

# *Complexity and Postmodern Criticality: Moral Dimensions of Emergentist Research*

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## **Introduction**

This paper will explore how complexity approaches to educational research create a space if not a moral imperative to make a positive difference for families who have been displaced by hurricanes Katrina and Rita along the Gulf Coast of the United States. Researching into their lives implicates emergentist logic, a way of considering the ecology of an environment that embraces rather than controls for uncertainty, accelerated effects, and turbulent dynamics. Traditional logics, as the basis for modernist research approaches, have the goal to predict a future yet-to-be based on assumptions of the knowability of the past and understanding of the present using objective means of gathering appropriate data. Traditional or modernist logics are deterministic, oriented toward closure and the already-known rather than the as-yet-unknown and unknowable (see Osberg & Biesta, 2007). Researching into the lives of those who have been displaced by the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes cannot accommodate for what New Orleans-based journalist Jed Horne reminds us was an “unnatural disaster—unnatural in its scale and destructiveness, but also unnatural in the sense it was not limited causally to the forces of nature, to weather and geography and tides” (Horne, 2006, p. xvi). As has become so readily apparent, the hurricanes of 2005 revealed failures along so many dimensions that one can in no way attribute the human impact on natural causes nor fail to recognize

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the moral dimensions of the catastrophe associated with the disaster that includes so much more than the flooding of New Orleans resulting from the failed levee systems.

Embracing an emergentist logic, researching into the lives of those who were displaced by hurricane Katrina implicates re-searching, searching again, into their pasts and presents, with the hope of making a difference for them as they create yet-unimagined futures. Emergentist logic treats past and future as a multi-dimensional continuum, where events are connected not by chains of causality but layers of meaning, recursive dynamics, nonlinear effects, and chance. An emergentist logic is based on the assumption of open-systems and, as applied to re-searching into the lives of those affected by hurricane Katrina, builds on Doll's (1986) application of open-systems ideas to educational contexts and the curriculum. In an open system, there is a richness or ecology of interactions that makes prediction with certainty impossible. Perturbation is important in open systems for change to occur. Tapping into the possibilities of the unknown future, control in open systems gives way to exploration of patterned relationship and emergent dynamics. Boundaries and borders are recognized in open systems as permeable and often artificial and are probed and prodded to reveal hidden relationships and emergent possibilities.

There is a moral dimension to researching into the lives of those displaced by the hurricanes of 2005 which is supported by an emergentist logic. In exploring the ecology of South Louisiana in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, this unnatural disaster reveals layers of injustice and complexities of relationship that are not easily understood using traditional, modernist logic. Whether grounded in rationalist, structuralist, or post-structuralist perspectives, the patterns of relationship and ecology of the south cannot be captured without using an approach to research grounded in an emergentist logical framework (see Osberg & Biesta, 2007) where openings are created for re-searching the past and present toward a more hopeful and yet-unknown future. Researching into the lives of those who have been displaced by the unnatural disaster of Katrina should open to possibility more positive and hopeful futures. Otherwise, we continue to exploit and remove ourselves from the moral obligation we have as researchers to re-search the past in order to make a positive difference for the future.

Building from an emergentist logic, post-modern criticality as a research approach is relevant for examining the lives of those affected by hurricane Katrina in order to make a difference in their lives and open spaces for more hopeful futures. Post-modern criticality looks for patterns of relationship without assuming the “given-ness” of past, present, or future, accepting the uncertainty of the future and driving research not in an effort to find truth but to explore the many layers of relationship and meaning that may present hope for a better future. The challenge to make a difference in people’s lives, to question the structures, institutions, policies and politics that create our current social ecologies suggests there are spaces for complex criticality in educational research.

### Multiple Layers/Multiple Dimensions

In August and September 2005, hurricanes Katrina and Rita struck the coast of Louisiana. Hundreds of thousands of residents were relocated to temporary homes. Through a partnership between UC Links (a collaborative after-school initiative out of the Graduate School of Education, UC Berkeley) and the College of Education at Louisiana State University, *Delta Express* was formed to address the educational needs of the children displaced by hurricane Katrina. We began our work at two sites. Our first efforts, lead by UC Links, established computer labs for children living on the cruise ships brought in to the Port of New Orleans to house thousands of essential employees and their families during the first months after the hurricane. Some of those who were residing on the cruise ships had earlier been displaced to the River Center in Baton Rouge in the days immediately following the hurricane. Students and faculty from Louisiana State University began their efforts to provide a variety of services at the River Center in Baton Rouge from the very early days of its use as an evacuation site.

Toward the end of 2005, as the cruise ships were removed and the River Center was closed, our efforts became centered at the Renaissance Village, a FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) trailer park in Baker, Louisiana north of Baton Rouge. Structures and services were designed to provide and extend educational services to include social, emotional, health, and civic components in order to address the myriad

of needs of the children and families residing in the trailer park and to develop materials and models for future responses to natural disasters when large populations are relocated to temporary villages such as these. Leveraging university resources and established partnerships, this project was intended to deepen and strengthen the service-learning infrastructure of our college and promote opportunities for university students and faculty to engage in their communities while providing essential services to the displaced peoples residing in the Renaissance Village.

While the hope of meeting the needs of those who had been displaced was coupled with engaging our students in service learning activities, it was less clear how our work in the trailer park and with other relief efforts addressed the research mission of my university. What was my role, as a researcher, to look into the lives of these families with whom we had become so involved and spent so much time? What are the ethics of researching families in crisis, and for whom is such research done? What kind of research captures the complexity of the events, even as they are unfolding, without reducing the differences and over-simplifying the interconnected relationships? What are the organizing principles of an approach to research that brings to light the many dimensions and complexity of meanings of the lives of the people in the Renaissance Village? How can my research be socially relevant and critically engage the many dimensions of social, political and educational issues that make the layers of meaning so elusive?

Evolving out of these questions has been an approach to re-researching the lives of those with whom we have worked in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina that is based on an emergentist logic. Post-modern criticality looks for patterns of relationship without assuming the “givenness” of past, present, or future, accepting the uncertainty of the future and driving research not in an effort to find truth but to explore the many layers of relationship and meaning that may present hope for a better future. Based in an emergentist logic, post-modern criticality as an approach to research has as a goal to expose the layers of inequity and injustice within complex social networks. The goal of this particular research is to create an awareness of the unnatural disaster made so apparent in the aftermath of the hurricanes. The stories of the people in the Renaissance Village have many dimensions and no attempt is made

to convey the depth of relations or ascribe specific meanings to them. As told to us in the context of our work with families and children in an after-school program, there is no feigned systematicity or attempt to reach exhaustion of data sources. There are no hypotheses to this research, nor is there the pretense that conclusions can be drawn. In re-searching into the lives of those who live in the Renaissance Village, there is hope, as their stories are told, that unnatural disasters perpetuated by traditions of poverty, discrimination, and imposition of culture can be deterred in the future.

Three connecting themes provide the terrain for conveying the dimensions of the lives of the residents of the Renaissance Village and those affected by hurricane Katrina. Uncertainty, breaking-the-rules, and adaptive dynamics are layers of the past that are intertwined to create a multi-dimensional picture of the unnatural disaster of South Louisiana.

### Uncertainty

The notion of recurring and incessant uncertainty cannot be better illustrated than by the stories of those in the Renaissance Village trailer park. Take, for example, Joseph<sup>1</sup>, whose family lost five homes in the 9th Ward of New Orleans. He lived with his family in what had been his grandmother's house. His uncle lived across the street and his son and his family lived in an aunt's house two blocks from him. He tells us of the ordeal of trying to find his wife and children, who had been evacuated to Houston, and then, with Rita coming, on to Oklahoma. He didn't have the time or resources to search for them. He waited out the storm in the chaos of the Superdome, then was relocated to Baton Rouge, where he spent another period of time at the River Center, still unclear about the destiny of his immediate family. For Joseph, there were many levels of uncertainty – were the members of his immediate and extended family okay? Where were his children and wife? What had happened to their home? Would they be able to move back? Where would they live? When could they get back together?

Another level of uncertainty was created by political and governmental edicts that suggested the FEMA trailer park in which over

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<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms and many stories are composites of several recurring stories.

500 families lived would be closed “within two months.” As the months for closure came and went, the families in the Renaissance Village became desensitized to the implied urgency to find alternative living arrangements. For those of us working within the fiscal and organizational timelines of trying to fund and operate an after-school program, however, the rumors of imminent closure were more than disheartening as funding sources, service-learning projects, and personnel assigned to work in the after school program were called into question. As we expressed concern about when the park might be closed, and what would the families do if forced to leave, Tina, a resident of the Renaissance Village, assured us not to worry that our work in the trailer park would come to an end. “Most of us don’t have any place to go,” she comforted us. “What they gonna do with us with no place to go? They won’t be shuttin’ us down.” While we faced the uncertainty of longevity and the challenges from potential funding agencies that our work at the Renaissance Village was to be short-lived, she reassured us not to worry.

In our efforts to maintain a consistent presence in the trailer park, there was another level of uncertainty beyond that of not knowing when the Renaissance Village might be closed down. Policies for providing resources for “temporary” shelters excluded us from applying for federal funding because the longevity of the existence of the trailer park was uncertain. As a “temporary” facility, it seemed a poor investment in us as providers of educational and social services for families and children who might be gone during any 30-day period. Never mind that Laney, a quiet seven year old girl, had spent countless hours in the water, hanging on to a board, waiting to be rescued, while the dead body of her aunt floated face-down nearby. Funding for our efforts has been spotty and primarily from private foundations and individuals who believed we could make a difference despite the unknown longevity of the existence of the trailer park and policies that prevented an investment into an unknown future.

These few stories reveal personal, political, and policy dimensions of a system that has failed those living at and working in the Renaissance Village. While our work has been hampered by policies and mandates that were developed for predictable and controllable situations, what does it mean to the lives of so many when they are put on hold until the

uncertainties can be managed? Where in our modernist world of mechanical control is there room for pervasive and unprecedented uncertainty within lived and felt experience? In what ways do mechanisms of uncertainty desensitize entire populations from having hope for their own futures?

The point is not to control the uncertainty but to expose it as both an indication and mechanism of a system designed to create imbalance and perpetuate helplessness. Ultimately, however, one has to wonder who will have the greatest chance of adapting to the future – those who have given up on certainty or those who wish to maintain control and manage uncertainty? One way of dealing with the uncertainties of unexpected events is to recognize the old ways of doing things may need to be abandoned. It became clear many of those who lived through the immediate uncertainties and unprecedented circumstances in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina recognized the need to throw out the rules.

### Throwing out the rules

There are so many instances where responses to hurricane Katrina required throwing out the rules and adapting to the unprecedented challenges of the situation. I recall a special report on National Public Radio shortly after the hurricane where reporters found a small group of individuals who had weathered out the storm in the French Quarter of New Orleans. Known for hurricane parties, the French Quarter, in particular, and New Orleanians, in general, have a long history of meeting the uncertainties of hurricane season with a bigger-than-life willingness to make fun of and, some would say, tempt the fates of destruction. These particular individuals, strangers before the storm, had stayed behind, partly because that was just what you do, and partly to protect their interests in the city. They felt the odds were that the city could ride out yet another pending disaster. The pattern of hurricanes in recent years had seen a series of storms with little impact on the lives of people in New Orleans. The previous year, in fact, there had been a series of evacuations which were more disruptive to those who spent nine hours traveling the 70 miles to Baton Rouge than to those who stayed behind. For their various reasons, this multi-aged, multi-

economic-level, multi-skilled group of individuals found their destinies thrown together by weeks of no electricity, limited resources, unknown enemies, and unpredictable circumstances.

One aspect of the shifting rules for this small microcosm of New Orleans was the disruption of the traditional social hierarchy supported by our society. The well educated professionals found themselves relying on the “street smart” individuals who knew how to deal in an exchange-of-services economy that was not based on traditional economic and monetary abstractions. Obtaining needed resources when scarcity could not be overcome by economies of scale or supply-and-demand dynamics required a know-how that isn’t part of traditional economic theory and the social exchange of money. Threats to their survival were not the lack of food, water, electricity, or clothing, however – to these uncertainties, they had responded quite well. The real threat came from those who were sent to maintain order and demanded evacuation, at gun-point. Their own little society had evolved and adapted to their changing circumstances. As military officials ordered them to leave, the very institution of normalcy, armed with automatic weapons and wearing sophisticated air filtration systems, was the enemy to their staying and making their own way. Ultimately, their resistance and persistence prevailed and those who were sent to “save” them found others in need.

Another story of breaking the rules was reported by Laurie Anderson (2005), a local reporter for the Baton Rouge newspaper *The Advocate*. As reported by Ms. Anderson, Dr. Mark Perlmutter, an orthopedic surgeon from Pennsylvania, quickly realized after the first reports of the devastation in New Orleans that there would be many in New Orleans in need of medical care. He flew to Baton Rouge with medical supplies, another physician, and a medical student, using the private jet of a friend. Once in Baton Rouge, he convinced the pilot of a Blackhawk helicopter to take him to New Orleans. The helicopter, used to transport injured and dying from New Orleans to Baton Rouge, would be empty on the return trip back to New Orleans. Dr. Perlmutter was taken to the tarmac at the New Orleans Louis Armstrong International Airport where hundreds of patients were waiting to be airlifted to hospitals in Baton Rouge and elsewhere. He said “scores of non-responsive patients lay on stretchers. Two patients died in front of me.” Initially, FEMA staff welcomed their help. His friend, Dr. Clark Gerhart worked inside the



terminal while Perlmutter attended to patients outside on the tarmac. With no electricity, the heat was sweltering and the humidity stifling inside as well as out.

Ultimately, their presence there was questioned. Because they did not have official authorization to be working at the airport during disaster relief, the FEMA official in charge insisted they had to leave. Dr. Perlmutter showed him his medical credentials and explained why he did not have a card from FEMA designating him as an “approved” physician. “I had tried to get through to FEMA for 12 hours the day before and finally gave up. I asked him to let me stay until I was replaced by another doctor, but he refused. He said he was afraid of being sued. I informed him about the Good Samaritan laws and asked him if he was willing to let people die so the government wouldn’t be sued, but he would not back down. I had to leave.”

It amazed Dr. Gerhart that the concern over being sued and the insistence on following the rules supplanted the obvious need for three skilled professionals who were willing and able to provide much needed assistance. Forced to return to Baton Rouge, the doctors finally received official approval to work in the disaster area. Once they were in contact with the correct officials in Baton Rouge, the approval took only a few seconds. Dr. Perlmutter noted that “I have been going to Ecuador and Mexico on medical missions for 14 years. I was at ground zero. I’ve seen hundreds of people die. This was different because we knew the hurricane was coming. FEMA showed up late and then rejected help for the sake of organization. They put form before function, and people died.” (quoted in Anderson, 2005)

The rules, designed for predictable situations, were maladaptive to the immediate crisis situation in which Dr. Perlmutter found himself. The moral dimensions of reacting to the uncertainties of the immediate crisis are obvious. It is not so clear, however, how bureaucratic barriers prevent adaptive responses in what we feel are more usual circumstances. Trying to provide a sense of normalcy to the children of the Renaissance Village by meeting their educational needs through schooling is a case where not being able to break the rules in the name of and hope for order has backfired.

Immediately following the hurricane, the now largest public school district in the state made valiant efforts to register nearly 10,000 children

who had been evacuated to and were now residing in the parish. Within the first few weeks after the hurricane, children residing in the River Center and countless other temporary shelters in the Baton Rouge area began (and sometimes even maintained attendance in) schools in the Baton Rouge area. Even with the early experiences in their new schools, how does one accustomed to taking public transportation or walking to school accommodate and negotiate traveling to unknown destinations on yet another yellow school bus, especially when many of the students had to take the Renaissance Village bus to a central distribution location where they boarded yet another bus to their new school?

As the buses drew up to the Renaissance Village trailer park at 6:15 in the morning on the first day that students were meant to attend schools, how were families to ignore their earlier memories of evacuation? Memories of days on waiting for help while stranded on flooded levees or roof tops, waiting for food, water, and transportation, as helicopters and boats passed them by, only to be taken, once rescued, by school buses to unknown locations, were still very fresh in their minds. Many of the parents and guardians stood waiting with their children with the expectation that they would accompany them to school on their first day. Still unfamiliar with Baton Rouge and with no personal means of transportation, they wanted and expected to board the bus on that first day. Most of those residing the Renaissance Village who had cars in New Orleans had lost them in the flood. Many of the parents had previously walked to school with their children, accompanying them, in many cases, to the very schools where they had attended years earlier. Others had become accustomed to using public transportation. The only public transportation available to those in the FEMA trailer park was a specially designated bus that went to Wal-Mart but did not go to the schools where the children were being transported.

So, as the school buses arrived and the parents attempted to board them, they were told it was against school policy for parents to be passengers on school buses. Many parents chose to remove their children from the buses that day rather than send them to unknown and, for the parents, inaccessible places. In April, 2006, eight months after the hurricane, of an estimated 700 children at the Renaissance Village, only 154 were recorded as attending school. In September, 2006, a full year after the hurricanes and approximately ten months after many had

begun residency at the Renaissance Village, only 120 of the approximately 450 school-aged children were going to schools.<sup>2</sup>

What these stories indicate is the hegemony of rules, as a means to control, as well as the deleterious effects of adhering to rules when circumstances are unusual. The idea that rules are to be followed except in dire and unusual circumstances, however, is not the point and begs the question: What is “normal” and when is a circumstance to be considered “dire” or “unusual?” All circumstances are unique, uncertain, and indeterminate. Providing spaces for adaptive responses requires openness to possibilities and autonomy of decision-making. These stories point to the ability of individuals to adapt to their changed and uncertain environments was another theme that was prevalent and for which there is a moral implication.

### *Adaptive Dynamics*

Examples of adaptive dynamics in the chaos of the immediate aftermath of the hurricanes in south Louisiana are numerous. In the weeks following hurricane Katrina, the superintendent of schools in St. Bernard Parish, Doris Voltier, found creative ways to meet the challenges of 100% devastation of her parish. Using the second floor of the high school as her command post, she and key staff watched as a wall of water rolled over her parish. Within a week, she assumed her role in leading efforts to “bring back the schools.” She felt, if the schools could come back, the community would come back as well. Her first efforts were to obtain FEMA trailers to house her staff. Faced with the bureaucratic red-tape of providing FEMA trailers for her staff and their families as well as for herself, she took out a personal loan and purchased trailers from a company in North Carolina. With the ability to reconvene her staff, other responses were put into motion that allowed the St. Bernard Schools to open within six weeks of hurricane Katrina, despite the fact that every building in the parish received water damage from flooding.

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<sup>2</sup> Exact numbers of residents and children has been difficult to determine. Estimates are based on residents and service-provider administrators’ records and documents.

Other school responses were not as adaptive. Early debates about the most appropriate educational setting for the displaced children of the Renaissance Village trailer park revolved around the issue of whether to mainstream the children into existing schools, open separate schools, thereby segregating the children of the Renaissance Village, or develop a school on-site at the trailer park, incorporating more of a home-school, full-service environment. While the ultimate decision to interject the children of the Renaissance Village into the area public schools was well intended, attempts to ensure attendance provides an example of adaptive responses to the environment that had deleterious and unintended consequences for those who had been so deliberate about their decisions.

In this case, the desire to blend the children of the Renaissance Village trailer park with those of the other children in the parish by enforcing attendance in the area schools did not recognize the individual needs of many of the children and their families. Compulsory attendance requirements exacerbated the already existing tensions caused by long-standing mistrust of authority and uncertainty about the permanence of their living situations. As truant officers came to the Renaissance Village to look for children who should have been in school, word rapidly spread throughout the community of 2,000. The truant officers went trailer to trailer looking for school-aged children who should have been in school. The invisibility of the children of the Renaissance Village trailer park became more than symbolic. While no adult who deliberately evaded the questioning of the truant officers did so with the intention of preventing their children from pursuing an education, it was clear to those of us observing this act of civil disobedience that a need for personal autonomy and individual pursuits out-weighed the need to follow the rules about attending school. The self-organizing behavior of the community, with rapid and efficient communication networks unknown to those outside of their network, reveals an adaptive response to the external threat represented by those in authority over them.

Another dimension of self-organization at the social level was apparent in our early working relations with the children and their families in the after-school program. Perhaps because of their previous experiences with the truant officers, or perhaps because of longer-standing mistrust of those who were sent to enforce rules, there was

suspicion of our offers to help. Many other social agencies had come and gone, sometimes resulting in eviction or unwanted “services” for those with whom they had become involved. And, ultimately, “the people” never stayed around to see the impact of their efforts. “Are you going to come back?” was an often repeated question as children expressed their fears that opening up to “the people,” in this case, to us, might mean an ultimate let-down. Even these very young children, by many measures completely dependent on “the people” were conveying an adaptive response to what may have been a hostile or unstable environment.

Adaptive responses to their environment for many in the Renaissance Village did not occur from positions of control or power but were embedded in the circumstances of the unnatural disaster. In these cases, lacking control of their environment or power over their circumstances, the Renaissance Village residents exhibited survival responses to their changed circumstances.

The dimensions of the lives of the residents of the Renaissance Village and those affected by the 2005 hurricanes as explored through the uncertainties they faced, their needs to break rules and break with tradition, and the adaptive abilities of individuals and groups to accommodate their changing environments have become intertwined to create a multi-dimensional picture of the unnatural disaster of South Louisiana. Researching into the lives and circumstances of those who were displaced by hurricane Katrina from a post-modern criticality perspective, treating past and future as multi-dimensional, layered, with recursive dynamics, nonlinear effects, and chance, an emergentist logic offers hope as the circumstances of the unnatural disaster of hurricane Katrina are exposed.

### One Dead in the Attic: Post-modern criticality

Chris Rose, a reporter for *The Times-Picayune*, writes in his book, *1 Dead in Attic*, (Rose, 2005), of his experiences telling the stories of the many individuals he encountered in the early days after hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. He describes the devastation, the mass exoduses, the smells, the sounds, the politics of New Orleans as the waters were receding. He does not play the role of the abstracted, objective observer but is a participant in negotiating the difficulties

experienced by those who were struggling to make sense of their surroundings. Underlying many of his stories is a sense of a failed system that had been designed to protect and defend the citizens of New Orleans. Meaning and logic were turned upside down as he tried to make sense of his surroundings.

Every night, we gather on my front stoop. We are multiple combinations of jobless, homeless, family-less and sometimes just plain listless. We sit and some of us drink and some of us smoke and together we solve the problems of the city – since no one in any official capacity seems able or inclined to do so. We are just one more committee howling at the moon. We are a civic life-support system.  
(p. 53)

As a reporter, in his case, or a researcher, in my case, our roles become more complex as we operate within the contexts we write about.

While an incomplete analogy for what it means to engage in postmodern criticality research, there are lessons to be learned from the devastation of Katrina and its aftermath as I have experienced them. The potential for complexity-based inquiry for social re-search must assume a stance that accepts uncertainty, embraces adaptive challenges, and creatively assumes the rule is that there are no rules that cannot be broken or called into question. But ultimately, to engage in research practices that have any hope of making a difference, to us as researchers and to those whose stories we tell, we must be willing to accept the moral dimensions of our work and be willing to recursively embrace these same three principles as guiding principles for our research. The layers of meanings and self-similarities across scales, as my voice as researcher blends with those with whom I have worked, echo questions of self-doubt and disbelief in a system of inquiry oriented toward conclusions as I try to embrace my own methodological uncertainties, need for adaptive challenges, and willingness to break the methodological rules of standard research approaches.

There are no endings in this kind of research. The layering of my story, imposed upon and reflected within the many stories of those of the Renaissance Village, reveals an on-going drama – challenging the status-

quo politics of schooling and sustainability of hegemonic social and political structures. As Best and Kellner (1997) challenge the techniques, methods and rationale of social science research, calling for the abandonment of “mechanical deterministic schemes” (p. 19), it seems time to challenge research driven by an underlying epistemological need for knowledge and research oriented toward definite answers. The dimensions of the future not only cannot be known, but are themselves layers of meaning and relationship. There is no monolithic singularity called “the future” as the band of time itself is multilayered, multidimensional, and multiperspectival.

Postmodern inquiry must have, embedded within its own framework of questioning, the recursive question of method itself. It is a moral imperative that, through my research at the Renaissance Village, I have made a difference in the lives of the children, their families, and those of you reading this paper. If I cannot make a difference, I have failed to sufficiently complexify the situation. For in making a difference, the dimensions of meaning and spirit of difference must be maintained. This is not about the celebration of individuality over the tyranny of the masses, but is, itself, a recognition that the one is in the many and the many within the one. This conundrum of existence presents, not an ontological challenge, but an ethical one, to embrace the many layers and intertwined complexities of being-in-the-world-with-others. Rose (2005) captures the moral imperative of postmodern research in describing his attempts to make sense of the devastation that is New Orleans.

I have this terrible habit of getting into my car every two or three days and driving into the Valley Down Below, that vast wasteland below sea level that was my city, and it's mind-blowing A) how vast it is and B) how wasted it is. My wife questions the wisdom of my frequent forays into the massive expanse of blown-apart lives and property that local street maps used to call Gentilly, Lakeview, the East and the Lower 9th. She fears that it contributes to my unhappiness and general instability and I suspect she is right. Perhaps I should stay on the stretch of safe, dry land Uptown where we live and try to move on, focus on pleasant things, quit making myself

miserable, quit reliving all those terrible things we saw on TV that first week. That's advice I wish I could follow, but I can't. I am compelled for reasons that are not entirely clear to me. And so I drive. I drive around and try to figure out those Byzantine markings and symbols that the cops and the National Guard spray-painted on all the houses around here, the cryptic communications that tell the story of who or what was or wasn't inside the house when the floodwater rose to the ceiling. In some cases, there's no interpretation needed. There's one I pass on St. Roch Avenue in the 8th Ward at least once a week. It says: "1 Dead in Attic." That certainly sums up the situation. No mystery there. It's spray painted there on the front of the house....I wonder who eventually came and took 1 Dead in Attic away. Who knows? Hell, with the way things run around here – I wonder if anyone has come to take 1 Dead in the Attic away. And who claimed him or her? Who grieved over 1 Dead in Attic and who buried 1 Dead in Attic? Was there anyone with him or her at the end and what was the last thing they said to each other? How did 1 Dead in Attic spend the last weekend in August of the year 2005? What were their plans? Maybe dinner at Mandich on St. Claude? Maybe a Labor Day family reunion in City Park? My wife, she's right. I've got to quit just randomly driving around. This can't help anything. But I can't stop. I return to the Valley Down Below over and over, looking for signs of progress in all that muck, some sign that things are getting better, that things are improving, that we don't all have to live in a state of abeyance forever but – you know what? I just don't see them there....But there's something I've discovered about the 8th Ward in this strange exercise of mine: Apparently, a lot of the Mardi Gras Indians are from there. Or were from there; I'm not sure what the proper terminology is....[T]hat makes me wish I'd been paying more attention for the past 20 years. I could have learned something. I could have learned something about a people whose history is now but a sepia



mist over back-of-town streets and neighborhoods that nobody's ever heard of and where nobody lives and nothing ever happens anymore; a freeze frame still life in the air, a story of what we once were. (pp. 63-66)

It is our collective moral imperative to tell the story, not necessarily of *1 Dead in Attic* or the Mardi Gras Indians, but of the complexity of and dynamics associated with the devastation of a community. The moral imperative of our postmodern inquiry is not to pass judgment, place blame, find root causes, or project into the future. Nor is it to set in motion events that we are compelled to (at least believe that we can) control, masterminding a future we cannot know other than as a myriad of reflections in a maze of broken mirrors.

In the layered dimensions of the stories – of *1 Dead in Attic*, of Joseph, of Tina, of Doris Voltier, of bus drivers refusing to take parents to school with their children, of doctors' help refused – within the strands of connected meanings and discontinuous lives, within the emergence and destruction of humanity, only in the dance of complexity, the waves upon the shores as borders-in-flux, and the telling of these stories can we hope to make a real difference.

Postmodern criticality must embrace the multilayered, fluid borders, and multiple dimensions of complexity to catch a glimpse in the maze of broken mirrors that are all we have of a tenuous space we call reality. Reflection upon reflection, occasionally providing fragmented pictures of ourselves in relation to others, as we were, reflections of ourselves, as we hope to be, glimpses of color creating kaleidoscopic pictures we can only pretend to imagine, in relation, in dynamic exchange with the individuals and events that make up the landscape of life. Occasionally we move the mirrors, catch the light differently, unfolding a new depth to the broken images we call reality.

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