
 Review

Ron Eyerman
Is This America?
Katrina As Cultural Trauma

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Ron Eyerman believes that Hurricane Katrina can be seen as cultural trauma, and he explores how it has been constructed as one through various media, arts and popular culture. At first only a tropical storm, it quickly turned into a dangerous hurricane which threatened the entire Gulf region. The damage was enormous: 1836 dead, between 80 and 120 billion dollars in losses. But the biggest damage came in the form of a “monumental governmental failure that brought shame to a great nation” (6). During and after Katrina, the rescue and relief efforts organized on all levels of government failed its people. Numerous reports of mismanagement, the diversion of money required to maintain systems that protect areas from flooding, a passivity towards helping and rescuing the poor, and outlaw police officers plagued the local level. At the state and federal level, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) failed to prepare and adequately respond to the threat, while President Bush failed to realize the seriousness of the situation.

Before diving into the print media, arts and popular culture that created the cultural trauma, Eyerman takes time to define

what cultural trauma is, and how it applies to Katrina. While individual and collective trauma happened directly under the influence of Katrina, cultural trauma was not created by this disastrous event, but made in order to explain said event. Those who create it are known as carrier groups, which, in Katrina, were often journalists and the media. He defines cultural trauma as “public articulations of collective pain and suffering that require representation through word, sound, and image as well as interested parties to construct and communicate them” (8). It took the form of a narrative that unified the experience of the individuals, creating a story that helped traumatized individuals explain what happened to them and to create the foundations of a revised collective identity that had been shattered.

Katrina’s role as a cultural trauma can be seen in the public debates that occurred after the hurricane, in which people tried to understand why the disaster was so devastating. Among many elements already mentioned, the question of race and socio-economic standing was considered to have been one of the major factors in deciding who lived and who died. Most of the people stranded during the event were impoverished blacks. This fact created a nationwide discussion in which the foundational values of America were brought into question. All of this culminated into viewing Katrina as a symbol of governmental failure, and the failure of the white majority to care about the black minority, who can be seen as the primary subjects of the cultural trauma. The reason for this is that the African American experience of Katrina brought back the notion that they are not seen as equal citizens to white people, that

they are separated as a group from other Americans, and that racism and discrimination still run rampant in today's "progressive" American society.

The way most Americans experienced Katrina was through print media, which reported the entirety of the disaster. It was the media that was the most important actor in defining the situation and judging how serious it was, and also one of the most important carrier groups of cultural trauma, since it was the prime source of information used to create the narrative and explain what was happening. One could observe how the media's focus subtly changed as the disaster unfolded, going from covering the disaster to reporting on the life of those left behind to trying to find out who is to blame for the mismanagement and inefficiency of the rescue operation. At first, the media simply covered the storm and the damage it caused. After that, there was a distinct, focused shift to showing the dramatic individual stories and cases of looting and violence. This can be seen in the way the media treated black people, especially young males, which were shown as angry marauders who robbed and attacked the rescue forces. This caused everyone to believe that they were the primary source of danger, which is obviously false, because there were also examples of young black people helping others and examples of white people committing crimes. Lastly, the media transformed this natural event into a political event, which opened a way to discern deeper truths about American society. Themes of victimhood and responsibility started to dominate the media, and the realization that the primary victims were impoverished black people set in. Katrina

was not just a natural disaster, but also a traumatic experience that shocked many Americans, and the print media was one of the main actors that reported on it and shaped the narrative, turning it into an event of national significance.

The city of New Orleans was the primary subject of arts and popular culture that dealt with Katrina. Eyerman notes that a Louisiana exhibition portrayed the people of New Orleans as resilient heroes, while making no mention of the perpetrators nor of crime and looting. But through careful observation one can perceive that there in fact is a perpetrator – the government. This can be seen in the music movement of New Orleans, in which various small and famous artists used music filled with political commentary about Katrina in order to influence and criticize the government. The music they wrote moved not only the people affected by the disaster, but also other Americans who sympathized with the victims. The reason why is that music binds minds and bodies, combining individual and collective experience, evoking identification and recognition. Visual arts were also important for the representation of disaster and trauma. Katrina opened many racial, political, and social questions that were almost never answered by official photojournalistic pictures. Therefore, many visual artists took it upon themselves to explore these unanswered questions, showing their viewers the aftermath of the disaster. And while the artists claim that their works are neutral and without political messages, they have a certain meaning and message for the people who experienced Katrina. Their works had an influence on both the people who experienced Katrina and the people who followed the disaster, creating

a sphere through which both groups could experience and feel the same thing.

The people following the disaster through television and live coverage had the possibility to fully experience the scope of the disaster, as reporters risked their lives to get amazing shots: desperate people, survivors, destroyed buildings and flooded streets. The aim of the broadcasts was to arouse public concern and shape public opinion. A recurring element in them was the American flag, which was supposed to represent courage, unity, resilience, and hope. But it was also used to remind people that this was happening in America. News broadcasts, just like print media, tried to open debates about fundamental issues, such as poverty and race, while also debunking claims that politicians and authorities made. And just like in the print media, as time passed the focus shifted from reporting the devastation of the disaster to reporting cases of urban warfare. The Bush administration eventually tried to present itself as often as they could on television, so that they could counter the image of passivity and negligence that the media created. The media often showed emotional reports of individuals, their suffering, and their attempts to find loved ones as a way of connecting victims and connecting the audience with the victims through dramatic imagery and story-telling. This way, the media was used as a bridge through which people could reach out to one another, locate family members and friends, and help them. And as it did so, it also transformed Katrina into an emotional symbol that sparked countless debates, which created cultural trauma.

While it is said that nature does not discriminate (it kills both rich and poor, white

and black), the same cannot be said about the human behaviour that enabled such a crisis, as well as the human behaviour during and after the disaster. Simply put, if a person was poor and/or black, that person had lower chances of saving themselves, since their race and socioeconomic status determined where they lived and how easy it was for them to escape to safety. Also, the government believed that everyone who stayed during the disaster did it of their own free will, which is why they didn't enforce a mandatory evacuation. All of this proved that America still has not fully abandoned its racist and discriminatory past, because race and class determined the chances of survival.

Katrina became a meaningful event through the use of an extensive interpretative framework, which combined language with experiences and memory. As the situation worsened, the focus was shifted from reporting a national disaster into reporting a human drama of despair, death and violence, into reporting the failures and incompetence of all levels of government. And all of this was aired live on national television for the whole world to see, turning Katrina from a regional disaster into an event of global significance. This prompted people to ask: "Is this America?" (123), a question directed to their government, which focuses on the relationship between the government and the governed, and the obligations a government should have towards its citizens. All of these obligations were abandoned, and the images of people (mostly blacks) stranded and helpless on rooftops and crowded Superdome gave the answer to that question: "This is America" (124).

The individual and collective trauma of the people affected by the disaster, along

with the lack of empathy and help they received had a strong impact on other American citizens who followed it. It helped concretize the imaginary notion of “we”, on which America is built, and it made people realize that they could have easily been the ones facing this disaster. Such a realization linked the individual and collective identity of American citizens, which can be seen in the media when it reported that the disaster happened in America and that the people affected by the disaster were indeed Americans. Eyerman believes that Katrina was definitely an event that created cultural trauma, since it was phrased as a “national shame” and a “national tragedy” for the US, and was “the cause for public reflection on the basic social contract” (130), that opened the question of whether one could trust the government to help them if they found themselves in the same ordeal. This realization did not shatter the trust in the government, but it damaged it. If we consider the job of the authorities to manage and contain situations, while making sure that the crisis does not evolve into cultural trauma, we can discern with certainty that in this the authorities failed. However, such discontent and mistrust with the government did not result in a political response, which means that the problems Katrina opened were buried deep into the subconscious of the American people in the form of cultural trauma, where they remain unresolved.

Katrina, and the events that came after it, are seen as similar to 9/11 or Pearl Harbor, in that they were extremely traumatizing events. But while these two events came from the outside, and managed to strengthen American collective identity because of the clear distinction between victims and

villains, Katrina came from the inside and completely shattered the collective identity, testing and breaching various boundaries in several areas of discourse. What can be considered to be the main source of trauma is the shattering of the collective identity, especially for black people, who realized that they are not treated the same as other American citizens. It is important to note that Katrina was a cultural trauma not only for black people, but for other racial groups that experienced Katrina and for every other American citizen as well, because it made them question their own safety and the possibility of help they would receive if the same thing happened to them. The event itself cannot be considered as cultural trauma, since then every case of tornado or tsunami disaster would create it as well. But, when paired with the government’s failure to efficiently control the situation, Katrina becomes one.

In the end, the notion “we” of the Americans can be seen as a reference to the idea that America is different and exceptional, that it can do things better and, through its leadership and bravery, prevent disasters such as Katrina. However, Katrina “delivered a staggering blow to the myth of American exceptionalism, initiating a wide-ranging debate about how to repair this tear in the social fabric and rewrite the foundations of collective identity” (130). Eyerman’s insight of the scope of disaster that was Katrina, both in physical and psychological senses, is invaluable for understanding the impact it had on American society. His notion that black people were especially affected by the disaster, the lack of help, and their negative portrayal in the media, proves that America still hasn’t fully left behind its discriminatory

past. The questions that Katrina opened still have not been answered, and, as long as they remain unresolved, a spectre will haunt American society. Whether Katrina only cemented certain faults of the American society or brought to light these faults and enabled them to be solved is a question that can only be answered in the future.

Matej Mikašinić-Komšo
Faculty of Political Sciences,
University of Zagreb

Review

Charlotte Beradt
Snovi pod Trećim Reichom

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Humans are differentiated from other beings by their superior mind and creativity. The book *Snovi pod Trećim Reichom* (*The Third Reich of Dreams*) by Charlotte Beradt shows the dreams that were dreamt by the citizens of Germany from 1933 until 1939, when the author emigrated to England. Before examining the dreams, and their meaning, the author explains how the dreams examined in the book are not regular dreams about violence and fear, but dreams filled with political motives, alienation, feelings of emptiness and loss of identity. Although the meaning of the dreams is clear, their dreamers still try to find alternative explanations, sometimes more complicated and sometimes less

complicated, because they fear the truth that the dreams reveal. The truth that demonstrates the relationship between their dreams and the brutal reality of the Nazi regime – almost reveals a kind of interwoven relationship between the sleeping and waking worlds. What is similar to all the dreams is the sense of the coming storm that affected Germany. They told of things yet to come and have better emphasised the threat the regime posed than reality ever could.

Depending on the nature of the individual, the dreams would be different – some would succumb to the regime while others would oppose Hitler and his horrendous regime. It is important to note how the political system influenced the individual. How, depending on the methods of indoctrination by the media, the type of dreams would change as well on many levels. The indoctrination's mere presence had a significant influence on the course of the dreams. Also, it could have a varying effect on dreams, making them more intrusive or vivid depending on the potency of the methods applied.

The relationship between the individual and the community is discussed as well because everyone wanted to belong. To note, even though the dreams analysed were individual in nature, the author herself states how they could easily be grouped – i.e. the phenomenon observed was present on a social level significantly higher than that of an individual. Because of this desire to belong no one wanted to believe in the real possibility of the horrors that the dreams foreshadowed. For one hopes that sleep will bring about fairer things than nightmares. The dreams interpreted through the book were all dreamt before the Nazi re-