Cultural Trauma, Memory, and Gendered Collective Action: The Case of Women of the Storm Following Hurricane Katrina

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This essay examines cultural trauma, memory, gender, and performance in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and documentary sources, this feminist analysis of cultural trauma and memory examines how an emergent, women-centered group, Women of the Storm, engaged in performative political practices aimed at increasing government support for Gulf Coast recovery efforts. The author argues that the group modified place-based practices related to ritual acts of mourning and remembrance, appropriated and transformed disaster-related symbol systems, and aimed to establish new forms of moral responsibility as part of its collective actions.

Keywords: cultural trauma / cultural memory / disaster / Hurricane Katrina / New Orleans / performance / place / collective action / ritual

Introduction

On December 11, 2005, the New York Times printed an editorial titled “The Death of An American City,” which projected a dire outlook for post-Katrina New Orleans: “We are about to lose New Orleans. Whether it is a conscious plan to let the city rot until no one is willing to move back or honest paralysis over difficult questions, the moment is upon us when a major American city will die, leaving nothing but a few shells for tourists to visit like a museum.” Warning against the city’s death by attribution, the editors continued, “Lawmakers need to understand that for New Orleans the words ‘pending in Congress’ are a death warrant requiring no signature.”

The invocation of the museum metaphor to caution against the abandonment and continued decay of a vibrant city following disaster taps into the broader debate over the importance of memory in recovering from extreme and traumatic events. As Judith Herman (1997) has pointed out, public remembering is an integral process that helps victims voice their suffering. But public remembering is not only concerned with the past, as embodied in public memorials, museums, or anniversaries; it also encompasses how memory work functions to confront urgent needs in the present and to influence conditions in the future. To demonstrate the complex intersection of these goals, I focus on the relationship between
remembrance work, cultural trauma, and social change by examining
the collective actions of one group, Women of the Storm, which formed
in Hurricane Katrina’s wake. I contend that remembrance practices, and
more specifically gendered forms of cultural memory were uniquely acti-
vated by Women of the Storm to address what has become the cultural
trauma of Katrina.

My analysis draws upon the work of feminist scholars who have begun to
explore how gender affects a group’s cultural memory of events layered with
trauma, violence, and terror (Baumel 1998; Baumel and Cohen 2003; Hirsch
and Smith 2002; Jacobs 2004, 2008; Lentin 1997; Ringelheim 1998). Femin-
ist scholarship has engaged with questions of cultural memory through
writings on sexual abuse and violence against women, and more recently
has turned to mass trauma such as slavery or the Holocaust and explored
the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, nation, and class (Hirsch and
Smith 2002). In part, this article’s investigation of Women of the Storm
serves as a modest corrective to what Hirsch and Smith (2002, 4) call the
“‘uneven developments’ of feminist studies and memory studies” and adds
to the recent literature on the gendered dimensions of cultural memory.

In what follows, I use the notion of cultural memory to examine the
performative and change-driven collective actions of Women of the Storm.
The interdisciplinary field of memory studies has begun to explore trans-
misions of memories related to violent and traumatic cultural events
through the lens of group interaction, performance, commemoration,
representation, and memorialization (Schwartz 1982; Sturken 1997; Taylor
2003; for a detailed discussion of the origins of memory discourse, see
Klein 2000). Just as trauma discourse has extended from the psychological
realm to that of cultures and collectivities, theoretical moves that deco-
center the psychological and historical dimensions of memory result in an
emphasis on how memories reside within, and are transferred through,
social group interactions and political cultures (Connerton 1989; Fentress
and Wickham 1992; Halbwachs 1992; Olick 1999). The recent expansion
of memory studies to include group analysis allows for broader under-
standings of collective traumas and extreme events such as the Holocaust,
genocide, mass rapes and killings, war and post-war cultures (Lembcke
1998; Sturken 1997), transformations of the nation-state (Neal 1998; Taylor
2003; Vinitzky-Seroussi 2001, 2002), natural and technological
disasters (Erikson 1976, 1995), and more recently, 9/11 and other terrorist
attacks (Haskins and DeRose 2003; Smelser 2004; Weissman 2005; see
also the section on gender and September 11 in Hirsch and Smith 2002).
The social frameworks of memory are critical in that individual memory
is acquired and activated through membership in particular social groups
(Halbwachs 1992). In a similar approach to understanding memory as
situated within social relations, Connerton (1989) emphasizes the ways
in which group memories are conveyed and sustained through social
practices, particularly commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices, and argues that these “images of the past and recollected knowledge of the past are conveyed and sustained by [more or less ritual] performances” (40). Following the analytical shift towards the spatialization of memory [Nora 1989; see also Bosco 2004; Crang and Travlou 2001; Rice 2003; Roach 1996], I explore these performances staged within spaces of Congressional decision making and also at various lieux de mémoire [Nora 1989]—sites of memory—in post-Katrina New Orleans.

It is also important to understand the Katrina catastrophe as cultural trauma (Alexander 2004) rather than solely an individual, psychological, or physical trauma. According to cultural sociologist Jeffrey Alexander, a “cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (2004, 1). It would be difficult to argue that Hurricane Katrina and the near death of New Orleans did not create the conditions for a crisis and reconstruction of collective identity. Alexander further claims that “however tortuous the trauma process, it allows collectivities to define new forms of moral responsibility and to redirect the course of political action” (2004, 27).

**Women of the Storm**

On January 10, 2006, an emergent group of women conversed at kitchen tables in Uptown New Orleans and began a grassroots endeavor to bring the members of Congress to the city to witness the storm and flood damage firsthand. They began by calling women throughout the city, seeking to create a diverse group of women to travel to Washington DC to extend hand-delivered invitations to lawmakers. By late January 2006, they had taken the name “Women of the Storm” and become a formal social movement organization, extending a long tradition of women-centered advocacy, volunteerism, and reform in New Orleans [Tyler 1996]. Aware that the survival, rebirth, and cultural memory of an American city were at stake, the women mobilized around the goal of inviting every member of Congress to tour Katrina’s devastation.

On January 30, 2006, Women of the Storm assembled 130 Louisiana women, some of whom had lost their homes in the flood, and took a chartered flight to Washington. The plane was filled with women from diverse class and race backgrounds and life experiences—ranging from philanthropists to florists, from attorneys and small-business owners to former debutants and Mardi Gras royalty, from housewives and mothers to bankers, writers, and two Catholic nuns. The women recognized the urgent need to bring decision makers to the city and claimed that
“nothing is more powerful than witnessing the devastation first-hand and experiencing the hardship and triumph that accompany recovery and rebirth of the state” [Women of the Storm 2006a]. At a press conference that morning, they unfurled in unison bright blue umbrellas, symbolically representing the same shade of blue tarp that covered thousands of homes across the region. Afterwards, the women split into pairs intended to represent the racial diversity of New Orleans and set out two-by-two to extend hand-delivered, formal invitations to every member of Congress to tour the destruction.¹

At the time of Women of the Storm’s January 2006 trip, while lights remained out across the desolate and depopulated city, in neighborhoods such as Lakeview, Gentilly, Mid-City, the Upper Ninth Ward, and the Lower Ninth Ward, only 55 U.S. representatives and 30 U.S. senators had visited post-Katrina New Orleans [Alpert 2006a]. As Women of the Storm founder Anne Milling put it, “It was a storm that was felt around the world. . . . Yet, who would dream that 87 percent of the House of Representatives and 70 percent of the Senate haven’t found time to visit the site of the largest catastrophe in the history of America?” [Alpert 2006a; for a discussion of the differences between emergencies, disasters, and catastrophes, see Quarantelli 2006]. Seemingly, the region had been forgotten by national lawmakers as thousands of (still displaced) residents tried to rebuild their lives. The women mobilized behind Milling’s persuasive call to action, “Our elected officials need to see for themselves—block by block, mile by mile—the immense devastation and the pressing challenges faced by so many people in this region” [Women of the Storm 2006b].

Armed with personal, hand-delivered invitations, the group offered lawmakers an all-expense paid, 36-hour trip to New Orleans with an itinerary that included meetings with civic and business leaders, land tours of the abandoned neighborhoods, visits to the major levee breaches, and flyovers of the storm-damaged region and eroding coastal wetlands in Blackhawk helicopters, assisted by Brigadier General Hunt Downer of the Louisiana National Guard [Williams 2006]. In addition to the invitations, the women presented lawmakers with the book America’s Wetlands on the erosion of Louisiana’s coast, and shared haunting photographs of the flooded homes of some of their members. Perhaps most importantly, the women communicated personal and collective stories of loss, trauma, and resilience. One Women of the Storm participant in her early 50s explained:

People brought whatever they wanted to, but what we really brought were stories. The stories of [long pause] . . . my two [adult] children lost everything. And when I say everything, I literally mean everything. And to a congressional person, looking at someone probably like myself, they don’t understand how anybody like me could lose everything. Well my children did and now they live with me. Until they find . . . they’ll be fine, they both have good jobs, you know. But, so we really brought stories to the people in Congress and their aides.
In addition to providing organized tours for Congressional leaders who accepted the women’s invitation, the group partnered with an environmental protection organization, America’s Wetlands, to encourage federal support for a sustainable revenue source drawn from offshore oil and gas royalties to help protect and restore Louisiana’s coastal wetlands. In March 2006, lawmakers began visiting New Orleans, including a bipartisan visit by a 32-member Congressional delegation led by Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (Alpert 2006b). Shortly thereafter, Women of the Storm partnered with four national women’s groups—The Association of Junior Leagues International; The National Women’s Leadership Council, United Way of America; The Links Incorporated; and The National Council of Jewish Women—thereby extending its base outside of Louisiana (Women of the Storm 2006c). In September 2006, Women of the Storm made a second trip to Washington, continuing to invite members of Congress and link the Katrina catastrophe to broader environmental concerns. The group has kept an ongoing count of Congressional visits to post-Katrina New Orleans [specifying name, state, and political party affiliation] on the Women of the Storm Web site (http://womenofthestorm.net), and more recently, expanded its efforts to other spheres of U.S. politics through the [ultimately unsuccessful] bid to the Commission on Presidential Debates site selection committee to hold the 2008 presidential debates in New Orleans, which was endorsed by seven presidential candidates.2

Don’t Forget Us: Remembrance Work as Postdisaster Activism

I first became interested in Women of the Storm while conducting fieldwork in post-Katrina New Orleans. Given that elite groups are often inaccessible to social science researchers (Marcus 1983), the opportunity to study an elite women-organized social movement has relevance beyond a particular historic event, “studying up” has democratic significance for understanding relations of power and inequality (Nader 1972). While Women of the Storm represents itself [on its Web site, in press releases, and in organized political actions] as a diverse organization, with participants from different cultural, racial, and class backgrounds, between the major collective actions, the core organizers who maintained the group are arguably part of the city’s social and economic elite. Continuity and survival of women’s movements over time has often depended upon the stewardship of elite women, as demonstrated by Taylor (1994) in her work on the twentieth century women’s movements. The focus of this research is on the methods used by Women of the Storm, particularly remembrance practices and cultural memory, to
activate a political response to the many crises plaguing New Orleans in
the aftermath of Katrina. Ethnographic research provides the tools to study
the dynamics and processes of memory (Prus 2007; see also special issue of
Symbolic Interaction [Fine and Beim 2007] on interactionist approaches to
collective memory). Accordingly, I conducted ethnographic field research
in New Orleans between October 2005 and September 2006, conduct-
ing in-depth interviews with women activists in the New Orleans area,
attending weekly meetings, observing collective actions, and collecting
documents.

Women of the Storm, made up of women from New Orleans and south
Louisiana, played a pivotal role in the region’s ongoing recovery following
Hurricane Katrina. In this article, I propose that the group accomplished
this largely through performative actions, some of which were patterned
after traditional gender norms, remembrance practices, and place-based
rituals. These actions were designed to pressure Congress to pass federal
legislation related to Hurricane Katrina recovery efforts. While the group
did not frame its actions as political and in fact explicitly describes itself as
nonpolitical, this research indicates that the actions of the group politicize
remembrance and forgetting through their claims and requests for material
and symbolic resources.

On Women of the Storm’s first trip to Washington, the group col-
collectively unfurled what would become its signature symbol: blue-tarp
umbrellas. Created by Women of the Storm specifically for this debut,
the umbrellas unfurled at the morning press conference were the same
distinctive shade of blue as the tarps that covered thousands of tattered
homes across the region. This reference to a particular blue pointed to
the fact that the hue had entered the region’s postdisaster cultural syntax
through the FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) relief effort.
In the hands of Women of the Storm, the umbrellas were strategically
and symbolically used in gendered performance, remembrance practices,
and collective actions. Absorbed into the visual nomenclature of post-
disaster New Orleans, Women of the Storm’s collective raising of blue-tarp
umbrellas synthesized symbols associated with protection from storms
and widespread government failures.

This symbolism took on particular significance for the women par-
participants. Overflowing with excitement during our in-depth interview,
a woman in her mid-50s explained to me the symbolic power of the
reference to blue tarps:

It was blue tarp. I mean it’s [the color of] a blue roof. But it was very . . .
three buses of women and we all opened our umbrellas as soon as we got off of the
bus. It was very visual because you see these, we walked for about a block and a
half I guess, and I was on the third bus, and you see these blue umbrellas going
up and then you see them coming up the Hill. And I think it was very impres-
sive, [. . .] and I know one person told me that she thought that Senator Landrieu,
when she turned around and saw that, people including her mom, Verna was on the plane, that the cavalry had come. You know, it was like she had been holding the fort virtually alone, she and the delegation, but here is the support, here is the cavalry, in this visible way, heading up the Hill. (5 February 2006)

Another interviewee, a woman in her early 60s, suggested that the blue-tarp umbrellas not only referenced the actual tarps that covered homes, but also symbolized the human dimensions of the Katrina catastrophe:

It was unbelievable, those umbrellas, the impact. Just simply because it’s blue tarps. That’s what it represents, the people that are still struggling to get their lives together and their houses, everything. (14 March 2006)

The double reference speaks to the materiality of patching damaged homes as well as of those who suffered direct loss. Describing how the blue tarps affected her emotionally, a woman in her early 60s spoke about how the symbols invoked a “stinging” sense of loss:

It’s still stinging when you go into an area where there’s an unusual number of blue roofs. It just—I’m in an area where I don’t see a lot of it, but then I go into other areas, and it’s a stinging feeling, because you realize that we are three months from hurricane season, and we still have so many houses that are not up and running. (16 March 2006)

As her narrative suggests, the symbols did not just reference the past; these were also poignant reminders about disaster vulnerabilities in the near future. At the same time, they came to symbolize women’s solidarity, as she went on to note:

I think that the experience that was most warming and satisfying and exciting to me was marching up the Hill. We got off the buses at the bottom of the Hill, and all of the women were together and we opened our umbrellas, and marching up the Hill, I was near the front, and when I looked back down the Hill to see all those little umbrellas, I thought, “God, this is just so incredible, that we are women of—we’re not young women, and we are together, marching up the Hill, marching on the Hill.” The thing about—one of the things I think is so significant about the Women of the Storm is that, first of all, our blue umbrellas say to people that we’re gentle. We’re not here to hurt you or hurt your feelings or anything like that. We’re just trying to represent New Orleans in the best possible way. (16 March 2006)

The actions of Women of the Storm were performative, and they were gendered. Accordingly, the use of the umbrellas invoked a gentle, non-threatening symbol of collective action, instead of, for example, accusatory statements on placards or oppositional activities that shut down organizational or institutional operations.

While these narratives speak to how the use of umbrellas garnered attention through performance and invocations of emphasized femininity
(Connell 1987), some participants also recognized how this particular symbol might not have been understood by intended audiences and the general public outside of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. Another woman in her early 60s spoke of the performative dimensions of the collective deployment of the storm symbol in just this way:

They were blue, so they had the “blue tarps,” although I’m not sure a lot of them in Washington understood that part. But it was very effective, because immediately we were spotted. We got off the buses and popped those umbrellas. People driving by asked, “What is this?” One of the cops in front of the Rayburn Building stopped and said, “What is this?” and [name of Women of the Storm partner] talked to him and said, “I’ve lost my home and I’m up here because I want things changed.” So the cop was even—he took notice of us. (21 March 2006)

In this regard, gaining attention through performance does not always involve comprehension of symbolic codes. While umbrellas are a powerful, place-based symbol tied to New Orleans culture, it is understandable that the icon may not be immediately legible to lawmakers in Washington or to readers of this essay.4

The currency of Women of the Storm’s performances derives from the broader sociocultural context of memory traditions in New Orleans. The use of symbolism in rituals surrounding death and rebirth is a visible aspect of the culture of New Orleans, where the umbrella, among other objects, has served as an important prop in mourning and remembrance practices. For instance, ritual spectacles involving umbrellas are part of a long tradition of jazz funerals in New Orleans, which themselves have origins in West African ritual traditions. The traditional jazz funeral often includes a solemn procession from the church service to the cemetery, which is followed by a moment referred to as “cutting the body loose” whereby “the deceased parts company with the procession in his honor” (Roach 1996, 278) and the mourners turn back as uplifting music, joyous shouts, and laughter fill the air. This transitional moment in the mourning ritual gives rise to what is known in local vernacular as the “second line,” a type of parading that consists of celebratory elements like brass bands, upbeat music, unfurled umbrellas that are popped and twirled, improvised dancing, and gendered ritual performance and attire, including, for some women, baby doll outfits (Coclanis and Coclanis 2005; Roach 1996, 2001). This highly stylized, place-specific script for mourning and celebration is rooted in the history of the city’s working-class African American community. After the Civil War, such symbolic rituals became more visible throughout the region as they were appropriated by the tourism industry and other segments of society, including the city’s elites (Regis 1999, 2001).

In this cultural context, the women drew upon the religious symbol of mourning and celebration unique to the city and transformed these
rituals tied to death and rebirth into secular and aesthetic rituals. Through the performative unfurling of the blue-tarp umbrellas, this reconfigured place-based ritual is itself a form of rebirth in Katrina’s wake. To be sure, the use of acts of remembrance could point in a troubling way to racial and class-based disparities in people’s ability to return to the city, as well as to the cultural appropriation of memorial practices. In this regard, displaced residents who could not return to New Orleans used the second line tradition, in consideration of their relationship to New Orleans as home (Breunlin and Regis 2006).

It could be argued that the group’s modification of cultural practices tied historically to communities of color is less about the cultural appropriation of ritual remembrance practices by elite women than an attempt to establish a coherent narrative of collective mourning grounded in the politics of place and the preservation of the city’s cultural memory. Thus, in addition to the struggle over material resources, Women of the Storm was also engaged in a larger symbolic struggle over the meaning of a place, the moral challenges and contradictions of speaking on behalf of the displaced, and the gendered responsibility of repairing a sense of home and community.

In focusing on the redirected course of political action and attempts to define new forms of moral responsibility by Women of the Storm, my intent is to call attention to the ways in which the cultural trauma of Katrina was constructed. My aim is not to depoliticize the catastrophe, which some may argue occurs when drawing on and deploying psychological discourses that might suggest that trauma inevitably and uniformly results from extreme events themselves. As Alexander (2004) points out, this would be a naturalistic fallacy that erases the political complexity of processes that produce cultural trauma. Instead, I want to direct attention to some of the ways in which the cultural trauma of Katrina was constructed and made visible, especially through the concerted efforts of a group of women guided by a sense of collective and moral responsibility. In this regard, the women displayed agency, innovation, and resiliency in times of extreme uncertainty. My approach to cultural trauma, informed by social constructionist research on the topic, helps move our understandings of suffering, violence, and loss out of the recesses of the individual psyche and into the body politic.

The transformation of cultural symbols and the practice of representing the displaced were ultimately a struggle over being remembered, as one member in her mid-40s reflected:

It was a phenomenal day for me, one that I will never forget as long as I live. Just the fact that we felt like the American process was in action. We had the ability to go to Washington, meet with our Congressmen, voice our concerns, meet with the White House, that this is part of being an American. In that
respect, I think it was very worthwhile and fulfilling for us. We were actually doing something, we were working with the government to open up some communication lines and begin the process of the federal government assisting our state. Because I think we all felt that there was a strong possibility that things would just move on and we would be forgotten. [7 April 2006]

A woman in her mid-50s spoke in a similar way about reminding the nation not to forget New Orleans:

The rest of the nation can’t close their eyes and forget it. We have to constantly remind them. This is day-to-day stuff. [20 March 2006]

For many Women of the Storm participants, memory work as political activism was characterized by its repetition and persistence. A woman in her mid-30s described how persistence over time defines the group’s efforts:

So you just have to keep at it. But I am not naïve [. . .] to think “oh that is fine, they are all going to come down and they are going to sign off on two hundred and forty billion dollars to New Orleans and it is all going to be saved.” And I think pretty much everybody else feels the same way, that we did our part but it is a long, long, long road that won’t have been solved by one, one-day trip to Washington. So, [I feel] both. Excitement, but also realization cracking in a little bit. That it is so much bigger than you are. [4 February 2006]

This work was also saturated with elements of gendered cultural practices. After returning from Washington, Women of the Storm sent handwritten thank you notes to elected officials reminding them of the group’s invitation to visit. The invitations served to keep the memory of post-Katrina New Orleans alive while simultaneously pressuring elected officials on the point that local and regional disaster recovery necessitated federal support through Congressional appropriations. These handwritten correspondences were a gendered form of communication connected to what many view as women’s traditional role of building and maintaining familial relationships and other social ties (di Leonardo 1987), and they correspond to notions of refined, polished, and cultured femininities. One interviewee, a woman in her early 50s, explained the gendered cultural practice in this way:

Southern women write thank you notes, that’s what we do. That is part of our makeup. We have to get our thank you notes out to every single person that we saw. Whether it be an aide or a congressman or whatever. And we have to do it now. So all of them are due today. [3 February 2006]

Despite uncertainty about the outcomes, the women’s performances were publicly validated through widespread media attention. The collective performance demanded that the public and the state pay attention to issues the group defined as important, which included responding to
Katrina as a serious issue in need of immediate attention. Describing the first trip to Washington, another woman in her early 50s stated:

So we all put on our pins and we all had an umbrella. And um, the only props that we had, and we wanted to make sure that no one thought that this was not a serious trip. This wasn’t Mardi Gras. This wasn’t Bourbon Street. This wasn’t second lining in Washington DC. This was women saying “pay attention to us.” (3 February 2006)

While the blue-tarp umbrellas undoubtedly conjure imagery of the traditional jazz funerals, the interviewee’s words make clear that the women’s actions should not be mistaken for the moment of “cutting the body loose,” which would emblematically signal a transition to the second line celebration of New Orleans’ own passing. Instead, the symbolic crossover to celebration had yet to occur, and the mournful tone extended onwards, reflecting the urgency and despair of a nearly forgotten city. In these ways, Women of the Storm, on its first trip to Washington, used performance “in the transmission of traumatic memory, drawing from transforming a shared archive and repertoire of cultural images” (Taylor 2003, 187). That is, the women highlighted cultural traditions and the symbolic meaning of a particular shade of blue, which continues to conjure memories of “the storm.” The widespread recognition by elected officials and media agencies in turn encouraged social cohesion among the Louisiana women, a recharging of group sentiments that set the stage for collective actions over the subsequent months in multiple, place-based locations of loss and suffering.

**Storm Warnings** and Mapping Landmarks in Time: Performance, Ritual, and the Cultural Appropriation of Disaster Symbols

Following the January 30, 2006, trip to Washington, the group brought the performances back home and engaged in actions within spaces of loss in New Orleans. Here, I offer a detailed description of one of its interactive performances that was part of a sustained effort to convince members of Congress to visit the area. The women continued to request federal funds for the Gulf Coast recovery and began a more concerted attempt to highlight the importance of restoring Louisiana’s coastal wetlands to mitigate future disaster losses.

The event, titled *Storm Warnings II*, was staged at the Tad Gormley Stadium in New Orleans’ City Park on June 1, 2006, more than nine months after levee breaches inundated the city with floodwaters. Women of the Storm, along with the nonprofit environmental group America’s Wetlands, mapped Congressional visits and absences on a football field-sized map of
the United States. The group chose a football field, because it spatially represented the rapid loss of coastal Louisiana, washing away at a rate of 100 yards (an area the size of a football field) every 30 to 38 minutes (Committee on the Future of Coastal Louisiana 2002; Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Conservation and Restoration Task Force and the Wetlands Conservation and Restoration Authority 1998). This point is significant because coastal wetlands help minimize hurricane storm surge and protect levees, which in turn, protect the built environment and reduce the area’s vulnerability to floods (Kousky and Zeckhauser 2006; Van Heerden 2007).

In addition to highlighting environmental loss and increased vulnerability, the women publicly thanked members of Congress who accepted their invitation to visit post-Katrina New Orleans and encouraged members of Congress who had not visited following the storm to make the trip. The group’s founder stated, “While we thank the members of Congress who have visited and gained an understanding of our plight, we remain shocked that 400 U.S. senators and representatives have not found the time to visit the site of the worst natural disaster ever to strike our nation” (Women of the Storm 2006d). At the time of the event, nine months after Katrina’s landfall, “seven states [had] yet to send a single member of their Congressional delegations to the devastated region, while 21 states [had] not sent a senator and 19 states [had] not sent a member of the House of Representatives” (Women of the Storm 2006d).

The map of the United States became a stage on which the women would dramatize the number of members of Congress who had visited post-Katrina New Orleans. Anne Milling, the group’s founder, read a roll call of the states in alphabetical order over a loudspeaker, and reported for each state the number of senators and representatives who had visited, and the number yet to come. Like chanting during religious rituals and memorial naming of those killed in political violence, or perhaps like piacular rites, those ritual ceremonies “that are conducted under conditions of uncertainty or sadness” (Durkheim 1912[1995], 393), the performative reading of the roll call drew upon rhythmic repetition and stylized speech patterns. As each state’s name echoed throughout the nearly empty stadium, several women walked to the state, opened their blue-tarp umbrella, and stood silently before a small crowd and cameras. At one point, the women dispersed to cover each state during a helicopter flyover, thus symbolically tying themselves, and Louisiana, to the nation. A local marching band played and the women began raising the umbrellas up-and-down as the notes filled the air. As the band continued and the helicopter swooped overhead, the women collectively raised the blue-tarp umbrellas to the sky.

In addition to the rhetoric of performance, the event drew upon visual discourses that had cut deeply into the city’s body politic. On each state, a tarp was marked with an “X.” Part of the new post-Katrina New Orleans
visual syntax, such marks cover homes across the region and serve as reminders of the systematic search-and-rescue operations immediately after the storm. The markings reflect an improvised effort to account for human life following the Katrina catastrophe and contain information on the date of the search (top quadrant), the search and rescue team (left quadrant), the number of living people found upon entry (right quadrant), and the number of bodies found (if any) at that location (bottom quadrant). It is important to note the weight of these symbols at the time of the June 1 event; decaying bodies were still being found, and even two months after this event, remains of what was believed to be yet another Katrina victim were discovered under piles of debris (see DeBerry 2006; Filosa 2006; and The Times-Picayune, June 18, 2006, and August 1, 2006). Undeniably, these haunting search and rescue marks on properties throughout the region have entered the broader cultural memory of the Katrina catastrophe and were invoked strategically as a powerful and symbolic resource.

In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, a rapid absorption and transformation of disaster symbols occurred throughout the city as the signs circulated within broader public and cultural discourses. In this context, Women of the Storm transformed the search and rescue marks, as well as the tarps used to cover storm-damaged homes, to communicate visually the number of Congressional visits to the city. On states that had at least one elected official visit, the tarps were blue, and states that had no members visit since the storm were highlighted with silver tarps. The top quadrant of the X indicated the state’s abbreviation. The number on the left communicated the number of members of the Senate that had visited, on the right, the number of House members, and on the bottom quadrant, the total number from each state yet to visit. In this way, disaster symbols were drawn from the regional context and transformed through the production of highly performative political actions.

In my field journal, I jotted down an initial reaction to the women’s use of disaster symbolism:

The Xs on the states were brilliant, a haunting reminder of the human tragedy, transformed and imposed on members of the United States government, those in control of the federal funding that is requested for the rebuilding of the city. It was transformed and imposed on those unaffected, forced on them through the eyes of the media as implicated in each and every one of the homes searched; The X is absorbed into the performance culture, a fascinating recirculation of signs of trauma, from the systematic and bureaucratic to the political and symbolic. They took the haunting signs of the state apparatus and transformed them symbolically to implicate the state in its failures to respond to the ongoing crisis in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast. (1 June 2006; personal field journal)

Through reconfigured storm symbols, cartographic communications, and performative actions, the group engaged in acts of transferring cultural and traumatic memory. First systematically inscribed on homes across the
region, storm symbolism was reinscribed in the cultural memory through repetitive displays during the performance.

Storm Warnings II, which also included remarks by then-Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco and U.S. Senator Mary Landrieu, coincided with the first day of the 2006 Atlantic hurricane season—a day that evoked visceral reactions, fear, and anxiety for many residents who survived the destruction of the previous storm season. The event became a “landmark in time,” which “not only serve[s] to divide up the passage of time,” but also “nourish[es] our thought, like the technical, moral, or religious notions which our thought does not localize in the past but rather in the present” (Halbwachs 1992, 175). The event marked a beginning within an annual cycle of storm seasons, one that was set against ongoing uncertainty surrounding the fragile state of the city’s infrastructure in the months following the previous (2005) storm season.

In addition to strengthening group sentiments, the collective performance of women’s bodies, en masse, also bears the symbolic weight of the storm through the use of blue-tarp umbrellas and gendered movements. Through the choreography and display of collective representations, the women formed cohesive patterns with their bodies during the performance, and in this way, Women of the Storm, as a collective of women, imbued the stadium space (implicitly masculine by virtue of its association with organized sports) with alternative gendered actions geared towards social change and remembrance.

Les Lieux de Mémoire: “Grounding” Performance in Sites of Memory

Further illustrating how repetition of performative acts is crucial for the transmission of cultural memory and pursuit of change following Katrina, members of Women of the Storm also raised their umbrellas in unison during several key events held at levee failures throughout New Orleans. For example, Women of the Storm organized a press conference at the 17th Street Canal levee breach in the Lakeview neighborhood of New Orleans to mark visits by Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham in March 2006. At this press conference turned performative action, Women of the Storm stood among the ruins of homes with umbrellas unfurled as the motorcade transporting the Senators approached the breach. Within a block of the levee breach, the women stood on grounds scattered with debris—once personal possessions within now-destroyed homes—and the mud-soaked residue left when the floodwaters receded. All around the women were houses still inscribed with crosshatched search and rescue marks, and visible traces of the flood lines, some as high as the roof tops. As engineers briefed the Senators on the levee failures, the women, in an improvised action, ascended the levees and encircled the elected officials.
The Senators stood between the exposed pilings of the once-breached levee and a crescent formed by women with blue-tarp umbrellas unfurled.

In the midst of ongoing uncertainty related to flood protection and national support for the recovery, this collective action at one of the many hastily patched breaches in the city’s levee protection system allowed the group to interact physically with the site of violence and loss, as well as with influential government representatives who came to see the damage firsthand. These levee breaches throughout the city became *lieux de mémoire*, a phrase coined by Pierre Nora to describe “the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists” (1989, 7). The women’s actions forced an expansion of meaning through memory work, as opposed to a commemoration of the past that would serve to fix boundaries around meanings of past events and locations of loss. In this way, *lieux de mémoire* are always open to multiple interpretations that blur divisions of time and space through the active process of memory work.

On at least two more occasions, Women of the Storm visited *lieux de mémoire* during official state-sponsored events at the invitation of then-Louisiana Governor Kathleen Babinaux Blanco. For instance, on August 26, 2006, three days before the first anniversary of Katrina, Women of the Storm was invited by Governor Blanco to the London Avenue canal to attend a press briefing on the status of levee repairs. The event at the canal, which suffered two breaches during Katrina, included a briefing by representatives of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, as well as a demonstration of how the new *floodgates* would close.

About a month later, on September 27, 2006, Governor Blanco invited Women of the Storm to attend a press conference at the 17th Street Canal breach, where she endorsed a series of constitutional amendments, some of which related to Women of the Storm’s goals, especially legislation that would establish a fund that would allocate federal dollars for coastal restoration and protection projects. When the announcement went out to members of Women of the Storm requesting their presence at the press conference, the core organizers encouraged the women to carry their blue-tarp umbrellas. Recognized by state officials, especially the governor, as an influential emergent group, Women of the Storm and its ritual raising of the blue-tarp umbrellas stood in for, and at the same time excluded, the many families displaced by Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent levee failures.

**Representation and Responsibility**

Women of the Storm, composed of many of the city’s elite white women and elite women of color, became a public face of those affected by the catastrophic events, producing new meanings that challenged narratives.
suggesting that progressive change had taken place. Through the construction of cultural traumas, members of social groups, in this case Women of the Storm, assume moral responsibility and “define their solidarity relationships in ways that, in principle, allow them to share the sufferings of others . . . expand[ing] the circle of the we” (Alexander 2004, 1).

In discussions of gendered solidarity, I do not wish to overlook issues of power or difference, as these dynamics are crucial for understanding post-Katrina suffering. Indeed, at stake here is the issue of representation, and more specifically the problems related to speaking on behalf of others (the less privileged, the displaced, the dead) and engaging in social action motivated by the women’s sense of moral responsibility. Alexander (2004) claims that when trauma is experienced at the level of culture, even social actors relatively removed from traumatic experience can potentially share in the suffering of others and “take on board” some significant responsibility for it. For many Women of the Storm participants, the recovery efforts in New Orleans in general, and the women’s individual actions in particular, were tied to attempts to define new forms of moral responsibility. For example, moral discourses tied to recovery efforts were evident when New Orleans was rejected as a host site for the 2008 presidential debates, as made clear in a November 2007 statement by Anne Milling, “New Orleans is the clear moral choice for a 2008 presidential debate. Unfortunately, it appears that politics has trumped in the site selection process carried out by the Commission on Presidential Debates.”

Discourses of moral responsibility are also present in the actions of smaller groups and individuals. One interviewee, a woman in her mid-60s, stated that Women of the Storm was “working in the moral center, not—they’re not doing it for their own gain. They’re not doing it for their husbands’ gain. They’re doing it because they think it’s the right thing to do” (14 March 2006). Later, she continued to speak about moral action and helping behaviors in paradoxical ways, which suggests the helpers in post-Katrina New Orleans are also in need of assistance as well:

I think they’re real right-minded people. But basically, I think that they’re very moral, right-minded, and they wouldn’t want to save the city for, let’s say, white people. They want to save the city for the people. And that’s the appeal that the group has for me. Because anybody that would do it for their own gain wouldn’t be interested in having me as a volunteer anyway.

[You don’t think so?]

I wouldn’t work for them. I’m just—I’m not oriented that way. I’d much rather help people that can’t help themselves. I mean, the people that can help themselves are gonna help themselves, right? But I think that some of the things, even for those of us that can help ourselves, the wetlands—we can’t do that. The levees—we can’t build the levees. (14 March 2006)
As this narrative suggests, there is more at stake in Women of the Storm’s actions than representing the displaced. Wetlands restoration, levee reconstruction, and enhanced flood protection will help even those who can help themselves. In addition to helping others, the women are also responding to threats to the very foundations of power relations in the city that have enabled their volunteerism in the first place. As such, these elite women had investments in New Orleans as a place to call home. In other words, if New Orleans disappears from the map, washes away like the coastal wetlands, so too does power and privilege of the members of Women of the Storm. This leaves even the most privileged contending with the possibility of future displacement; the chance is enough for anyone with resources to take action. In this way, Women of the Storm draws on moral responsibility both to represent others and themselves.

At the same time, this claim requires an examination of how those individuals and groups with material, political, and symbolic resources have unevenly taken action and shaped cultural memories of the Katrina catastrophe. Enabled by “a politics of mobility and access” (Massey 1994, 150), Women of the Storm strategically mobilized social, economic, and cultural capital to move across geographic scales. The members extended their spheres of influence during the disaster recovery period when many displaced New Orleanians could not return home to visit family or friends or retrieve personal belongings, let alone move back to gut their flood-damaged homes, contend with insurance companies, or rebuild their abandoned neighborhoods.

Thus, we arrive at a sobering challenge in understanding post-Katrina struggles for social change and survival. Through efforts to bring about social change through gendered collective actions, those efforts to “expand the circle of the we” through gendered solidarity, the group simultaneously reinscribed a politics of power surrounding the uneven social practices of remembrance work in the context of disaster recovery. Put differently, cultural memory is transferred within the parameters of existing power relations, and given the contested politics of the Gulf Coast recovery, we must not forget that “control of a society’s memory largely conditions the hierarchy of power” (Connerton 1989, 1).

Conclusions: The Persistence of Memory

In the months immediately following Hurricane Katrina, during which many across the nation believed that New Orleans and its residents had already recovered from the storm, Women of the Storm constructed and delivered a cultural memory to the nation’s elected officials and global media audiences. Drawing on social and cultural capital that facilitated access to power structures, Women of the Storm highlighted the
persistence of memory and remembrance through performative deployments of symbolic systems to advance its requests for disaster-related assistance and significant policy commitments from the state.

In this essay, I have focused on the ways in which Women of the Storm’s collective actions contributed to the construction of cultural memory and cultural trauma through symbolic performance and actions derived from collective appeals to moral responsibility. These symbolic and political actions are grounded in historical practices and rituals linked to place-based acts of public, collective mourning, and “circum-Atlantic memory” (Roach 1996). Rooted in historical and cultural traditions of New Orleans such as jazz funerals and second line parades, Women of the Storm’s creative use of umbrellas in highly visible performative actions draws upon and creatively adapts rituals related to death, rebirth, and collective mourning. The group also appropriated signs of the state (search and rescue marks) in a powerful effort to keep the urgent needs of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast in national discourses.

It is also within the framework of cultural trauma that Women of the Storm sought to shed light on the ongoing crisis in New Orleans by keeping the catastrophe in public discourse, collectively endowing the events with heightened meaning and engaging in affective and expressive reactions to fears of being forgotten. The women’s participation in the process of constructing cultural trauma through gendered collective actions and appeals to moral responsibility was particularly important when New Orleans seemed to prematurely fade from public memory. In this context of the potential onset of cultural amnesia, whether real or imagined, the women’s actions and reactions were a rallying cry for the nation to remember and respond to the material and symbolic needs of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast.

This study suggests that local and regional disaster recovery benefits from cultural interventions at multiple locations of decision making and sites of memory, in this case engaging various disaster memory sites to influence national policy for problems brought on and intensified by catastrophic events. The group resisted the prospect of an organized forgetting of Katrina at different spatial locations and imposed cultural memory through active presence at multiple sites: locally at the sites of the levee breaches, regionally at the stadium in City Park, and nationally at the nation’s capitol. In addition to symbolic achievements, two major pieces of legislation speak, to some degree, of the impact of Women of the Storm’s collective actions. First, on June 8, 2006, the U.S. Senate reached agreement on a $94.5 billion emergency supplemental spending bill that includes $4.2 billion for housing recovery programs and $3.7 billion for levee upgrades, small amounts in comparison to the money ($66 billion for overseas military operations) provided in the same bill for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Alpert 2006c). Second, on December 20, 2006,
President Bush signed legislation giving Louisiana a share of offshore oil and gas royalties, which would be channeled into a “trust fund” for enhanced flood control, hurricane storm protection, and coastal wetlands protection (Deslatte 2006).

At the level of national public policy, remembrance was central to the issue of federal funding for local and regional recovery following the storm and catastrophic flood event. The New York Times editorial reminded us that New Orleans, “the city that care forgot,” was at risk of death by Congressional inaction in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The scale of the Katrina disaster necessitated responses at all levels of government: local, regional, and national. Yet very few groups were able to successfully organize across these levels to engage in broader public policy deliberations. Women of the Storm constructed arguments that reframed the collective trauma inflicted on local and regional populations in terms of a national disaster. Supported by symbolic, material, and cultural capital, and a love for the city, the group engaged in forms of gendered memory work that were characterized by persistence, repetition, and continuity in the face of change—and that were undeniably integral to disaster recovery efforts. In the context of this unprecedented extreme event, forgetting a whole region and leaving its residents to suffer in limbo would be yet another cruel extension of what has become the cultural trauma of Katrina. To avoid this, Women of the Storm, as caretakers of cultural memory, took on the daunting challenge of helping the nation remember.

By (re)focusing national attention on the ongoing and unfolding crisis in New Orleans through gendered performance activism, I argue that Women of the Storm’s collective actions served to maintain the living cultural memory of the dying American city. By examining Women of the Storm’s performances at multiple sites of remembrance and decision making, I situate the group’s actions within sociohistorical practices, cultural contexts, and symbol systems unique to (pre- and post-Katrina) New Orleans. In doing so, I demonstrate how the group drew upon and creatively adapted cultural memory through place-based ritual practices and representational systems. This case study shows the importance of the concept of cultural memory for disaster studies. The fate of an American city rested on the ability of Women of the Storm, lawmakers, and the nation as a whole, to resist what Paul Connerton (1989, 14) calls the “method of organised forgetting.”

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Notes

1. Complete with RSVP card and return envelope, the presentation of the invitation is significant because it reveals how the women drew upon traditionally feminine forms of communication and social practices akin to correspondence that would be sent out for a formal luncheon, tea, or dinner party.

2. These include endorsements by Joe Biden, Sam Brownback, Hillary Clinton, Chris Dodd, John Edwards, John McCain, and Barack Obama.

3. The group included several women from southwestern Louisiana, the area of the state hit by Hurricane Rita. This helped the group frame themselves as Louisiana women rather than just New Orleans women. However, most participants were from the Greater New Orleans Metropolitan area.
4. The iconography of the umbrella also resonates in popular images of the Southern Belle. I am grateful to Elissa Auther, who pointed out that the umbrella in these images connects to intersecting discourses of gender, race, and class, since historically many women have tried to shield their skin from the sun so as not to suggest they labored outdoors. This resonates with Joseph Roach’s interpretive reading of John Ogilby’s folio atlases and his conclusion that the “umbrella seems to represent an icon in the atlas of cultural difference,” (2003, 95) and that the parasol is “evocative of prestige, luxury, and pampered excess” (2003, 105), especially when held overhead by others.


6. The first Storm Warning event, where America’s Wetlands Foundation made the case for coastal restoration as necessary for minimizing disaster impacts, took place before Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. On June 1, 2005, America’s WETLAND dramatized a flooding in the French Quarter to demonstrate vulnerability to flooding caused by hurricanes, a warning which according to Women of the Storm “proved eerily prophetic three months later when Hurricane Katrina struck, inundating many other parts of the city with water” (2006d). That these warnings went largely unnoticed (among other forewarnings, see especially Laska 2004) and failed to mobilize widespread preparedness measures through environmental protection speaks to a failed intervention in the unfolding, and in many ways foreseeable, catastrophe.

7. Within the context of the privatization of leisure, the choice of this particular football field also points to the lack of public funding for the maintenance of City Park. Although the land occupied by the park is owned by the City of New Orleans, private funds collected through donations and user fees constitute the majority of the park’s operating budget. According to the park’s Web site, “City Park receives $200,000 [1.8%] of its $10.8 million pre-Katrina annual operating budget from the State of Louisiana and no public support from the City of New Orleans. The remaining $10.6 million needed to operate is self-generated through donations and user fees.” Retrieved November 24, 2006, from http://neworleanscitypark.com/index.html.

8. According to Alpert and Walsh (2006), “For Louisiana, the bill is expected to generate $106 million in 2007 and between $11 million and $22 million a year through 2016 before rising to $586 million in 2017, according to Landrieu’s office. It is expected to remain well over $500 million a year through 2026, when it is expected to reach an annual total of $721 million. With financing in other existing legislation, the state is expected to take in at least $1.89 billion
a year during the next four years for coastal restoration and hurricane protection work. The number drops to less than $300 million a year from 2011 to 2016 before rising again to $888 million in 2017."

9. While completing the final revisions of this manuscript, more than two and a half years after Katrina, remembrance work was made explicitly political through the title of Senator John McCain’s weeklong campaign tour of America’s “forgotten places,” which included a visit to the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans [Bumiller 2008].

10. Of course, my examination of Women of the Storm raises important questions about the internal dynamics and politics of power within women’s activism, the strengths and limitations of deploying the category “women” for political ends, and how this women-centered group is situated within debates about the future of feminism and contemporary women’s movements. These issues will be addressed in my dissertation, Women of the Storm: Gender, Culture and Social Movements Following Hurricane Katrina.

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