"They Didn't Go in Those House":
Katrina's X-Codes, Race, and Practices of Memory

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Introduction

By mid-September of 2005, *The Times-Picayune* reported on New Orleans neighborhoods covered in "crisis markings" following the Hurricane Katrina rescue efforts.[1] The markings were reported on during the immediate aftermath of the flooding in order to decipher their meaning. One speculation by a FEMA rescue worker carried a grim sort of prescience, saying that "everything's going to be cleaned up except for these marks… They're going to be here for a long time."[2] These "hieroglyphics of catastrophe," which came to be commonly called "x-codes," were seen throughout post-Katrina New Orleans; for many, they seemed to encapsulate the social history of the storm.[3] While many residents and commentators presented the x-codes as interpretations of survival, rescue, hopeful defiance, and duty, what does it mean for this kind of artifact to play the role of "mapping collective tragedy"?[4] What do the x-codes reveal about the political stakes for practices of memory? And more broadly, what might the x-codes allow us to discern about the possibilities and limits of memory-works for provoking political transformation rather than normalizing "disaster"?

Official declarations of "disaster" are embedded within a discursive-political genre meant to generate legitimacy for actions that secure order, invoking the rhetorical and emotional tropes of securitization and humanitarianism.[5] This is meant to produce feelings of shared vulnerability

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[1] Chris Rose, "Badges of Honor – Part Historic Preservation, Part Act of Defiance, The Spray-Painted Markings of Katrina Rescue Workers Remain As Many Reoccupied New Orleans Homes," *Times-Picayune*, July 24, 2007.
[2] Michael Perlstein, "For Tales of Life and Death, the Writing's on the Wall – Rescuers' Language of Painted Scribbles Awaits Homeowners," *Times-Picayune*, September 17 2005.
[3] Rose; Dorothy Moye, "The X-Codes: A Post-Katrina Postscript." *Southern Spaces*, published August 2009, last accessed April 27, 2019: https://southernspaces.org/2009/x-codes-post-katrina-postscript.
[4] Moye, "The X-Codes"; Janell Ross, "The Art—and Controversy—of Hurricane Katrina 'X-Codes,'" *Washington Post*, published August 29 2015, last accessed April 27 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/08/29/the-hurricane-katrina-x-codes-art-politics-controversy-and-now-reform/?utm_term=.f1b0dbf5ee59.
[5] Jeroen Warner, "The Politics of Catastrophization," in *Disaster, Conflict, and Society in Crises: Everyday Politics of Crisis Response*, edited by Dorothea Hilhurst, New York: Routledge, 2013, 78. This discursive framing of disaster, drawing on Fassin, invokes three positions by which receptive audiences may "take in the face of misfortune: expressing anger toward the perpetrator, feeling moved by aid workers, or aestheticizing the tragedy of the victims." Fassin's categories elucidate "misfortune" works in concert with white supremacist logics of white injury and the production of racialized "others." Thinking these paradigms together provides an interpretive frame whereby both schemas contribute to the normalizing of "disasters", and as a consequence particular projects of memorialization. Didier Fassin, "Heart of Humanness: The Moral Economy of Humanitarian Intervention," in *Contemporary States of Emergency: The Politics of Military and Humanitarian Intervention*. Edited by Didier Fassin and Mariella Pandolfi, New York: Zone Books, 2013, 271.

between victims of the event and the on-looking public, both by establishing the uncontrollable power of the hazard and appealing to a general precarious condition of human existence.[6] This frame is coupled with moralizing categories of "rescue" which serve to console these enflamed anxieties by accentuating humanitarian action, producing a tragic yet manageable "disaster" rather than a disruptive crisis.[7] Thus, when later efforts are made to re-present disasters for public recognition, these universalized tropes of injury and rescue are retained, further obscuring alternative or politicizing memories.[8] Following this logic, popular renderings of the x-codes reflected this genre of disaster memories by accentuating the hurricane and subsequent flooding's "natural" destruction. And at the same time, there are examples of the x-codes being re-deployed to actually *contest* the logics of disaster. This paper considers the practice and possibilities of memorializing x-codes as practices of "counter-memory," memories that take the form of redress, destabilizing the political and temporal spaces of disaster by refracting this narrative frame of rescue, employing different visual narratives that use x-codes to illuminate racialized structural subjugation.[9]

This paper begins by describing x-codes in relation to the production of "disaster relief," attempting to give an account of their multivalent "work" in the context of New Orleans. Next, I will elaborate further on x-codes *as memories* in order to establish how frames of disaster relief reproduces its political structures in the processes of memorialization. To contest this reproductive logic of memorialization, I will explore how the Women of the Storm and Spike Lee offer the x-codes as *counter-memories* that deconstruct the normalizing frame of Katrina. And finally, I will explore the possibilities and limits of memory as a tool of political redress.

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[6] See Harriet F. Senie, *Memorials to Shattered Myths: Vietnam to 9/11*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
[7] Warner, 83-4.
[8] See Angela Failler, "Remembering the Air India Disaster: Memorial and Counter-Memorial," *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies 31*(2-3): 150-176.
[9] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, 74.

X-Codes in the Frames of Disaster

The goal of this section is to offer a kind of mapping of the x-codes, one that is not limited to the markings themselves, but also attempting to chart their location within the wider history of disaster relief. This is not to suggest that the x-codes are representative of all disaster relief efforts in the United States, nor that the x-codes function in conjunction with different approaches to insurance, infrastructure development, or any other particular project devised by state approaches to disaster. In reality, the x-codes are a rather minimal bureaucratic procedure that carries no legal weight; they are only meant to simplify an otherwise overwhelming task of search and rescue triage.[10] However, it is useful to consider the frames of political judgments surrounding disaster itself, in addition to the origins of the markings, because it clarifies the channels of power within which the x-codes operate. In other words, part of understanding the "work", the effect, of x-codes is understanding the powers constituted in and by the markings, its agents, and their governing norms.

During the flooding in New Orleans that followed Hurricane Katrina, x-codes were used by Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) task forces organized under guidelines from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).[11] The National Urban Search and Rescue Responses System manual is designed to coordinate, develop, and maintain the federal effort to "locate, extricate, and provide immediate medical treatment to victims trapped in collapsed structures."[12] The manual provides standardized techniques and procedures that "promotes safe and effective search

[10] Although there may be some reason to believe these markings were used informally by insurance companies to otherwise deny claims related flood and/or hurricane damage to homes, this was definitely not the intention of FEMA search and rescue efforts. Sharyn Alfonsi, "The Storm After the Storm," *60 Minutes*, published March 1 2015, last accessed April 27 2019. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/hurricane-sandy-60-minutes-fraud-investigation/.

[11] Paul A. Brallier, "Communicating the Damage: Post-Disaster Building Placards and Marks." *Civil+Structural Engineer Magazine*, published February 19 2014, last accessed December 23 2018. https://csengineermag.com/article/communicating-the-damage-post-disaster-building-placards-and-marks/.

[12] "National Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) Response System Field Operations Guide." *Federal Emergency Management Agency*. Published September 2003, last accessed October 30 2018. https://www.fema.gov/pdf/emergency/usr/usr_fog_sept_25_2003_color_final.pdf, iii

and rescue operations" to be used by the 28 US&R teams of primarily volunteer responders across the United States.[13]

The codes themselves serve as communicative performances meant to convey information about US&R team entrance to a home or any other structure, which is denoted by the first dash of the "x", and the "x" itself is completed when the rescue team exits (figure 1). The "x" marking then serves to structure systematic account about the search itself: the team who searched the building, date searched, hazards encountered, and a total of human bodies recovered (figure 2).[14] This practices of the US&R teams were developed in part after the 1985 Mexico Earthquake, where over the course of three days, more rescuers were killed than people rescued.[15] In the late 1980s, federal and state-funded research conducted by private engineering research firms developed standards of practice that took into account the most recent experiences of earthquakes (and much later flooding) to determine federal rescue protocols. The field guides reports produced by these private investigators were designed to be taken into the field by practitioners, giving them visual diagnostics for "where to look for damage."[16] While these teams tend to be made up with cross-trained emergency professionals that ordinarily work as doctors, nurses, engineers, firefighters, and paramedics, the training of US&R teams resemble military practices of security. This manifests in FEMA "simulation exercises," conducted with other DHS entities, which "produce knowledge about needed capacities… among participants."[17] Hurricane and flooding exercises were practiced twice "in the 36-month Comprehensive Homeland Security Exercise Schedule, covering July 2004-

[13] "National Urban Search and Rescue Manual", I-1; "Task Force Locations." *Federal Emergency Management Agency*. Last accessed April 27 2019. https://www.fema.gov/task-force-locations

[14] Moye, "The X-Codes"; In nearly all accounts that focus on or only mention the x-codes, this aforementioned description of the "four quadrants was deemed essential to "interpreting" the codes, the emphasize was placed on their content and function rather than any other kind of social, political, or aesthetic questions or concerns. It is also worth mentioning that now US&R task forces use sticker markings that are written on with felt-tipped pens, removable and standardized.

[15] Brallier.

[16] "ATC-45 Field Manual: Safety Evaluation of Buildings after Windstorms and Floods." *Applied Technology Council*. Last accessed March 14 2019. https://www.atcouncil.org/atc-45.

[17] Andrew Lakoff, "Preparing for the Next Emergency," *Public Culture* 19, no. 2 (2007): 264.

September 2007," out of a total of 222 exercises that primarily focused on terrorist attacks.[18] In this way, FEMA and the DHS reflect "disturbing crises of planning," driven by privatization and militarization of state functions, that leaves militarized security as the primary operational language.[19] "Security," of course, depends on significant assumptions about risk, threat, and value. These assumptions can be accounted for through structures of racialized moral binaries that reproduce these assumptions, and thus, to some extent, circulate within the x-codes, as well.

Disaster relief in the United States was founded by logics of "blame and fate," which were constitutive features of public judgment of morally innocent victims or faulting blameworthy figures for their "disastrous" situation.[20] The "intuitive distinction between losses caused by natural disasters and other sorts of needs" obscures the procedural role of Congressional deliberation in assigning claimants their "disaster" status: "the very ability of claimants to narrate themselves as the morally blameless victims of sudden catastrophe—a disaster—that has largely determined the success or failure of a given claim."[21] To put differently, relief requests became deliberation on responsibility and risk, who must be judged to have had a "true disaster."[22] This construction of true or "natural" disaster that warranted expenditures of public funds to preserve community itself functioned in opposition to "social ills" of poverty and other racial disparity. Liza Lugo argues the history of white supremacy and "domination and subjugation" of African Americans and settler colonial anxieties are built on dehumanizing logics of moral inferiority.[23] This reveals a connection between racialized

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[18] Tom Reifer, "Blown Away: U.S. Militarism and Hurricane Katrina," in *Racing the Storm: Racial Implications and Lessons Learned from Hurricane Katrina*, edited by Hillary Potter. New York: Lexington Books, 2007, 199.
[19] Ganesh K. Trichur, "Spectacular Privatization: Perceptions and Lessons from Privatization of Warfare and Privatization of Disaster," in *Racing the Storm: Racial Implications and Lessons Learned from Hurricane Katrina*, edited by Hillary Potter, New York: Lexington Books, 2007, 226-7.
[20] Michele L. Landis, "Let Me Next Time Be 'Tried By Fire': Disaster Relief and the Origins of the American Welfare State 1789-1874," *Northwestern University Law Review* 92, no. 3 (1998): 969.
[21] Landis 971.
[22] Landis 979. When thinking about Hurricane Katrina, one repeated sentiment is that building in a "risky" area, susceptible to flooding, undermines any obligation the state has to assist these communities. A similar punitive logic defined a relief denial in 1796: "relief was denied following a [city fire] due in part to fears that granting relief would create a moral hazard and leave 'no occasion for insurance companies, nor any inducement to build with brick in preference to wood,'" p. 981.
[23] Liza Lugo, *How do Hurricane Katrina's Winds Blow? Racism in 21st Century New Orleans*, Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2014, xxiv, 30-1.

hierarchies in claiming the moral title of "disaster" and the disproportionate exposure to risk through the mechanisms of segregation and exclusion.[24]

One example that continues to reverberate through memories of Katrina is the "catastrophic flooding" of the 1927 Mississippi Flood. In one way, this flooding altered the affective and political terrain in the US, inducing new possibilities for jurisdictional expansion of federal obligation to disaster relief and new feelings of humanitarianism.[25] And yet, at the same time, relief efforts demanded black families crowd "into slave labor camps on dangerous levee tops" without consistent access to food or housing.[26] Even though the levee system was strategically demolished to protect white neighborhoods and capital investment centers, exposing black neighborhoods to immense flooding, black laborers were conscripted to rebuild the levee system, without assurance of compensation.[27] Black residents were also exposed to white resentment and violence from aid workers, who referred to blacks as "sinful" agents of their own destruction. This kind of white injury displacing black suffering is central to understanding disaster relief, but also how the x-codes were distanced from past harms.[28]

These histories point to the insufficiency of understanding the x-codes in terms of its objective characteristics or bureaucratic functions. Memories are not mere historical products that

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[24] Lugo xxii; Landis 990, 977, 1021-6. Other examples include the "exceptional" poverty of flooded communities in Mississippi in 1874 justified federal relief package of $190,000 on the grounds of easing their misfortune and restoring their ability to "contribute towards the wealth and defense of the nation," it was held in contrast to the poor (predominantly black) communities of New Orleans who were "burdensome" examples. Indigenous tribes such as the Sioux were often depicted as "devils incarnate" and "as a force of nature—bestial, savage, animalistic—a tornado—beyond any ability to predict or prevent," which justified relief payments to white settlers following 1862 Sioux Indian war. Alternately, a commercial agent operating in St. Domingo was awarded $15,000 in relief in 1794 "following the slave revolution" because this sudden depravation was unrelated to his moral standing, leaving "his hopes… dashed by events he could not have foreseen or guarded against."

[25] Part of what makes the 1927 Mississippi Flood so significant is the confluence of events related to the hundreds of thousands of internally displaced and homeless people, particularly its effect on black communities throughout the region. Interestingly, the Flood Control Act of 1928, a direct result of the 1927 disaster, culminated in a massive expansion of federal responsibility for the Mississippi River, and ultimately an expansion the federal government, Jason David Rivera and DeMond Shondell Miller, "A Brief History of the Evolution of United States' Natural Disaster Policy." *Journal of Public Management and Social Policy* 12, no. 1 (2006): 7.

[26] Landis 1024.

[27] John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998, 250-5; Lugo 29-30; Landis 1024.

[28] Barry, 324-351; Lugo, 29-30; Boris Heersink, Brenton D. Peterson, and Jeffrey A. Jenkins. "Disasters and Elections: Estimating the Net Effect of Damage and Relief in Historical Perspective," *Political Analysis* 25, no. 2 (2017): 3; Barry J. Barnett, "US Government Natural Disaster Assistance: Historical Analysis and a Proposal for the Future." *Disasters* 23, no. 2 (1999): 6-7.

are more or less adequately known, but instead an intertwining of critical sites of production and reception.[29] The x-codes, in this sense, illuminate the blurry line drawn between representations, their historical production, and their resonance with the emotions, events, and beliefs of interpretive communities.[30] In this way, the connection between racial subjugation and the discursive-historical production of disaster relief complicates which social "tissues" might pull together the re-membering of the x-codes.

By troubling the universalizing framing of disaster, the x-codes can be seen as a symbol of racialized condemnation. The x-codes reflect the interconnected historical processes of state power and the application of disaster technologies to selectively mitigate vulnerability. The development of state responses to disaster aims at preparing and protecting morally worthy bodies. In this way, the x-codes reflect practices of exclusionary racial politics that mark differential levels of intervention and risk, delineating what is valued or protected, and what constitutes sufficiently "marked." So, to read the x-codes as an inconsequentially related to "disaster relief" or even to directly link their ubiquity with a traumatic unity for all residents of New Orleans is to underestimate their latent historical-symbolic power. At the same time, situating the x-codes within the frame of disaster ties together the imagined (white) victims of disaster with the vulnerable national body in need of rescue. Exemplifying this logic: SWAT teams deployed to halt "looting" by families in need of food and supplies contrasted with the images of rescuers emerging from black communities as "socially unintelligible." In this frame, the US&R x-codes marks can become signs of relief rather than indifference or subjugation.[31] The x-codes are embedded within the same interpretive labors that

[29] Wulf Kansteiner, "Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies," *History and Theory* 41 (May 2002): 192
[30] Kansteiner, 192-3.
[31] Cheryl I. Harris and Devon W. Carbado, "Loot or Find: Fact or Frame?" in *After the Storm: Black Intellectuals Explore the Meaning of Hurricane Katrina*, edited by David Dante Troutt, New York: The New Press, 2006, 100-2. Also, though framed as "helpless victims" and also "unworthy of rescue," black women played significant role in community-led rescue efforts, Barbara Ransby, "Katrina, Black Women, and the Deadly Discourse on Black Poverty in America." *Du Bois Review* 3, no. 1 (2006): 220-1.

frame these SWAT teams as morally appropriate agents of disaster relief. Situating the x-codes within this framework shows how the construction of the "disaster" in New Orleans informs the political possibilities and limits of remembering Katrina through the x-codes.

Stories to Tell: X-Codes and the Practices of Memory

Memories of the x-codes, then, are reflective accounts of their material and symbolic constitution that either rely on coherence with their intentional meaning, but also contain the potential for raising questions that augment the norms of racialized disaster framing. Accounts of preservation, encounters with, or interpretations of the x-codes reveal a variety of practices of memory: some foreground shared disaster experiences of Hurricane Katrina while others attempt to illuminate the continued structures of racial inequality and exclusion.

Anniversaries of Hurricane Katrina provoked media outlets to collect stories about post-Katrina New Orleans. To many, it was fascinating that the x-code markings persisted for more than a decade. The news stories sought out individual homeowners to show stories of how they dealt with "their x-code." While some residents believed they would never remove theirs in order to acknowledge the "blessing" of their survival, others painted over the x-code immediately to hide reminders of the "pain and trauma" of what "they found."[32] Some spoke about the x-codes as "challenges [to] the unbridled rhetoric" of recovery that pervaded New Orleans politicians' speeches, "a sad statement on displacement" of houses that remained empty, and a sign of the government's lack of effort to repair what happened in their neighborhoods.[33] The "sense of dispossession" overpowered one resident, recounting her return to her home, marked by an X: "it

[32] Christopher Romaguera, "Spray-painted FEMA X Still Marks the Storm in New Orleans," *Curbed*, published August 19 2015, last accessed October 30 2018. https://www.curbed.com/2015/8/19/9929170/fema-x. In the story, the "they" used by one resident is ambiguous as to whether this refers to rescuers, families able to return, or both.
[33] Romaguera; Billie Mandelbaum, "X Marks the Diverging Tales of Post-Katrina New Orleans," *Washington University Political Review*, published January 1 2016, last accessed October 30 2018. http://www.wupr.org/2016/01/01/x-marks-the-diverging-tales-of-post-katrina-new-orleans/.

was just horrible to walk into *something* knowing that it wasn't like that when you left it. We couldn't stay in there… We didn't come prepared for what we saw."[34] While one family remarked that upon returning to find an x-code on their residence, "forget this, we here. This is home now. That shouldn't be here;" another woman commented to a local reporter's question about removing the x-code: "Baby, you know that's never coming down."[35] One resident recounted returning to his house only to be confronted by US&R teams who forced him to leave, in order for the team to mark his house; his "horrified" memories of his x-code are remembered "with some pride," in terms of how he quickly erased it.[36]

While their material presence on people's homes provoked divergent activities of preservation and erasure, the memories of the x-codes were presented as a kind of uniform provocation, something that was unavoidably part of the city's "emotional processing" of Hurricane Katrina and the federal disaster response. Other accounts of people re-making x-codes, whether as tattoos, paintings, murals, or ironworks affixed to their homes permanently, suggest that the sharing of x-code memories by reproducing and repurposing their form offers an aesthetic capable of registering Hurricane Katrina as a recognizable trauma, one that can be blatantly seen, expressed, and conveyed to sympathetic audiences (figure 3 and 4).[37] In this sense, the x-code became a popular synecdoche of Katrina, framed as a symbolic remnant of both the storm and the efforts to respond.

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[34] Sara Le Menestrel, "The Process and Politics of Commemoration." In *Hurricane Katrina in Transatlantic Perspective,* edited by Romain Huret and Randy J. Sparks, Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2014, 159-60.
[35] Romaguera.
[36] Romaguera.
[37] Glenn W. Gentry and Derek H. Alderman, "Trauma Written in Flesh: Tattoos as Memorials and Stories," in *Narrating the Storm: Sociological Stories of Hurricane Katrina*, edited by Danielle A. Hidalgo and Kristen Barber, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007, 188-91; Susan Langenhennig, "Memorializing Katrina X Marks: Why Some People Saved Their Home's 'Katrina Tattoos,'" *The Times-Picayune*, originally published August 28 2014, updated August 18 2016, last accessed October 30 2018. https://www.nola.com/homegarden/2014/08/memorializing_katrina_x_marks.html. According to local tattoo artists, thousands of people flocked to parlors to memorialize their experiences of Katrina, and many chose to incorporate x-codes into their design. One resident tattooed the x-code left on his house to his leg in order to reference the "'federal flood' of government failures that continue to deeply affect the city." Speaking more generally about tattoo memorials, one artists suggested that "tattoos represent badges of pride and survival, as well as markers of the traumas that unfolded on the landscapes and in people's lives. The loss of house and home, family and friends, and the struggles to help others are [written on] their skin." Others reproduced the x-codes after repainting their houses, recreated them in community murals, or transferred their markings into wrought-iron replicas. Referring to the iron workings as "Katrina Stigmatas," the pieces are intended to memorialize how the flooding is "part of us, and part of our house."

One significant representation of x-code memory work is Dorothy Moye's digital gallery/archiving project. Moye's work began as 2009 commentary that explored the "prevalence and significance" of x-codes throughout New Orleans, as a kind of shared visual signifier that was recognizable and generating multiple interpretive discourses within local media, as well as neighborhood conversations collected by Moye (figure 5).[38] As photographs and stories were collected, and recovery efforts intensified, Moye published "Katrina+5: An X-Code Exhibition," that featured images of houses marked, demolished, erased, preserved, and many other forms of recollection five years after the hurricane.[39] Moye understood the x-codes as vivid historical representations:

> Although the tale told by these codes is still raw, the importance of the narrative in this unexpected format promises to persist, along with the memory of the graphic itself as an inescapable reminder of *post-Katrina* events. Individually, one code is interesting, but together, thousands are a stunning recording and reminder of the power of the storm and its impact on the city...The image has become iconic as a part of the larger story of *a devastating storm and its aftermath [and] shorthand for those involved* on any level.[40]

According to Moye, the x-codes represent Katrina's after-effects on the city, giving residents an aesthetic-artistic site of shared social meaning that can persist through visible, malleable reproductions.

Moye frames the x-codes as symbolic markings that can be approached and re-formed through stories or artwork, meant ultimately to refuse a kind of forgetfulness that might repress Katrina's history. But these memories, as presented by Moye, seem to exist in silos, separating popular responses to the x-codes from accounts of the disaster technologies of rescue. Moye writes, "all too often the message sent [by FEMA] was received entirely differently by [residents]."[41] While

[38] Moye, "The X-Codes."
[39] Dorothy Moye, "Katrina + 5: An X-Code Exhibition," *Southern Spaces*, published August 2010, last accessed April 27, 2019: https://southernspaces.org/2010/katrina-5-x-code-exhibition.
[40] Moye, "The X-Codes," emphasis added.
[41] Moye, "The X-Codes"

this hints at contestation, Moye does not explore this dissonance.[42] Moye's gallery leaves unexplored interpretations that contest the x-codes themselves as figures of Katrina's significance. The memory-work done by Moye revolves around recalling the problem of translation, the "official" meaning and the plethora of apocryphal popular meanings. This archive of the x-codes documents the phenomena as a narrative of mistranslation, seeking to remembering this communicative failure as the synecdoche of Katrina. The x-codes become memories of "tragic circumstances" and flawed heroism, memories ultimately left open to the shared experiences of disaster.[43]

These memories of the x-codes relied on a kind of shared meaning, a sharing that emphasized how markings on one's dwelling compounded the trauma of disaster. In other words, the x-codes assumed that the markings were reliable provocations, abstractions that opened up to real story of uncontrollable loss and survivability. While Moye and others suggested that the x-codes were haunting, it was a ghostly presence that was kept in the past, a reminder of when things were bad. Or even to some, the x-codes could be seen as reminder of hopefulness when things were otherwise bleak: "At a time when people around the country were wondering how such a seemingly un-American type of inefficiency and, to some, race-related indifference left so many people in terrible conditions after the storm, the X-codes were an antidote. They were a form of official notice. This home had been searched. This home had not."[44] Even in accounts that were less hopeful about the x-codes, many flocked to artwork that painted over, incorporated, or otherwise insisted on seeing past the x-codes as a way to imagine a new life that refused to be defined by

[42] Moye, "The X-Codes", "Katrina+5" Several quotes point to this political field of discourse, a field that might elucidate any connections between the assumptions and activity of FEMA's rescue and the haunting memory of the x-codes. One photographer wrote, "the X's are a glaring and still present reminder of how our government… not only failed us, but made it worse;" an artist commented to Moye, "the discovery that what I had perceived to be marks of annihilation were in fact useful tools did not diminish the visceral experience of seeing those Xs scrawled across my beloved city. For me, they will always be stigmata of immense loss and unexpected death." Yet, these quotes do not elicit further reflection on the connections between technologies of emergency and rescue, and the aftermath haunted by x-codes.
[43] Moye, "Katrina+5."
[44] Ross.

Katrina (figure 6 and 7).[45] For these memories, the x-codes become a flawed but recognizable form of rescue, one that links the unavoidable precarity of disaster to hopeful narratives of survivability that narrow the space allocated for political contestation.

In contrast, the Women of the Storm's political aesthetics and Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke* offer two examples of "counter-memories" of Katrina, responsively connecting "the multiple failures that inequitably affected the population and that exacerbated discrimination" by invoking the latent historical-symbolic power available within the x-codes.[46]

The Women of the Storm organized originally around the goal of making the destruction of New Orleans and the vanishing Louisiana coastline visible to Washington. In January 2006, roughly 130 women journeyed to visit with representatives and to speak publically about the continued state of destruction they were experiencing and witnessing in the aftermath of Katrina.[47] Although the group described itself as "non-political," Emmanuel David argues that the "performative actions" that defined the group's stylization of memory-work actually "politicized remembering and forgetting" the conditions of New Orleans by "making claims and requests" out of the material realities of life after Katrina.[48] For example, during their first trip to Washington, the group carried blue umbrellas meant to reference the FEMA tarps used to "triage" home repairs, opening the umbrellas in unison during press conferences. The "collective raising of blue-tarp umbrellas synthesized symbols associated with protection from storms and widespread government failure."[49] Additionally, the group incorporated performances of mourning and celebration, such as second-line jazz funeral processions, that referenced New Orleans' working-class African American religious

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[45] Zalia Beville, "Southern Love," *Hurricane Digital Memory Bank*, last accessed April 27 2019, http://hurricanearchive.org/items/show/43061.
[46] Le Menestrel, 156.
[47] Emmanuel David, "Cultural Trauma, Memory, and Gendered Collective Action: The Case of Women of the Storm Following Hurricane Katrina." *NWSA Journal* 20, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 140-1.
[48] David, 143. While David suggests that the group was a multiracial group, he made clear that most of the women represented the "city's social and economic elite."
[49] David 143.

rituals mean to establish cultural connections to space, contestation, and gendered notions of home and community.[50]

In this register of performative interpretation, the Women of the Storm enlisted the x-codes as a calling to account, a "counter-memory." In order to continue to draw attention to the need for federal funding for housing reconstruction and coastline restoration, the Women of the Storm held a performative art event entitled, *Storm Warnings II*, referencing efforts by community activists prior to Hurricane Katrina to draw attention to the environmental precarity of the Gulf Coast communities.[51] The presentation centered on distinguishing the representatives who "gained an understanding of [their] plight," and marking the "400 U.S. senators and representatives [who] have not found the time to visit the site of the worst natural disaster ever to strike our nation."[52] With the women staged on a US map covering an entire football field, names were read aloud of states and its visitors or lack thereof, and then each state was marked with an "X" that replicated what David referred to as the "visual syntax" of the x-codes. But the "X" quadrants were filled instead with the state's abbreviation, the number of Senate and House members to visit, and the remaining number still to visit.[53] As David persuasively argues, "these haunting search and rescue marks on properties throughout the region have entered the broader cultural memory of the Katrina catastrophe and were invoked strategically as powerful and symbolic resources" by the Women of the Storm.[54]

The Women of the Storm seem to be reversing the gaze of the x-code, marking the nation itself as a disastrous project, one that is still waiting on transformative relief. The x-code quadrant reserved for the dead now haunts the representatives unwilling to find their way to New Orleans to

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[50] David 145-6. Importantly, David also note the ways in which second-lining has been "appropriated" since Civil War times by the tourism industry and city elites to serve their economic and political interests. This points to the ambiguous sort of symbolic memory-work that Women of the Storm performed, attempting to achieve visibility while dealing with the "challenges and contradictions" of cultural forms that reference displaced or otherwise subjugated peoples.
[51] David, 148, fn 6.
[52] David 149.
[53] David 150.
[54] David 150.

be confronted by the histories of divestment and segregation. The "choreographed display" played along with the temporal orientation of the x-codes.[55] Rather than simply re-present them to elicit some kind of sentimental scenery to make their performance "more memorable," the actors transformed the communicative register so that the x-codes might speak to a pressing present, not simply a static past. Insisting on moral and political standing, the Women of the Storm replay the x-codes as failures, first as symbolic reminder of a failed rescue, but second as a failure to adequately confront the lingering "disaster" of racial disparities and its (displaced) survivors.

In a similar fashion, Lee's *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* deployment of the x-codes and the return to uncounted victims heightens their contradictory significance to illuminate distressing legacies of state intervention. While it is not wrong to see the film as a documentary, it is framed as a requiem, an artistic composition for those who died in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Each of the four acts of the film begin by dedicating the work to "all the Hurricane Katrina victims in New Orleans and in the Gulf states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida. Today, the people living along the Gulf Coast continue in their daily struggle to rebuild, revive and renew in these United States of America."[56] From the beginning, there is already a sense of the "concentrated Herculean effort" attempted in Lee's film, not only to document the complex social, political, and emotional terrain, but also to allow the dispersed and devastated speak back to "these United States of America."[57] In an interview, Lee suggested that his decision to not have the film narrated by a single voice was partly to allow "these citizens to speak their peace."[58] But, at the same time, Lee's film draws on the dispersal of voices, spread across not only the social and political landscapes of New Orleans, but also consciously acknowledging "the 75 percent population of New

[55] David 151-2.
[56] *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, directed by Spike Lee, 2006.
[57] Ed Gordon, "Spike Lee Produces a Vision of Katrina," News & Notes, *National Public Radio*, published August 18 2006, last accessed April 27 2019. https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5669697.
[58] Gordon.

Orleans who no longer live there, who are spread out across these United States. I think about how… not that much has changed."[59] It is this dynamic of constant movement and stillness, of "sonic buoyancy" met by "lyrical loss," of vibrant stories told by those present and images of abandoned houses of those displaced that provokes a kind of reckoning built on contradiction and confrontation.[60]

Lee's evocative use of the x-codes in the narrative arc between recollecting the struggling celebration of Mardi Gras and condemnation of the levees emphasizes their inescapability, both as a traumatic marking of the city and as a reminder of the governing structures of white supremacy. The fourth Act begins with brass band leading a second-line funeral procession "playing a somber, soulful version of 'Old Rugged Cross' while ushering a coffin labeled 'Katrina' to a final resting place among the ruins of the Ninth Ward."[61] While this is a poignant, and aesthetically complex, scene that frames the entire Act, one thing that stands out is the use of music, truly a definitive "character" of the entire film. While this rendition of the evangelical hymn can certainly be heard as a sorrowful dirge, James Cone persuasively argues that the significance of the cross in the African American Christian tradition is always connected to the historical legacies of the white supremacy's lynching tree: "Every time a white mob lynched a black person, they lynched Jesus. The lynching tree is the cross in America… what is invisible to white Christians and their theologians is the inescapability of black people."[62] Thinking with Cone, the musical framing does not only speak to the sorrow of death, but more specifically, it raises up the specter of state-sponsored death and the experiences of black communities living in the midst of racist violence that may otherwise go publically unacknowledged.

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[59] Gordon.
[60] Eric Hynes, "Make it Read: The Long Echo of When the Levees Broke," *Film Comment*, published August 31 2015, last accessed April 27 2019, https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/make-it-real-the-long-echo-of-when-the-levees-broke/.
[61] Hynes.
[62] James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, New York: Orbis Books, 158-9.

Building from here to draw the viewer into the x-codes, Lee expresses the muted celebration of Mardi Gras. As parade floats drive by, several residents lament that not far from the celebration awaits the (contingent) return to debris; one man shared his uncertainty of whether people will be able to return. The film moves directly from the scene of a loader truck pushing piles of house fragments to an excavator vehicle, peeling back layers of a home marked with an x-code. A local US&R captain explains that dogs detected "the scent of human remains" in a residence already marked with a x-code. The team continues to search by demolishing the home. As visuals of US&R members marking various structures, one man's voice come in: "you see the marking on the home, and the markings mean nothing." His frustrations echo the voice of a young man from the prelude to the fourth Act who suggested that as people were coming home, they continued to "find dead people in the houses," registering his skepticism: "the military says the checked every house… but let's keep it real, they didn't go in those houses." These echoes serve as foreshadowing for Paris Ervin's story of coming home three months after Katrina to find his mother's body under her refrigerator, drowned and never accounted for despite the x-code on her front door. As Paris retells the two-month process of recovering his mother's remains, another story of a family finding their loved one in an x-coded home nearly 6 months after Katrina is laced in between. As Paris attempts to finish his story, he is struck by silence. Then, the camera fixes on his eyes as he stares off, finding the words to remind the audience that his mother drowned in her own home and was covered over for 3 months. This then leads directly into the section indicting the Army Corps of Engineers and the failure of the levee system. Consciously aware of the reports of the levees being intentionally demolished, as well as the history of the 1927 Mississippi Flood, the film juxtaposes the media reports of Corps admitting the levee failure was a result of improper construction, and one resident insisted: "why didn't anybody fix it or make some noise about it? To me, if they knew if could have happened, it's almost like they let it happen."

In this sequence of memories, re-telling "what happened" during Katrina, the x-codes become themselves patterns of foreclosure. Lee's situating of the x-codes between the destruction of neighborhoods, to the inescapable debris, and finally to the negligence of flood infrastructure, the homes marked by x-codes fit this telling of loss that is not sporadic or exceptional, but instead repetitive. The residents explain to the audience that the appearance of the x-codes does not tell the whole story. The state does not go in "those" houses. And yet, it does arrive to mark, demolish, and evaluate the landscape of the post-disaster. In fact, the x-codes demonstrate that the state *does* appear in these spaces. But rather than a negligence that is forgetful, the x-codes position in the narrative seem to speak to something more insidious: rather than accepting shared vulnerability, the x-codes evoke a tragic tolerance for black suffering. While the interview with the coroner affirms the horror of people returning home to find dead loved ones unceremoniously buried in their own home, the x-codes are viewed by Lee's camera as knowing ruses, deceptive only those who naively accept these occurrences as tragic necessities in the effort to secure disaster zones. The biopolitical scene in the demolition to uncover a previously neglected "scent of human remains," in conjunction with the collective memories of "letting happen" along with the defiant and tearful silence of Paris Ervin signals the political and affective cruelty that remain present in Lee's "counter-memory" of the x-codes.

Counter-Memory, Disaster, and Redress

Janet Donohoe describes the idea of memory well when she says "[one] is never alone, never experiencing the city on [one's] own..." [63] Donohoe emphasizes that these shared and contested memories are not merely reducible to stories or linguistic frames, but also embodiment and place as

[63] Janet Donohoe, *Remembering Places: A Phenomenological Study of the Relationship between Memory and Place*, New York: Lexington Books, 2014, 31.

sites of historical sediment and affective resonance that sparks the kind of shared experience and common worlds necessary for collective memory.[64] The recognition of x-codes as pervasive markers that littered the New Orleans landscape demonstrates this impulse to share in the work of remembering the traumatic event referred to as Katrina. Amidst the destroyed homes, the ruins of neighborhoods gone or decomposing, the x-codes seem to function "like palimpsests, [tracing] the different people, processes, and products which circulated through their environs," calling forth etiological stories, policy documents, or stories of loss and survival.[65] The x-codes seem to attract attention for a wide range of reasons, but in particular, this layering of temporalities expressed in the duty to remember "continues to haunt the present as much as it structures and determines the past."[66] Marking the presence of representatives of the state, the x-code simultaneously reveals a glaring absence; not only to ask "who wrote these messages and where are they now," but the x-code oscillates between the inaccessibility of the state and the uncertain future of what the marking could mean for resident's returning to damaged neighborhoods.[67] In this way, the common "visual syntax" of the x-codes provides a shared site for seeing the losses of Katrina and reflecting on the possible futures of New Orleans.

But this treatment of the x-codes tends toward situating Hurricane Katrina as a disaster separable from oppression experienced on the margins, displacing these disparate effects as "[exceptional] episodes."[68] In other words, fixation on individual instances of government failure, whether policies or figures, may provide some strategic political leverage, but run the risk of treating structural oppression as an incidental feature that could be addressed with replacing protocols or

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[64] Donohoe, 33-4.
[65] Tim Edensor, "The Ghosts of Industrial Ruins: Ordering and Disordering Memory in Excessive Space," *Environmental and Planning D: Society and Space* 23 (2005): 834.
[66] Thomas Stubblefield, "The Camera as Corrective: Post-Photography, Disaster Networks and the Afterimage of Hurricane Katrina," in *Ten Years After Katrina: Critical Perspectives of the Storm's Effect on American Culture and Identity*, edited by Mary Ruth Marotte and Glenn Jellenik. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014, 198.
[67] Stubblefield, 198.
[68] Paul Frymer, Dara Z. Strolovitch, and Dorian T. Warren, "New Orleans is Not the Exception: Re-Politicizing the Study of Racial Inequality," *Du Bois Review* 3, no. 1 (2006): 39.

leadership, rather than acknowledging the institutional chasms continuously reproduce these "failures."[69] In the echoes of President Bush's initial commentary ("My attitude is: the storm didn't discriminate, and neither will the recovery effort"), the implication that "the government legitimately [could not] be expected to recognize that the challenges facing African American victims of the storm were in any way distinctive" builds on hegemonic discourses of post-racial memories.[70]

Pointing to ways in which memorialization obscures structures of racial precarity, Alfred Frankowski argues that "post-racial" memorial culture displaces the continuing legacies of anti-black violence. Frankowski points to the inverting temporal mechanism of white universalism and its burgeoning memorial culture that seeks to remember anti-black past wrong as a reverent sign of standing against "social modes of violence."[71] The desire for progressive equality, the ever-expanding "work of reconciliation" disavows the *present* conditions of racial hierarchy, leaving the contemporary white subject-form intact, while continuing to displace current black grievances: "the more blackness and black history received and receives recognition as something we collectively bear witness to as a particular experience of history, the less this memory appears to mean… [to] the present."[72] In this sense, figuring the x-codes as a representation of survival and unity following Hurricane Katrina seems to presupposed that memories of disaster ought to "move towards closure and reconciliation" as a primary intervention into healing or repairing black communities neglected by federal rescue efforts; "the political goal" of refusing to forget Katrina's damage, encapsulated in frantic markings of rescue teams, "is assumed to be complete with the representation."[73] This

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[69] Frymer et al. 41.
[70] Robert C. Lieberman, "The Story Didn't Discriminate: Katrina and the Politics of Color Blindness," *Du Bois Review* 3, no. 1 (2006): 9
[71] Alfred Frankowski, *The Post-Racial Limits of Memorialization: Toward a Political Sense of Mourning*. New York: Lexington Books, 2015, 6-7.
[72] Frankowski 6, xii.
[73] Frankowski 39. One mechanism that would be worthwhile to explore is the way that homeownership became a tool for generating this shared, post-racialized memory, with the framing of "worthy" victims of the Ninth Ward as long-term homeowners. This intertwines, of course, with the x-codes because the majority of public housing did not survive the flooding, and thus was not marked in this way. This raises the question: how does ideologies of property, morality, and race come to shape the post-racialized discourse of Katrina? How do the x-codes reproduce these "legitimate" grievances that can become sharable?

mistakes the insistence about the duty to remember as a form of political restoration with the practices of memory that haunt the living.

But what does this "haunting" mean? And in what sense does returning to the x-codes as sites from which the contestation of memory and memorialization provide insight into these structures of inequality and white supremacy? In a sense, this kind of memorialization invokes an "insurgent nostalgia," one that upends terrains of representation meant to bind black bodies to liberal narratives of community, by revealing instead the "revenants of a dismembered past."[74] To put differently, the haunting memory rejects the memorial form of reparative representation, and instead provides enactments that estrange the quotidian, re-presenting those who have been killed by these "ordinary" systems of terror.[75] Saidiya Hartman argues the everyday memory practices of black "lived relations of domination and subordination" appear in the ways that allow the "quotidian [to] articulate the wounds of history... these practices witness and record the violent discontinuities of history" introduced by legacies of enslavement and white supremacy.[76] But the point of noticing these "everyday practices of the dominated" is to account for the "precariousness of the assaults waged against domination, the fragmentary character of these efforts… and the characteristics of a politics without a proper locus."[77] In other words, in the repetition, creativity, and defiance of memorializing Katrina as part of a longer legacy of white supremacy, these practices of memory become enactments of redress, not in service at "fixing" the injury that "cannot be reversed," but instead working to articulate alternative configurations of "living with… devastation and loss," imagining a world where disasters actually end for black communities.[78]

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[74] Hartman 72
[75] Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartman. "Fugitive Justice." *Representations* 92, no. 1 (Fall 2005): 2.
[76] Hartman 72-3.
[77] Hartman 50-1.
[78] Best and Hartman, 2.

What is crucial to notice is that the orientation of these memories is not towards creating narratives that aim primarily at political unity or even empathetic learning from the experiences of black suffering. Development of an authentic "public space for black grief" is, of course, a project that must be pursued. However, the hegemonic design of shared memories both creates the context for white injury and pleasure to displace the relative opacity by which racial hierarchy constructs subjectivity, and also undermines the "black noise" of radical "political aspirations."[79] Instead, as Hartman seems to suggest, these practices can be seen as "counter-memory," meant to enact its own form of care, its own attempt to navigate the complicated terrains "between hope and resignation."[80] Certainly, the aesthetic invocation of the x-codes to demand a radically alternative future is significantly curtailed by the on-going realities of white supremacy, capitalist commodification, and anti-black violence. Yet these "counter-memories" persist none the less. This vision of "counter-memory" prioritizes political claims meant to illuminate "futures still tethered to [violent] past[s]," rather than harmonizing or forcing the irreparable wounds of civil and social depravation under the "shared" atoning narratives of progress.[81] So, the "counter-memorial" seeks to "reconstitute the terms of subjectivity of the socially dead," by acknowledging that the historic events as repetitions of a lingering structure of chattel slavery and white supremacy.[82]

Seeming to channel Hartman's sentiments, the provocative question asked by a New Orleans journalist that leads towards creative responses of "counter-memory": "how do you commemorate… something that is still happening? The devastation of our city is not just something that happened a year ago, it's something that was going on yesterday, continues today and will go on tomorrow."[83] In a sense, the memories of Katrina's x-codes exist at this place between recording the

[79] Best and Hartman, 9.
[80] Best and Hartman 3.
[81] Best and Hartman 5, 10.
[82] Hartman 77.
[83] Le Menestrel 156.

chilling conditions required to survive the flooding and contesting, however faintly, the continuation of racial subjugation, in an effort to destroy "the temporal limits places upon the duration and finality of a wrong."[84]

(Figure 1)

(Figure 2)

[84] Best and Hartman 8.

(Figure 3)

(Figure 4)

(Figure 5)

(Figure 6)

(Figure 7)

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