with what it means to be good, intelligent and secure.

Still, understanding that our students may be mired in a paralyzing despair as a result of confronting systems of injustice in our cultural backyard compels us to push further and harder toward the end of loosening the hold that this despair inflicts upon them. There are groups of students who are engaging the larger social dilemmas that matter to them. For many students however, as suggested by Paul Loeb, "our culture hasn't given them the models to take action"<sup>7</sup> in response to the things that matter. We in the larger culture have not shown them how to enact empathy and engagement, for example, with social concerns that ultimately impinge upon us all. We have neglected to embolden our youth to act as agents with ideas and responsibilities beyond simply voting, and have, in fact, covered over their curiosity, compassion, and potential for empathy, detouring them toward historically contrived expectations and rhetoric about productivity, economic success, and individual accountability.

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Welch calls for middle-class reformers to give up the power and control they possess and look to create mutually respectful relationships with the traditionally dominated or marginalized. She draws from social theorist Emilie Townes, who calls for “both people of color and whites” to create relationships based on accountability, which means developing “a respect-filled communal dialogue with a transclass base.”<sup>8</sup> Welch also calls on all people in such a relationship to allow themselves to risk, which “begins with the recognition that we cannot guarantee decisive changes in the near future or even in our lifetime” (*FER*, 46).

#### MOVING TOWARD SOLIDARITY

Another form of risk that Welch recommends is for the middle-class reformer to meet the Other without set goals as to how to enact change. The reformer does not come into this relationship with an agenda and plans for how to manipulate and control those who are weaker. The reformer forms an identity in relation to the Other and together, Self and Other form a mutual dependence and responsibility in taking action to enact social change. The encounter is further characterized by material interaction and mutual critique. While the self/other relation is implicit throughout the work of Welch, the works of Sharon Todd and Lorraine Code have helped us to articulate a more explicit notion of the relation of Self and Other.

Todd suggests that “It is in the *relating* to an unknowable Other through the adventure of learning (and teaching), that teachers and students become *psychically* implicated in the very possibilities for ethical interaction.”<sup>9</sup> Our refusal to feel and our inability to relate to Others different from ourselves takes a heavy toll on us, depleting our emotional and sensory selves. In addition, our neglect as educators to address this impoverishment further impedes our and our students’ capacities for processing and responding to the information, feelings, and experiences we have learned to filter out. If we can provide opportunities wherein our students are not only exposed to information and critical questions, but also invited into a dialogue about the similarities and differences that exist between themselves and Others, the potential for considering, relating to, and empathizing with Others is enhanced.

Citing the work of Susan Brison, Code suggests that “people in their ordinary lives...are not taught to empathize with victims,” nor are they trained to *listen* with “imaginative empathy.”<sup>10</sup> Imaginative empathy is marked by not only the willingness and ability to put one’s self in the shoes of another. Rather, it is construed by recognition of the Other’s distinctiveness, belief in their knowing and experience, and a reciprocity that makes the Other privy to our claims of knowledge and experience. Thus, imaginative empathy opens the space “down on the ground” for the co-creation of understanding and knowledge between individuals and groups who do not necessarily share the same experiences, but whose testimonies are received and believed.

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Welch sees this mutuality occurring between Self and Other when solidarity is the goal. Departing from conventional communitarian ethics, as well as the ethics of Jürgen Habermas, Welch emphasizes solidarity rather than consensus. She sees the goal of consensus that is so much a part of communitarian ethics perpetuating existing hierarchical power relations because those of the dominating group can wield more power and make up the majority in a consensus-making decision process.<sup>11</sup> Solidarity, however, recognizes that “the lives of the various groups are so intertwined that each is accountable to the other” (*FER*, 133). It allows for mutuality in action as all involved have an important voice and agency, and allows for interdependence and responsibility to develop among all involved. It is only when these two traditionally disparate groups come together in material interaction that change can occur. Welch bases this mutual goal in love and the affirmation of life-giving work, such as making clothes, preparing food, and building houses. Mutuality of interaction through these forms of work is particularly appropriate for groups who are significantly far apart in their social locations. She states that “people are empowered to work for justice by their love for others and by the love they receive from others” (*FER*, 165).

Welch grounds this idea of relationship in spiritual terms, influenced by poststructural and feminist theory and conceptions of the beloved community. She links her ethic to an agnostic spirituality based not in a deity (certainly not an all-powerful or controlling deity), but in humanness. She recognizes a divinity that is created when human relationships form reform communities that are based on love and solidarity. She describes this as “from within the matrix of the beloved community, there is a solid basis for social critique and self-criticism: the life-giving love constitutive of solidarity within the oppressed and love of oneself” (*FER*, 161). Instead of redemption or transcendence, she finds a place for repentance, suggesting that:

the healing response of whites to racism, of men to sexism, is quite simple□ repentance. Out of love for others, out of love for oneself, as a person who respects all people, it is possible to admit fault, to examine social patterns that perpetuate racism and sexism, and to begin the careful work of making amends, of building egalitarian social structures....Accountability, not guilt, is the response to critique when our selves are constituted by love for others. (*FER*, 174)

#### CREATING MODELS FOR SOLIDARITY IN EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Welch draws on the African American historical struggle of empowerment, resistance, and renewal as expressed in African American women’s literature. She crafts a model for the white liberal middle class to emulate as a means to move toward empathy and solidarity for those who experience social injustice. Specifically she uses the African American struggle for racial justice as a model for the liberal middle class to learn how to exercise

power while yielding control in the struggle, to embrace the risk involved in pursuing social justice that may not be realized fully in its individual efforts. Welch draws upon the writings of African American women, including Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Paule Marshall, and Mildred Taylor, to reveal how the struggle for racial justice has been one of faith and patience, a recognition that this struggle is one that crosses time and generations (and is expressive of love for future generations). In this way, Welch emphasizes the need for reformers to recognize that their own individual efforts even in their lifetimes may not come to fruition; rather, it is a communal effort that involves solidarity among different groups across society and even across the generations. Welch's use of literature to illustrate this point provides narratives and characters which help to immerse the reader in the minds and lives of others and employs the storytelling device as a means to draw the reader into reception of and possibly empathy for the characters' struggles.

In her social foundations class, Julie was faced with students who were not yet open to the idea that they may play a role in the struggle for racial justice, much less Welch's model for solidarity in this struggle. They were still learning to express and understand their own apathy and disconnection from others. Drawing from Welch's use of African American literature, Julie selected a fictive text to attempt a pathway to empathy. Several days after the dialogue in her class regarding the second anniversary of Katrina, Julie tried an experiment that she hoped would evoke additional emotional responses from her students to the quandaries of many African American and Black survivors of Katrina.

She invited students to read the eighteenth and nineteenth chapters from Hurston's anthropological novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The chapters describe the central character Janie and her lover Tea Cake's experience of enduring and surviving the Okeechobee Hurricane of 1928.<sup>12</sup> In deft detail, Hurston takes her reader on the treacherous journey of these two characters as they weather ecological and cultural catastrophe. Julie did not tell students from where the chapter came, although they quickly figured out that the story was not one about Katrina. Before assigning this work, she imagined that such a literary account, a testimonial reading, might lead her students to envision the racism and environmental devastation; to acknowledge despair, whether their own or that of the characters in the book; to imagine and experience empathy; and to "believe" that what they were reading illustrated a reality with which they may not have direct experience. She hoped as well that reading Hurston would offer her students an historical context through which they might begin to examine the manifestations of racism in a particular place and draw connections to the fallout of Katrina.

Responding to the assignment, one student offered, "I realized that there were entire cultures encased in our country that I had never truly recognized or appreciated before." This student went on to herald the significance that novels had played in her own life prior to college, affirming that "they were



testimonials to *life* in other countries, cultures and times. But even more important than the novels themselves were the discussions they generated within the class.” She continued, “We were able to openly discuss the events, descriptions, and style that the books utilized, as well as the feelings they invoked in us.”

The rest of the class seemed to engage Hurston's accounts of the intersection between environmental devastation and racism with a similar and genuine curiosity and compassion that did not need to be confirmed. Rather than wondering whether or not Hurston's account was legitimate or factual, students engaged the narrative imaginatively and personally, unencumbered by any need for explanations or justifications:

“I can't imagine what it would be like to feel swept away by such a powerful storm.”

“I can't imagine having to pick up bodies, and then sift through them to decide who would get to be buried in a pine box and who would be buried in a hole.”

“What were those people thinking when they made Tea-Cake pick up bodies? Who were they? I mean, really, *who were they?*” (emphasis added)

In this last quotation, a student assails the white racist posse rounding up African American men on the street in post-hurricane Palm Beach and at gunpoint forcing them to bury the dead. The forced labor, documented from real events, represents one of the few encounters between white and black characters in the novel. Rarely in the text are black or white readers invited to empathize with white characters. With the possible exception of the doctor who treats Tea Cake for rabies (ultimately in vain), in the chapters excerpted for this class exercise white readers cannot escape imaginatively empathizing with black characters as an initial step toward naming social and racial inequity.

#### CONCLUSION: CONTINUING IN STRUGGLE

The simultaneous emotional intensity and historical distance of a literary testimonial provides for acceptance of the legitimacy of the experience that it portrays. The distance can be highly problematic, however, if the historic connection is not clearly made. Megan Boler suggests that “ideally, testimonial reading inspires an empathic response that motivates action: a ‘historicized ethics’ engaged across genres, that radically shifts our self-reflective understanding of power relations.”<sup>13</sup> Certainly, Hurston's literary testimony did not address the immediate situation on the Gulf Coast.<sup>14</sup> For now, however, Julie was pleased to have opened a conduit through which she and her students might explore and engage the possibilities of experience and emotion with which they might assume the survivors of Katrina grapple.

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Welch's vision of successfully enacting racial justice begins with a reorientation of our individual visions, reorienting ourselves to connection with Others. Julie's struggle began with creating a space for empathy to emerge in her students. The missing piece is then giving the students, in light of their reading of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the opportunity for re-imagining their reactions to Katrina and making the connection to current professional practice. It is a matter of building upon the empathy invigorated by the text and using it to interrogate and expose the defenses launched to resist connection with the racial and social injustices of Katrina. Welch writes:

As we become accountable for the limits of our vision and the damage caused by the violation of those limits, we become a different community. The public that emerges from the mutually accountable work and dialogue is mutually transformative. We do not emerge as the same people, but we all become different, our traditions are reformed, as we begin to be liberated or begin to dismantle systems of oppression. (*FER*, 140)

The aesthetic experience of engaging Hurston enabled the teacher education students to stand in their position of privilege and experience an analogous situation with empathy. From this experience, the students have the opportunity to name their own situations of privilege and may perhaps begin to question their double privilege of despairing in the face of racial injustice. Reading Hurston helped the teacher education students to "believe" that what Rahim shared in his video clip earlier in the week about the residents of the lower ninth might actually be true, or at least possible. Julie's students were beginning to engage and empathize with stories and experiences that are quite different from, and even outside the range of possibilities of, their own experiences. Further, as an educator, Julie was able to provide a momentary bridge over the language gap. And, in that light, her class could then enjoy a ground upon which they might explore the potentialities of transformative dialogue to the end of witnessing and considering our individual capacities for empathy and advocacy. As Welch helps us to see, such action helps establish new, more promising conditions for continuing the struggle.

#### NOTES

1. Patrick Slattery and Dana Rapp, *Ethics and the Foundations of Education: Teaching Convictions in a Postmodern World* (Boston, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon, 2003), 219–20 and 225–6.
2. Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, revised ed. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2000).
3. Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990).
4. Malik Rahim, interview by Amy Goodman, *Democracy Now!*, August 30, 2007.

5. Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); and Slattery and Rapp, *Ethics and the Foundations of Education*, 185.
  6. Welch, *Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 103. This work will be cited for all subsequent references in the text as *FER*.
  7. Paul Loeb, "Against Apathy: Role Models for Engagement," *Academe* 87, no. 4 (2001), <http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/academe/2001/JA/>.
  8. See Emilie Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation, and Transformation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 34.
  9. Sharon Todd, *Learning from the Other: Levinas, Psychoanalysis, and Ethical Possibilities in Education* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003): 4.
  10. Lorraine Code, *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 230.
  11. Welch likewise departs from Habermas for similar reasons. She sees specifically as problematic Habermas's ideal of conversation as socially emancipatory. She does not see it being extended to include marginalized groups nor including alternative traditions of conversation like oral tradition.
  12. According to the National Weather Service, the Lake Okeechobee Hurricane of 1928 is not incidentally the most recent hurricane with a U.S. death toll higher than Katrina, causing in excess of 2,500 deaths, nearly all in Florida.
  13. Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 158.
  14. There are multiple opportunities for sharing with students some of the stories that are emerging and being documented by and about the survivors of Katrina. See for example, Jennifer Howard's "Stories from the Storm: Folklorists Train Survivors of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita to Harvest Research—and Even Healing—from their Experiences," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Sept. 14, 2007; and, the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank: "Collecting and Preserving the Stories from Katrina and Rita," <http://hurricanearchive.org/>.
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