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Hurricane Katrina and the African American Creation Narrative

Abstract:

'Katrina' has become a household word and has been coded into the African American oral traditions of the Middle Passage, the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the Emancipation and Black Migration. Land and water has served as a two-way mirror reflecting the depth of African Americans' vulnerabilities and this country's injustices. This paper will explore intertextually Psalm 137, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," and a 'Katrina Narrative' to explore the role of land and water in the development of African American spiritualities. Using the hermeneutical key of diasporic displacement/homelessness, this paper will engage in a literary analysis of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," a socio-historical critique of the Katrina disaster and will place both narratives in dialogue with Psalm 137. I propose that in these narratives that the destructive nature of water and land are used rhetorically to reclaim, reconnect, and reconstruct the identities of displaced communities.

Author's Social Location

As an African American woman born in the United States, I belong to a community whose identity has been shaped and informed by the Mid-Atlantic Slave Trade (i.e. the *Middle Passage*). As a member of the African Diaspora, I come from ancestors who were forcibly deposited on U.S. shores in shackles. Although most Americans do not question their inalienable right to exist in this land, many African Americans have yet to feel truly at home. Some of us live in an in-between place - at times at home; yet still 'a motherless child' haunted by a residual memory of 'home' that has been passed on generationally, but its location has been forgotten.

The term Diaspora is derived from "the Greek – *dia*, 'through' or 'over', and *speirein/speiro*, 'to scatter' or 'to sow'. For the ancient Greeks it was used to "signify expansion, migration, and settler colonization."¹ According to the *Webster's Dictionary*, in the United States the term, diaspora, refers to a 'dispersion from'. In contemporary times, the word embodies a notion of a center, a locus, a 'home' from where the dispersion occurs. It invokes images of multiple journeys."² The journeys are historic movements that are characterized by loss, collective trauma, forced exile, displacement, disruption, and "myths of home and return."³ There is a relational disruption of cultural identity, communal traditions, and collective memories that are never fully recoverable.

The African Diaspora, or Middle Passage, entailed the forcible displacement of over ten million Africans across the Atlantic Ocean. Chained together were people who were culturally

¹ Afe Adogame, "Diaspora," in the *Encyclopedia of African Religion*, ed. by Molefi K. Asante and Ama Mazama (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2009), 200.

² Avta Brah, "Thinking Through the Concept of Diaspora," in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), 443-446.

³ Adogame, "Diaspora," 200. In the early 50's the term was claimed as an African phenomenon due to the historical dispersion and settlement of Africans. It is a process complicated by the voluntary and forced dispersion of "Africans, their descendants and their cultures at different historical phases and into diverse directions." Today it includes those of African origins who voluntarily migrate to other continents.

diverse and theological grounded and who had different cultural understandings, languages and dialects, and personal and collective narratives. These women, men, and children served as the economic base of this developing nation for over 400 years. I recognized that the African American narratives are among many African Diaspora global narratives, but this paper will speak specifically to the African American Diasporic creation narrative.

This paper examines how Diasporic communities use memory to engage loss, trauma, displacement, and disruption. Using the hermeneutical key of Diaspora displacement, the paper first engages in a literary analysis of “*The Negro Speaks of Rivers*,” and then engages in a socio-historical critique of the 2005 Hurricane Katrina social disaster⁴. It concludes with an intertextual reading of Psalm 137 using the “Three Worlds of the Text” of Sandra Schneider.⁵ It concludes with implications for religious educators and contemporary faith communities.

Analysis of “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”

*I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and
older than the flow of human blood in human veins.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.
I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans,
and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.
I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.⁶*

Langston Hughes weaves a river of experiences that are his own and yet not his own. He uses images, sounds, and socio-historical knowledge that stretch far beyond his years to articulate experiential realities that have shaped the collective consciousness of African Diasporic peoples in the United States. He artfully recalls and evokes the collective memory of displaced and dispossessed African American communities and inscribes their lived experiences into the cosmic consciousness of the world. In this poem, he creatively demonstrates the art of re-remembering as he links *African geography, code words and images* to the more *contemporaneous reality* of emancipation – events that were foundational in the shaping of the collective memory of African Americans.

⁴ Holcombe, Emily, “Understanding Community-based Disaster Response,” in *The Sociology of Katrina: Perspectives On a Modern Catastrophe*, 2nd ed., ed. David L. Brunson, David Overfelt, and J. Steven Picou (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010), 121. “Social disaster theory focuses on both the event and the social consequences that follow a disaster. A disaster can have a devastating impact on a community by disrupting normal social functions and altering social relationships (Erikson 1994; Fischer 1998; Quarantelli 1978). While all disasters by definition destroy communities, Hurricane Katrina’s destruction was terrible.”

⁵ Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting The New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 2nd ed., (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 113-115, 133, and 174. The world behind the text is concerned with the historical nature of the text. The world of the text is an investigation of the nature of the text itself and its world, and the world before the text is the appropriation of the existential meaning of the text for the context before the text.

⁶ Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel, eds., *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York: Random House, 1994).

This poem uses rivers as mnemonic devices to chronicle the lifespan of a being in existence before the dawn of human creation. Rivers are a reservoir of memory constructing a creation narrative correlating the time of the first flowing waters to the presence of Africans on earth. Also, they are signifiers of the acts of creation, transformation, and emancipation in the journeys of African Americans. In the first movement, Africans, existing at the dawn of time as a free people, mindfully coexisted with their God; seemingly the first humans in the Garden of Eden who were living in harmony with their God and nature. In the second movement, the Middle Passage, they became enslaved chattel. The third movement, signified by the transformation of the muddy Mississippi waters into a golden hue, is a return to freedom through Lincoln's Proclamation of Emancipation. Onwuchekwa Jemie states that "The rivers are part of God's body, and participate in [God's] immortality. They are the earthly analogues of eternity: deep, continuous, and mysterious. They are named in the order of their association with black history."⁷ His analysis of the poem places black life in its context of struggle; yet with a sign of hope as African Americans moved out of oppression,

Allusions to the Old Testament iconography of place by which enslaved blacks identified themselves with the enslaved Israelites in Egypt and Babylon in the geography of their song reverberate in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," . . . Hughes claimed this legacy-vocabulary of place . . . This usage of spiritual geography, rooted in the characteristic idiom of the oral traditions of enslaved Americans of African descent and in the narrative texts of former slaves, and present even in Hughes's earliest published work, would remain a lifelong figurative strategy.⁸

James De Jongh also emphasizes Hughes' ability to subvert and reinvent the African American oral tradition in this poem of resistance and reclamation through the signification of geography. The forceful assimilation of this displaced community during the Middle Passage demanded a psychological, existential, and intellectual disruption from its African roots and Hughes reclaims the *Africanness* of the American heritage, thus situating the African presence into its rightful place within the U.S. context as co-architects of the nation itself. Not only had Africa given up its people as laborers, but She also provided the skill sets, intellectual property, and talent needed to build and shape this country.

Hughes uses not only the image of rivers to retell the African American experiences, but structures this poem in a way that evokes the image of the Middle Passage, this triangular route between Europe, Africa, and the Americas. William Hogan states, "The river comes to stand for the common history and common experiences connecting people of color over distances of time and geography . . . in wedding that culture to certain landscapes – for example, the river as a symbol of both rooted connectedness and fluid mobility – he [Hughes] also posits, as it were a distinctly African American sense of place." According to Hogan, Hughes conveys water's power to be a conduit of disruptive change and separation that signifies death, disruption, trauma, and dislocation. Yet he also reclaims and re-envision water (rivers) as a tool of rootedness; a reconnection to one's African history and culture. With his pen, the movement and fluidity of the

⁷ Onwuchekwa Jemie, *Langston Hughes: An Introduction To The Poetry*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 103.

⁸ James de Jongh, "The Poet Speaks of Places," in *A Historical Guide to Langston Hughes*, ed. Steven C. Tracey (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 66.

waters that deposited Africans on the soils of many continents becomes a source of strength and rootedness by connecting the African Diaspora to its African beginnings.

Narrative of A Hurricane Katrina Survivor, “Dreamer of Dreams”

May 2006, I participated in a guided tour that led a small group of nine through New Orleans neighborhoods starting in a neighborhood on high ground bustling with joggers traveling in pairs and restaurants preparing for the dinner on downwards toward the Lower Ninth Ward where there was little or no visible activity. As we spiraled deeper into the Lower Ninth Ward, a deep compassion stirred within me for the internally displaced people who were now scattered across this nation. This recent destructive movement of water had birthed a new community of refugees, predominantly from the African Diaspora.

As we sank deeper into the Ward I could not shake the feeling that I was entering into the emptied womb of God. Unlike the Garden District, there was little to no evidence of life and the silence was deafening. Yet out of that silence I heard a cry to bear witness to the devastation before me. I sensed that I was straddling two dimensions; one was a visible, entangled wet collage of destruction; the other one was a submerged reality waiting to be birthed.

Social Analysis

Michael Dyson, a humanities professor, analyzed the socio-economical, racial, and class inequalities exposed by Hurricane Katrina. In *Come Hell or High Water*, he discloses that “More than 90,000 of the people in each of the areas stormed by Katrina in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama made less than \$10,000 a year. Blacks . . . were strapped by incomes that were 40 percent less than . . . whites. Before the storm, New Orleans, with a 67.9 percent black population, had more than 103,000 poor people. That means that the Crescent City had a poverty rate of 23 percent, 76 percent higher than the national average of 13.1 percent.”⁹

For Dyson, class and race analyses are critical to understanding the structural racism beneath this event resulting in governing officials’ lackluster responses to the suffering of those trapped. He states, “When it comes to the federal government’s response to the victims of Hurricane Katrina, the specific elements at play must be examined. There were poor blacks, mostly from Louisiana, drowning in twenty-five-foot floods, stranded in their homes, or crammed into makeshift shelters, awaiting help from a Texas-bred president and an Oklahoma-born head of FEMA. At its core, this was a Southern racial narrative being performed before a national and global audience.”¹⁰

Dyson critiques Southern regional narratives of poor ignorant blacks and uncaring racist whites intertwined with a collective national narrative. His coded words portray a reality established on structural inequalities resulting in binary realities of winners and losers; rich and poor; and black and white. He draws upon the creation narrative of this country’s beginnings that also contributes to African American oral traditions. Just as the United States has a creation narrative, I propose that Hughes’ poem epitomizes the African American Creation Narrative which originated on the waters and rivers of the Middle Passage, Slavery, and Emancipation.

Throughout the centuries, African Americans have weaved a spiritual narrative as to how they understand and engage suffering. For this nation and global communities, ‘Katrina’ has

⁹ Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2006), 5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

become a household word and is being woven into the text and texture of various narratives. It is now being embedded into the African American oral traditions alongside the Middle Passage, Slavery, Emancipation and the Black Migration. It is no longer a solo event outside of our frame of reference, our memories or our traditions for intersecting the *metaKatrina* narrative are individual, cultural, regional, and national narratives.

Psalm 137

In reading Psalm 137, I pause and find myself pulled deep within by some unfathomable connection to *water* leaving me feeling *isolated and alienated*. There's an inexplicable feeling of not "*being home*" – *a sense of not belonging* - that this text evokes from me and I intuit the *water* as the source of these sensations of *displacement and loss*. These feelings motivate my interest in Psalm 137. The Judeans' new home, like that of the African slaves, was one of chaos and disruption. How did disenfranchised slaves from Africa reconstruct a contextual and ethnic collage of memories designed to sustain the next generation? How did they patch together the tattered cultural, linguistic, and musical remnants within a strange and hostile new environment and to what end? Can their acts of reconstruction speak to the community of Psalm 137 and vice versa? Can African Americans' dissonant chaotic chords of reconstructed memories speak to global communities who are gripped by the symptoms of traumatic stress from displacement (internally and externally)?

Psalm 137 -- World Behind the Text

Psalm 137 was composed either shortly after the exile to Babylon (587-539 B.C.E.) or shortly after the return of the exiles to Judah, or Yehud. The psalm can be classified as either a lament, a complaint, or an ascent song. There is no certainty regarding the geographical location of the two countries or rivers mentioned in the narration. Scholars are unsure if the actual location mentioned in the psalm is Babylon, Rome, or some fictitious place. Athalya Brenner examines how the writer of the psalm uses identity markers, or code words, to evoke the collective consciousness of the group. For her, Jerusalem is not just a city, but it symbolizes land and the act of singing symbolizes the Judeans' religious identity.¹¹ The people and their land have been conquered, their religious life and their identity as a nation created and protected by Yahweh were challenged, and their theological understanding of *chosenness* was now debatable. The ligaments that held their faith together (religion, tradition, nationality, and geography) were torn asunder.

World In the Text

Remember O Lord! was the cry of the Judeans as they suffered the torments of their captors. The Hebrew form of the word *zakhar* usually refers to inner mental acts (at times accompanying by external actions when referring to people). It is used in reference to God when one is calling God's attention to something. Brevard Childs states that there are "shades of variations on the basic meaning of 'zakhar.' One 'remembers', 'calls to mind', 'recalls' past events, conditions, and persons which he has once experienced... There is a slight shift of

¹¹ Athalya Brenner, "'On The Rivers of Babylon' (Psalm 137), Or Between Victim and Perpetrator," in *Sanctified Aggression: Legacies of Biblical and Post Biblical Vocabularies of Violence*, ed. Jonneke Bekkenkamp and Yvonne Sherwood (London, New York: T&T Clark International, 2003), 86.

meaning when the emphasis turns from the recalling of past events to a preoccupation with the present and the future. The word comes to mean ‘keep in mind,’ ‘be attentive to,’ or ‘consider’ ...”¹² It is upmost important to recognize the significance of God remembering for if God does not remember, then the person, group, or event does not exist. Thus, God’s act of remembering validates that which is remembered and God’s action is based on God’s commitment to the person(s) remembered. Also, God’s act of remembering is not chronological as God is always present at all times and in all locations. God’s memory includes God’s past deeds for the people as well as God’s future deeds. Remembering a past event provides present generations the opportunity to wrestle with the meaning of the redemptive event for themselves. Therefore, the act of remembering becomes the act of participation. This ensures the longevity of the redemptive act for the people are given a chance to *insert* themselves in the tradition of their ancestors. Thus the retelling becomes an act of incorporation. Thus, God’s act of remembering future generations, i.e. the exiles, is a way of calling them back into existence. It is an ontological rebirthing and reclaiming of a lost “diasporic” community.

The Judeans in the Diaspora are not at home. They are under siege and the psalm reveals their pain and suffering as they encounter the taunts of their captives. Their enemies ask for a song of Zion and similar to “The Negro Knows Rivers”, this psalm signifies an act of resistance as well as an act of remembrance. Being asked to engage in cultural activities that were inappropriate for their state of captivity, their act of resistance was to lay aside their harps.

World Before the Text

Whether deliberately or not, individual or group memory selects certain landmarks of the past – places, artworks, dates; persons, public or private, well known or obscure, real or imagined – and invests them with symbolic and political significance.¹³

Fabre and O’Meally appropriate the term *lieux de mémoire*¹⁴, or sites of memory in a historical project designed to recapture ““black and unknown bards,” historians without portfolio, who inscribed their world with landmarks made significant because men and women remembered them so complexly and so well that somehow the traces of their memory survived to become history.”¹⁵ This recapturing is what Hughes does in his poem as he draws upon the African and African American past to weave the creation narrative of enslaved and oppressed peoples. Katrina commentators systematically recapture their Katrina narrative by pulling upon the socio-historical narrative of New Orleans; especially as it relates to race and gender. Residents of New Orleans have told their Katrina narrative to the extent that there is now what is defined as ‘Katrina fatigue’ for those displaced as well as for host states. There are pre-, post-, and Katrina narratives depicting three different pictures of New Orleans as a social entity. According to media narratives, I live in a post world: a post-modern; post-911; post-Katrina; and some say a ‘post-

¹² Brevard S. Childs, *Memory and Tradition in Israel* (Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, Inc. 1962), 50-55.

¹³ Genevieve Fabre & Robert O’Meally, eds., *History & Memory in African-American Culture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 7.

¹⁴ Fabre and O’Meally, *History & Memory*, 6. “The term was coined and the theory developed by the French historian Pierre Nora...Nora examines the polarization so often established between abstract, intellectual history, and the affective stuff of memory – and declares his distrust for “dictatorial, tyrannical’ memory. But what is most striking is Nora’s yearning to discover ways in which history and memory can creatively interact.”

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

racial' society. A world full of "pasts" yet with no clearly defined 'label' signifying a future or their relationship to the present. We know where we have been, but do not seem to know where we are heading. This plunge into the unknown darkness is more feared than in the past. In fact, I may be living in a new "Diasporic times" that transcends culture, ethnicity, geography, language, imagery, and tradition. My Diaspora emerges out of a national sense of alienation and loss that grips us daily. Here is where I find the work of religious educators pertinent. We are living in diasporic times and this sense of rootlessness needs a place in our pedagogies.

For many who are forced to leave their homelands, there is a disruption filled with traumatic and repetitive suffering and a reconfiguring of individual and communal identities. Thus, displaced groups, and their host communities, as well as this nation, is left to begin anew the task of gathering the scattered pieces of cultural heritages and reconstructing the remnants of our national, regional, personal, and religious identities. Stuart Hall, a cultural theorist and sociologist, views cultural identity reconfiguration as a process of becoming. He states, "Cultural identity...is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation."¹⁶

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¹⁶ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), 443-446.

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