

CHAPTER 5

LIFE PRESERVERS: THE NEOLIBERAL ENTERPRISE OF HURRICANE KATRINA SURVIVAL IN *TROUBLE THE WATER, HOUSE M.D.*, AND *WHEN THE LEVEES BROKE*

Jane Elliott

I've seen some flotation devices that you would not believe. But I mean we got some geniuses in our race who don't even know it. I mean, you'd be surprised, empty barrels, telephone posts that's fallen down, they'd ride them, you know. There's things that before then you would never have even thought they had use for.

—Henry Armstrong, Quoted in “Henry Armstrong and Dorothy Griffin Remembering Katrina”

People were inventive. Look at that. Forget about boats. If you didn't have a boat, you had to find something. Container, mattress, refrigerator. Look at that, using a broom as a paddle. People were being inventive. People were trying to save their necks.

—Spike Lee, *Audio Commentary*, *When the Levees Broke*

Certain images of Hurricane Katrina have come to be ritually repeated when the storm and its aftermath are represented in the visual media: white flags and SOS signs being waved from rooftops, thousands massed in the heat outside the New Orleans Convention Center, an elderly African American woman dead in her wheel chair. For critics such as Henry Giroux, these images have inscribed in visual terms the imprisoning and

lethal nature of neoliberal “biopolitics,” which corrals those who are unproductive as workers and consumers into zones marked out for death.¹ In this reading of the intersection of governmentality, race, and poverty, neoliberalism positions the poor, particularly the non-white poor, as a constitutive outside in two related ways: on the one hand, neoliberal policies result in the creation of a disposable and often unacknowledged class living in unrelieved poverty, while on the other neoliberal rhetoric blames those persons for their fate by presenting them as lacking the characteristics required for successful, self-enterprising neoliberal subjectivity.² While this account of the racialized poor as failed neoliberal subjects has considerable explanatory power in relation to many aspects of what Nicole R. Fleetwood terms “the Katrina event,” it is less useful in coming to terms with another set of frequently repeated images from the aftermath of the storm: the ingenious actions of “inventive” citizens in the process of “sav[ing] their necks,” as Spike Lee puts it.³ It is hard to imagine a better or more chilling example of neoliberal self-responsibilization than citizens and communities in the act of saving themselves from imminent death in the absence of government support.⁴ If, as Nikolas Rose and others have argued, neoliberal subjects must be “self-entrepreneurs” of their own lives, maximizing their “human capital” in a fashion that allows them to fulfill all their own needs within a fully privatized economy, the resourceful and determined actions of individuals engaged in self-rescue seem to express these principles to a degree previously unimaginable.⁵

In addition to images of biopolitical death zones and conservative narratives of African Americans engaged in out-of-control violence and looting, the Katrina event thus offers another version of the intersection of race, poverty, and neoliberal governance: the implementation and performance of the ideals of neoliberal subjecthood by poor Americans, particularly African Americans, in a fashion and on a scale never before registered by the national media.⁶ In this set of images and narratives, Katrina survivors appear not as failed bearers of neoliberal subjectivity but rather as avatars of the perils of functional, even hypostasized, neoliberal personhood—subjects whose attempts to save themselves epitomize the extreme demands placed on citizens under the guise of self-responsibilization. Turning to Tia Lessin and Carl Deal’s documentary *Trouble the Water* (2008), the episode of the television series *House M.D.* entitled “Who’s Your Daddy?” (2006), and Lee’s monumental four-part documentary *When the Levees Broke* (2006), I explore the ways in which these texts engage

with the neoliberal enterprise of Hurricane Katrina survival, presenting very different arguments regarding this phenomenon and appropriate responses to it. For left-leaning documentaries such as *Trouble the Water* and *Levees*, the association of positive, agential actions of survivors with the imperatives of neoliberal self-governance presents significant challenges to the usual Left practice of uncovering or agitating for an increase in agency by oppressed subjects. The more conservative *House* embraces the association of self-preservation and enterprise that accompanies the Katrina event, but uses this association to turn its survivor character into a stand-in for all the series' usually disavowed fears regarding the horrific aspects of neoliberal hegemony, or what I term "catastrophic neoliberalism." Despite their differences, all three texts indicate the way in which moments of self-preservation encapsulate the peculiar trap of neoliberal subjectivity, which can increase agency at the same time as it increases suffering, suggesting another crucial means by which the nightmarish by-products of catastrophic neoliberalism were laid bare by the Katrina event.

"Success . . . The Only Option"

In the opening scenes of *Trouble the Water*, we see Kimberly Roberts entering a Red Cross shelter for Hurricane Katrina evacuees. In a brief exchange with the filmmakers, Roberts begins promoting some as yet undefined object, declaring, "Nobody ain't got what I got" and "This need to be world wide." After a cut to what seems to be the same space on the same day, she and her husband, Scott, introduce themselves to the camera as from the Lower 9th Ward of New Orleans, "under water." The screen goes black, the words "two weeks earlier" appear, and we find ourselves watching handheld footage of the couple's neighborhood on the eve of the storm, shot and narrated by Kimberly Roberts under her rap moniker, Black Kold Medina. The "what" that Roberts wants to take "world wide," it now becomes clear, is the footage she shot just before and during Hurricane Katrina—footage that, along with interviews with the Robertses and their friends and family, is the subject of the film we are watching. The black screen between the Robertses' self-introduction and the start of the Black Kold Medina footage thus does more than take us back in time to the brink of the storm. It also takes us ahead to the point at which an agreement has been reached between Roberts and the filmmakers that allows this unique footage to receive the

exposure Roberts desired. While the actual discussion takes place off-screen, the pause of the black space seems to remind us that there is a piece of this story missing, encouraging us to imagine that agreement being hammered out. What allowed the film to come into being, we come to understand, is a transaction, possibly financial, that took place between a Katrina evacuee, a poor African American woman from New Orleans, and a couple of documentary filmmakers from New York.

In foregrounding this transaction, my point is not to impugn the documentary ethics of *Lessin and Deal*. Although we don't see it unfold, the necessity of this transaction—the way in which Roberts must sell herself and her experiences if she wants to try to improve her life—is in fact an element of the status quo that *Lessin and Deal* consistently critique throughout the film. That the existence of *Trouble the Water* arises from this transaction is less a fault than the central means by which form mirrors content in the film: *Trouble the Water* both arises from and materially embodies a transaction based in Kimberly Roberts' self-entrepreneurship, and the film is fundamentally about what it means to live in a neoliberal world in which such individual enterprise is offered as the only possible avenue of transformation or uplift. In both its usage of Roberts' footage and the way it encourages us to read her self-presentation, I want to argue, the film suggests that Kimberly Roberts, her husband, and her friends are all hostages to a form of contemporary neoliberal selfhood that intertwines experiences of agential action, self-reliance, and profound suffering.

Roberts' association with neoliberal discourses of enterprise and self-entrepreneurship is evident from her first moments on camera. Not only do we first see her selling herself (“nobody ain't got what I got”), but also the very existence of Roberts' footage resonates with neoliberal capital's injunction to make profit from risk. In a through-the-looking-glass version of what Naomi Klein terms “disaster capitalism,” Roberts attempts to capitalize on her own hurricane experience, cannily predicting that the footage she gets may be of some value: as she presciently tells one of her neighbors, “If I get some exciting shit, I can sell it to the white folk.”⁷ Enacting the sort of lemons-into-lemonade narrative dear to the heart of American neoconservatives, Roberts sets out to turn the very elements of her oppression into a moneymaking opportunity. In effect trapped in the city—she recounts in her voiceover that she was unable to “get a rental”—Roberts turns this imprisonment in the path of the coming

hurricane into an opportunity for on-the-spot reporting: “I ain’t going nowhere, I’m going to be here to give you this live and direct footage.” If, as Lisa Duggan points out, neoliberalism masks its underlying racist and sexist agendas by promoting goals such as “self-esteem,” “independence,” and “personal responsibility” among the poor, this is a perspective that Roberts seems to have internalized.⁸

Although the storm footage is in effect focalized entirely through Roberts—she is both cinematographer and narrator—*Trouble the Water* itself raises immediate doubts about the efficacy of her commitment to self-entrepreneurship. Because the film as a whole begins with news reports of the storm’s aftermath and locates Roberts within that trajectory through her introduction at the Red Cross shelter, Roberts’ footage is subject to considerable dramatic irony. We already know that the levees will break and that the children she interviews, who argue that there is no reason to be afraid since a hurricane is “nothing but water,” will unfortunately soon have every reason to change their minds. From the moment we begin to watch Roberts’ footage, in other words, we are placed in a position in which her own account of her situation begs another level of interpretation, in which we weigh her reading of events against what we know will come to pass. This sense of meta-interpretation is intensified by the brief interaction we have seen between her and the filmmakers. We know that this is not Roberts’ film but instead a film that employs her footage, and that the documentarians occupy a very different class position than Roberts does—one that makes them the “white folk” that Roberts hopes will purchase her film. Thus, when we begin watching Roberts’ footage, we do it in effect over the shoulders of filmmakers who seem unlikely to live in or ordinarily visit neighborhoods like the one Roberts inhabits and documents.

This class difference—“gulf” might not be too strong a word—creates a kind of bifocal view of Roberts’ footage, one that overlays an outsider’s curious, almost ethnographic gaze over Roberts’ own, contemporaneous perspective. Because of the film-within-a-film effect, Lessin and Deal remain framing presences whose own view of this footage we know has preceded our own, and, given their assumed unfamiliarity with Roberts’ milieu, part of what is spotlighted by their imagined gaze on this footage is the sheer information it conveys regarding what it is like to be a poor African American woman living in New Orleans. Thus, at the same time that Roberts is adopting a journalistic tone that works to underscore the on-the-spot, historic nature of her storm footage, the presence of this second view

draws our attention not to these momentous events but rather to the details of daily life among African Americans in the 9th Ward, as exemplified by Roberts: buying smoked neckbones, joking with drunks on the corner, waking up an uncle passed out on a porch. That is, while Roberts presents herself as embarking on a project of individual enterprise designed to improve her lot, the framing view of her footage underscores instead the undertow of a daily life spent in poverty in a fashion that both shows the necessity of transformation and calls into doubt—almost ironizes—her optimism regarding the ability of any individual action to bring about that transformation. In effect, this doubled perspective on Roberts' footage both uncovers and enacts the pernicious juxtaposition of a neoliberal discourse of self-empowerment with a life systematically denied access to resources and opportunities.

As when the camera later lingers on a t-shirt worn by Scott Roberts, which reads "Success... The Only Option," *Trouble the Water* consistently focuses on what happens when such neoliberal discourses of individual self-empowerment are taken on by those who are most oppressed by them. While it is clear, since after all we are watching Roberts' footage, that to some extent her self-entrepreneurship has been successful, the film's approach to Roberts' own artistic efforts makes equally clear the limits of this process.⁹ As the film shifts from long segments of Roberts' hurricane footage to later footage of her life after the hurricane recorded by Lessin and Deal, Roberts' attempt to record her life is in turn recorded by the *Trouble the Water* film in a fashion that creates a hierarchy between these two artistic projects. In the first such scene, we see the Robertses and their friend and fellow Katrina survivor Brian Nobles in a car, while Brian films and Kimberly Roberts talks on the phone, telling a friend that she has met some "people who are making a documentary, a real documentary. And all in the same minute, I'm teaching Brian [Nobles] how to be a director." Although Roberts' description indicates the persistence of her own ambitions, the phrase "a real documentary" seems to acknowledge a kind of downgrading of her own efforts (particularly as earlier Roberts describes her hurricane footage as "the documentary '05" in her voiceover). Underscoring the existence and ranking of these competing projects, the image track in this scene cuts between long segments of footage of the Robertses shot by the filmmakers' cameraperson, much briefer and more washed-out segments of footage shot by Nobles, and then footage of Nobles filming. The effect is to encapsulate Roberts' and Nobles' efforts within a

larger and more polished product, which orchestrates and controls the viewer's access to Roberts—and vice versa.

Again, I am less interested in censuring Lessin and Deal than in untangling *Trouble the Water's* argument about neoliberal subjectivity in relation to survivors of Hurricane Katrina, which unfolds in large part through its complex and subtle positioning of Roberts. It is evident that the filmmakers took pains to acknowledge Roberts as an artistic collaborator, giving her pride of place as one of the film's directors of photography and showcasing her music as the central performer on its soundtrack. However, these efforts sit side-by-side with an approach that simultaneously foregrounds, contains, and offers its own perspective upon Roberts' artistic and interpretive efforts. In a confluence of form and content similar to that encoded in Roberts' originating transaction with the filmmakers, the hierarchy of interpretive visions at work in *Trouble the Water* stages in artistic terms the power dynamics in which Roberts is ensconced in the world at large: all of her self-affirmation does not give her the power to prevent her footage from being framed and reinterpreted once she has transacted with the filmmakers, nor does it give her the power to offer an on-screen interpretation of Lessin and Deal that would compete with or question their interpretation of her. The limitations placed on her artistic agency within *Trouble the Water*, which we see unfold even as Roberts continues her own film project, intimate the way in which Roberts' fierce commitment to herself and her achievements may have a similarly delimited effect in the face of the pernicious racism, sexism, and classism that have shaped her life.

It is within the context of this critique of self-empowerment that we see and hear Roberts' account of her rescue, a perspective that creates a link between neoliberal discourses of individual enterprise and the heroic efforts of residents of the 9th Ward to save those left to die by their government. *Trouble the Water* goes beyond exposing neoliberalism's structural role in creating this situation to focus on the way in which individual rescue efforts reflect the specific burden of neoliberal subjectivity for the poor. This dynamic unfolds particularly in relation to Roberts' neighbor Larry Sims, who ferries those stuck in the Roberts' attic to a taller house, using a punching bag as a flotation device. When Sims first appears as a rescuer in Roberts' footage, she describes the bag's appearance with some amusement and zooms in on it, and when Larry appears later without it, he is asked "Larry, where the punching bag?" Sims' choice seems humorous precisely because it is so incongruous, but it is also this fact that

makes it so ingenious—exactly the sort of inventive and resourceful approach to a problem that defines the word “enterprising.” Roberts suggests just this connection between rescue and capitalist enterprise when she praises Sims’ efforts during the storm: “Give it up for my brother Larry, bro, cause he really handled his business, man.”

Although we learn later in the film that the rescue efforts of Sims, Scott Roberts, and Brian Nobles also involved a boat, the boat is at that point outside a school that has become a government base, and Scott Roberts and Nobles only approach it gingerly after gaining permission from the surrounding soldiers. The boat, a proper instrument for water rescue, seems to belong to the authorities, while the punching bag is both a makeshift raft and uncontested neighborhood property. Like the globe that Scott Roberts and Nobles use to plan their drive to Memphis, the punching bag and the other improvised objects of self-rescue function as metonyms for the twin burdens neoliberal subjectivity places on the poor: the insistence on self-empowerment and self-care, and the radical diminishing of material resources with which those living in poverty undertake this project. If the classic injunction to “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” epitomizes neoliberal governance, then these makeshift tools suggest the efforts of those who have been systematically denied both boots and straps, but who still strive to fulfill the requirements of neoliberal citizenship, demonstrating their fitness for survival precisely by inventively employing the few scavenged and substandard resources to which they have been allowed access.

While the examples I have discussed thus far register a struggle to achieve the ideal of individual agency required for neoliberal self-responsibilization, moments of successful self- and community rescue in the film indicate the way in which achieving this agential ideal fails to result in a reprieve from structures of domination. Usually, of course, we consider agency to be an index of freedom, assuming that the more effect one can have on the world the more free one is, but this perspective founders when we consider the rescue experiences represented in *Trouble the Water*. In comparison with the tedium and stasis of life in the 9th Ward as demonstrated by Roberts’ pre-storm footage, the sort of dramatic rescues Sims undertakes—as when we see him carrying a little girl on his back through rising waters—represents a veritable explosion of agency. Overnight, he moves from a landscape in which young African American men are given scant meaningful opportunities for positive action in their communities to one in which he is literally making life and death decisions that will

determine the fates of those around him. At the same time, however, it seems cruelly unjust to describe this transformation as one that somehow either increases Sims' freedom or decreases his interpolation in profound structures of domination. Such moments suggest the way in which neoliberalism puts pressure on the conventional association of agency and freedom, intertwining experiences of intense agential activity with circumstances of intense suffering and profound structural inequities. The film stages precisely this conjunction when it pairs dramatic footage of Sims' rescues with audio from 911 calls in which drowning New Orleans residents are told that no rescue services are available. Saving one's own life and the lives of others in the absence of governmental intervention may mean that one has decisively escaped political controls on one's actions, but this is hardly a form of freedom most of us would choose.

This tragic confluence of intense domination and neoliberal discourses of individual achievement comes to a climax in *Trouble the Water* in Roberts' performance of her song "Amazing." While Roberts testifies to her strength and commitment to survival in extended speeches at two earlier points in the film, the song takes these claims to a new level, offering an arresting account of Roberts' life history that seems to occupy a different, heightened register from the rest of the film. In part, this sense of intensity arises from the relationship the song constructs between Roberts and the film's creators and audience: when she insists that "I don't need you to tell me I'm amazing," Roberts' performance seems to punch through the frame that has been constructed around her by the filmmakers, issuing a direct challenge to those who are engaged in recording, watching, and evaluating her life. If part of Roberts' loss of artistic agency came from the way in which she and her footage were framed and interpreted by the filmmakers, her lyrics push pointedly back on that process of interpretation, insisting that she doesn't need anyone else to explain her life to her. As Rob Nelson suggests, much of the pleasure in this scene, which is often described as the highlight of the film by reviewers, comes from seeing Roberts at last achieve some of the artistic control she so clearly craves throughout the film, a sight that Nelson justly describes as bringing on goose bumps.¹⁰

At the same time, however, when Nelson goes on to argue that this scene offers "a brief moment [in which] socioeconomic adversity is transcended," he seems to have missed the other half of the scene's point.¹¹ The song makes clear Roberts' achievements in a fashion that fully endorses her self-assessment, but it also calls into question

the possibility of “transcending” the socioeconomic through artistic agency. For example, while her performance is indeed stunning, Roberts’ lyrics are notably repetitive, (“Trying to swallow me up but I was determined to make it/Had enemies everywhere but I was determined to make it”), violating the usual hip-hop convention of avoiding identical rhymes in favor of clever and surprising ones that

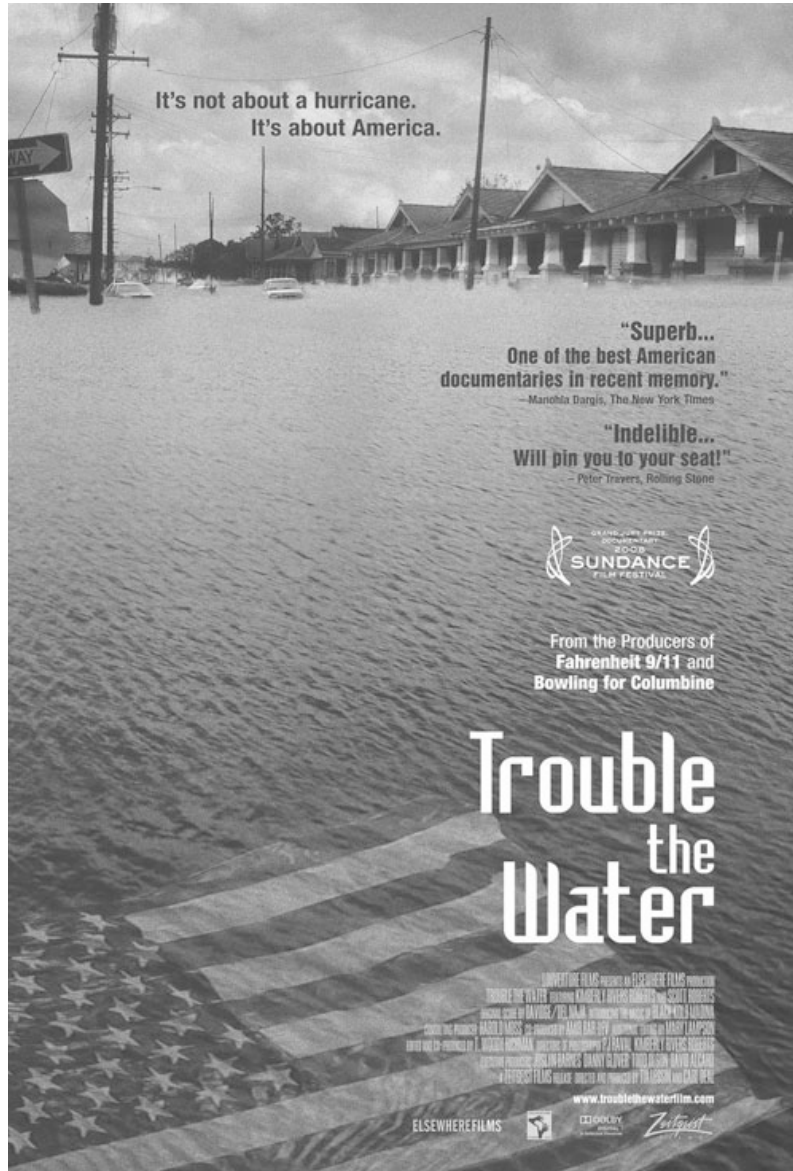


Figure 5.1 Documentaries such as *Trouble the Water* and *When the Levees Broke* associate the positive, agential action of survivors with the imperatives of neoliberal self-governance.

showcase the artist's flair. The appearance of repetition where one would expect difference suggests an artistic struggle to break with the given that reflects the thwarted attempts at transformation at work in the lives of the Robertses as a whole throughout much of the film. That Roberts raps along with a recording of her own voice brings together the stasis of repetition with the burden of self-help in all its meanings: as when Roberts recalls that she wrote the song to cheer herself up "when [she] was depressed," Roberts' self-accompaniment registers the sterile tautology of even "amazing" efforts at self-empowerment in a climate in which doing everything for oneself is the very form of domination. *Trouble the Water* does enact the process of uplift through art, sharing its artistic cachet with Roberts in a way that seems to have had materially transformative effects on her life off-screen. But its climactic scene also questions that very process, calling on us to resist the seductive idea that the increase in agency suggested by successful neoliberal self-empowerment is a genuine step toward freedom—even when that idea comes to us in the well-beloved guise of the *sui generis* artist whose talent and belief in herself triumph against all odds (figure 5.1).¹²

“Because of what’s she’s been through . . . because
she’s still alive”

If the adoption of neoliberal principles by Hurricane Katrina survivors is depicted as a form of cruel and unusual punishment in *Trouble the Water*, it becomes a crime that merits just such punishment in the television series *House, M.D.* In general, *House* offers an ongoing paean to neoliberal subjectivity in the person of its hero, the brilliant diagnostician Dr. Gregory House. Coming off like a particularly abrasive spokesperson for Chicago School neoliberalism, House routinely argues that people always act in their own interests and that human behavior can be accurately predicted based on this fact—and his own reliably scandalous activities constitute a veritable personification of this maxim. A leg injury associates him with that most Benthamite of interests, physical pain, while his shameless addiction to painkillers enacts the neoliberal axiom that every individual has the right to pursue his or her own interests, provided no one else is harmed.¹³ House's other major interest, diagnosing unusual medical illnesses, gives this neoliberal fantasy a markedly utopian cast: fortuitously, House's consuming and entirely self-centered desire to solve puzzles just happens to save lives. In a fashion reminiscent

of Adam Smith's infamous invisible hand, the maniacal pursuit of individual interest somehow results in benefits to all. Although his clash with a profit-obsessed boss in Season One demonstrated that House employs neoliberal rationality in the service of locating "the answer" rather than improving the bottom line, even this commitment to truth finds a reflection in the neoliberal tendency to boil every employment decision down to performance metrics: whenever House's shenanigans get him into trouble, he need only point to his high success rate in solving cases to stymie his critics.¹⁴

It is into this milieu that the series introduces its Hurricane Katrina episode, which features an old friend of House's from college, Crandall, and Leona, a sixteen-year-old Katrina survivor who lost her mother in the storm and claims that Crandall is her father. Having had an affair with Leona's African American mother while he was writing a book about Leona's grandfather, a famous jazz pianist, Crandall, who is white, accepts Leona's claim and brings her to House for treatment after she suffers from hallucinations and a heart attack on their flight out of New Orleans. House, knowing his friend for an easy mark, immediately decides that Leona is scamming Crandall and decides that he will prove that she is not Crandall's daughter and diagnose her illness at the same time. On one level, this plot line offers a straightforward if revolting national allegory: Leona represents the destitute Hurricane Katrina survivors desperate for assistance after the storm, while Crandall represents the decent if overly gullible American public, who allow themselves to be conned into thinking that it is somehow their responsibility to provide this help and are thereby positioned (as House puts it) as the "Katrina victim victim[s]."

In the transposition of the word "victim" from a poor black woman to a middle-class white man who is providing assistance to her, we can hear echoes of the infamous "welfare queen" rhetoric of the 1980s, which positioned white middle-class Americans as the victims of scheming black female con artists who bilked the system at the expense of hardworking white people; in both cases, the oppressed and suffering are transformed into the aggressors against the white middle class, who appropriate the mantle of innocent victim for themselves. Yet Leona retains her own victim status to an extent that sharply distinguishes her from the imagined welfare queens of Reaganite lore. Rather than questioning the extent of her suffering, House's medical team describes Leona as having been "stuck in hell" because "New Orleans was a third world country."

The hellish nature of her experiences is ratified for the viewer via Leona's harrowing hallucinations of the storm, and ultimately we learn that it was an infection related to the storm that has caused her illness. The episode never blames Leona for her "choice" to stay in the city in a fashion that would raise doubts about her status as a self-responsibilized neoliberal subject, nor does it imply that she disdained other, more ethical or arduous means of self-support in favor of latching on to Crandall. Instead, "Who's Your Daddy?" takes a very different and ultimately more disturbing approach: accepting that Leona was "in hell," that Crandall was her only way out of hell, and that, in keeping with neoliberal principles, only irrational individuals fail to act in their own best interests, the episode nonetheless presents Leona's rational and self-interested attempt to escape hell as utterly repulsive and unconscionable. Rather than criticizing Leona as failing to merit neoliberal citizenship, the episode positions her bid for survival as a logical outcome of rational neoliberal subjectivity but reviles her nonetheless.

Obviously, this is an oddly laborious and contradictory way to go about vilifying Hurricane Katrina survivors, particularly when the tools for painting them as failed neoliberal citizens are so ready to hand. But this approach makes sense if we view maligning survivors as a by-product or side benefit of a more overarching narrative project: distinguishing neoliberal hegemony from the desperate, chaotic struggle for survival associated with New Orleans after the storm. While in modern political theory the drive for self-preservation is more commonly associated with the extra-political state of nature—a lawless realm devoid of normative standards of behavior—than with modes of political rule, neoliberalism's constant war on any sense of a shared communal public life has seemed to position the state of nature less as a long-abandoned past or philosophical hypothesis than as a swiftly approaching future.¹⁵ By associating Leona with the problem of self-preservation, the episode presents her as a stand-in for this chaotic, violent state of self-interest run amok. When Crandall asks House how he can doubt Leona with "what she's been through," for example, House interrupts him to say that it is "because of what she's been through" that he doubts her, in particular "because she's still alive." Because Leona's self-preservation was threatened, House can argue that her necessary self-interest led to desperate and hence non-normative and unprincipled behavior; self-preservation equates to an unacceptable incarnation of the philosophy of interest, a vision of "catastrophic neoliberalism" as an anarchic realm in which nothing

at all is held in common and people are merely vessels for the amoral engine of self-interest.

This association between Leona and catastrophic neoliberalism is underscored by her hallucinations of Katrina, the first of which features a life-threatening flood. In the episode's opening scene, while Leona has a quiet conversation on a plane with Crandall, she notices a trickle of water that soon explodes into a filthy tidal wave that submerges her, an occurrence we quickly realize took place only in Leona's mind. Like her later hallucination of the dead and maggot-ridden body of her mother, this scene verifies the reality of the threat to Leona's life experienced during and after the storm, but it does so through a vision at odds with external empirical experience, creating a single-occupant "reality" that is at once intensely individual and fiercely motivating. In a fashion that mirrors House's assertions regarding the non-normative quality of the interest in life, Leona's hallucinations of the storm enact both the fevered pursuit of her interest in survival and the radical loss of a shared, consensual social realm in which such normative standards might be enforced.

It is as proof and reminder of this nightmarish vision of neoliberal hegemony that Leona is condemned and punished by *House*. The remainder of the episode assembles the case for differentiating House's own version of neoliberal existence from Leona's catastrophic Katrina experience, in the process rejecting Leona in a fashion so violent and overdetermined that it would be amusing if it weren't so pernicious. Pain is the key means by which this process unfolds, an approach that makes sense given that the pain/pleasure calculus plays such a crucial role in codifying human interests under neoliberalism. In both scenes in which Leona has hallucinations regarding her awful experiences during and after Katrina, the episode cuts directly from her screams of horror to a shot of House struggling to withstand his leg pain. In both scenes, House is shown enduring his pain in order to pursue his other, more socially beneficial interest, finding the truth about a medical illness, thereby indicating that self-interest serves the social fabric rather than destroying it. The second phase of the episode's deployment of the pain trope is the transformation of Leona's suffering from mental to physical anguish. Gathering from various medical clues that Leona has a neurological condition in which physical pain results in hallucinations, House decides to prove his theory by systematically hurting Leona while her brain is being scanned. After feeble protests from his staff, we watch as House straps Leona down, mendaciously informs her that

“This isn’t going to hurt at all,” and then begins to drive a needle into her body while demanding that she tell him the truth about her parentage. When this doesn’t work, he bends back her finger until it breaks, and this more intense pain brings on a hallucination, proving House’s diagnosis right.

As even this brief summary will suggest, this scene is so nakedly sadistic as to almost beggar belief. Given House’s status as a hero in the series, viewers are apparently expected to look on with approval and enjoyment as a towering white man deliberately inflicts pain on a literally helpless, weeping teenage African American girl. In its recourse to torture, this scene indicates both the intensity of the threat that catastrophic neoliberalism represents, and the means by which this threat comes to be contained: the re-regulation of self-interest. As hallucinations, Leona’s pain indicated the individual, extreme, and hence problematic quality of self-interest. As a physical sensation, however, her interest in avoiding pain becomes the means through which she can be governed and controlled. Torture ceases to be scandalous under neoliberal hegemony precisely because it is only an acute example of neoliberal governmentality more broadly: as in neoliberal governance at large, subjects under torture are compelled to make individual choices between options that have been pre-designed to appeal to their self-interest through the presence of certain incentives and disincentives.¹⁶ In torture scenarios, the choice regarding whether or not to talk is seemingly left up to the individual; not talking just happens to carry the disincentive of extreme pain. When House tortures Leona, he turns the same rational interest in avoiding suffering that has led her to scam Crandall against her; he transforms her self-interest from a hyper-individual, anarchic force to a means by which she can be subdued. In the process, the specter of catastrophic neoliberalism is likewise subdued, replaced with a vision of individual self-interest as a potent, almost omnipotent technology of control. Completing the differentiation between Leona and House, House argues that his own role in this process is innocent because, like his other interests, his desire to torture Leona happens to result in benefits for others besides himself: “Diagnostically, she needed to be hurt. I wanted to hurt her. Win, win.”

The success of this containment strategy is proven by the utter eradication of Leona as an active subject from the remainder of the episode. Breaking with the series’ own conventions, the episode presents no scenes in which House’s underlings chat with Leona, and, in fact, after the torture scene, she never speaks another line.

While many of House's patients enter comas or become otherwise unresponsive in the course of an episode, Leona's status is rendered rather more specific when her digestive system becomes blocked and feces ooze from her mouth—a notably abject and revolting mixing of consumption and excretion. If Leona's self-preserving behavior brought to mind the dangers of extreme, chaotic interest, this reduction of her to an inert abject body gone awry seems to suggest that this chaos has now been confined to her body, leaking out only enough to let us know that it is ensconced and raging within her. As she is immobilized, silenced, and rendered an object of disgust, the horror of Leona's experiences seems to be compressed into her physical being, safely cordoned off below the surface of a body that is then itself symbolically ejected from the social through the process of abjection.

Having decisively dealt with Leona, the episode directs our attention to Crandall in order to promote its own version of post-Katrina neoliberalism. House at first attacks Crandall's desire to "manufactur[e] responsibility" for Leona but revises his opinion when Crandall argues that believing he is Leona's father "feels good" and "feels good is a good enough reason." This reasoning is endorsed by the episode's final shot, which shows House's morphine syringe next to test results that prove Crandall is not Leona's father, information House never shared with Crandall. If helping Katrina victims makes you "feel good," the juxtaposition implies, then it is reasonable to be allowed to pursue this interest, just as the physical interest in avoiding pain makes it reasonable to shoot morphine if you are in agony. In a corollary to *House's* long-standing argument that self-interest has the side effect of helping society, we now learn that social benefits should *only* arise as side effects to self-interest. Meanwhile, the key to diagnosing Leona's illness turns out to lie in Crandall's book about her grandfather, Jesse Baker, entitled *Genius Destroyed*. The book blames Baker's drinking for his deterioration into madness, but House gleans from the accompanying performance CD that Baker was not crazy and drunk but suffering from an obscure illness that Leona has inherited. Crucially, House's exoneration of Baker arises from the intersection of truth and performance metrics: House can tell Baker was ill because he played too well to be intoxicated. Instead of having destroyed himself through ungoverned attachment to what "feels good," Baker turns out to be a sick man who nevertheless performed admirably—rather like House, in other words. The subplot attempts to persuade us that African Americans won't

necessarily be excised from a stable neoliberal future, provided they avoid Leona's association with self-preservation and match House in marrying self-interest to measurably valuable performance.¹⁷

“We place a great importance on culture”

I want to conclude by examining briefly the way in which *When the Levees Broke* negotiates the problematic of self-preservation I have been exploring thus far. Assembled primarily from talking-head interviews and archival footage, *Levees* frequently intercuts interviewees' description of events that they witnessed or that relate to their professional expertise with footage of the same or similar events, such that the interviewee's account becomes in part a voiceover for the film's chronology of the storm and its aftermath. Because it avoids including Lee's questions as much as possible, this approach serves to make the interviewees the film's primary narrators, in a fashion that Lee in his audio commentary describes as allowing survivors to “testify.”¹⁸ When it intercuts interviews and archival footage, the film both illustrates and authenticates Katrina survivors' testimony, which is proven to be accurate via the indexical record of the film footage that accompanies their description.

However, the use of this practice is varied in a fashion that gives it resonance beyond its value as authentication. In general, *Levees* relies on intercutting when interviewees are providing general accounts of developments and events that they witnessed or opinions about various causes and effects during the Katrina event, but it rarely employs this practice when its interviewees are describing their own individual experience and actions. For example, Mike Seelig's dramatic interview account of watching the sewer system in the process of failing is intercut with footage of the same event; Phyllis Montana LeBlanc's account of being stuck at the New Orleans airport is not, although such footage is provided for the immediately preceding interview, an airport director's account of the same period and events. The effect of this approach is to foreground the interviewee's role as narrator and observer rather than as suffering participant, even when he or she is describing personal experience and actions. Because LeBlanc took part in the events in the airport as an evacuee rather than a government official, intercutting her account with footage of evacuees stuck in the airport would in effect identify her with or interpolate her within those archival images, recreating her participation in these earlier events. By avoiding the inclusion of

footage to accompany LeBlanc's account, *Levees* ensconces her outside of and at a level above her past experience—a position underscored by the location of her interview on a balcony overlooking the floor where she and her husband were packed in with thousands of others, awaiting a flight out of New Orleans.

Tellingly, the film's major deviation from this practice arises in the sequence focused on self- and community-rescue efforts, which consistently intercuts between the interviewees' accounts of individual action and archival footage of people undertaking the same or similar actions.¹⁹ For example, when LeBlanc describes how she and her family waved SOS signs and then evacuated themselves using refrigerators as rafts, her account in part overlays aerial footage of people undertaking similar actions with empty plastic tubs and other makeshift flotation devices—the only one of LeBlanc's many interviews in the film proper to be intercut in this fashion.²⁰ This technique foregrounds the link between self-rescue and agential activity by turning its narrators back into protagonists: when we hear the interviewees' descriptions of their actions as voiceover accompaniments to images of similar actions, the effect is to place the narrators within the footage, to associate them with the bodies depicted taking those actions. In so doing, these sequences in effect synchronize the interviewees' past acts of self- and community rescue with their present narrative account, linking them through both content and form to the presence of agential action in the midst of suffering and domination.

If moments of self-preservation indicate something of the problematic quality of agency under neoliberalism—the way in which neoliberalism's eradication of a shared social realm can increase agency and deprivation simultaneously—*Levees'* intercutting practice both acknowledges and attenuates this connection. The film registers the interfiliation of agency and suffering in its use of intercutting in the self-preservation sequences, but it more often presents its interviewees as narrative authorities over an experience of suffering from which they have been distanced, both temporally and formally. By foregrounding narrative authority in this fashion, *Levees* pries apart and reconfigures the relationship between suffering and agency through the addition of a third term: cultural practice. Through the emphasis on interviewees as narrators, agency becomes associated with an act of *describing* an experience of suffering—an experience that is simultaneously honored and located as an object of contemplation lodged within the past. This transfiguration of the link between agency and suffering through artistic practice is further developed

in the film's reliance on diegetic musical performance—for example, Wynton Marsalis' *a capella* rendition of "St. James Infirmary," which serves as the soundtrack for a montage of still photos of people enduring the aftermath of the storm. Because these are still images, all activity of the bodies within them is halted, while Marsalis' recorded-live performance of a New Orleans jazz classic enacts a present tense, ongoing tradition of African American cultural agency, into which the suffering caused by Katrina seems to be transmitted directly. Instead of the intercutting process that peopled Katrina footage with subjects we have come to know through interviews, we view images of stilled, unnamed bodies in distress while the performance of a renowned musician brings a cultural artifact to life. In effect, the agency that accompanied suffering in the survivors' accounts of self-evacuation is replaced here by jazz musicianship, which both preserves the experience of suffering and becomes itself an object worthy of preservation.

Of course, the historical importance of New Orleans to African American cultural history, particularly jazz history, has made the linkage between culture and storm in films such as *Levees* seem only to be expected, a sense of inevitability intensified by Lee's own connections to the jazz community. Because of this history, it seems equally inevitable that the film would deploy New Orleans' cultural heritage in a canny attempt to prove that the poorer areas of the city deserve to be rebuilt. If New Orleans residents "place a great importance on culture," as actor Wendell Pierce puts it in the film, this is a valuation shared with what Jodi Melamud calls "neoliberal multiculturalism," a late twentieth-century variant of multiculturalism that draws on the idea of a culturally diverse nation in order to position the United States as morally superior to "monocultural" regimes abroad.²¹ In its emphasis on New Orleans' unique culture *Levees* seemingly plays to the logic of neoliberal multiculturalism, in effect offering cultural specificity as a reason why the 9th Ward should be rebuilt. Yet the intercutting patterns I have been tracking in the film suggest something else may be at work as well. If moments of self-preservation indicate the way in which agential action in one's own best interest does nothing to release one from neoliberal structures of domination—quite the opposite—then we might understand the film's preference for artistic practice as an attempt to retain some sense of agency for its interviewees without simultaneously endorsing the tainted version at work in neoliberalism. In effect, *Levees'* focus on the artistic agency necessary to represent suffering seems

to offer something of a utopian alternative to the particular dynamic of neoliberal domination; in both cases, suffering and agency coexist, but in the moments of artistic practice featured by *Levees*, they are separated into two bodies, the one whose life was under threat and the one who tells the tale.

In its attempt to produce this alternative, *Levees* draws on the long-standing and highly contested association between art and resistance, redeploying art's utopian pulse in an attempt to resist new neoliberal forms of domination. Whereas earlier incarnations of art's utopian promise highlighted art's ability to wrest agency from ideological closure, *Levees* instead attempts to replace a problematic version of agency with an artistic form that seemingly, and perhaps wishfully, is presented as safe from neoliberal associations. In so doing, *Levees* indicates the way in which the reconfiguration of agency under neoliberalism is placing new demands on our ability to both comprehend and represent domination and resistance, a shift that is registered by each of the texts I have been discussing. In a sense, *House*'s virulent attack on its Katrina survivor, Leona, underscores this shift most emphatically. While the representation of Leona is almost unbelievably racist and castigatory, it relies on none of the Reaganite tropes that depicted African American subjects as either secretly living in comfort or too lazy to improve their circumstances by non-fraudulent means. Instead, *House* positions Leona's drive for self-preservation as an incarnation of neoliberal principles and then condemns her for her association with an event that showed the worst effects of those principles. Even *House*, a veritable paean to neoliberalism, is unable to deny fully the searing reality of catastrophic neoliberalism inscribed by the Katrina event, but it concedes this threat only to expel it through a new racialized politics of blame.

Although their politics are diametrically opposed to that of *House*, *Trouble the Water* and *Levees* display a similar shift: both documentaries demonstrate the way in which acts of self-preservation by African American survivors resonate with the neoliberal ideal in which actions in one's own best interest are undertaken in a governmental vacuum. For *Trouble the Water* and *Levees*, however, the resulting challenge to their representation of Katrina is rather different: once the heroic reclamation of agency from tragedy becomes itself a sign of neoliberal citizenship, the long-standing Left project of augmenting agency for the oppressed is itself called into question. *Trouble the Water* handles this challenge by making the question of agency its central concern, ultimately demonstrating the way in which the

limitations on agency and the limitations *of* agency are fundamentally and disastrously intertwined for Roberts and her community. In contrast, *Levees* attempts to resist the problematic nature of neoliberal agency by reconfiguring agency as a form of artistic practice, an approach that both acknowledges and displaces the neoliberal confluence of suffering and agency. Taken together, these texts suggest the way in which racialized narratives of the Katrina event at times exceed the paradigm of the biopolitics of disposability, producing new configurations of neoliberalism, race, and domination that do not require the eradication of agency to produce unspeakable domination.

Notes

1. See *Stormy Weather: Katrina and the Politics of Disposability*, p. 22.
2. Although it is specifically focused on the Katrina event, Giroux's polemic resonates with pre-Katrina analyses of the relationship between neoliberalism and identity politics such as Lisa Duggan's important assessment in *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. Both readings underscore neoliberalism's tendency to attach the worst effects of its policies to the racialized bodies of the poor, and to circulate images of those bodies as examples of failed neoliberal citizenship.
3. Nicole R. Fleetwood, "Failing Narratives, Initiating Technologies: Hurricane Katrina and the Production of a Weather Media Event."
4. On neoliberalism and self-responsibilization, see, for example, Bilge Yesil, "Watching Ourselves: Video Surveillance, Urban Space and Self-Responsibilization," and Mitchell Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society*, p. 163.
5. *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*, p. 142. Rose's work is grounded in Michel Foucault's influential account of liberalism and neoliberalism in *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1978–79*.
6. I am indebted here to Kimberly Springer's illuminating analysis of the relationship between neoliberalism and African American figures such as the hip-hop entrepreneur. See Springer, "Hate the Game, Not the Playa: Unmasking Neoliberal Articulations Amongst the Black Power Elite." For an important and related reading of reality TV and self-responsibilization, see Anna McCarthy, "Reality Television: A Neoliberal Theater of Suffering."
7. Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: Rise of Disaster Capitalism*.
8. *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy?*, p. 14.

9. For a review of *Trouble the Water* that examines Roberts' loss and recovery of artistic agency in the film, see Rob Nelson, "Screenings: *Trouble the Water*."
10. For example, Nelson terms the performance "an old-school show-stopper" in his review, while Legacy Lee describes it as "uplifting" and "the film's only resolution." See Nelson, "Screenings: *Trouble the Water*," p. 69, and Legacy Lee, "Trouble the Water," p. 18.
11. Nelson, "Screenings: *Trouble the Water*," p. 69.
12. In her incisive account of "situated testimony" in *Trouble the Water*, Janet Walker raises important questions regarding the utopian ending of the film, particularly in relation to Scott Roberts' new employment by a kindly white boss. See "Rights and Returns: Perils and Fantasies of Situated Testimony after Katrina."
13. On the relationship between Jeremy Bentham and contemporary neoliberalism, see Stephen G. Engelmann, *Imagining Interest in Political Thought: Origins of Economic Rationality*, pp. 52–55.
14. This plotline involved an African American millionaire who attempted to rationalize hospital operations in a way that would maximize profits and benefit his own pharmaceutical company, a process that led him to try to fire House. The casting of an African American in this role is in keeping with the series' association of the business of medicine with House's female boss; in both cases, minorities/women ventriloquize the elements of neoliberalism that serve corporate interests, a tendency that the series desires to disavow. Regarding House's commitment to truth over profit, see E. Rich Leigh et al., "The Afterbirth of the Clinic: A Foucauldian Perspective on 'House M.D.' and American Medicine in the 21st Century." On neoliberal governance through performance metrics, see Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*, pp. 151–153.
15. See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*. On self-preservation, normativity, and liberalism in Hobbes, Locke, and the war on terror, see Yaseen Noorani, "The Rhetoric of Security."
16. For a related argument regarding torture and governmentality, see Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society*, p. 15.
17. This emphasis on the cultural value of Katrina survivors in terms of music history was reflected in real-world media attention to the rescue of Fats Domino. I discuss New Orleans' music culture, agency, and Katrina survival in greater detail in the next section.
18. On *When the Levees Broke* and "situated testimony," see Walker, "Rights and Returns: Perils and Fantasies of Situated Testimony after Katrina."
19. Exceptions include footage produced by Lee's crew regarding the return to New Orleans and the long-term effects of the storm (e.g., Terence Blanchard's return to his mother's house) and footage shot

by interviewees, in which they appear as narrators and cinematographers (e.g., Shelton “Shakespeare” Alexander’s footage from the Superdome). In the first case, temporal distance removes survivors from the extremity of physical suffering associated with the flooded city, while in the second, artistic agency is emphasized through the presence of the interviewee as narrator and filmmaker. I discuss the role of cultural agency in greater detail later.

20. There is significantly more intercutting in the ancillary Act V in interviews with LeBlanc and others; for the most part, the intercutting occurs in an extended segment focused on self- and community-rescues.
21. See “The Spirit of Neoliberalism: From Racial Liberalism to Neoliberal Multiculturalism.” On *Levees*’ own investment in monocultural experience, see Walker, “Rights and Returns: Perils and Fantasies of Situated Testimony after Katrina.”