Urban Education
Volume XX Number X
Month XXXX xx-xx

10.1177/0042085908315946
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hosted at
http://online.sagepub.com

Documenting Tragedy and Resilience

The Importance of Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke*

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Spike Lee's documentary, *When the Levees Broke*, provides an informative, enduring, and alternative presentation surrounding the human and man-made debacle associated with Hurricane Katrina. Levees centers the voices of survivors and others involved in the weeks during and after the hurricane, historicizes residents' understandings and reactions, and grounds the entire film in powerful images and footage captured by countless people during the protracted moment. As an enduring document that exists outside of the contemporary television-driven news cycle, *Levees* provides critical groundwork for community conversation. Likewise, and with thoughtful preparation work, *Levees* offers a tremendous opportunity for culturally and contextually resonant and relevant classroom teaching.

Keywords: ***PLS PROVIDE AT LEAST FOUR KEYWORDS***

Spike Lee's documentary, *When the Levees Broke* (2006), is a powerful and poignant film that can help students, educators, and the general public remember and learn from the human and man-made debacle associated with Hurricane Katrina. The provocative film documents Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath in a way that allows for the voices of those affected to be historicized, heard, and more deeply considered. As presented on the DVD release, the film is presented in five acts. Act I covers the preparatory actions (or lack thereof) taken immediately preceding the storm's arrival. Act II sheds light on the experiences of New Orleans residents during and after the storm and in the wake of failed governmental emergency support. Act III draws attention to the dispersal of the evacuees and separation of families to areas all around the country, and Act IV highlights the ongoing

failure to effectively rebuild the city and bring back displaced residents. Act V serves as an epilogue and features extended interviews and additional information regarding many of the compelling stories and voices we heard through the first four acts that originally aired on HBO in August 2006. Though it is sometimes difficult to discern the basis for the separate sections, and although there are some sections on history and culture that appear out of place, the viewer for the most part witnesses a chronological unfolding not only of the events but also of the residents' concurrent emotions—shock in Act I, then anger, then grief, and finally resolve. As reviewers elsewhere have noted, the acts can be characterized by the emotions that ring through; furthermore, the emotional journeys shared by survivors bring humanity, personality, and power to the film.

To say that this is a documentary of historic proportions is not hyperbole. Because we live in an age when television media "news cycles" dictate collective memories of events (no matter how monumental and catastrophic those events may be), documentary films that capture and bear witness to unvarnished realities of devastation, triumph, or even everyday life take on special importance. Of course, the special role of media in the life of the nation and the understandings shared by its people are not new. During the U.S. civil rights movement, the campaign picked up steam to the extent that people who were not directly affected by the demonstrations and violence were nonetheless witnesses to indisputable civil unrest. Television owners in homes across the nation were compelled to acknowledge and come to terms with the historic moment because it invaded their homes nightly via the evening news. In today's media climate, however, shocking news and images are the norm. Each piece of devastating reality is, paradoxically, only fleetingly so. Because we see so many images of death and destruction, we ever more easily forget one ongoing tragedy the moment its otherwise compelling images are superseded by those associated with another.

In such an era, when horrific assaults on humanity are so easily forgotten, documentaries such as *When the Levees Broke* play an important role. Such films are designed and positioned to last—documentaries as media events themselves and documentaries as enduring testaments. The documentary debuts one day. But then, and much more important, it quickly becomes available for purchase through countless retail outlets that we can walk up to in person or that we can connect with through the Internet. This access provides the means for voicing and sharing alternative perceptions, experiences, and realities that counter sensationalized, repetitive, racist, and otherwise inaccurate portrayals of people and events. It likewise brings to light the worst behaviors of government officials—from police officers to the federal government—many of whose various actions can be characterized

as racist, incompetent, bureaucratic, or sometimes all three at once. As an enduring document that exists outside of the news cycle, *Levees* provides an apt groundwork for ongoing conversations.

Amplifying Voices and Bearing Witness

When the Levees Broke serves as a conduit for voices crying out to be heard as on-camera interviews serve as an entryway into the worlds of the survivors. The residents' candor draws viewers inside their world as they share the happenings of the event as they saw and experienced it. We, as the observers, are privy to information and emotional reflections typically not captured by outsiders coming in.

Although the viewer is given the chance to briefly step inside the survivors' worlds, we remain on the outside. As outsiders witnessing the residents' unfeigned hope, perseverance, and bravery in the midst of broken promises and untimely deaths, the documentary becomes painful to watch. It is a tall order for a film to serve as a primary expression of "what happened," *and* as a voice piece that captures and presents the expressions of the typically voiceless, *and* as a document that does all of this "capturing" with a straightforwardness, simplicity, candor, and dignity difficult to achieve in the context of the virtual devastation of an entire major American city. Nonetheless, *Levees* is beautifully and painfully effective. The film renders heart-wrenching empathy while invoking solidarity among the viewer, the city, and its residents. As with many great documentary films that capture contemporary human realities, the power of *Levees* comes from (a) the director's choice to honor and center the voices of those most directly affected by the events, (b) the visual images presented (stills and live action), and (c) the tone and atmosphere that comes through in the film. Regarding the first source of the film's power, when *Levees* was first screened in 2006, reviewers time and again remarked about the power of hearing from and seeing individual people—determined, infuriated, and dumbfounded survivors—who told their tales with passion, eloquence, and in several cases thoroughly understandable profanity. Across races, victims spoke to their losses, spoke to their frustrations, and spoke to their faith and determination.

Voices of Struggle, Voices of Hope

As survivors spoke, their presence and comments spoke to their ongoing posttraumatic stresses even as they simultaneously embodied and epitomized strength and resolve in the face of abandonment, betrayal, death, and

dislocation. We never want to forget the person who tells us in the film that "my name is Mrs. Phyllis Montana LeBlanc." From the New Orleans airport, from her FEMA trailer, and from elsewhere, Mrs. LeBlanc tells it like she experienced it and tells it as she saw it. She is funny, she is powerful, she is beautiful, and she is in pain. Most important and most impressive, she is surviving. In fact, one gets the sense that we, through our viewing, hearing, and paying attention, are doing our very small part to help her, and hundreds of thousands like her, to heal. Phyllis Leblanc is one of those people who has the gracious and rare power to help us laugh to keep from crying (although in her case, one gets the sense that she laughs to keep from having to beat somebody up).

It is difficult to capture the stark reality laced with humor, but in one memorable moment she explains,

> We are already in 5 almost 6 feet of water. If the Levee breaks again we gonna drown. And I'm [going to] have to swim and carry my momma out of here too. And like I told my husband, you either punch her or knock her out because some kind of way we are gonna have to get her out of here because she is deathly afraid of water. But my momma was a soldier. When it was time to get in the water, because we self-evacuated, we was like we're not gonna wait any longer for anybody to come and get us. Because they weren't going to come and get us. I knew they weren't coming to get us.

Of course, Mrs. LeBlanc is just one of the wonderful people who grace us with their words and stories, who share with viewers their pain at what happened and their awe that they could be so thoroughly abandoned by their country. Mrs. LeBlanc is a survivor, yet she is still suffering. As viewers, we witness the unsensational, yet poignant and inspiring, experience of an ordinary person suffering yet surviving through life's trying times.

Tapping Into the Power of Film

An additional source of power in *Levees* is the footage itself. Reminiscent of the detailed imagery captured during the civil rights movement and other documented monumental events, imagery shown throughout the film allows the viewer to better appreciate the enormity of the struggle and the courage of the survivors. Many of the scenes are not for the faint of heart but must be shown lest they be ignored or forgotten. Along with the images of people sweating in stifling heat, sitting on roofs, and battling the water to save others, the most devastating images come by the dozen—repeated

images of floating, bloated dead bodies. Although difficult to watch, the reality of bodies decaying for weeks in the streets of a major American city must never be downplayed. True to the very notion of creating documents and documentaries, it is better that we witness the awful images and create conditions that mediate against their tragic recurrence rather than conveniently forget that they ever existed and doom ourselves to repeat them anew and in untold ways.

Yet another source of power for Lee's *Levees* is the ambience of the film, as most aptly addressed through a consideration of the film score. As the film unfolds, the only apparently "extra" dramatization to be found is the addition of the powerful and melancholy musical score by longtime Lee collaborator Terrence Blanchard. Even here, however, there is nothing artificial, nothing overblown, and nothing inorganic about Blanchard's sounds. The tight relationship between the music and what we see is in large measure because of the fact that Blanchard is a native resident of New Orleans and a victim of the storm as well. At one point we watch as his mother suffers through seeing her trashed home for the first time since the storm. From that point and through the funeral procession that opens and closes the fourth act of the documentary, it becomes impossible to see the music as anything less than indispensable to the effectiveness of the film as a coherent document. We remember, here, there, and throughout, that New Orleans is the birthplace of jazz and still one of the richest music sites in the country and the world. Only in excluding those sounds that are so true to the city could there have been an inorganic act related to the scoring of the film.

Reflecting on the Film's Impact

By the end of the experience, *Levees* comes through as true to the city and as true to the event as one can imagine. Over several years of experiences that are not within the scope of this review, each of the authors of this essay has developed deep love, admiration, and respect for New Orleanians. Our deepest admiration is reserved for these folk. We also add that there were several others who came through as impressive and admirable as well—not for their huge heroics but for their vocal incredulity at the tragic ridiculousness of it all and for their willingness to pitch in. Two that stand out are actor turned rescuer with symbolic capital Sean Penn and news anchor Soledad O'Brien. In the former case, we learn in Act I and more in Act V how Penn, as he decided to do something, anything to help, was able to do much more than others because of his recognizable celebrity face. Realizing who Penn

was, Pastor William Walker, Jr., resident of Kenner and the pastor of the appropriately named Noah's Ark Church, approached Penn with a worthy cause: There were 40 children who needed rescuing. Penn later realized Walker must have told him a lie to get Penn out searching for members of Walker's congregation in need. Penn and his "crew" rode the streets in a borrowed boat, pulling people off roofs and out of houses and delivering them to higher ground. In Act II, O'Brien quite possibly becomes the spokesperson for millions of Americans when we see footage of her questioning and challenging Michael Brown, head of FEMA, to explain the apparent incompetence of the federal government. As she is later interviewed for *Levees*, she talks candidly about the experience of interviewing Brown:

> It was baffling to me how you could have what was at that point a sort of official estimate of 50,000 people at the convention center and not know about it and have no idea. The other thing that was surprising to me was that he seemed to have no intelligence. At one point I said, "How can we have better intel than you have? Because I have a research file prepared by my 23-year-old research assistant, a production assistant. And I am getting better intelligence than you are getting. How is that possible?" It was really baffling. I mean it was really one of the more baffling interviews because they seemed so out of touch with a reality that I think a lot of people had been watching day after day after day.

For those of us who see this whole morass as part of a larger reality in which information, disinformation, and collective amnesia are integral parts of the contemporary American experience with tragedy, disaster, scandal, and even basic government operations, it is nice to see people who find themselves simply unable to go along with a straight face.

Though a minor part of the bigger story, viewers are likely to experience a sense of gratitude for the cathartic effect of learning about and seeing O'Brien and Penn. Hearing a news anchor go off script to take the uncharacteristic stance of the morally outraged and seeing the actor in the uncharacteristic stance of actually being in action instead of pretending take us toward a place where we can begin to recognize that we do not have to play the role that the government or others script for us, that we can act to protect one another and that we can call it like we see it when we see it.

Throughout *Levees*, Lee provides an opportunity for local people who lived through Hurricane Katrina to call it as they see it. What makes this Lee's most powerful piece of work to date is that the evidence is so powerful, and he is so sure of that evidence that he needed not even speak, lest he undermined its power. Lee collects a range of perspectives and experiences

of the ordinary people as both a collective chorus and as unique individuals, each suffering and struggling in their own meaningful ways. The documentary conveys how devastation is not about statistics but about painful realities piled one on another, until the weight of collective experience feels like more than anyone can or should have to bear. Thus, Lee lets the damning evidence mount. And as it piles on, it becomes undeniable, not just for those who were there, who watched, who helped, or who cried but for those in the future who would not otherwise believe that any of what happened in 2005 and since could have taken place.

Implications for Instruction

As urban educators, our teaching effectiveness often hinges on our ability to account for difficult realities associated with race, class, power, inequality, and even democracy. Although it is sometimes convenient to avoid these discussions (and often challenging to fit them in at any rate given the current climate of high-stakes testing), we believe that Lee's *Levees* provides a poignant starting place for exploration of these themes in the classroom. Within the film's motifs of tragedy and resilience are teachable moments. These themes faced in New Orleans are applicable to many urban communities and are significant to those of us who witness less dramatic manifestations of them regularly. Lee's documentary serves as an ideal starting place for dialogue in the classroom because it allows viewers (both young and old) to approach these emotional topics with a fresh perspective on the complexities of inequality and vulnerability. *Levees* offers one lens through which to study a multitude of social issues, consider the importance of historical context, and examine media literacy in contemporary life. Because the lessons from *Levees* go beyond the classroom and beyond the discourses of standard curriculum, they may just provide the lasting impressions some students take from their educations.

Levees can be used across the curriculum for a range of ages. Teachers College of Columbia University, through the support of the Rockefeller Foundation and HBO Documentary Films, has developed an influential and thought-provoking curriculum titled *Teaching the Levees: A Curriculum for Democratic Dialogue and Civic Engagement* (TLC; Crocco, 2007). It is available for free at www.teachingthelevees.org. The TLC curriculum includes units on media literacy, geography, history, civics, and economics and provides timelines, questions by chapter, and ideas for summative activities. Yet even without the aid of the prepared curriculum, educators can incorporate Lee's film to meet the instructional and content-appropriate

needs of their students. As students learn about human relationships with geography, discussion could follow the film's segment on how wetlands are damaged by the building of canals. Students learning about citizenship can ponder the role of government in disaster relief before, during, and after Katrina. With *Levees*, the curricular possibilities are immense.

There are a few considerations educators should take into account before incorporating *Levees* in the classroom, however. Because issues of poverty, race, and civic participation can be deeply personal, educators should take time and care planning the integration of this film to meet their students' and communities' needs. It should also be noted that some parts of the documentary contain explicit language and images, and teachers should use only the clips from the film that are appropriate to their students' age and maturity levels.

Documentaries such as *Levees* can help students analyze the conditions and realities of urban communities and schools while still offering a glimpse of hope for the future. By so vividly illustrating the flaws that made Hurricane Katrina so tragic, and by paying tribute to the resilience of people helping each other heal, Lee uses this horrendous event as a catalyst for change. Despite its frank portrayal of the devastation Hurricane Katrina imparted on the citizens of New Orleans, *Levees* can uplift the human spirit. Its assembly of voices and perspectives can initiate student compassion through the film's teaching of tragedy and resilience. Perhaps as we teach these motifs we can educate the next generation of leaders and citizens to use humility in their careers, their interactions, and, most of all, their communities.

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