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From the Filmmaker, *Still Waiting: Life After Katrina*

KATE BROWNE

Still Waiting: Life After Katrina leads many viewers to comment on the strength and centrality of women in the 155-member family that we followed. I want to point out, however, that this woman-centered film rises not from a decision to showcase women's voices or experiences, but from the truths that came to light through steady, ethnographic work.

Over a period of 18 months, we became students of the family's nightmares and their struggles to find a way back to life as they had known it. As we interviewed all varieties of people at different stages of grief and recovery, many key stories, personalities, and themes emerged naturally. The force of women became an undeniable theme. Through storytelling, cooking, and ritual gatherings, key women reproduced a sense of belonging and continuity amidst the upheaval, displacement, and confusion of life away from home. Women galvanized others in the network to get organized, stay connected, practice their faith, and face with courage the overwhelming odds that threatened every member of the group. And, beyond the details of their own stories, the women in *Still Waiting* capture a larger social truth about African American families and the multiple ways that women manage and sustain their kin networks, however profound the challenges.

In the last days of August of 2005, like millions of other Americans, I watched with horror the raging storm that pushed right through ill-built levees in New Orleans and threatened to drown the city. Reports from the bayou communities outside the city showed how these areas were imperiled by even more than the levee breaches. In places like St. Bernard Parish where most of the *Still Waiting* family had their homes, the natural buffer of extensive wetlands had largely disappeared as a result of oil pipeline construction and manmade ship channels. Without the thousands of acres of wetlands that had once kept powerful storm surges at bay, whole parishes like this one had become vulnerable.

New Orleans has always been a complex, soulful city. My shock and sadness at the unspeakable and unnecessary damage of Katrina moved me to look for a way to relocate my research here. The prospect of doing anthropology in New Orleans, the only French Caribbean city in the United States, felt like a natural extension of my long-term fieldwork on the French island of Martinique. By chance, I had nearly completed an ethnographic film with Emmy-winning filmmaker Ginny Martin about my research with Afro-Creole women entrepreneurs in Martinique.¹ When Katrina struck, like many scholars all over the country, I felt a sense of urgency to research what was happening. At Colorado State University, I formed a research partnership with an extraordinary young disaster

sociologist, Lori Peek, and together we secured funding from the National Science Foundation to pursue our separate Katrina research plans. Peek would focus on interviewing evacuees to Denver as would my graduate student, Megan Underhill; I would collaborate on a new film project with Martin to document the lived experience of disaster in hopes of one day communicating these realities to a broad American public.

From our first encounter with the family portrayed in *Still Waiting*,² the women of the group made a strong impression. The senior women became models for others, practicing every conceivable strategy to reproduce the sense of family and comfort they had enjoyed back home. In Connie's kitchen, they prepared "down-home" comfort food, and even sent men on periodic all-day runs to Louisiana just to bring back the Creole ingredients that were unavailable in Dallas. They told stories, drew out anxious children, and schemed ways to get back home. We filmed everyone who agreed to be interviewed, and most of these were women. In the end, the people that others regarded as the glue of the family—Katie, Connie, and Janie—became the glue for our film.

Connie's centrality to the network and to our story was evident from the beginning: she was the one who had welcomed all her bayou relatives to her home in Texas.³ The 155 people who showed up the weekend before Katrina made landfall certainly had no intention of staying. Evacuating ahead of the storm was a ritual precautionary exercise that had never required them to stay away more than a day or two. But when Katrina changed all that, Connie never blinked. With unfailing compassion and energy, she stepped up to the breathless, monumental task of locating everything everyone needed, from housing, doctors, and schools to eyeglasses and toys. Connie's management of the crisis thrust her into the center of the network where she performed small miracles every day for six intense months. She represented the source of provisions, the interface with bureaucracies like the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the solution to almost every question, and the steady reassurance that life would go on.

If Connie provided the shelter from the storm, Katie and Janie made it feel a little more like home. They are the natural storytellers who shared the joy and poignancy of ordinary life as they knew it—stories about the regular gatherings of family, the crab boils and gumbo, the special occasion foods and dress up and the "house-to-house" rituals that wove together families into a single network and a genuine system of reciprocity. Their stories drew others to them and helped bind the most distant of kin to the social memory of the group. Through their warmth and intelligence, Katie and Janie helped others process the pain and hold onto hope.

Like the women, the men in this extended family are responsible parents and income providers. There were few senior men in the family network, however, and most of the younger men seemed uncomfortable talking with us about themselves and their losses. We learned of their contributions and

many kinds of initiative from their mothers and aunts. Both in Dallas and back home, the men typically separated themselves physically in the yard, grouping around the grill or hanging out in Connie's upstairs game room. I learned from my Caribbean research that the social world of Afro-Creole men is intricate and interesting, but it is often a separate world, not fundamentally organized around kin ties as women's lives are. However dependent they may be on their kin networks for exchanges of food, babysitting chores, and information, they commonly defer to women to reinforce these ties and ensure the health of the family ecosystem.

Women at the center of the film indeed have the most to say and provide visible direction and counsel to others, but it is important not to mistake them for one-dimensional, mythic figures without troubles or emotional challenges of their own. Janie accepts her own fragility, although this vulnerability does not reduce her value as a model. To the contrary, while Katie demonstrates unflinching resolve and humor, Janie provides a model of the freedom to feel confusion and anger, to be unsure about what will come. Connie's vulnerability bubbles up once people begin trickling back to the bayou. Losing the closeness that had defined those months in Dallas at the same time that Connie must forfeit her role at the center of the network ushers in feelings of loss, doubt, and confusion. Katie's vulnerability shows up toward the end of the film: by this time, nearly two years after Katrina, the unending difficulties of trying to regain her life simply wear her down. Disappointed with the church, with the state she has become dependent on, and even with her family members who are too busy to come eat her food, Katie slips into a new phase of sadness. It is not possible in this space to relay the full complexity of each of these characters, but the film attempts to reveal their humanity as well as their courage.

In sum, the force of women in this family cannot be dismissed as an accident or a producer's vision. Like the center beams that hold up a home, the women in *Still Waiting* signal a female power that derives from a distinctive cultural history. Theirs is a history steeped in slavery in which the expectations of women slaves were equal to those of men. The legacies of these brutal experiences contributed to shaping women who exert economic and emotional independence and, in doing so, ensure the survival of the family. For this reason, the woman-centered story of *Still Waiting* not only draws on ethnographic reality, it also echoes gendered patterns in other Afro-Creole societies of the Caribbean as well as African-American communities in the U.S. today.

Update Since the Release of *Still Waiting*

Since the filming ended, Connie has seen her son graduate with a Ph.D. degree from a British university. She is herself now pursuing a Master's

degree in psychology. Her mother (who was also Robin and Deborah's mother) died in October 2007 from the stress of Katrina. On her bed in the hospice, she and Connie watched the PBS broadcast of *Still Waiting*. Janie and her husband John have decided to move back to New Orleans, but have no place to live since they turned over their ruined home to a daughter who has rebuilt it with her husband. For now, they are rotating their residence among their scattered children. Katie suffered a stroke on Christmas Eve 2007, and struggles to recapture her voice and her mobility. The family members closest to her blame the hardships of Katrina—the material losses, the strangeness of life in Dallas, the indignity of still living in a cramped FEMA trailer, the bureaucratic mazes and incomprehensible language required to navigate them, the loss of neighbors, the death of family and friends, the slow rebuilding of the church, the waiting for Road Home money, the fall off the steps that put her in a wheelchair, the gradual decline of family gatherings—wearing down Katie's spirit until there was simply too little left with which to fight back. Family gatherings continue, but the strain of this ordeal has penetrated the ethic of the collective and leaves in doubt the viability of continuing the good life on the bayou.

Katherine E. Browne is professor of anthropology at Colorado State University. She has published numerous journal articles about Afro-Creole culture, economic morality, and gender identities, and her book, *Creole Economics: Caribbean Cunning Under the French Flag*, is published by University of Texas Press (2004). Her new book, *Economics and Morality: Anthropological Approaches* (2008), is co-edited with Lynne Milgram. Send correspondence to kate.browne@colostate.edu.

Notes

1. The original, French-language version of this film is now completed: *Au Tour-nant de l'Histoire*, and was broadcast on French national and international TV in May 2008. An English-subtitled version of this film, called *Lifting the Weight of History: Afro-Creole Women Entrepreneurs*, is scheduled for release in December 2008.
2. We had already begun filming evacuees in Denver in early October 2005 when we heard about a large family that had all evacuated to a relative's home in Dallas. One of Martin's friends had met Connie Tipado in a breast cancer survivor group in Dallas and passed on her name.
3. Connie and her family also welcomed our interest in following their story, and we filmed them over the subsequent 18 months, through March 2007.