Performance and Resilience: Performance, Storytelling, and Resilience Building in Post-Katrina New Orleans

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Performance and Resilience:

Performance, Storytelling, and Resilience Building in

Post-Katrina New Orleans

Senior Thesis by Sophie Becker
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Chapter 1: Introduction and Overview

Performance, and the performance-making process, enables the creative inhabitation and transformation of place. Performance events create sites around which communities form in the midst of vulnerable and changing landscapes. Performing arts and performance processes are visceral methods of storytelling that provide a medium and vernacular through which to express and address individual and collective responses to trauma or cultural loss.

My project investigates the role of storytelling and performance-making in building environmental resilience, defined as “the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and still retain its basic function and structure” (Walker and Salt xiii). I approach the subject through a study of storytelling platforms and performing arts communities in New Orleans and New York. I argue that the communities that materialize around performance (its process and presentation) build resilience through forging social relationships and cross-institutional partnerships. To do this, I primarily draw upon the theory of social capital within the resilience discourse of environmental studies, and focus on social relationships that arise in performance-making contexts. The project underscores performance and storytelling’s contributions to the constitution of social capital by asking the question: how does narrative (performed or orally relayed) help to retain memory, meaning, and the social and cultural identity of a place amidst change?

In the last decade, New York and New Orleans have experienced climate catastrophes related to global environmental change. Though different in severity and character, Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Sandy caused damage and distress, testing the resilience of the urban centers they
respectively affected. Global environmental change poses the risk of increasingly severe storms. Each successive disaster, with disaster defined as an “event that suspends normal activities and threatens or causes severe community wide damages” (Aldrich 3), increases vulnerability of the impacted community. This is particularly true for New Orleans because of its seasonal exposure to hurricanes, and the alarming rate at which the Southeastern coast of Louisiana is losing its wetlands, which act as an essential barrier against storm surge. With ever-diminishing coastal wetlands, the city will experience increasing exposure and vulnerability.

In my analysis, I borrow heavily from performance studies theory and methodology. I use ethnographic methods by conducting interviews, and draw from my participant observation in workshops facilitated by performing arts communities, particularly those I connected with during a seven-week stay in New Orleans during the summer of 2014. While there, I apprenticed with performing arts ensemble NEW NOISE and held a job with the Gulf Restoration Network. As an apprentice, co-collaborator, and participant observer, I had the opportunity to intimately witness ongoing cross-institutional collaborations between artist ensembles and community organizations in New Orleans. The performance projects, processes, and digital archives I focus on here include: (1) Cry You One, a site-specific processional performance and digital storytelling archive about the loss of coastal wetlands in Southeastern Louisiana; (2) Oxblood, a site-specific dance-theater piece about land, labor, and home in the South; and (3) Sandy Storyline, a digital storytelling archive dedicated to the personal narratives of people impacted by Hurricane Sandy. The devisors of the above mentioned pieces connect creative work to their local context with artist-community partnerships, and in doing so, their performances respond to the unique concerns and contextual environment in which they are performed.
Given their unique ability to generate networks and social relationships, I argue that performance and storytelling are strategic tools for environmental organizers, cultural organizers, and artists. The communities of witness and collaboration that form around performance and storytelling create distinct and valuable nodes in the webbing of a place’s social and cultural identity. In “Implementing Collective Approaches to Massive Trauma/Loss in Western Contexts,” Saliha Bava and Jack Saul argue that community, narrative, and performance are important structures and practices collectively approaching trauma. They write “an important part of the communal healing process is having one’s story validated and made a part of the collective story that emerges after a complex and horrible tragedy” (27). I use their framework to argue for the importance of the Cry You One and Sandy Storyline online archives, which create digital communities for collecting personal narratives. Both performance pieces and digital storytelling archives offer platforms where individual and collective narratives are told, performed, and seen. In the course of my interview with New Orleans native and performance artist Nick Slie, he described the definitional breadth of performance, referring to it as a “place of witness,” or “witnessing place.” In ways similar to performances, digital archives constitute a place around which community forms, and therefore compose a digital “place of witness.”

Methods

This research stands at the intersection of environmental studies and performance studies. Within environmental studies, I construct my argument by drawing upon the discourses of resilience thinking and environmental justice. I use a mixed methods approach characteristic of the performance studies field, including semi-structured interviews and participant observation, and I draw upon scholarly work from within the fields of environmental studies and performance
studies. My direct involvement with supporting creative work in New Orleans enabled me to conduct this research as a “co-performative witness,” – a term first used by performance ethnographer and scholar Dwight Conquergood\textsuperscript{1} - and at times, a co-collaborator. “Co-performative witness” is a performance ethnography term that implies the researcher is directly involved with the creation of the performances they seek to analyze (Conquergood 149). Though not native to New Orleans, my role as an apprentice to NEW NOISE, and my participation in story circles, workshops, trainings, and rehearsals, allowed me to observe partnerships and creative processes as a temporary “insider.” I also use the term “witnesses” to describe the viewers of performed acts, and in doing so, suggest them as active participants in the transformation of place through performance. Witnessing takes on special political significance when applied to public demonstrations, where “be[ing] there” (Taylor 116) activates the witness’s role in the unfolding of a collective narrative. Witnesses then join performers in creating the communities that performatively intervene and re-write collective narrative.

I seek to integrate the lines of thinking from the two multidisciplinary fields of performance studies and environmental studies, paying special attention to how the mixed-methods used in performance studies facilitates departure from empirical approaches used within traditional policy frameworks for disaster management. Damage to infrastructure, like in post-Katrina New Orleans, is only one piece of a disaster narrative. In addition to harming ecosystem services and causing infrastructural damage, disasters pose an interruption to the identity and self-concept of a place, to the narratives of daily life, to the functioning of public institutions, and to community practices. In addition to the need for science and policies for adaptive management, there is a need for strategic social methods to create space for the stories arising out of global

\textsuperscript{1} More on performance studies and co-performative witnessing can be accessed in Dwight Conquergood’s “Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research.”
environmental change and collectively experienced trauma. I focus on the power of narrative, performance, and embodied practice because although conventional policy frameworks are important, by themselves they are insufficient approaches to address the complex consequences of global environmental change.

Fields of Study

Performance studies

In arguing for performance as social strategy that embodies and performs social and cultural memory, I draw upon the scholarship of Diana Taylor. Taylor employs a mixed-methods approach in constructing the argument of her book, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. She writes from a tradition of Latin American studies and performance and theater studies. Using a combination of archival research, ethnographic methods, and performance analysis, she suggests that performance is an “act of transfer” which “transmit[s] social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity” (2-3). With this, she asserts that cultural memory is actively made in performance’s transfer of embodied knowledge. She suggests a methodological shift to include repertoires of performance as “cannons” that extend beyond the capacity of written archives to transmit social and cultural memory. I expand on this concept by suggesting that retaining memory and reclaiming place through embodied practice of performance resists erasure of social and cultural memory in post-disaster landscapes. These approaches address a system’s vulnerability via their unique capacity to assemble bodies in space and facilitate social networks that contribute to resilience. I extend Taylor’s argument by suggesting that knowledge transmission through storytelling and
performance is an important embodied alternative to written accounts of post-disaster landscapes in the mainstream media.

I also discuss the work of dance practitioner and scholar Judith Hamera. Her book *Dancing Communities* is a useful model for defining place and producing meaning through performance. *Dancing Communities* explores the possibilities of dance to create spaces for “communal and cultural continuity” while interfacing with complicated intersecting identities of gender, ethnicity, class, and culture. Writing from the field of dance and performance studies, Hamera employs participant observation and performance ethnography in her research on amateur and professional dance communities in Los Angeles. She writes about performance as “social force, as cultural poesis, as communication infrastructure that makes identity, solidarity and memory shareable” (1). I extrapolate from this in observing that the practice and process of performance are vehicles for the retention of social and cultural memory. I build upon Hamera’s framework and methodology by suggesting that spaces dedicated to performance praxis or storytelling serve as models and practice places for collaboration, partnership, and critical discourse. Drawing on my own participant observation and semi-structured interviews, I comment on performance-making techniques’ ability – devising and story circles included – to convene communities, and in so doing, create relationships between individuals.

Cultural historian Catherine Michna’s scholarship and interviews with performance practitioners in New Orleans serves as a model for the mixed-methods approach I employ. Though Michna approaches the subject of storytelling and performance from the perspective of cultural history, the analysis in her article “Performance and Cross-Racial Storytelling” runs parallel to my own. She writes about collaborative storytelling’s role in “build[ing] solidarity” and increasing awareness of structural and systemic racism (49). Examining racialized
geographies and gentrification in the post-Katrina New Orleans landscape, Michna’s other published articles include “Stories at the Center: Story Circles, Educational Organizing, and the Fate Neighborhood Public Schools in New Orleans,” and “How Not to Be a Gentrifier with Your Theater Project: A Starter List”. Michna’s argument usefully frames the social applications of performance and the story-circle method. However, whereas Michna’s focus is on cross-racial storytelling in the post-Katrina landscape, my focus is on story circles and digital storytelling archives acting simultaneously to build environmental resilience through the networks that they create.

By describing the powerful bonds that form around artistic process and embodied storytelling, I seek to illuminate new ways of thinking about resilience. I apply approaches from performance studies to the field of environmental studies in order to argue for the value of addressing crisis through more lenses than the strictly empirical. I analyze the capacity of storytelling and performance to expand the discourse around what constitutes methods of resilience. Whereas traditional policy frameworks don't necessarily leave room for the expression of personal narratives of those impacted, I suggest performance and platforms for storytelling fit within the discourse of resilience thinking as viable recovery tools and as examples of practices that constitute social capital. The transitory nature of knowledge exchange through performance, and the experiential and embodied knowledge it produces, does not easily cohere with forms of analysis reliant on testability, quantification, and measurement. For example, trying to measure the impact of a story or performance on an individual in a measurable way is near impossible. This is because much of the knowledge and meaning produced by bodies in performance is based on the “act of transfer” between performers and witnesses. In her book Critical Ethnography, D. Soyini Madison writes “fieldwork research has
a very long and early history of scientific empiricism and concern with systematic analysis that is testable, verifiable, and objective without the distraction or impairment of subjectivity, ideology or emotion” (8). The aim of this thesis is not to measure the impact of performance and storytelling or prove its affect, but rather my goal is to explore interdisciplinary solutions to the consequences of global environmental change, which, in my opinion, can only be seen as an intersectional problem.

Environmental Studies: Environmental Justice Discourse

Despite their distinctiveness as fields, there are meaningful points of intersection between environmental justice and performance studies. The discourse of environmental justice concerns itself with local knowledge, experience-based knowledge, and with what Jason Corburn calls “street science” (47). Emphasis on the power of local knowledge puts the environmental justice discourse in dialogue with performance studies’ focus on the production of meaning from embodied practice, including but not limited to participation in public events, protests, and festivals. Corburn cites Clifford Geertz’s concept of local knowledge, defined as “practical, collective, and strongly rooted in a particular place” and forming an “organized body of thought based on immediacy of experience” ([1983, 75] 48). Local knowledge, and its centralization of cultural traditions and experience, then becomes an important approach for retaining social and cultural memory of a place. I use Geertz’s definition to suggest that the performance practices and storytelling platforms analyzed here constitute important methods of generating, displaying, and disseminating local knowledge, and creating places where social networks materialize.

Within the field of environmental justice, Julie Sze and Jonathan K. London identify a “promising trend” of “revitalized focus on the interactive and continually evolving relationship
between scholarship and social movements” (1331). I seek to join this conversation by drawing from both practitioners and theorists. In the tradition of environmental justice scholarship, I aim to centralize the voices of practitioners engaged in the intersecting worlds of community organizing and performance making.

Through the environmental justice discourse, I address the mainstream media’s response to Hurricane Katrina, and the failure of the city’s public institutions to mitigate the impact on low-income communities and communities of color. In discussing Katrina’s aftermath, I draw from Naomi Klein’s *Shock Doctrine*. She writes on how private sector profiteers exploit post-disaster circumstances, and in so doing displace marginalized communities, usurping their agency and undermining their cultural ties to place. Klein’s approach offers a slightly different vantage point on the environmental justice issues that I raise. Klein studies the role of profit-driven private contractors in post-disaster landscapes and the obstacles their endeavors pose to recovery. I am particularly interested in merging a performance studies framework with an environmental justice framework to analyze “reinvasions” – the reclaiming of land and property by displaced communities Klein writes about. I build upon Klein’s writings on reinvasions by suggesting that such public intervening performances are symbolic acts of reclamation. In reclaiming usurped places, these acts construct sites of resistance out of public space. I suggest that the performative reinhabitation of these “lost” places is a method that employs resistance and remembrance as strategies for justice.

Environmental Studies: Resilience Discourse

My argument for expanding resilience thinking draws support from the scholarly work of Donna Houston. Writing from a cultural studies perspective, Houston’s paper “Crisis and
Resilience: Cultural Methodologies for Environmental Sustainability and Justice” argues for incorporating cultural studies, humanities, and public humanities into building resilience amidst crisis. I have chosen Donna Houston’s work as a lens through which to approach this project because her methods suggest the same departure from strictly empirical frameworks as does performance studies scholarship. She identifies the ethical dilemma presented by “the current diminished role of social and public spheres as complex sites of diverse cultural knowledge and collective action” (183-4). She argues that dismissing the humanities in favor of empirical policy and scientific approaches delegitimizes the social and cultural importance of such resilience building methodologies as “memory-work, witnessing, storytelling, gardening and walking” that might, “produce different forms of learning and knowing about loss, hope, and resilience (Rose 2004)” (185). I build upon and extend Houston’s contributions by suggesting that storytelling and performing arts constitute sites of collective action and concentrated cultural knowledge, as well as serve as the kinds of “social collectives” that Houston says “remak[e]” their environments (180). I suggest that these sites of collective action take shape in artist-community partnerships and in online digital storytelling archives, which, through their networks, bolster resilience in the face of crisis. Expanding methodological approaches to building resilience means employing the methods of “memory-work,” “storytelling,” and “witnessing,” – ephemeral and experienced-based (yet no less essential) ways of adapting to crisis (Houston 185).

Integrating artistic projects in community organizing offers opportunity for galvanization around the distinct worlds created by performance, and for subsequent formation of social networks that fortify resilience. In his book Building Resilience: Social Capital in Post-Disaster Recovery, Aldrich employs a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods including
process tracing, cross-sectional maximum likelihood models, time series, and propensity score matching (ix) to argue for social capital’s role in building resilience. According to Nan Lin, social capital is comprised of the resources embedded in social networks; Aldrich maintains that the production of social capital facilitates participation among members of a network and produces information, knowledge and trustworthiness between the members of that network (13). I reference Aldrich’s work because of his position that networks of social relationships constitute an integral factor in the retention of resilience in post-disaster landscapes. He writes, “I argue that high levels of social capital – more than such commonly referenced factors as socioeconomic conditions, population density, amount of damage or aid – serve as the core engine of recovery” (15). Moreover, Aldrich categorizes participation in festivals and local events as a factor in determining the production of social capital and the pace at which a community recovers from a disaster (15). His argument suggests that social resources be considered equally valuable, if not more so, than the testable, quantifiable factors that determine and facilitate recovery.

My project is most directly focused on the subcategory of bridging social capital, which concerns the connections between disparate locations, linking organizations, and individuals across institutional lines (32). I apply the concept of bridging social capital in my analysis of community partnerships between performing arts ensembles in New Orleans and community organizations. I maintain that the links between arts ensembles and community organizations, as well as those between individuals and such organizations provide a strong sense of community. I also suggest that though they are not explicitly organizations, digital storytelling archives connect individuals to hubs of knowledge, cultural resources, and contacts in the art-making community. Performance and digital storytelling are community-building practices that
constitute forms of bridging social capital because of the opportunity they present for people to meet one another and exchange personal or institution resources during times of crisis.

Site and Context

This study’s primary site of inquiry is New Orleans, since I was introduced to the majority of interviewees through personal engagement with environmental and performance art work during my stay in that city. In addition, I view the performing arts community of New Orleans as exemplifying the cross-disciplinary work this paper seeks to discuss. That said, it is important to acknowledge that partnerships between artists and community organizations are by no means confined to one place or time. I use Hurricane Katrina as a primary point of reference because although the storm occurred a decade ago, the circumstances of environmental racism and structural vulnerability that contributed to the storm’s devastating aftermath still persist. Though the performance works I primarily analyze do not thematically engage Katrina, they do engage the cultural loss and biophysical impacts associated with Southern landscape transformation, including those that followed Katrina. For example, *Cry You One’s* themes of coastal wetlands loss relate to diminishing resilience against storms due to the loss of the barrier that wetlands provide against storm surge. Before moving on to subsequent chapters, I give a description of the principal works, community artist-partnerships, and storytelling platforms included in my analysis.

The live performance aspect of the *Cry You One* project, co-produced by Mondo Bizarro and ArtSpot Productions, is an outdoor processional performance that engages loss of coastal wetlands in Southeastern Louisiana. The project describes itself as “celebrat[ing] the people and cultures of South Louisiana while turning clear eyes on the crisis of our vanishing coast”
(cryyouone.com). In its Southeast Louisiana presentation, witnesses to the performance were divided into five groups (snakes, boars, birds, gators, and spiders) and led by one of five characters into the wetlands area behind the Los Islenos Center in St. Bernard Parish. Though divided at the outset, the audience reconvened as one large group throughout the performance. Based on the excerpt of Cry You One I viewed at Alternate Roots’ yearly conference and retreat in Arden, NC, a dialogue took place between different leading characters that illuminated diverse and conflicting perspectives on how to approach coastal wetlands loss. Personas represented by the characters included that of a scientist arguing for sediment diversions, an ornithologist arguing for relocation, a former oil industry worker in favor of dredging, a public health official agonizing over the region’s poor environmental health, and a sanitation worker in favor of constructing plastic barrier islands (Pepper). In addition, the Cry You One project has toured as a 2.5 mile processional performance, music concert, and cultural organizing salon to four US locations (Slie).

Witnesses to the original performance saw a series of stories, dance sequences, and participatory parades, which wove together a multivocal and complex narrative of land loss. In addition to the live showing, the creators of Cry You One launched a robust digital storytelling archive of interview excerpts documenting the lived experiences of peoples impacted by wetlands loss. Together, the Cry You One/ Gulf Future Coalition partnership also organized a series of community salons held across five Gulf State cities. Community salons sought to galvanize and collaboratively imagine solutions to the environmental issues facing the Gulf.

Sandy Storyline is the only major project outside of New Orleans I discuss. Michael Premo, a New York City resident and leader in the Occupy Sandy relief effort, described the process of developing the Sandy Storyline digital storytelling project in our interview. He and his
collaborators felt that the disaster narrative was “too big for any one person to tell,” and so, in addition to the relief effort of Occupy Sandy, they mounted the Sandy Storyline online storytelling archive. The project serves a similar purpose as Cry You One; both use technology and digital media for the collective sharing of “storm stories.” I analyze Sandy Storyline because of the project’s parallel post-crisis vision to Cry You One. Both digital storytelling archives respond to the impacts of global environmental change by creating a platform for the voices of people impacted.

The community partnership between the NEW NOISE ensemble and Grow Dat Youth Farm (located in New Orleans’ City Park), involved a mutually beneficial resource exchange. Grow Dat is farm and community-based program that, through its youth program, implements structure to “nurture a diverse group of young leaders through the meaningful work of growing food” (growdatyouthfarm.org). NEW NOISE ensemble members volunteered labor hours, and in return, were able to use the farm’s open space as a site to perform their piece Oxblood. After Saturday evening performances of Oxblood, audience and performers gathered to share a meal prepared with Grow Dat’s fresh produce.

My apprenticeship with NEW NOISE coincided with the rehearsal process for Oxblood, which allowed me to intimately observe their process of bringing to life a story about land, labor, and home in the South. The plot follows two sisters, Rose and Laurel, and Rose’s husband Jacob, as they struggle to decide the fate of inherited land after a property-destroying fire. The piece engages intense suburbanization in the Southern landscape and the cultural and personal impacts of this transformation. During the Oxblood rehearsal process, I observed the ensemble use the story circle method – a “story-sharing” and “collaborative performance making approach” developed in a cross-racial collaboration between New Orleans’ Junebug Productions
(daughter organization to the Free Southern Theater) (junebugproductions.org), and Appalachia’s Roadside Theater (Michna 51). Subsequent chapters further discuss the role and use of the story circle method; but briefly described, the participants of a story circle gather (often after a performance) and collectively listen as each person responds to a theme or question by telling a story from their lived experience.²

I also refer to the public devised theater workshops facilitated by the Mondo Bizarro ensemble as another example of collaborative approaches to performance making. I include these workshops in my analysis for their capacity to gather participants, and open the practice of creating performance to the public as a community resource. Ensemble workshops for devising performance take place in Catapult Studio in New Orleans every Tuesday night from 7-9. The Tuesday trainings, a few of which I participated in, are open to the public, and comprise a series of devising and improvisatory exercises. The leaders give very little verbal instruction, and participants are encouraged to engage one another in physicalized improvisation, devising short sequences through gestural scenes and tableaux. This collaborative and inclusive performance-making form, among the other projects and partnerships described above, have been the guiding inspiration behind this project and were discussed in the context of my interviews with practitioners.

Chapter Overview

Three following chapters emerged from my thinking through the possibilities of performance and storytelling to articulate and construct responses to climate change. Themes in Chapter 2 engage the disruptive nature of post-disaster circumstances, the impact of which falls

disproportionately on low-income communities and communities of color. Such circumstances compromise the social and cultural fabric of a place, both through weakening of public institutions, and through possible distorted documentation of the event, the place, or the affected residents. As climate change-related damage to vulnerable landscapes persist and marginalized groups are further exposed, I suggest that performance platforms, as well as alternative media outlets dedicated to the experiences of people impacted by climate change, become valuable resources for cultivating a sense of collective identity and narrative.

In Chapter 3, I introduce models and theories from the resilience discourse. I use a model provided by Brian Walker and David Salt to explain the temporal progression of pre- and post-Katrina New Orleans as it moved through different stages of resilience. However, the theory of social capital as a means to build resilience is this chapter’s main focus. I draw upon Catherine Michna’s interviews with John O’Neal, Carol Bebelle, and Nick Slie to argue for the story circle method as an approach that supports movements for social change and facilitates strengthened bonds within a community, as well as Aldrich’s scholarship on bridging social capital to discuss the networks formed by artist-community partnerships in New Orleans.

Chapter 4 is divided into three sections. The first addresses the role of the narrative in performance and the relationship of narrative performance to time and individual and collective memory. The second section expands the definitional scope of performance, and the third engages the idea that performance transforms its environment into and “place of witness,” both within and outside of studio spaces.

As a whole, these three chapters argue for the roll of performance and storytelling in resisting the erasure of social and cultural memory, and building resilience through fortifying communities. Practices of storytelling and performance are situated within the resilience
discourse and described as collective responses to ecological hazards. Through investigating the social, cultural, and aesthetic functions of performance and documentation of stories, approaches to building resilience are illuminated.
Chapter 2: Post-Disaster Documentation and Environmental Injustice

In our interview, Jayeesha Dutta, Gulf Future Coalition cultural and environmental organizer, discussed the importance of expanding our understanding of environment. She advocates for a broad definition of environment that extends beyond “policy frameworks and models” in responding to global environmental change. She says, “If you think about the environment as being what holds all of us – including culture within that, once you start to include human beings within the framework of the environment, it completely shifts the paradigm of what’s necessary and policy no longer becomes the only thing that you need. Because you need to start to shift the cultural understandings of what it means to change our society to be able to be living in balance.” Jayeesha’s perspective clearly articulates global environmental change as an intersectional problem. Without addressing structural racism and classism, the environmental movement will remain unsuccessful in addressing the concerns of demographic groups most likely to experience the impacts of climate change. I therefore seek with this chapter to engage an audience of resilience thinkers, urban developers, social service professionals, and performance makers in thinking about: (1) the specific oppression of marginalized communities in post-disaster situations and related spatial and cultural loss; and (2) the merit of an inclusive and intersectional approach to global climate change, with focus on preserving the culture and identity of a place through the arts. In later chapters, I argue performance and digital storytelling platforms as agents in interrupting distorted media narratives and reconstituting space for collective storytelling. I suggest these practices act as key figures within a multidisciplinary approach to collective trauma and ecological hazards.
Post-Katrina New Orleans

The link between structural and systemic racism and global environmental change is clearly articulated by the socio-political circumstances that make marginalized groups vulnerable in post-disaster situations. For example, economically underprivileged black communities residing in low-lying areas experienced the lengthiest rescue delays after Katrina (Leichenko and O’Brien 85). Instances of death were disproportionately high among low-income African American communities and many who lived in the Lower Ninth Ward were unable to evacuate (Tierney; Gullette). Reconstruction of damaged housing (a task mostly left up to the private sector) was comparatively slow in low-income communities including the lower Ninth Ward (Leichenko and O’Brien 88). This lag in reconstruction efforts meant that the city became home to fewer poor residents and fewer African Americans, many of whom were permanently displaced (Leichenko and O’Brien 88). The permanent displacement of low-income people and communities of color indicates the failings of public institutions in serving those communities and suggests a structural erasure and invisibilization of marginalized experiences. This erasure is further accomplished through distorted media representation, and the periods of intense gentrification that can follow crisis. I argue that misrepresentation of the storm’s aftermath (particularly of communities of color) in the mainstream media, perpetuated trends of environmental racism and stood in the way of addressing collectively experienced trauma.

Misrepresentation in Media Narratives

Narrative has incredible power to shift perception and to transfer meaning and knowledge. In addition to acknowledging the transformative and healing potential of narrative within performance spaces and storytelling platforms, equal acknowledgement is due to how
narrative can misrepresent and distort the experiences of those most impacted by disaster. Unequal distribution of agency becomes clear by looking at who is empowered to write and rewrite public narratives in the wake of disaster. Deirdre Smith draws astute parallels between the respective aftermaths of Hurricane Katrina and Michael Brown’s death in Ferguson, Missouri. In her article “Why the Climate Movement Must Stand with Ferguson,” she engages the correspondent media portrayals of black bodies after each crisis. In both cases, images of a police force pointing weapons at black people “in the name of ‘restoring order’” (Smith) saturated mainstream media. Smith writes: “When crisis hits, the underlying racism in our society comes to the surface in very clear ways. Climate change is bringing nothing if not clarity to the persistent and overlapping crises of our time.” In post-Katrina New Orleans, disastrous circumstances were as much perpetuated by the response to the storm, as by the storm itself. The repercussions were intersectional, stemming from biophysical and institutional contexts, including racial segregation of the city and problems in the infrastructural protection of low-lying regions.

Smith’s analysis of the narrative aftermath of these events underscores the impact of structural and systemic racism in media accounts. The demonization of black and brown bodies as looters and criminals infiltrated post-Katrina media narratives and subverted the experience of the people most impacted. In A Paradise Built in Hell Rebecca Solnit uses the term “elite panic” to describe the widespread and racialized after-effects in the post-Katrina landscape (234). Her critique of the media suggests that a closer look at who is telling the stories of climate change is necessary. She writes that the media’s dissemination of “looter,” “pillager,” “mass murder,” and “mass rape,” stories only further facilitated the social crises of post-Katrina New Orleans (241). Considering the interconnectedness of racial and economic inequality and disproportionate
disaster impact, it is a limited approach to separate environmental organizing from anti-racist organizing. Only by viewing the environment “holisti[cal]y” – as an intersection of biophysical and cultural landscapes – can we find genuine solutions to intersectional problems. As Jayeesha stated, “creating false dichotomies of environmentalism and environmental justice is not appropriate, and that in and of itself is a racist framework. I feel like the way in which all of those things have been framed has been very boundary driven and very non-intersectional…the most effective solutions are going to be intersectional ones.”

Donna Houston’s emphasis on the importance of cultural studies becomes relevant here. She has critiqued the strict adherence to empiricism and called for a fuller inclusion of the public humanities in approaches to crisis. Just as she questions the default framework of empiricism within resilience thinking, I question the ways in which narratives become collapsed or reduced by mainstream media representations. To Houston, one of the problems of empirical frameworks within modern environmental politics is that they tend to treat, as Fredrick Buell says, “the ‘environmental crisis’ as a singular, ahistorical category” ([Buell 2003] 180). A solution to the ahistoricism of modern environmental politics can be found, I believe, in the less quantifiable forms of “street science” and local knowledge that Corburn suggests. Such forms are manifest in the performance projects and storytelling archives described here. Documented narratives, and how and where they are presented, are approaches that assist in documenting the collective memory of a place. The national documentation and media coverage in the wake of Katrina sorely misrepresented the respective plights of white people compared with black people as they struggled to find resources for relief. The inequity is exemplified, for example, by the prevalence of the word “looting” in reference to black communities, while stranded whites received more socially respectable terms like “finding.” I suggest that storytelling archives like
Cry You One, Sandy Storyline, and I-Witness Central City offer those impacted by crisis the opportunity to claim their experience and become the authors of their own stories.

“Creative Destruction” in the Post-Disaster Landscape: Application of the Shock Doctrine

Naomi Klein offers a useful perspective on vulnerability, its relationship to marginalized identities, and its effects on both psychosocial and biophysical aspects of place. Her argument is, in large part, an extended response to Milton Friedman’s view that “only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change” (Klein 174). Klein uses the term “disaster capitalism” to describe and expose how the private sector uses the disruptive nature of disaster to turn the vulnerable landscape into fertile ground for capital gain. She characterizes disaster capitalism as “orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities” (Klein 6). In the case of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, international investors and profiteers facilitated the turnover of Thai coastline to resort entrepreneurs, making it impossible for fishing people to rebuild their livelihoods at the water’s edge. In the case of New Orleans, swift implementation of charter schools replaced the state-run school system. Another version of disaster capitalism took place in post-Katrina New Orleans when real estate developers saw an opportunity to develop the Ninth Ward, from where many of its former residents had been displaced. The private sector’s exploitation of disaster’s interruption to daily life, including development of neighborhoods into high-value real estate in the name of “removing blight,” amounts to the violent erasure of memory, identity, and culture. These gestures of capitalism are, in effect, the private sector’s attempt to shape the public narrative.
I reference Klein’s studies of post-Katrina New Orleans and post-tsunami Thailand because in both cases, those marginalized by disaster capitalism resisted its force. Community efforts that resist disaster capitalism exemplify strategies for retention of collective memory and approaches to collective trauma. Both in New Orleans and in Thailand, this manifested in reinvasions of culturally and historically important “lost” places through public demonstration. The “reinvasions” that Klein document reveal how these practices employ memory as a strategic approach to justice. Regarding Thailand, Klein writes that “within weeks, hundreds of villagers engaged in what they called land ‘reinvasions.’” They marched past the armed guards on the payroll of developers, tools in hand, and began marking off the sites were their old houses had been” as opposed to “wait[ing] patiently in camps for an official reconstruction plan” (586). Similar direct action in New Orleans was undertaken by residents reinvading their old homes, which were bound for destruction under the Bush administration. Actions in both places showed, in Klein’s words, that “…people’s reconstruction efforts represent the antithesis of the disaster capitalism complex’s ethos, with its perpetual quest for clean sheets and blank slates on which to build model states” (590).

Without an alternative outlet for a community to document and disseminate its story, exclusion of the experiences of those directly impacted by crisis is inevitable. However, enactments of civil engagement and “reinvasion” reclaim narrative agency and disrupt erasure of social and cultural memory. By using public performance and choreography of dissent, these reinvasions call for witnesses, and the gathering of bodies in space. This act of reinvading public space is usefully framed when considered alongside the public interventions of performance artist Bill Talen, and his performance persona “Reverend Billy.” Performance studies scholar Jill Lane writes about the sermons Talen stages in commercial spaces (Starbucks
and Disneyland included) to “unleash and reveal programmed scripts and narratives that constitute the scenes of today’s consumption” (63). As with the reinvasions in Thailand and New Orleans, Talen’s sermons interrupt and suspend conventional narratives. While Talen “intervene[s]” and “arrest[s]” consumerist tendencies, reinvasions of land and process disrupt narratives of redevelopment and disaster capitalism – phenomena that disproportionately affect communities of color and economically underprivileged people. Lane writes “stories provide alternative structures of memory, alternate modes of keeping – literally safeguarding – experience for other social uses” (73). Reinvansion participants re-narrativize the aftermath of disasters and symbolically reject the imposition of the disaster capitalist narrative.

Viewing performance and storytelling platforms as important socio-political features of post disaster re-organization will encourage researchers, academics, urban planners, and community organizers to redefine the scope of resilience thinking and adaptive management. The importance of publishing post-disaster personal narratives is applicable to post-Sandy New York as well as New Orleans. In an interview, Michael Premo, Sandy Storyline’s co-creator, affirmed the importance of storytelling platforms as tools that extend beyond the mainstream media’s scope. He described the central questions behind the project as “(1) How do we collaborate with millions of people to tell a story?” and (2) “how do people leave artifacts of themselves at exhibitions?”

**Sophie**: What were you trying to do with the project?

**Michael**: “…We knew that there were two sides of the story, there was both the actual, tangible, physical side of the event; people needed to attend to their immediate needs, but tend to them in a way that could recognize the structural
and systemic systems of inequality that were laid bare by an event like this…
how could we meet immediate needs in a way that deals with a long term
recovery question in a more constructive way – in a way that allows for
leadership of people directly affected? So we knew in tandem with the tangible
needs, we wanted to have a way for folks to share, and to express, and that was
the impetus for *Sandy Storyline*.

We needed the potential to have a long-term outlet that is still around
after the media cycle moves on, so within the first week, we started *Sandy Storyline*. We called it ‘storyline’ for two reasons. One was that (a) we had the
mobile texting, and there was also an 800 number you could call – that was the
physical storyline. The other “storyline” was we were interested in connecting
diverse stories that have shared meaning. So the idea is that as you contribute
your story, you can tag your story with keywords and information…those stories
as a group –self identified signifiers create their own storyline which become
these narrative threads that run through the event.”

The digital storytelling archives of *Cry You One* and *Sandy Storyline* enabled personal
narratives in a post-disaster landscape to be published, and not swept up, buried, or distorted by
misrepresentation in the media, nor quashed by disaster capitalism. In the next chapter I move to
discussing the ways performance and storytelling produce creative work that fortifies the social
fabric of a place and contribute to its resilience.
Chapter 3: Building Resilience - The Adaptive Cycle, the Story Circle, and Artist-Community Partnerships

This chapter explores how performing arts and storytelling can open and expand collective thinking on frameworks for resilience. I present three sections: (1) a foundational understanding of resilience through a model of the adaptive cycle; (2) the story circle method; and (3) a description of how partnerships between artist collectives and community-based organizations fortify community resilience. I suggest that social networks form around collaborative storytelling, and that such networks provide foundational structures for constitution of social capital.

While the private sector exploits post-disaster situations and plants seeds for capital gain, performance makers and storytelling platforms have a unique opportunity to “perform” resilience – not unlike the post-disaster “reinvasions” – and combat erasure of social and cultural memory through cultivating places of expression. The communities that form around these “witnessing places” likewise create the foundational networks for resilience building.

The Adaptive Cycle

Before arguing for the story circle method and artist-community partnerships as networking tools for resilience, I suggest that one way of describing a community’s resilience is through the use of Walker and Salt’s adaptive cycle. The adaptive cycle model they offer is visually represented as an infinity ring, with its four curves representing four phases. Walker and Salt categorize these stages as the (1) rapid growth phase (r phase), (2) the Conservation phase (K phase), (3) the release phase (Omega phase), and (4) the reorganization phase (Alpha phase) (76-8). A system initially flourishes rapidly by maximizing its capacity to produce or to take advantage of economic opportunities or ecosystem services. Walker and Salt give the
examples of weeds in an ecosystem, or entrepreneurs in the economy (76). Following Hurricane Betsy in 1965, new levees and improved internal drainage in New Orleans enabled fresh residential development in low-lying urban regions, increasing exposure by 170,000 households (Revkin). Development in these low lying areas exemplify the rapid growth (r) phase and, recalling Klein and disaster capitalism, reflect the private sector’s inclination to take advantage of lucrative development opportunities. Applied to pre-Katrina New Orleans, housing developments built in low-lying areas (often home to low-income people of color) are an attribute of the rapid growth phase. During the conservation (K) phase, a system becomes less flexible. Characterizing the conservation phase, Walker and Salt write that “different ways of performing the same function (redundancy) are eliminated in favor of doing the function in just the most efficient way” (77). Applied to New Orleans, I suggest that the use of levies as the primary approach to disaster mitigation is a manifestation of the K phase – a temporarily efficient, but ultimately unsustainable, way of maintaining resilience in a social-ecological system.

The severity of the shock (e.g. Hurricane) that sparks the release (or Omega) phase is often related to how long the K phase has gone on. This is because as the K phase persists, the system’s rigidity increases and overall resilience decreases; when disaster occurs, it destabilizes the system and leads to “loss of structure” as “natural, social, and economic capital leaks out the of the system” (77). Such was the case with Hurricane Katrina. And such is the case in systems across the country and globe that focus energy into rapid growth and conservation of capital at the expense of long-term resilience.

As an alternative to the post-disaster exploitation outlined by Klein, the reorganization (or Alpha phase) in the adaptive cycle presents an opportunity for communities to adopt creative
approaches to collective trauma and vulnerability. Walker and Salt write that during this phase “novelty arises in the form of new inventions, creative ideas, and people.” I suggest that performance and storytelling practices deserve recognition as key components in a community’s post-disaster renewal.

The Story Circle

The transformative and community-building power of storytelling is manifest in the story circle method. Cultural geographer Catherine Michna has written about the story circle method in the post-Katrina cultural landscape. The method was first employed by the Free Southern Theater in order to enable conversations with their audience following performances (junebugproductions.org). According to Michna, the Ashé Cultural Arts Center serves as a post-Katrina cultural institution of crucial importance. Carol Bebelle, an organizer with the center, said that “collaborative recovery was brought about through telling and listening to storm stories” (49). Michna writes about how the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina presented an opportunity for performance makers to use their practice for social transformation – opening up a temporary window where people more willingly acknowledged the existence of institutionalized racism (49). Performance makers who had long since used story-sharing as a foundational component of uprooting racial oppressions, “felt they had to seize the opportunity to generate performance projects rooted in practices of collaborative, public storytelling” (49). In an interview with Catherine Michna, John O’Neal discussed how the format emerged from a need for conversations and dynamic telling/listening across audience members and performers. He says:
The narrative – the social narrative that emerges from our collective experiences – is what we use to construct our collective future. And that is the heart of this whole storytelling enterprise. If we get enough people engaged in telling enough stories, and if we get enough artists and teachers engaged in using those stories, analyzing those stories and the dynamics they reveal, then we’ll find ourselves in a position to make stronger, more deeply rooted plans…The indoctrination system that exists in the power structure in our society has more and more ways and energy to indoctrinate people. We can’t win on those terms. We can’t win. But if they start trying to tell stories – they can’t win! Because when people share their true experiences with each other the conclusions become inevitable, you know, the discoveries become inevitable (56).

Michna provides an excellent analysis of performance and the story circle’s role in the post-Katrina landscape saying: “Exploring New Orleans community-based performance makers’ goals and accomplishments in the traumatized city enables us to see the crucial importance of theatre and performance to social movements working to resist the increasingly prominent narratives of US ‘post-racialism,’ and instead show how possibilities for freedom and democracy can be found in struggles over collective memory making” (50). Michna’s documentation of instances where performance is used for an anti-racist social movement runs parallel to my suggestion that performance can interrupt distorted narrativization and documentation.

Performance artist Phil Cramer of NEW NOISE describes using the story circle “to build relationships between collaborators around the themes of the work.” By using story circles in NEW NOISE’s creative projects he says that, “through the process, we not only grow closer to each other as individual artists who have come together in collective creation, but we also draw closer to the work by understanding how it relates to our own lived experiences.” Looking to Michna’s scholarship on cross-racial storytelling as a model, I suggest that the story circle offers an invaluable approach to building community resilience in environmentally vulnerable and/or
transforming locations. The method’s use among NEW NOISE collaborators in *Oxblood* rehearsals, as well as in the cultural organizing salons of the *Cry You One/Gulf Future Coalition* partnership, indicate its powerful role in forming communities that then share experience and knowledge. I argue that the story circle, and the collaborative and inclusive approach to performance-making it models, facilitates the creation of communities and social networks in vulnerable or post-crisis landscapes.

Artist-Community Partnerships and Bridging Social Capital

Jayeesha Dutta described the role of artist-community partnerships within the broader context of social movements and movement of resistance. In our interview, she referred to artists and cultural organizers (in her opinion, fields inextricable from one another) as engaged in an “intersectional practice,” and well positioned to move forward toward an “intersectional narrative.” Addressing the role of arts in community engaged work, Jayeesha explained that, “if you look at those places where people are doing boundary pushing, you are always, in my opinion, going to see art being used as one of [the] levers.” This intersectional practice Jayeesha describes is manifest in artist-community partnerships that bring individuals into networks with one another.

Aldrich writes that “community resilience describes the collective ability of a neighborhood or geographically defined area to deal with stressors and efficiently resume the rhythms of daily life through cooperation following shocks” (2). He identifies bridging social capital as the form of social capital that connects individuals to organizations, and to the resources of organizations. The artist-community collaborations I observed in New Orleans were models of cross-institutional cooperation and action. Aldrich and Meyer describe that
connections to a social organizations also bring individuals into contact with each other that otherwise might not have met due to difference in class, race, or social background (7). Constructing these relationships allows resources and skills to flow more freely between organizations and between individuals from different communities.

The diverse collaborations facilitated by artist-community partnerships are exemplified by the *Cry You One* Gulf Future Coalition salons. To Jayeesha, the Gulf Future Coalition salons served as an “entry point” to intersectional organizing. She described the project as a tool to “model and show how using the arts as the engagement tool and not other means of engagement really shifts people’s feelings – understandings.” By engaging in this partnership, the two organizations were able to assemble communities from disparate vocations and locations to participate in the interdisciplinary organizing. With the salons, the *Cry You One*/Gulf Future Coalition partnership facilitated a connection between New Orleans and “extralocal” networks, as salons took place across five Gulf cities. These cultural organizing salons included viewings of documentary films, participatory theater and story circles facilitated by the members of the *Cry You One* ensemble, workshops on restoration policy, and collective community visioning exercises (*gulffuture.org*). The strategies, knowledge, and methods shared in the context of the salons exemplify tangible resources that artist-community partnerships and public events can produce, and demonstrate how arts ensembles and community organizations can work in collaboration to educate and galvanize.

Employing a similar model for community engagement, the creative process behind NEW NOISE’s piece *Oxblood* involved a long-term community partnership between the performing arts group and Grow Dat Youth Farm in New Orleans’ City Park. The project chose a site-specific performance venue around which community and discourse could materialize. The
ensemble members of NEW NOISE volunteered at the farm for the months leading up to
Oxblood’s opening in exchange for the opportunity to perform onsite. NEW NOISE and Grow
Dat, organizations with distinct visions, formed a mutualistic relationship centered on an artistic
project. Artist-community partnerships are an important reminder that performances and their
sites are not discrete or isolated entities, but a part of a network and community that forms
around the process, project, and product. Along similar lines, Houston writes, “Reconstructing
the dwelling places of environmental crisis through cultural knowledge, grassroots science, and
community praxis is contingent and messy but it can also build remarkably ‘sturdy bridges’
between disparate and spatially disconnected communities (Gilmore 2002). This is because the
everyday struggle for sustainable and sustaining environments creates and collects an inventory
of stories, cultural memories, scientific data, legal rulings, and community protest and organizes
these things into a portable (and performative) methodological framework” (186). Through
shared vision and contributing distinct resources, both artist-community partnerships described
formed “sturdy bridges” from “cultural knowledge” to “community praxis,” which contribute to
the strength and resiliency of communities.
Chapter 4: Narrating Through Performance

How do performing artists and storytellers bring their relationship to time, place, and the past into their transforming landscapes? How can practitioners interrupt and supplant narratives of distortion via their bodies and performances? In addition to reflecting on their relationship as performers to time and to collective memory, interviewees also spoke about their relationships to performance spaces, highlighting the unique opportunity practitioners have to gather witnesses at a given site. In this sense, performers are agents of a repertoire, recalling Diana Taylor, which connects peoples and places at a specific point in time and space. Practitioners not only serve as embodied links connecting the present to memory and history, but also create places where witnesses are called to participate in the collective act of remembering.

In this chapter, I focus on the ways the projects, performances, and collaborations I have analyzed employ their own unique methods to tie narrative to place and time, either by centralizing voices impacted by landscape transformation, or by creatively interpreting that transformation through performance. The ideas that follow are divided into three parts. In the first part, I explore the ways the performers I interviewed think about their work and it’s relation to history, time, and preserving cultural memory. The second expands and reimagines the definitional scope of “performance,” suggesting that all members of a community are agents in the embodied narrative of their social and political landscapes. I draw from interviews, as well as from the performance scholarship of Diana Taylor, in arguing that performances of culture and ritual in the landscape of daily life counteract erasure of social memory through embodied knowledge transmission. Borrowing Hamera’s language, the third part describes how technique in performance “recreates space” (65). I suggest that the “places of witness” facilitated by
performance are models for reimagining socio-political landscapes. I build upon my argument for public spaces as platforms for performative intervention introduced in part 2, and suggest that studio space is a practice place for civic engagement. With these three sections, I suggest that performances of cultural memory, and the networks these create, fortify resilience within communities.

Time, memory, and narrative

In my interviews, I asked practitioners the question: how can the performing arts and storytelling help retain social and cultural memory? In response, Hector Aristizábal described the role the performer has as a living link to ritual, ancestral past, and collective memory. He affirmed performance’s importance as a strategic tool to access collective cultural memory. Similarly, Phil of NEW NOISE spoke more specifically of tying contemporary performing arts practice to cultural memory. He discussed the process of situating *Oxblood* within the context of Southern history, as well as the work’s relationship to the rapidly developing Southern landscape. Research for *Oxblood*’s development was in constant reference to the past. During my apprenticeship with NEW NOISE, I worked on a visual compilation and interactive photo journal that drew heavily on the Library of Congress archives. The group devised choreography based on the research pertaining to farming tools and the gestural motions associated with wielding those tools. A whole Tumblr site existed to record relevant digital materials from historical research – artifacts from the Library of Congress, text, and photos.

When I spoke with Phil, NEW NOISE had just closed *Oxblood*. Phil is continuing historical research in preparation for *Jubilee*, the next performance in their trilogy *New Southern Hymnal* (of which *Oxblood* was the second part). Though *Jubilee*’s theme is not directly about
the Civil War, the research Phil described engages the Southern legacy of erasing and rewriting of histories. It focuses on the Confederacy’s attempt to disconnect the Civil War from enslavement, and to gloss over the impetus for the war by attributing the conflict to the South’s desire for states’ rights. Phil went on to explain how reflecting on this historical abdication of responsibility influences the framing of NEW NOISE’s future projects and creative path forward as an ensemble. Phil spoke of the work’s role in “chart[ing] a path forward” and “reconciling with pieces of the past that we would rather not think about or talk about.” In response to this collective denial of ugly historical truths, Phil proposed what he called an “intervention angle of the work” by “call[ing] into active remembrance these things that we don’t want to think about … and to seek to reconcile them into our self-concept as someone who’s in the 21st century to find a way forward.” The artistic and historical research in NEW NOISE’s devising process demonstrates performance’s capacity to bring social and cultural memory to the current moment.

The sharing of food between performers and witnesses will also find its way into Jubilee’s presentation. Phil describes sharing the “bounty of jubilee” as a “true enactment of cultural memory.” By bringing their embodied research and cultural rituals into performance, the performers invite witnesses into enactments of collective traditions.

Nick Slie, native to New Orleans, similarly referenced the overwriting of memory and experience. His attention to narrative distortion on the part of the mainstream media recalls Deirdre Smith’s analysis. To Nick, “the mainstream media’s attempt to deal with one of the largest disasters in modern American history …miss[ed] all of the points.” In Hurricane Katrina’s aftermath, he and his collaborators felt that the best thing they could do in response was to listen to as many stories as possible, specifically from people affected by the storm. Their

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This legacy is explored in greater detail in the book *New Mind of the South*, by Tracy Thompson.
approach was to, “story by story reframe the experience” and “to hear from people who actually experienced it and see if we could paint a more nuanced picture of what was going on.” This approach formed in response to the fact that, in Nick’s opinion, “the story being framed about us here in Louisiana was not only false, but racist and classist.” The one-dimensional media representation of the post-Katrina landscape was the driving impetus behind the I-Witness Central City project, which sought to curate and make accessible the stories of Central City (a neighborhood that experienced heavy gentrification in the wake of Katrina). Nick’s description of distorted media narratives and Deirdre Smith’s argument both expose the systemic racism that come across in the media portrayals of post-disaster situations. Speaking from his experience with post-conflict sites globally, Hector Aristizábal corroborated these limitations of mainstream media narratives. He described media narratives as stories of “data,” “distortion,” and “statistics,” stating that, “the human story, in most cases, gets buried in people’s hearts.” He advocated for people to claim authorship of their own stories by regaining and retaining agency as storytellers. Hector explains that when “we tell a story, we re-signify the experience.”

Personal and collective recognition of an individual’s autonomy as a storyteller resists generalizations and misrepresentation.

The digital story-telling archives of Cry You One and Sandy Storyline are platforms geared toward combatting the distortion Nick and Hector describe. These internet spaces provide a place where people can gain recognition as the authors of their own stories, and where their stories are acknowledged as pieces of a collectively shared experience or trauma. Hector’s emphasis on the importance of personal narratives recalls Bava and Saul, who argue for validating individual stories as part of a collective narrative through “protecting physical and enhancing virtual space for convening communal activities” (36). The I-Witness Central City
Story Site project and post-disaster digital archives of *Sandy Storyline* and *Cry You One* exemplify enhancement of virtual space as platforms for hearing the experiences of impacted people. Bava and Saul also write that “collective trauma requires a collective response” (23). The scholars underscore the importance of “space for communities that have endured calamities to come together to share experiences and engage in public discourse” (29). Projects like I-Witness Central City project, the *Cry You One* digital archive, and *Sandy Storyline* demonstrate how storytelling platforms can interrupt an incomplete narrativation of a place, and help people conceive of a collective social and cultural identity in a disaster’s aftermath. These performative interventions affirm performers and creative documentarians as facilitators for narratives performed and re-performed in defense of the social and cultural memory of a place.

Performance Reimagined

Repertory performance, including dance, theater, and performance art, employ languages of symbol and gesture to transmit meaning and knowledge. A gesturing body performs cultural memory in a studio setting; it also does in the street. Viewing performance as a practice that extends beyond studio spaces enables us to see the ways in which quotidian routines, as well as participation in protests, public events or festivals, perform cultural identity and transmit meaning. New Orleans’ yearly Mardi Gras festivities is an example of such ritualized cultural performances. Nick Slie discussed Mardi Gras in the context of advocating for what he called a “polytheistic” view of performance.

**Sophie:** Do you see performance as means for retaining social and cultural memory? How have you observed or experienced this?
Nick Slie: We would have to define performance. In my performance studies class we do the performance of everyday life, performance in ritual, performance in the arts, performance in technology, performance of sex, performance in sports and entertainment...my vision of performance is everything. I distinguish between the theater with a capital “T” and the theater with a little “t.” The theater with a capital “T” – the institution of theater, does it perpetuate social and cultural memory? In a way. Theater with a little “t” – the witnessing place, the place of witness, the place of seeing – I think it more [so] perpetuates social and cultural memory. Cooking a gumbo with your family, learning a family recipe, also perpetuates social and cultural memory. It has the same tenets as does a live performance in a warehouse somewhere; it has very similar principals.

The witnessing..., the storytelling, the experience of heightened sensations – the sense of cooking, the smell of it all, the sense of theater, the eyes of it all, the audible experience... I think it contributes. I’m really interested in a more polytheistic way of viewing performance and an analysis of how power is related to institutional practice of theater and performance... When we start to talk about artistic practice and performance practice, I mean, we’re about to take it to the streets for five days, and that’s all performance.

Sophie: Mardi Gras you mean?

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4 Nick’s class and the categories of performance are based on material from *Performance Studies: An Introduction* by Richard Schechner.
Nick: Yeah, it’s spectacle, color, costuming, reclaiming of the streets, all kinds of stuff. Again, so many strata of how the experience can be met by an audience member. But the big principle is: you’re the show. You. [To] anyone who wants to be in the show: you’re the show. You want to jump in the streets and march with somebody? March. You want to make your own crew? Make your own crew.

The opportunity to witness a vibrant performance of cultural identity, such as Mardi Gras, is an instrumental part of embodied knowledge transmission. In Nick’s description, “taking performance to the streets,” offers community members the opportunity to assume roles as witnesses and performers in creatively re-inhabiting their urban environment. Recalling Taylor, simply by “be[ing] there,” witnesses take part in the transfer of cultural memory. Mardi Gras transmits social and cultural memory through honoring the rituals and traditions of New Orleans. Like Nick Slie and Hector Aristizábal, Taylor addresses the relationship between performance, ritual, and memory in *The Archive and the Repertoire*, where she writes that embodied and “nonverbal practices” including “dance, ritual, and cooking” are ways of “preserving a sense of communal identity and memory” (18). Cooking, parading, or recalling the work of Donna Houston, “tree planting,” “public artwork,” “spirit walks,” “prayer circles,” or “protest encampments,” are similar insofar as participants can witness, perform, or co-performatively witness. The “witnessing place” of a communal or ritualized practice, like cooking gumbo or parading during Mardi Gras, produces knowledge that extends beyond that which can be conveyed through written documentation. For New Orleans, Mardi Gras is an expansive performance that disrupts the quotidian narrative of the city’s social and political landscape and offers a series of encounters that celebrate and perform the cultural identity of the
city through parades and festivities. The role of public performance in arts practices and cultural organizing is, recalling Houston, one example of cultural studies responding to crisis. As in the use of public performance, the embodied and communal practices Houston argues for reimage relationships between individuals and their environments.

In addition to appearing in collective celebration like Mardi Gras, this reimaginative process is likewise discernable in the performative, gestural, and symbolic practice of civil disobedience. Susan Leigh Foster argues for symbolic action and physical intervention’s dual existence in the body. She “approaches the body as a vast reservoir of signs and symbols, by envisioning the body as capable of both persuasion and obstinate recalcitrance” (395) and in doing so, she too legitimizes embodied practice and performed acts as integral in transmitting meaning and message. In her analysis of the choreography of protest, Foster poses questions resembling those that a performance scholar might ask including, “what kind of significance and impact does the collection of bodies make in the midst of its social surround?” and, “how does the choreography theorize corporeal, individual, and social identity?” (397). Similar questions emerged during the Oxblood rehearsal process. The ensemble developed a movement vocabulary that investigated the corporeality and social identity of a georgic ideal. Likewise, Bill Talen’s performance art, though perhaps not explicitly civil disobedience, uses symbolic action to intervene in social spaces of consumerism.

Taylor, Foster, and Lane help us think about the performer’s body as a vessel of cultural memory. The repertoire of performance, the embodied language of gesture, and the ritualized tasks performed in daily living meaningfully comment on our collective relationship to time and space and invite us to expand accepted frameworks for resilience.
Landscapes Reimagined

Hamera has theorized about the dance performer’s relationship to space and time in the studio, and writes that “dance technique re-visions and re-creates space by literally ‘placing’ it in dialogue with the body” (65). This re-visioning and re-creation that starts in the studio, whether for ballet or Mondo Bizarro’s devised theater trainings, suggests that we have the power and capacity to, with our bodies, transform the environments within and outside of the studio through the formation of creative communities. In other words, “places of witness” are not confined to conventional performance spaces. Hamera references dance technique as a tool to “build diverse and compelling communities within the larger global city” (4). This description of dance technique resembles that of the story-circle method, as they are both tools passed between generations of performing arts communities. They share capacity to build community between artists and facilitate transportable “places of witness.”

Hamera defines dance’s role in carving out “place” from “space.” She writes that “space is multivocal, characterized by perpetual possibilities for transformation. Place is univocal, stable, proper” (65), and that “… individuals inevitably seize opportunities to narrate studio space, and performatively construct place” (69). Carving out place, or stable and defined “place[s] of witness” from digital or physical space is a foundational attribute of the projects and practices analyzed in this thesis. Carving out “places of witness” manifests literally in site-specific performance – evidenced both by NEW NOISE’s artistic investigation of the rapidly suburbanizing southern agricultural landscape, and Cry You One’s integrated research process on the disappearance of coastal wetlands in southeastern Louisiana. Both projects link stories to land; and through choices of site specificity, they invited audiences into “witnessing places” where narrative and place were in dialogue. For example, the narrative of land, labor, and loss of
home that NEW NOISE created with *Oxblood* was enacted both by its physical location at the Grow Dat Youth Farm site, and through the embodied and gestural research undertaken by the ensemble used to tie their artistic exploration to land use practice.

I suggest that *Oxblood, Cry You One, Sandy Storyline*, the devised theater trainings, and the story circle method, in their own ways, work to facilitate “places of witness.” In doing so, these practices cultivate places from which to draw social resources, and arenas in which to express personal and shared experience. Nick Slie uses the term “live space” to describe the place where performer and witness imaginations lead to creative avenues for collective action. He says, “[The] role of the live space – the live performance, is to get people in the same place together. And create the conditions for them to celebrate – to get to know one another, and in some cases, decide if there is anything that they want to do together with their bodies.” This congregation of bodies in space, whether solely performers or performers and witnesses, enables individuals to draw upon the resources of social relationships made, and constitute places of transformation.
Conclusion

To vulnerable communities, global environmental change poses the threat of social and cultural memory erasure. We can expect that future environmental catastrophes will, like Hurricane Katrina, underscore the structural and systemic inequalities of the places where they occur. Those who study community resilience have recently turned their focus to the social ties and networks of support that provide an invaluable, if not easily quantifiable, resource for resilience. This thesis seeks to extend our model of resilience to include the performance practices and storytelling platforms that help vulnerable communities continue to retain their social and cultural fabric, identity and distinctive beauty.

The performance of cultural memory and gathering of voices in physical or digital space reinforce the opportunities for social networks to arise, and work against the threat of distortion in mainstream media portrayals. The post-disaster “reinvasions” in Thailand and in New Orleans mark instances where members of a public engaged in the embodied act of protest to the end of reclaiming meaningful places. In so doing, they tied their personal experiences of marginalization, and their personal narratives, to the land they occupied. With their protest, they drew attention to sites where the private sector and structural racism had interrupted existing narratives of daily life. In attempting to re-tie their social and cultural narratives to place, they engaged in performative intervention.

Performing arts and storytelling platforms constitute creative “witnessing places” amidst flux, from which people can respond with multivocal stories and combat narrative distortion. In so doing, they strengthen the bonds between artist communities and community organizations. Methods like the story circle bring individual and collective narratives of the past into the
rehearsal process, allowing the shared cultural memory to be enlivened, embodied, and re-performed in the repertoire of performance. The making of “places of witness,” where social relationships are formed, itself becomes an instrument for building community resilience.

These places of performance, and of technical and creative inheritance serve, in turn, as practice spaces for public engagement in broader socio-political landscapes. I suggest that reliance on local knowledge, and embodied knowledge transmitted through storytelling and performance, can prepare the members of a public to engage in acts of resistance, and become agents in tying their own narratives to sites of social and cultural importance. Performances of cultural traditions, resistance, and reclamation tie collective memory to place, and in doing so fortify resilience through providing opportunity for people to gather, and networks of resilience to form. As environmental crises increase, these practices will be important to cultural survival, hope, meaning, and memory.
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