Trauma Written in the Flesh: Tattoos as Memorials and Stories

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Derek H. Alderman
University of Tennessee
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On October 29th, 2006, I drove east on North Robertson Street and
merged onto North Claiborne Avenue through the Ninth Ward towards
Chalmette. There is no way to adequately describe New Orleans since
Hurricane Katrina devastated the city. I wish I had a camcorder pointed
out the passenger window to capture the devastation that whipped past me
as I drove around the city. The homes that hug the narrow road through
the Ninth Ward gave way to wide medians and gas stations as I
approached the Jackson Barracks where the National Guard had been
trapped by flood waters during the storm—deep red bricks and iron gates
damaged. Traveling through Arabi and into Chalmette, I recognized a
Wal-Mart from the media blitz following the storm; the neighboring
Home Depot had just reopened. The St. Bernard Civic Center stood empty
and tomb-like above a sea of white FEMA trailers. It reminded me of the
post-apocalypse zombie movie, 28 Days Later. My destination was a
neighborhood of long, straight streets with brick homes, solidly middle-
class and replicated across the United States—suburbia.

That particular day I helped a family re-grade their lot so that their
home would not flood during downpours. Later I cleaned and busted
bricks. During this time, and at the end of my trip, I contemplated the New
Orleans landscape as it has been transformed both on the ground and in
my mind. I thought particularly of the Ninth Ward with its many wooden
homes and churches punctured and toppled by wind and water; I
wondered how it might look next year or ten years from now. Areas near
the canal have been cleared and the vegetation, which grows quickly in the
warm and humid climate, has begun to reclaim the empty spaces that once
held homes. Kenneth E. Foote (1997 [2003]) suggests four possible
outcomes for sites of tragedy: sanctification, designation, rectification and obliteration; all of which either demonstrate or hide the memory of past tragedies. The Ninth Ward is too large to become a memorial (sanctification) and I suppose a sign will be put somewhere to remind others of the tragedy of the floods following Katrina (designation); but what concerned me were rectification and obliteration. In order to be rectified the site has to be returned to its pre-tragedy condition, with the same recognizable look and use. I cannot imagine that will occur as politicians, planners, and others with good (and not so good) intentions struggle over how the Ninth Ward and other sites in New Orleans will be rebuilt, if at all. Many locals, displaced and otherwise, fear Foote’s final category, obliteration. Will the Ninth Ward and other spaces be left as green-space or rebuilt with architecture and residents foreign to its soil and history? What concerns us is how memories are retained, repeated, or lost in the city. Or, more directly, how are Hurricane Katrina-related memories made visible in a city where repair and rebuildingerase sites that act as witness and memorial to this historic tragedy?

The city’s neighborhoods, structures, and spaces are still in flux. While the French Quarter sustained little structural damage, a weakened economy continues to drive out many businesses. The Garden District, an area wealthier than much of New Orleans, also had little damage and its residents generally have the monetary means with which to properly bandage the cosmetic damage to their homes. But other areas such as Uptown, Midtown, Lakeside, and Gentilly, still have significant damage to the structures and communities that occupy these places. These sites have been “tagged” in spray-paint by both rescue officials marking searched buildings and by residents who scribble messages to Katrina and government officials on plywood, windows, doors, junked refrigerators, and in debris piles along the road side. Slowly, very slowly, these messages and reminders are being leveled and hauled away. They were spontaneous memorials (Azaryahu 1996) that will soon be lost in time. However, a more permanent and mobile form of visible memory work is etched in the skin of many of the survivors, rescuers, and volunteers of Katrina.

The Tattoo Storm

In the wake of Katrina, tattoos have become a popular means for people to express their trauma, honor the deceased, and pay tribute to the city of New Orleans. Tattoo artists interviewed by the Associated Press a year after the hurricane indicated that as many as half of their customers
wanted storm-related inscriptions (Plaisance 2006). The tattoos include images of crumbling buildings, broken hearts gushing floodwater, explicatives about Katrina or eulogies such as “9th Ward, RIP Lower 9” (See Image 13-1). People with hurricane tattoos include both first-timers and experienced collectors. Family members and friends come in together to be tattooed. For instance, after being rescued from New Orleans by the National Guard, Sean Jeffries and two other friends got matching tattoos. Jeffries was quoted as saying: “I’ll probably never get another tattoo, but this one means something to me. I got it because it has meaning behind it” (Plaisance 2006).

![Image 13-1: Andrea Garland displays her tattoo that reads “9th Ward RIP Lower 9,” a memorial to those lost during Hurricane Katrina near her 9th Ward neighborhood in New Orleans. October 2006. Photographer: Cheryl Gerber. Reprinted with permission from Associated Press/World Wide Photos.](image)

Tattoos provide a means by which those affected by Katrina can express and deal with their memories of trauma and place attachment, a way to make these feelings visible not only to themselves on a daily basis but also to a larger public. Annette LaRue, the owner of Electric Ladyland Tattoos in New Orleans, captured the mood of much of the surge in
Katrina-related tattoos when she suggested that it represented “a way for people to wear their pain.” This observation has been further substantiated by the research of Marline Otte of Tulane University, who conducted post hurricane interviews with citizens. She characterizes these tattoos as a “phenomenon of mourning” and suggests that they occur across class, gender, and racial lines. Otte also observed that amid these feelings of sorrow are attempts to reclaim the memory of New Orleans and its distinctiveness. Underlying many of these body inscriptions is fear that the city is becoming a “‘forgotten place in America’” as response and recovery efforts continue to be frustrating and disappointing (MacCash 2006, 1). It is little wonder, then, that the fleur-de-lis is a common motif in Katrina tattoos, often represented alongside or inside the standard hurricane symbol or swirl (See Image 13-2).


Derek, after reading an article by Doug MacCash (2006) in the *Times-Picayune*, a local New Orleans’ newspaper, began talking with me about how people were using tattoos as a way of uncovering the memories and stories about Katrina and its aftermath that they wished to make visible. As cultural geographers, he and I share an interest in vernacular expression, specifically the ways in which ordinary people inscribe their experiences and perspectives into visual symbolic forms. Being seen and heard is important to people, but it is particularly important when coping with the psychological, social, and physical stress of a disaster (Alderman and Ward, forthcoming). In the case of tattoos, people respond to trauma
by writing their story into flesh, thus creating a highly personal memorial to Katrina and its impact.

In order to explore the cultural importance of Katrina-related tattoos and what they mean to the people who get them, Derek and I contacted several tattoo shops in New Orleans. We asked tattoo artists to help us understand this phenomenon, as well as assist us in finding people with storm-inspired tattoos. I visited New Orleans in the Summer and Fall of 2006, and interviewed tattoo artists and customers within the city. From the number of tattoos that artists said they or their shops had done, we estimate that there have been thousands, if not tens of thousands, of Katrina and New Orleans-related tattoos inked into flesh since the hurricane. Some artists told us that these tattoos are generally larger, more detailed, and more visible than ones before Katrina. This suggests that tattoo wearers may be seeking to make public memorial statements, in addition to creating personal reminders of the tragedy.

We initially thought of New Orleans’ tattoo artists as gatekeepers who would help connect us with people who had received storm-inspired tattoos. However, it quickly became apparent that the artists were a much richer source of insight than we had originally assumed. Artists gave us a valuable perspective on trends in New Orleans tattooing both before and after Katrina. Perhaps more importantly, artists were often victims of the hurricane and had their own stories of loss and displacement to tell. In some instances, artists—like their customers—were motivated to mark their trauma by getting a tattoo, allowing us a special understanding of the process of designing and wearing the final product. The following narratives are from interviews that I did with three tattoo artists in October 2006. The first two interviews, with Tom and Brock, focus on their experiences during Katrina and how their stories became inscribed into the tattoos they now wear. The third interview, with Jody, demonstrates how the inking of someone else’s tattoo can serve as a point of emotional reflection and storytelling for both the artist and the client.

“X” Marks the Spot

We met a bit accidentally on the city street outside of the tattoo shop, Art Accent Tattoo, where I went to do interviews. I approached a man to ask about parking on Rampart Street without paying the parking meter (it only took credit cards—but not mine). He informed me that “they don’t come this late on Wednesday. They don’t boot yet. Anyway, that’s a rental car…why worry, what they goin’ do?” When I mentioned why I was there, he introduced himself as Tom, a tattoo artist at the shop, and that he
was waiting for me. The interview began right there on the sidewalk with the story of his latest tattoo. After a few minutes we moved into the tattoo shop where I began to ask my questions.

The conversation moved quickly to the “rescue X” tattoo that covers the outside of his right calf and takes up most of his lower leg (See Image 13-3). Tom’s tattoo requires an audience for it to achieve its intended purpose. Although clear to those who recognize the symbolism, tattoos do not speak for themselves, but require audience interpretation. Some tattoos are more easily “read” than others. Though Tom’s X tattoo is powerful for those who followed the media coverage on television and the Internet, a fuller understanding of the symbolism and meaning behind any tattoo can be learned through the personal stories that accompany it.


Immediately after the storm, rescue responders searched homes for both survivors and the dead, marking each building they searched with a spray painted “X” (See Image 13-4). Among other things, this X indicated the date of the search and the number of bodies found dead. The markings, while originating from a practical need to facilitate search and rescue, took
on deeper psychological meanings to those in New Orleans as a sign of death and the beginning of FEMA’s long and often frustrating intervention in the city. For some, including Tom, the X marks the spot of their trauma brought on by both the floods following Hurricane Katrina and the “Federal Flood” of governmental failures that continue to deeply affect the city.

As a local tattoo artist, Tom was well aware of the surge in Katrina-inspired tattoos, and since he rode out the storm in his 9th Ward home with his pregnant wife, Tom was there when the shop opened shortly after the storm. “A lot of thought was put into this tattoo,” he said. “I didn’t want something reactionary and just like everyone else. I already had a NOLA on my arm and Mardi Gras masks,” he told me as he grabbed his left arm and showed me the tattoo. “This was so people could not forget what happened…what is happening. We musn’t forget.”

Tom used pictures taken of post-Katrina New Orleans homes to design his new tattoo. This is not his first nor will it be his last tattoo memorializing the storm. At the time of the interview, he planned to have another one inscribed as a full back piece. The X tattoo is especially important to him because of its connection to his daughter, who was born a couple of weeks after the storm. Pointing to the tattoo, he told me,
My daughter walks up and points to my tattoo...and she points at the houses when we are going home [in the 9th ward]. She knows they are related. My daughter was born a couple of weeks after Katrina. This is part of her legacy. She has no idea how hard it was to keep her alive, the struggle it was without electricity, clean water, diapers...nothing man. I mean we were just trying to keep her alive. She was just so little...

As Tom told me his story, he became visibly emotional as tears welled up in his eyes; I struggled with my composure as well. I struggled as a researcher who was supposed to “objectively” listen to this man’s story, but found myself wanting to really listen and experience the emotion and poignancy of the moment. He continued,

We didn’t even have clean water and you couldn’t boil it...That is why this tattoo is so important. She does not know it yet, but the city’s struggle is part of her lifetime, it is part of her legacy...She could have died...We just struggled to keep her alive...This is why we cannot forget what happened.

The tattoo bridges generations. For Tom, it represents the experience of Katrina while also representing the birth and life of his daughter. The story of Katrina will be passed on to his daughter; it is part of her legacy, permanently written on her father’s leg. Tom told me that his tattoo has meaning to others as well. “I cannot go anywhere without people staring, or pointing, and people always have a story. Man, everybody. I got this because it is too important to forget. I can’t,” he said slapping his tattoo, “It is right here.”

Tom took the design and placement of his tattoo seriously. It stands not only for his own experiences with Hurricane Katrina, but for the experiences of all of the victims and the city that he loves. The tattoos represent badges of pride and survival, as well as markers of the traumas that unfolded on the landscape and in people’s lives. The loss of house and home, family and friends, and the struggles to help others are encoded upon their skin. They demonstrate pride in a city, their city, which has been critiqued and criticized in the media and by politicians.

Watching It All Go Down

Tom’s tattoo was a product of serious reflection, being inked several months after the storm had passed. Brock, a tattoo artist who had been living in the city for only a few years, was more reserved when talking about his own tattoo. This is not to say he shared with reluctance, but relied more on my own understanding of how someone can become
attached to a place, telling me, “You’re from Texas, you understand.” Brock received his Katrina-inspired tattoo soon after he had evacuated, letting his love for the city of New Orleans guide the design more than making a particular statement.

I met Brock at the tattoo shop he works at on Magazine Street, an area that did not flood during the storm and its aftermath; it was one of the first shops to reopen after Katrina. Brock got his tattoo soon after evacuating to Kentucky the day before the storm made landfall. A friend and fellow tattoo artist with whom he was staying, completed the tattoo. “I did not know if I would return,” he told me, “[but] I needed a tat, something to remember the city and the way it was.” This was not his first tattoo, and he noted that he lets his tattoos “tell stories about [a particular] time in [his] life.” He collects tattoos as both reminders and as pieces of art. In this case, he felt the need to commemorate his experience of Katrina and his life in New Orleans.

Brock’s Katrina-tattoo includes a crawfish and a fleur-de-lis inked on the top of his right thigh (See Image 13-5). He wanted the tattoo to “be more for myself…to commemorate the happy things.” He told me that he was “not trying to represent the city to anyone else,” but to remember his city—the city he did not know, at the time, whether or not he would see again. The fleur-de-lis is a French iris, both a symbol of France and an icon for the city of New Orleans. To speak to the damage inflicted by the storm, Brock’s fleur-de-lis appears worn and is missing “petals.” Curled around the fleur-de-lis is a crawfish, a happy and recognizable symbol of New Orleans for Brock and for others. When I asked about the crawfish, he smiled and told me that, “Every year we [at the tattoo shop] have a crawfish boil. Those are always good times, sitting around eating, drinking, and talking. Those are the best times here and I didn’t want to forget them.”

What is perhaps the most interesting aspect of Brock’s tattoo is its placement. According to Brock, he chose to have the tattoo placed onto his thigh so that he could watch the tattoo being “inked” while simultaneously watching the coverage of the flooding of New Orleans on television. Hours of inward reflection, sharing his stories with others, and viewing the stories of thousands of others being played out in front of him on the television were all part of his Katrina tattoo experience. So while Brock’s tattoo is meant for him (where Tom’s was also meant for others), the memories involved in the tattoo are both publicly shared (images and messages from the media coverage) and private.
Brock’s tattoo is personal and is commemorative of his love for and feared loss of New Orleans. Whereas Tom’s X is intended as more of a public memorial, Brock’s is envisioned in more private terms, but readable by others as related to New Orleans. In both cases, the process was important to the final product. In Brock’s case, the ability to see the tattoo in concert with the images of his flooded and neglected home is pivotal to understanding its significance. His tattoo marks a particular time and event in history. In contrast to Tom’s tattoo, which marks his struggle to save his family from flood waters, Brock’s inscription came from a different point of trauma as he watched it “all go down.”

**Who Sent You?**

This last vignette is as much about the tattoo artist as the tattooed. This story comes from my questions to tattoo artists about memorable tattoos they inked onto others since Hurricane Katrina. Since Jody told me the following story about one of her clients, there is no picture or analysis of the tattoo. At this point in the interview we had been talking for well over
an hour in his shop on the Westbank. The interview included another tattoo artist/piercer and was very conversational as they took turns answering questions, often disagreeing with one another. During this particular story, Jody had left to an adjacent room and was speaking through an opening. We could not see each other during the exchange.

“It was the first tattoo I did once I got back,” Jody said. He was working as an independent tattoo artist in another shop because his pre-storm shop had burned down. He went on,

A Red Cross dude came in and wanted a red cross, no outline, with Japanese waves behind it and “Katrina” underneath. The man cried after he saw the tattoo when it was finished. He had me sign the tattoo [which is unusual in tattooing] because he said that being in New Orleans was the most important thing he had ever done and wanted to remember who gave him the tattoo. On his way out I asked him why he had come to me to get the tattoo. He said his [Jody’s] friend R****** had suggested him. They had met when the Red Cross dude pulled R****** from the water. He had saved his life. I just tattooed the guy who saved my friend’s life. This was after I had only been back two days. Doing this tattoo meant the world to me.

This account illustrates the emotionally charged nature of both getting and giving storm-inspired tattoos. By inking the tattoo described above, Jody not only memorialized the experiences of the Red Cross worker, but also the story of his friend’s rescue from the floodwaters. In asking who sent the rescue worker to him, Jody reflects on how the shared trauma of Hurricane Katrina brings people together in unexpected ways. This forced him to reevaluate his personal relationship with the tattoo and its wearer. What started as perhaps just another tattoo for Jody, turned out to be a “tattoo that meant the world” to him, and was now part of his own storm-related recollections. By signing his name on the tattoo, Jody became an indelible part of the Red Cross worker’s remembrance of New Orleans, creating a bridge of memories and stories that transcend “just” one person.

Perhaps it was the effect of the disembodied voice, but more likely the brevity in delivery and the unexpected aspect of the answer that gave Jody’s story such an emotional impact. Rarely did tattoo artists provide long stories about their most memorable tattoos, yet each story evoked powerful emotions; I began, almost automatically, to brace myself for the telling. Despite this, I was overwhelmed by each story, and the depth at which they struck a chord with me. As a researcher, I have been told to strive for rich detail and long, involved stories. The power of Jody’s story reminds me that stories bare in length and detail are far from sparse in meaning and impact. In much the same way, many of the Katrina-inspired
tattoos I saw mean far more than their visual weight suggests. This is not a case where “less is more.” Rather, it is a reminder that we must be open to the seemingly little things if we are to understand the full breadth of how individuals reveal their identities and experiences to others. They are not simply little things, but keys that unlock larger landscapes and worlds of meaning.

**Tattoos as Memorials and Stories**

In understanding the cultural power of tattoos as modes of expression in New Orleans, it is necessary to see them as memorials. The city’s landscape presents a special challenge to the project of memorializing the disaster that followed Hurricane Katrina. In contrast to other nationally significant tragedies such as the Oklahoma City Bombing of 1995 and the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York City in 2001, New Orleans has been unable to engage in large-scale monument building or even smaller, more temporary memorial construction. As a result, New Orleans is a site of tragedy not easily memorialized. In such an environment, tattoos have emerged as an alternative site for people to remember and reflect on the disaster, a way of symbolizing and retelling their stories in the absence of a stable social and physical landscape upon which to memorialize. Tattoos may not have the same physical or symbolic gravity as large, planned memorials or even small, spontaneous shrines; yet, it is important not to ignore or underestimate the “micro-features of everyday life…[Because] the small can serve as a marker for the large” broader systems of collective memory and trauma (Fine and Hallet 2003, 12). Moreover, the body—although long treated as a “biological given”—is now understood as an important site for representing and participating in the social world (Reischer and Koo 2004, 298).

There is a strong connection between tattoos and storytelling. Tattoos, as visual narratives, communicate important messages about the cultural experiences and identity of the inscribed persons (Atkinson 2003, 2004; Burton 2001; Demello 2000; Kosult 2000). As Judith Sarnecki (2001) suggests, receiving a tattoo may be an especially appropriate way of marking tragic stories. On this point, she asks: “Does pain, loss, and suffering require more drastic ways of [story] telling, ways that involve our entire being? Does writing in the flesh in some permanent way help us both to let go and to memorialize a particularly painful or traumatic event in our life” (Sarnecki 2001, 39)? New Orleans remains a landscape of trauma. Memorial tattoos are popular ways of dealing with this trauma and
marking the loss of people and places both tattoo artists and clients hold dear. The vignettes presented in this chapter demonstrate the potential of tattoos to serve as significant and emotionally charged expressions of memory. The events of Hurricane Katrina are written permanently on the bodies of many whose lives have been affected by the disaster. Many, if not all of the tattoos, represent an effort by individuals to set their trauma in time and place. For some, it was motivated by a defensive pride in their city in light of the social inequalities and political inefficiencies that have been revealed. Regardless of the reason behind the tattoos, they are steeped in stories that are in need of being told—stories communicated through the images themselves as well as the discussions they provoke between the tattooed and other people. Katrina-related inscriptions are not just windows into understanding a single personal traumatic experience. As evident in examining Brock’s story, the tattoos also take on a collective or social quality as people reflect on the potential loss of their community of friends or their entire city. Stories surrounding Katrina-related tattoos are often touching, at times lengthy in explanation, and hit you like a swift and painful blow to the gut.

Notes

1. We have permission to use the real names of tattoo artists interviewed for this chapter. In Annette’s case, her last name is used because she was quoted by several media outlets. In all other cases, we provide first name and shop location to give the artists credit for their work without making them public figures.

2. The term “Federal Flood” appears to have been coined in the blog, The Wet Bank, which seeks to keep Hurricane Katrina and its impact in the public memory as well as to critique government response to the disaster.

References


