Crisis, Place, Health, and Narrative in Oral Histories of Hurricane Katrina and the Chernobyl Disaster

Senior Thesis

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Homeland is like heaven. The sun doesn't shine in a foreign place.

-Village Chorus, *Chernobyl'skaya Molitva*

We felt like we had no value, and the land was no longer ours.

-Harold Toussaint, resident of New Orleans, *Overcoming Katrina*

Introduction

Home plays an enormously significant role in definitions of identity and carries great symbolic value, but recently new forms of environmental risk have jeopardized the stability and security of home as a concept. Beginning in the 20th century, climate change, coupled with the ever-growing ability of humans to manipulate the environment, led to the rise of a new kind of catastrophe. As scientific and industrial capabilities advanced at an increasing pace, our knowledge of the effects of these interventions could not and did not keep up. Crutzen and Stoermer define this new era as the Anthropocene, characterized by the "central role of mankind in geology and ecology" (2000). As such, Anthropocene-era natural disasters are necessarily anthropogenic. Their complete impact is not fully understood, and their effect on the world population is stratified and unevenly distributed (Ogden et al., 2013). For example, the harnessing of nuclear energy has given rise to a health threat that is currently unfathomable in its spatial and temporal reach. Even non-radioactive forms of contamination are often temporally removed from their causes and sources, making this new form of health risk all the more difficult to comprehend.

In addition, the new danger posed by the environment is inextricably linked to ecosystems. For many, the earth they walk on and the place they live in have changed from being a direct source of sustenance (as agricultural production is outsourced) to being a source of toxicity. Climate

change and large-scale environmental catastrophes lead to mass displacement with a new cause: danger coming from the ecosystem, i.e. the place itself. Displacement is not only a physical or economic loss, as the right to a safe and private home in a culturally and emotionally meaningful location is an essential component of social, mental and physical health. Loss of a house can mean loss of memory, loss of heritage and loss of culture.

Individuals are affected by these catastrophes to varying degrees, and their causality is diffuse and nebulous, which poses a difficult question – how are we to assess human suffering and seek to eradicate it? Paul Farmer provides an analytic approach: he theorizes structural violence as "a broad rubric that includes a host of offensives against human dignity: extreme and relative poverty, social inequalities ranging from racism to gender inequality, and the more spectacular forms of violence that are uncontestedly human rights abuses, some of them punishment for efforts to escape structural violence" (*Pathologies of Power*, 8). More importantly, Farmer places human suffering within this framework: "suffering is structured by historically given (and often economically driven) processes and forces that conspire – whether through routine, ritual, or, as is more commonly the case, these hard surfaces [of individual suffering] – to constrain agency" (*Social Suffering*, 263). That is, the response to environmental catastrophe is controlled and organized by individuals in positions of power fulfilling (or not) the basic promise of the modern state – protection of its citizen, so it makes sense that the response to these events can be viewed and analyzed within a structural framework.

The health effects of environmental disaster, both mental and physical, have not been completely parsed out or described. In part this is due to the nature of the damage – environmental effects are spatially and temporally removed from their source, diffuse and multi-layered. However, it would be short-sighted not to acknowledge the negligence that clearly plays into this

lack of information. Jonathan Metzl and Helena Hansen point out the reluctance of healthcare practitioners to take structural factors affecting their patients into account. Such an approach is dangerously myopic, for, as Farmer explains, individuals' "life choices are structured by racism, sexism, political violence, and grinding poverty" (Social Suffering, 263). Metzl and Hansen call for structural competency – an approach to clinical encounters that promotes "awareness of forces that influence health outcomes at levels above individual interactions" (3). Crucially, they emphasize structural humility as a key component of this practice: "clinicians are at once speakers and listeners, leaders and collaborators, experts and benighted" in the framework of structural competency (12).

Part of attaining environmental justice is to realize that marginalized communities are often those most affected by anthropogenic climate change. Farmer emphasizes that scholars must look to the experiences of those who are most affected by structural forces to most fully understand what he terms "the political economy of brutality" (*Social Suffering,* 274). Combined with the centrality of listening to Metzl and Hansen's notion of structural competency, Farmer's analytic approach necessitates an interdisciplinary methodology that would address traditionally marginalized and silenced groups while simultaneously subverting traditional axes of power, along which structural violence is enacted. This method seeks to explore and illuminate partial, individual experiences in the context of far larger forces. Farmer accomplishes this by focusing on individual stories with an awareness of both their generalizability and their uniqueness. Oral history can serve as a methodology that combines the partial and the general and the global and the local. Therefore, a structural approach to oral testimonies will illuminate the relationship between the individual and the collective in the context of environmental threat. In addition, oral

history gives the narrators more ownership and agency over their own histories and thus subverts existing axes of structural violence.

Luisa Passerini, an oral historian, argues that oral history is particularly suited to counteracting the deleterious effects of what she terms "totalitarianism." In fact, Passerini's notion of totalitarianism is broad enough to include capitalist democracies and incorporates a structural approach to suffering, drawing a strong connection between the practice of oral history and an awareness of structural violence. To Passerini, totalitarian structures enforce a "cult of consensus and authority," while "democracies […] host structures that facilitate the latent application of force as the oppression of persons by persons through unperceived structural violence that shapes ideologies, values, and dependencies" (7-8). She sees parallels between these forms of oppression and silencing and posits oral history as a method to "insist on the diversity and plurality of memory […] to detach human memory from all forms of totalitarianism, in politics as well as culture" (Passerini, 18). Oral history is a means by which Farmer's ambition to highlight and elevate those at the bottom of axes of structural oppression can be accomplished in order to gain an understanding of and ultimately combat structural violence.

The environment can't speak, but oral history amplifies the collective voices that can speak for their experiences in this environment. Environmental catastrophe highlights the critical importance of place to health. Public policy and healthcare decisions in the wake of environmental crisis must make central people's understanding and experience of space, place and home, as opposed to the beliefs of individuals in positions of power. Oral history is a critical methodology in accessing these otherwise marginalized narratives of place and space in the wake of environmental disaster.

Context

Two events exemplify the different facets of this new form of environmental disaster: the accident at the nuclear power plant in Chernobyl, USSR in 1986, and Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, LA in 2005. They occurred in two states, the United States and the Soviet Union, that have long been assumed to be diametrically opposed to one another. Given the many differences between the Soviet socialist state and US capitalist democracy, a comparison will prove particularly illuminating, as it will illustrate how "there have been similarities of oppression among systems of thought and power that were in many ways very different" (Passerini, 6). Moreover, both of these environmental catastrophes were seen as watershed moments that laid bare the profound risks associated with modernization. Finally, they are separated by nearly 20 years, and yet the similarities of state negligence, withholding of information and individual suffering in both cases are striking and disheartening.

It is crucial to note that these environmental disasters are direct results of political and economic decisions made by these two state systems. Given that the response to environmental crisis is carried out by the state, the state's complicity in these disasters cannot be overlooked. The rise of the Anthropocene is seen as a result of industrialization, which was heavily fueled by capitalism in the United States and Stalinism in the USSR. Environmental regulations in the US emerged as a response to egregious mistreatment of the environment by large corporate interests. Meanwhile, Soviet attitudes to the environment must be examined in the context of the Socialist utopian project. For example, there were plans to reverse the currents of massive Siberian rivers to aid industrial projects in the region in 1971 (Pravda, 2 July 1971, 6). Taking control over nature and the environment was an essential component of socialist aspirations in the USSR.

In the early hours of April 26th, 1986, an accident occurred at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Ukraine, a republic within the USSR, leading to a fire within the reactor and the release

of radioactive isotopes into the atmosphere. This accident was the result of a combination of errors and careless decisions: the reactor had been poorly constructed, leading to the potential of increased power output in the case of an accident. The fire occurred during an experiment that was testing the function of the reactor in the event of the failure of the main electricity source. However, the experiment was initially postponed, yet the employees chose to go through with it even though the starting conditions had changed and become unsafe. They also did not correspond to the conditions required for the experiment, rendering its execution pointless. Some sociologists have even argued that it was the totalitarian resistance to dissenting opinion that allowed for such a risky and careless experiment to be carried out (Baranouskaya, 40-41). Among the released radioactive isotopes, Strontium, Cesium, Iodine, and Lead were of the most danger to humans. The effects of radioactive iodine could have been counteracted by providing the population with iodine tablets, which was not done.

The ensuing fire in the reactor lasted for 10 days, although the most intense fallout occurred on the first. It was contained due to the heroic efforts of firefighters and volunteers, who often did not realize the risk associated with the doses of radiation they were receiving. To this day, the firefighters are venerated as heroes in the former USSR, and a monument to their work has been erected near the reactor. The firefighters were followed by several hundred thousand "liquidators," soldiers and volunteers who cleaned up the area from 1986 to 1989 and built the sarcophagus that covers the reactor to this day. The liquidators cleaned the other buildings in the power plant, buried contaminated topsoil, repaved roads, etc. They also, according to oral testimonies given to Svetlana Alexievich and published in *Voices from Chernobyl*, rounded up and shot feral dogs and cats.

The town of Pripyat was closest to the power plant and received the greatest dose of radiation. The town of Chernobyl is located to the south of the power plant and is separated from

it by a cooling pond. The residents of Chernobyl were not immediately alerted of the danger and, on the morning of the 26th, children were still playing outside. The evacuation of Pripyat (pop. 44,000) occurred on April 27th, while people living within a 30-kilometer radius (this area subsequently became known as "The Zone" and is officially uninhabitable to this day) were evacuated on May 2nd. 116,000 people were evacuated initially, followed by 250,000 in later years.

The radioactive plume from the accident spread predominantly over the republic of Belarus (Chernobyl is very close to the Ukrainian-Belarussian border), unevenly affecting the landscape, with the greatest concentration of radioactive particles falling on the Mogilev and Gomel regions. However, little is known about the effects of radiation in small doses (and radiation is naturally absorbed and produced), so it can be difficult to assess the risks posed to the general population. Only 50 deaths have been reported as a direct effect of the accident, although in 2005 a group of scientists concluded that the final toll may be closer to 4000. The vast majority of evacuees from the Zone have not returned, but some people have moved back to rural villages, and part of the Zone is inhabited by ethnic Russians who fled from the USSR's Central Asian states after perestroika, where they faced persecution.

Nearly two decades after the accident at Chernobyl, on August 28th, 2005, a category 3 hurricane made landfall at the Mississippi delta. Hurricane Katrina had already ravaged the coast of Florida, but weather experts were concerned that the greatest damage would be done to New Orleans. These concerns were exacerbated by the geographic stratification of the city – low-income neighborhoods are not as elevated above sea level as wealthier neighborhoods. New Orleans was also unusual among Southern cities due to high homeownership levels among its Black residents: many barriers (redlining, lower levels of capital, structural violence, etc.) prevent

homeownership among African-Americans, especially in Southern states. This heartening statistic would prove tragic when so many houses were irreparably damaged after Katrina. The majority of the population in New Orleans was Black. The city was one of the most racially segregated cities in the country and had a poverty rate far higher than the national average.

An evacuation order had been issued on the previous day, but buses were not available, and airports and highways were quickly overtaken by people trying to leave the city. Moreover, many residents chose to or were forced to stay: not everyone had cars, and there were no government-sponsored evacuation efforts. In addition, some residents were too ill to leave, or did not believe the storm was too worrisome – New Orleans sees hurricanes and tropical storms quite often. In an attempt to provide assistance for these populations, the Superdome and the New Orleans Convention Center were designated as a shelter of last resort – a common practice during hurricanes and tropical storms. In total, Hurricane Katrina led to the displacement of 2 million people.

The storm itself caused severe winds and destroyed some houses, especially more poorly constructed homes in low income neighborhoods. In the most severely affected neighborhoods in New Orleans, 73% of all homes were damaged, 79% of which were classified as "affordable to low-income households" (Crowley, *There is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster,* 124). The Superdome, which many people rushed to, did not hold up to the winds, and tiles were torn off its roof.

But it was after the storm had passed that Katrina turned into one of the most horrific disasters in US history. New Orleans is protected from the surrounding water in the Mississippi delta by a series of levees. One separates the 9th ward, a low income, predominantly Black neighborhood, from the Industrial canal. Built by the Army Corps of Engineers in the 1970s, this

levee was structurally unsound and not built to withstand the enormous waves cause by Katrina. This levee, among two others, was breached by the force of the water, submerging 80% of the city. Low income neighborhoods were most severely affected by the flood. Meanwhile, residents were still stranded in the Superdome.

Hurricane Katrina was marked by an appallingly slow government response. It quickly became clear the Louisiana government could not manage the disaster on its own (and New Orleanians were being evacuated to other states, especially Texas), but the federal government, especially FEMA, did not hurry to address the crisis. Perhaps most shockingly, George W. Bush denied the existence of a serious crisis and praised the glaringly inadequate work of FEMA. He gave his first official speech on the disaster on Wednesday, three days after Katrina first made landfall ("Waiting for a Leader"). Many responsibilities fell on the Coast Guard, who rescued thousands from their homes. FEMA teams, along with volunteers, also inspected every home for casualties once the water subsided, leaving eerie markings on each home designating the number of residents and corpses in each home. The death toll from Katrina was at least 1,200, but the different government agencies report different numbers and Louisiana has been reducing the official toll over the years. Many died from heat and dehydration, especially in the Superdome – not because of the hurricane itself, but because FEMA could not provide people with adequate support.

Evacuation of the Superdome only began on Thursday, September 1st, and the Convention was not evacuated until the following day. The task of conducting the evacuation was assigned to the US military. The delay in response was partially due to rampant crime and looting in the city in the days after the storm. However, this looting has been a topic of dispute: firstly, many people were starving and looted to access food and clean water. In addition, images of poor, angry,

African-American residents looting the city were widely circulated in the media, playing into stereotypical notions of violence in order to rationalize the constrained rescue efforts. Many critics have concluded that the decision to prioritize reducing looting (made by mayor Ray Nagin) over evacuation was racist, deeply misguided and led to far more deaths among those stranded in the city. In another tragic turn, the Mississippi police did not allow residents to cross the bridge between New Orleans and Gretna, LA, stranding people in excruciating heat.

Finally, later evacuation efforts serve as further evidence of government negligence and gross mishandling of the emergency. FEMA did not provide sufficient trailers for emergency housing, and those provided contained toxic levels of formaldehyde, posing a danger to their residents. In addition, housing vouchers intended to help New Orleanians move or rebuild their homes. However, efforts to rebuild and resettle New Orleans emphasized making the city attractive to tourists and young professionals, a sort of "boutique city." Many New Orleanians living in low income neighborhoods felt that they were no longer welcome in this new wealthy, glitzy, predominantly white New Orleans.

Analysis of this new form of environmental danger, or risk – global and local – as epitomized by environmental catastrophe must find ways to strike a balance between the partial and the universal. These events pose a threat to the entire world and are the result of truly global phenomena – climate change and the harnessing of nuclear energy, themselves co-constitutive processes, and yet they are firmly located within their specific cultural, political, and social contexts. In light of this, a cross-cultural comparison will serve as an attempt to navigate the local and global axes of these events. In addition, comparison of the testimonies of marginalized groups in the USSR and the United States will help elucidate the different (and at times surprisingly similar) ways in which structural violence operates in these contexts. Although the USSR and the

United States were defined as politically dissimilar, a close examination of the response to these two disasters reveals that oppression manifested itself in similar ways in both societies. It is my hope that a less ideologically influenced comparison between these two systems will add a degree of nuance and ambiguity to the study of individuals' experiences in capitalist and socialist societies.

Methodology

Aside from its comparative nature, which is particularly useful in applying the methods of the humanities of the study of health and society, the comparative literature approach to the study of environmental justice and structure is advantageous in its interdisciplinarity. This lens facilitates an awareness of the complex and layered effects of environmental catastrophe and allows for the oral testimonies of survivors of these catastrophic events to be viewed in a rich and dynamic context. This corresponds to Paul Farmer's assertion that any structural analysis must be "geographically broad" and "historically deep" (*Social Suffering,* 274). As such, this work will analyze oral histories with the help of oral history theory, critical space theory, critical race studies, and narrative theory. Climate change blurs constructed spatial and social boundaries, and thus humanist scholarship of climate change must also seek connections and links between different fields of study in order to illuminate the changing nature and significance of space in the Anthropocene.

Oral History

Gaps in research on the aftereffects of climate change and environmental contamination serving the needs of marginalized and affected groups are yet another form of structural violence, as environmental justice involves providing those affected by environmental change with valid and comprehensive information about the risks they face. In their writings, Adriana Petryna and

Sandra Steingraber demonstrate how this epistemological dilemma has often led scientific authorities to abandon any sort of investigation of long-term health effects due to the presence of excessive confounding variables. This approach is frightening in its negligence, as it leaves many people without any explanation of their lived experiences and does nothing to prevent or ameliorate the consequences of future catastrophes. Petryna and Steingraber suggest that the theoretical complexity of these phenomena should instead serve as a nudge for scholars and policy-makers towards other forms of knowledge, and that those who were affected by these events need to have a prominent voice in the study of environmental catastrophes.

Oral history is a powerful tool in this setting because it assumes that "people always have something to say on what is proposed to or even imposed on them, or at least that potentially every individual has an understanding and an interpretation of his/her history as well as of History" (Passerini, 5). In telling a story, the narrator is creating, reinforcing and sharing a memory which will become part not only of their individual narrative, but that of their community and of the world. Mary Marshall Clark has argued for the therapeutic capabilities of oral history collection, "oral history carries with it the capacity to address the resurgence of violence and indifference in global contexts. This ethical possibility requires that the act of telling, and the act of hearing, always be followed by the shared act of interpretation that illuminates the historical or political sources of injustice and also reveals one's own responsibility in the face of it" (269). This is why Luisa Passerini, in explaining how oral history can serve to address the aftermath of totalitarianism and other forms of structural oppression, focuses so heavily on memory. Oral history creates memories that are not ideological, universal, or controlled – it finds plurality and diversity in the deeply partial and personal.

By focusing on the narrator and providing marginalized individuals with agency with regards to their own narrative, oral history serves to counteract the forces of structural violence and elitist academic traditions. Alessandro Portelli, an oral history scholar, posits oral history as "the process of creating relationships: between narrators and interviewers, between events in the past and dialogic narratives in the present" (Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out,* 15). Therefore, oral history can prove useful in grappling with crisis precisely because it is a series of unified narratives that necessarily touch upon the different axes influencing and exacerbating these events. Finally, oral history as a method of study lends agency to those who were most affected by catastrophic events – a fundamental form of respect and dignity that is commonly overlooked in historical analyses. This is particularly important in the case of events that are unprecedented in their temporal and spatial consequences. Svetlana Alexievich writes that, "In my books these people tell their own, little histories, and big history is told along the way" (Alexievich, 8). Finally, oral testimonies operate by means of symbols (Portelli, *Death of Luigi Trastulli*, 2-3), so they are particularly suited to the study of concepts with enormous symbolic value, like place, home, and health.

Few oral historians have collected testimonies from people who were somehow affected by Chernobyl – in part, this is complicated by the unprecedented temporal and spatial consequences of the disaster. Svetlana Alexievich is the most prominent oral historian to have done so, and her work, *Voices from Chernobyl* (the original Russian title is closer in meaning to *Chernobyl Prayer*) is part of a series chronicling the people she terms *homo sovieticus* - "the Soviet Man." She wants to know "how [socialism] played out in the human soul" (Nobel Lecture, 6). The other collections in this series focus on women and children's involvement in World War II (*War's Unwomanly Face* and *The Last Witnesses*), the lives of young Soviet soldiers who fought in

Afghanistan (*Zinky Boys*) and people's experiences of perestroika (*Secondhand Time*). Her work on Chernobyl is particularly personal, as she is Belarussian and thus also considers herself to be a witness of the event. Alexievich's project, which is simultaneously miniscule and enormous in its scope, is especially suited to the exploration of the global and local aspects of risk. Not much is known about Alexievich's methodology, but she does not always publish the narrators' full names (this anonymity and semi-anonymity may encourage honesty on the part of the interviewees). Alexievich's work is critically acclaimed (she has been awarded the Nobel prize, solidifying the oral history's place in the literary canon), but she has been criticized for excessively editing the testimonies she collects and publishes. However, these critiques fail to take into account Alessandro Portelli's explanation that oral histories are necessarily edited and condensed – Portelli does not believe that this practice takes away from oral histories' veracity and value.

Methods of recording and transmitting oral histories also raise the question of accuracy. Firstly, much is lost, according to Portelli, when an oral recording is transcribed: intonation, volume, verbal punctuation, and nonverbal communication. In becoming a literary genre, oral history loses its orality. This loss of meanings and symbols continues in translation, which cannot convey all of the nuances of the transcript in its native language. Akin to oral historians caught between accuracy and "readability" when transcribing an interview, literary translators must navigate between loyalty to the author's tone and style and accessibility to readers in a different language. The translation of *Voices from Chernobyl*, by Keith Gessen, encounters this issue. Gessen chooses to be extremely liberal with the text, reordering testimonies, editorializing beyond Alexievich's own work, and drastically cutting Alexievich's introduction. This likely made the text more accessible to English-speaking readers, and it may have reached a wider audience, but extremely liberal translation is a fraught practice in the case of oral history, as it further distorts

the voices of individuals that are marginalized and silenced to begin with. In addition, Gessen's edits are fundamentally different from Alexievich's, as he did not enter into the narrator-interviewer relationship that is at the crux of oral history like she did when she conducted her interviews. As such, both the original text and Gessen's translation will be used in this work, to ensure maximum fidelity to the narrators' stories.[1]

The work of oral historians in the former USSR provides a perfect example of what Passerini defines as the power of oral history in rejecting and resisting totalitarianism. In the post-Stalinist world, speech was rigidly censored, and most Soviet citizens knew of at least one person who was arrested for merely saying the wrong thing. In addition, until the 1950s, nondisclosure was criminalized, so citizens could be arrested for not reporting on a political prisoner. As such, silence and public speech became fraught with risk and responsibility. In the Stalinist era, writing reports on fellow citizens was very common – often as a means to protect oneself from imprisonment and to prove one's loyalty to the dominant ideology. Moreover, the definition of a "political crime" was fluid and nebulous, making justice arbitrary and legitimizing state violence in essentially any context. Hundreds of people were arrested or executed extrajudicially. As such, speech was extremely political in the USSR, and, as Irina Scherbakova, another Soviet oral historian, explains "historical truth within our country lived on only through underground memory" (103). Most of official history was colored by a strong ideological bias and was thus mythologized and edited. Writing was even more incriminating, as written proof of an ideological doubt or dissenting opinion is more permanent.

[1]Testimonies quoted from Gessen's translation will be cited as *Voices from Chernobyl,* while testimonies quoted from the original Russian and translated by the author of this paper will be cited as *Chernobyl'skaya Molitva.*

In this context, Portelli's characterization of orality as threatened by impermanence and writing as threatened by permanence acquires another dimension: in a society where speech is policed, speech, especially private and anonymous, is safer. As a result, "kitchen" conversations, in which people felt comfortable divulging frank political and social opinions to those they trusted, have become something of a trope in Soviet culture. This is the context in which Alexievich approached her project – her narrators often feel more comfortable sharing their stories orally and anonymously because of how speech was policed in the USSR. As one of Alexievich's interviewees explains, "There were a thousand taboos. Party and military secrets. […] We were people chained by fear and prejudice" (Vasily Nesterenko, 207). Alexievich's project is radical because it records and immortalizes words that had always been ephemeral. In a way, this recording of fleeting concerns and stories that live only within people's minds is itself a version of justice. In light of this, it is clear why so many of the narrators are interested in bearing witness to these events. In *Voices from Chernobyl*, individual truths override the truth of the state. This is powerfully conveyed in the testimony of Nikolai Kalugin, whose daughter died after the catastrophe, "I want to bear witness: my daughter died from Chernobyl. And they want us to forget about it" (Gessen, 33).

There are more oral histories available on Hurricane Katrina than on Chernobyl, but two collections stand out in particular. One is part of the *Voice of Witness* series, a collection of oral histories specifically interested in furthering social justice and human rights for all by amplifying the voices of those who have faced violence. The historians' goal is to "chronicle the racial discrimination and outright neglect many endured in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina" (Eggers and Vollen, 1). Like Alexievich's, this collection of oral histories aspires to bear witness to government mistreatment of citizens in the aftermath of crisis. The oral testimonies are

supplemented by an appendix with excerpts from interviews of major government officials, a timeline, summaries of court rulings, recordings of negotiations, and other materials. Juxtaposed with compelling and terrifying testimonies, these impartial yet damning documents tell the story of a disaster that was as much social as it was natural.

This collection can be supplemented with another: *Overcoming Katrina: African American Voices from the Crescent City and Beyond*. As its editors argue, most mainstream individual narratives of Katrina feature white protagonists, so this collection endeavors to amplify Black voices specifically to counteract this lack of representation (Penner and Ferdinand, xxi-xxii). This effort also serves to emphasize the enormous significance of racism in the aftermath of Katrina. This is particularly significant in the context of a comparative study – the USSR has a very different history of racial tension and racial oppression than the United States, and institutionalized discrimination operated in different ways in these two countries. Overcoming Katrina, along with writings that have focused on the role of racism in Hurricane Katrina, will highlight this axis of structural violence.

Oral histories of Chernobyl and Katrina play a crucial role in processing and interpreting these disasters. Both events were compounded by structural violence: government organs prevented effective and timely evacuation, many victims did not have access to adequate information and warnings, and many were deprived of a sense of place and belonging. Oral history, by giving voice to the silenced, subverts this axis of power. Alexievich chose to interview Belarussians because she was appalled by the silence surrounding an event she saw as culturally defining. Oral historians of Katrina believe that they offer the chance "to learn the firsthand experiences of the survivors: to be on the roof of Eastern New Orleans for three days […], or at a Superdome loading dock" (Penner and Ferdinand, xix).

Access to information, or a lack thereof, shaped the response to these disasters. These events are the effect of intangible and invisible environmental changes, so their victims are particularly reliant on adequate, timely, and truthful information on the risks they faced. This is particularly salient in the case of Chernobyl, given the "invisible" nature of radioactive contamination and damage. After the catastrophe at Chernobyl, government officials did not inform Soviet citizens of the extent of the danger of the fallout. Moreover, nuclear physics and climate science are complex concepts that not everyone has the privilege to learn, linking environmental justice to equality in access to educational. Democratic and egalitarian distribution of education and information is another component of equity in the era of climate change. Lack of access to accurate information, in part, leads to the presence of scientific inaccuracies and urban myths in oral testimonies. Alessandro Portelli, a scholar of oral history, asserts that in oral sources "the discrepancies and the errors are themselves events, clues for the work of desire and pain over time, for the painful search for meaning" (Portelli, The Order Has Been Carried Out, 16). Therefore, inaccuracies in lived accounts do not necessarily devalue the content of the testimony and are in and of themselves a historical phenomenon.

Given that oral history is uniquely equipped to address the fallout of structural violence, and environmental contamination and destruction, as an effect of the very structures and powers that enact structural violence, can be analyzed as a form of structural violence, it is not surprising that oral historians have begun to collaborate with environmentalists. For example, oral histories collected in Cornwall, where fields were irreversibly damaged by excess clay mining, added to the information gathered by visiting environmentalists and scholars because they are a "practical tool to investigate human relationships with and experiences of local environment with respect to a wider context" (Trower, 86). Environmental oral history provides a way for local voices to be

heard and thus expands the field of knowledge considered valuable and salient in the aftermath of environmental destruction.

Aside from equipping researchers with the tools and methods needed to conduct ethical research that advances social justice and amplifies marginalized voices, the oral testimonies of survivors reflect differences and similarities between the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl and Hurricane Katrina and thus illuminate the relationship between government, individual, society, home, and ecosystem.

Ecological Risk Theory

In *The Risk Society*, Ulrich Beck theorizes that the growth of industrial society and its accompaniment by scientific prowess has led to a world in which risk is simultaneously and produced and obscured by the industry. However, as industry's ability to severely manipulate the natural environment has grown, especially with the advent of nuclear power and nuclear weapons, manageable risks have been replaced by uncontrollable threats. These threats lose their "delimitations in time and space, and thus [their] meaning" and become events that have "a beginning and no end; an 'open-ended festival' of creeping, galloping and overlapping waves of destruction" (Beck, 54). Thus, Beck's definition of risk is inherently concerned with spatial and temporal boundaries and their dissolution.

Beck also explains how industrialized nations find themselves unable to respond to these new threats. Responsibility for them is diffuse and difficult to trace temporally. New ecological hazards "slip through all the meshes of technology, law and politics" (Beck, 57). The welfare state, intended to preserve health and security, finds itself powerless before something that is the inevitable result of industrialization. Science now can produce that which it cannot curtail or control, and this production is driven by capitalism and industrialization. The natural sciences

legitimize these risks, because they come into existence before they can be properly studied. Importantly, Beck notes that the exposure to risk is unequally distributed among different populations, "there are countries, sectors and enterprises which profit from the production of risk, and others which find their economic existence threatened together with their physical well-being" (Beck, 62). For the purposes of this work, Beck's focus on health as the main target of these new threats is particularly productive.

Moreover, Beck draws a strong link between place and justice in the risk society, arguing that "morality and justice are not extra-territorial values for modern society" (10). As such, any analysis of structural violence in the context of environmental destruction would be incomplete without an explicit focus on location. This corresponds to Farmer's calls for a "geographically broad" analysis of structural violence and suffering (*Social Suffering,* 279). Therefore, exploring narratives of place in the wake of ecological disaster is particularly illuminating.

Critical Space Theory

For the purpose of this work, the symbolic meaning of home and space can be explored by means of anthropological theory. Recent anthropological studies have focused specifically on environmental contamination and how humans' relationship to the earth has been profoundly changed in the 20th century. Anthropological theory provides context for the framework of symbols and meanings that narrators operate within, thus substantiating and grounding the comparison between Hurricane Katrina and Chernobyl.

Yelena Minyonok, an ethnographer and folklorist who studies Belarussian folk customs, argues that the significance of home in the Eastern European context is that of a location that "guarantees maximum safety and peace" and serves as a "psychological portrait of the individual living [within]." Importantly, windows serve as the eyes of the home and are thus often lavishly

and intricately decorated. These traditions are rooted in pagan belief: the universe consists of two worlds, one familiar and safe - world of the living, as symbolized by the home - and one dangerous and confusing - world of the dead, symbolized by the "outside" world. The Soviet government had a complex relationship with folk beliefs, at times coopting or recasting them to serve its ideological needs.

In addition to anthropology, modern studies of the environment can inform an oral history analysis. Portelli emphasizes the importance of studying the temporal shifts in memory that may depart from chronology, leading to factual inaccuracies in oral histories, as they all speak to the narrative's patterns of meaning and symbolic structures. As such, any discussion of oral histories should be supplemented with information collected by sociologists, historians and environmental scientists, as it will add richness and context to the analysis. However, oral histories will nonetheless be of central significance. Hopefully, this will serve to counteract an epistemic hierarchy in environmental studies in which sources produced by academics in a position of privilege are valued over the opinions and experiences of members of affected communities.

Edward Soja, a critical theorist, argues that prior critical theory analyses have erred too far on the side of historicism and have thus neglected the spatial dimensions of modern society. This is particularly pertinent in works that grapple with the significance of the Anthropocene. He explains the role of space in the reinforcement of structural violence, "space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology" (Soja, 6). Soja challenges the conception of space as static, passive, and innocent and argues for a critical awareness of space's subjectivity (11). In the aftermath of ecological disaster, as space

becomes a source of toxicity or is irrevocably changed, analyses that do not grapple with "the significance of space and geography in social production" are myopic (Soja, 15).

In "Of Other Spaces," Michel Foucault defines the modern epoch as one defined by space: "the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed" (Foucault, 1). Foucault explains that spaces in the Middle Ages were sanctified and imbued with a stable privilege. To Foucault, the modern epoch has begun but not completed a "theoretical desanctification of space" (Foucault, 2). In the context of environmental destruction, perhaps the rise of the Anthropocene is the ultimate desanctification, as it is the result of the ultimate assertion of power over the Earth by mortals. Foucault chooses not to make a moral judgment about desanctification, but perhaps, in the context of Beck and Steingraber, final and complete desanctification is extremely dangerous due to its environmental and health effects. Maybe the bankruptcy of space Alexievich mentions in the quote that serves as the title for this chapter is a form of desanctification, of stripping space of its value. Foucault further delineates two types of privileged spaces that, by their very existence, inform and define all other spaces. One is the utopias, which are "fundamentally unreal" (Foucault, 3), while the other is the heterotopia, that which is outside of all spaces and fundamentally different. To Foucault, all other space is defined through heterotopia in a kind of layered dialectic, and it is "simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault, 3). Crucially, heterotopias are culturally universal and dynamically defined.

As examples of heterotopia, Foucault uses the cemetery (although this notion is contested by narrators from both Chernobyl and New Orleans), brothels, and hospitals. In an environmental context, heterotopia consists of not just the social components of a space, which Foucault is preoccupied with, but also nature itself. In addition, the meaning of heterotopia acquires a new

intensity and gravity when place begins to pose a risk to health. Perhaps this is a defining feature of the Anthropocene – man can now make nature itself into a heterotopia. In another interesting connection with environmental catastrophe, which introduces a new understanding of temporality and causality, Foucault argues that "the heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time" (Foucault, 6). Aside from death, which is the example given by Foucault, the lasting effects of chemical contamination subvert conventional notions of time and space. Another important feature of heterotopias is a peculiarity of access: "either the entry is compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications" (Foucault, 7). The spatial sequestering of the survivors of both Chernobyl and Katrina is reminiscent of Foucault's words.

Critical Race Theory

Racism is a paramount component of structural violence in the United States. In *There is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster,* Mary Frances Berry argues that "the most salient and ongoing story [of Katrina] is one of poverty and racism" (2). Moreover, space is racialized in the United States, so any discussion of the relationship between structural violence and space would be incomplete without employing critical race theory. Most historical appraisals of Katrina used in this work are extremely cognizant of the enormous role institutionalized racism played in the disparity of response to Katrina. Finally, oral history, as a practice deeply concerned with identity, must be viewed in the context of racial identity and thus structural racism in the United States. This is all the more salient given that one of the oral history collections that will be analyzed is specifically concerned with elevating the voices and narratives of Black New Orleanians.

Narrative Theory

Beck was interested in how sociopolitical institutions, which function as a form of insurance against more conventional risks, fail in the Anthropocene. This question can also be explored on a more personal and emotional level: how do unprecedented forms of trauma and risk distort or subvert traditional narratives, meanings and symbols? Unprecedented, drastic, and all-consuming events like the accident at the Chernobyl power plant destabilize conventional methods of human understanding, which are most often expressed in narrative form. This is easily traceable in oral histories: narrators compare the world post-crisis to "a horror movie," "a parallel reality," "the Twilight zone." Often these metaphors are accompanied by a representative example, story or image. Focusing on these stories allows for an analysis of where conventional narrative shatters under the pressure of unprecedented dangers.

Susan Sontag's writings on war photography and illness can prove useful in terms of their analytic approach to the relationship between narrative and human understanding. In *Regarding the Pain of Others,* she writes, "Narratives make us understand" (89). Sontag juxtaposes narratives with photography to emphasize that the understanding and cultivation of memory through a story (not an image) is essential to the human condition. In *Illness as Metaphor,* Sontag applies her theory of human understanding to the way we speak and write about illness. Focusing on tuberculosis and cancer as representative examples, she explains that the "controlling metaphors in descriptions of cancer [are] from the language of warfare" (*Illness as Metaphor,* 64). Sontag provides proof for this assertion by examining literary descriptions of cancer and listing the terms doctors use to describe the disease. Crucially, Sontag sees in this application of war metaphors a desire to categorize cancer as the ultimate enemy and thus the Other (*Illness as Metaphor,* 84). Sontag's approach, which assumes that the use of certain language and metaphors reveals what

conventional narratives are being applied to a situation or event, proves useful in analyzing oral histories, a narrative form.

The Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin argued that in the context of a literary narrative space and time cannot be examined independently of one another: rather, they function as a chronotope. Bakhtin went on to identify commonly appearing chronotopes and trace their historical development in a variety of narrative genres. Foucault also argues for an analytical approach that views space as connected to time, although he is more interested in the notion of an intersection than that of a firm link. In the context of oral history analysis, Bakhtin's theory implies that an awareness of the role that time plays in the narrative and symbolic structure of an oral history is essential. This is echoed in Alexievich's introduction, "Chernobyl is primarily a catastrophe of time" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva*, 30). But all environmental contamination is primarily a catastrophe of time – few other crises have such lasting temporal effects and are so far temporally removed from their root causes. Beck defines these new risks as being both global and local in their spread. In a Bakhtinian interpretation, an event with indeterminate spatial dimensions must necessarily have indeterminate temporal dimensions if it is to be a chronotope.

"We Have a New Understanding of Space Now. We Live in Bankrupt Space:"[2] Place, Time and Risk in the Anthropocene

In her introduction to the Russian edition of *Voices from Chernobyl,* Svetlana Alexievich writes, "Chernobyl is not a metaphor for [its victims], it's their home" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 31).[3] It is abundantly clear that Chernobyl is not simply a metaphor for it survivors, but, given its

[2] Svetlana Alexievich, *Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 39
[3] From here on, anything cited as *Chernobyl'skaya Molitva* was translated from the original Russian by the author of this text. Anything cited as *Voices from Chernobyl* is from Keith Gessen's English translation.

global reach and lasting environmental, social and political impact, Chernobyl is not just a metaphor for anyone. However, Alessandro Portelli would argue that any understanding of a personal experience is necessarily mediated by symbolic understanding. As such, yes, Chernobyl is not just a metaphor, but it can be understood metaphorically, in accordance with Susan Sontag's theory of narrative as an instrument of human understanding. More importantly, *home* can serve as a metaphor – for a sense of family, safety, culture, identity and even eternity – and this is reflected in oral histories of both Chernobyl and Katrina. Mary Marshall Clark defines oral histories in a way that highlights their relationship to space, "I believe that oral history must establish a landscape, a ground, in which acts of the imagination are meaningful and from which stories can emerge and meaning can be made" (297). This definition serves as a solution to the problem of attrition of trauma. As such, even something as seemingly ephemeral as an oral tale can serve to preserve that which seems eternal but is actually extremely vulnerable – place.

New Orleans and Chernobyl, as geographical locations, have vastly different legacies. New Orleans is an enormous city with a unique cultural tradition and a long history of structural discrimination, high poverty levels, neighborhood segregation. Chernobyl and Pripyat were fairly small, primarily settled in the Soviet era, and did not boast a rich or specific cultural tradition like that of New Orleans. Many of their residents had fairly recently moved there, assigned to this location by the state. In an ironic twist, they would have likely been very proud to be sent to work on a nuclear reactor given the overwhelming pride most had for the USSR's technical and nuclear capabilities. Perhaps the only people with significant ancestral ties to the land, which had been predominantly rural and agricultural, are those still residing in the small villages in the Zone. As such, these individuals' narratives about home focus on largely different themes than those of New Orleanians.

However, there are many similarities in the way place is transformed into a source of danger and risk after both catastrophes. Given that Ulrich Beck was inspired to write *The Risk Society* in the aftermath of Chernobyl, it is clear that he saw nuclear disasters as a form of risk. In fact, he posited the catastrophe as an event that illustrates the components of the "global ecological risk society" (Beck, 8). But it can also be argued that Hurricane Katrina is a form of uncontrollable risk – firstly, this hurricane's magnitude and scope is a direct result of anthropogenic climate change, which has led to an increase in the incidence of extreme weather events. Secondly, it is quite clear that the mechanisms put in place by the US government were insufficient to control the effects of the hurricane and prevent extreme suffering and massive loss of life. Finally, the notion of Hurricane Katrina's role as an unprecedented threat is corroborated by the older narrators of this event. They often begin their stories with a description of Hurricane Betsy, the most recent severe hurricane that they can recall. But the stories inevitably lead to incredulity – no one thought that a hurricane could be this bad. The comparison with Hurricane Betsy is particularly telling in this regard: Katrina was much, much worse than anyone could have expected. In the words of Cynthia Banks, "*nobody* dreamed that in the week to come the situation would become worse" (*Overcoming Katrina,* 64).

"They told us at the time we were not citizens of the United States. We were listed as not existing:"[4] Political and Social Responses to Catastrophe

Beck theorizes new ecological crises as simultaneously global and local. A crucial point of his argument is that existing state-enacted safety nets fail to adequately address the global reach of these events. As such, environmental disaster in the era of risk subverts the sovereignty and control of the state over nature and its citizens. This subversion is at the root of the inadequacy of

[4] Eleanor Thornton, *Overcoming Katrina,* 137

the state response to catastrophe. In the case of Chernobyl, the effect on the state apparatus was fairly disastrous: Mikhail Gorbachev has famously attributed the collapse to the USSR to the aftermath of Chernobyl (Project Syndicate, 2006). Perhaps this contributes to the lack of inquiry into the causes and effects of Chernobyl in the former USSR.

Compared to the complete dissolution in the USSR, the political reverberations of Katrina were fairly inconsequential. Nonetheless, the response to the crisis focused heavily on the shortcomings of the US government, and many thinkers saw Katrina as an event that revealed the presence of racism in US society. In *Come Hell or High Water,* Michael Eric Dyson calls for engagement in "memory warfare:" the aggressive, confrontational, angry reminding of American society that the response to Katrina fell far beyond the realm of acceptable state behavior (211). The gross inadequacy of the response is poignantly demonstrated by Eleanor Thornton's words above: it is unspeakable that people were meant to feel as if they did not exist in the government's eyes. This is one of the most basic forms of dehumanization. Dyson's usage of the term memory is also particularly interesting in the context of oral history, which necessarily deals with memory. Mary Marshall Clark has called for oral history recordings in the wake of traumatic events because she believes that recovering the memory of the crisis helps form personal narratives. This, in turn, allows us to "respect the fragility of individual stories and yet find ways to link them to collective understandings of suffering" (Clark, 267), which is the true mission of memory. Combining Dyson's and Clark's views allows for a potentially uplifting response to catastrophe – understandings of collective suffering may help prevent this suffering in the future or help respond to it in a more timely and appropriate manner.

In modern society, the state is inextricable from its location. In the most primitive sense, citizenship is license to live in a particular location. In the USSR, this was exacerbated by extreme

levels of state control over individuals' actions: people were only allowed to live where they were "registered." Moreover, many workers were sent to different locations by the state, and they could not dispute their assignment. Therefore, some of the people living in Pripyat were assigned there by the state and were not living there as a matter of choice. In the United States, the people who were most vulnerable to Katrina – those living in what Dyson calls "concentrated poverty" – are also most reliant on the state for assistance with housing. In addition, it's important to recognize that the social group *most* affected by Katrina, Black Americans, has endured a great deal of government-condoned housing discrimination. Even in a purely philosophical sense, the experience of living in a country to which one's ancestors were brought by force makes the notion of home a deeply fraught concept. In light of this, exploring attitudes towards the state response to crisis in oral histories, as well as the state's involvement in providing (or not providing) housing for the victims of crisis, is a fundamental component of this analysis.

Propaganda in the Soviet Union was relatively straightforward – it penetrated every aspect of daily life, but by the 1980s many people understood that party slogans were deeply biased and that the government was hiding the truth. In the US, however, misinformation worked in different ways. The residents of New Orleans were ostensibly informed of the risks inherent in remaining in their homes, but not everyone was capable of leaving and there was no large-scale government effort to evacuate people until it was much too late. Many New Orleanians did not own cars and relied on public transportation. In addition, traffic was terrible as the entire city tried to leave, and it was extremely difficult to get plane tickets. Patricia Thompson, who remained in the city, explains, "I know you've heard all of this foolishness about the people that just did not want to leave: those are bald-faced lies. I did not have a vehicle, so there was no way for us to get out" (*Voices from the Storm,* 65). Transparency and information are pointless without structural means

of support. Structural violence can be enacted both via lies and propaganda and via the spread of information that conveniently omits the lack of support and assistance to the survivors of catastrophe.

Many of the survivors of Katrina are unsurprised by the government response – institutionalized racism is nothing new. In the words of Patricia Thompson, "even the babies know the police kill in New Orleans" (*Voices from the Storm*, 129). The narrators draw very clear connections between their race and how they were treated by the police. They are outraged, but not incredulous. Why did Katrina not lead to a similarly drastic overhaul (disintegration) of the political system as did Chernobyl? To be fair, much changed – the media response focused a great deal on the racist nature of the government response, and certain officials were fired. Perhaps there was more transparency than there was in the USSR, so the truth was revealed in a more timely and less shocking manner. However, as Michael Dyson's call for "memory violence" demonstrates, many believe that there is much to be done. Malik Rahim and Kalamu Ya Salaam are two narrators who also work as activists, and a great deal of their work has focused on eradicating the class- and race-based oppression that allowed Katrina to spiral in the way it did.

According to Alessandro Portelli, it is particularly important to examine moments in oral testimonies when the individual's narrative differs from factual historical accounts, as the "discrepancies and the errors are themselves events, clues for the work of desire and pain over time, for the painful search for meaning" (*The Order Has Been Carried Out,* 16). In the context of Chernobyl and Katrina, conspiracy theories are of particular interest – firstly, conspiracy theories attempt to address and explain uncertainty, which is elemental to a situation of environmental risk. If insurance schemes and the welfare state are society- and state-level institutions that exist to mitigate the effects of crisis, then conspiracy theories can be thought of as an individual reaction

to the failure of those mechanisms. Moreover, conspiracy theories are often revealing of a level of distrust of government, which is of particular salience to this analysis.

The most common conspiracy theory surrounding hurricane Katrina has been widely publicized and is addressed in essentially every work exploring the event. The massive flooding, which appeared after the storm had passed over the city, was caused by four levee breaches, the most prominent of which were on the Industrial Canal and on the 17th Street Canal. The Industrial Canal bordered the Lower Ninth Ward, which was a low income and predominantly Black neighborhood. The breaches were investigated after the fact (to be expected given that they caused the devastating flooding), and it was found that the Industrial Canal Levee in particular had been poorly constructed and could not have withstood a hurricane with Katrina's force. The Army Corps of Engineers, which was in charge of the construction, were found to be responsible for this. This discovery is particularly concerning given that it seems that tropical storms will only grow in incidence and magnitude.

Many of the narrators in both *Overcoming Katrina* and *Voices from the Storm* were residents of the Lower Ninth Ward. An understanding that the levee was blown up intentionally, to "sacrifice" their home for the wealthier parts of the city, is quite prevalent. The popularity of this theory is compounded by the city's history: in 1927, a levee was indeed blown up during a hurricane for that very purpose. Black neighborhoods suffered the most from this decision. Moreover, it is not a huge cognitive leap from an understanding of racist government policies that enact violence against Black Americans to the assumption that the levee breach was intentional. This point of view is reflected in many testimonies. In the words of Pete Stevenson, "I can't go back to the city. I don't want to have nothing else to do with New Orleans. Anybody with sense should be fed up. The blowing of the levees was meant to kill the blacks and the poor whites. The

two people that helped blow up the levees killed themselves" (*Overcoming Katrina,* 37). This stance is also powerfully reflective of the widespread sense of betrayal felt by many residents: it places the levee breach firmly within a commonly held understanding – Hurricane Katrina was devastating because of racist policies and decisions, not just because of its magnitude. Stevenson is echoed by Parnell Herbert, "I believe that there was a deliberateness to allow tactical portions of the levees to deteriorate so that they would be the weak points. They couldn't beat us otherwise. So that's how they drove us out" (*Overcoming Katrina,* 48). Crucially, in Herbert's understanding, the (fictitious) intentional levee breach is linked to actual events and effects – like the later choice to not reconstruct poorer neighborhoods.

However, many other conspiracy theories abound. They are fed by the culture of institutionalized racism in the US that is hidden behind a conventional narrative of a "post-racial society" and "colorblindness." This leads to a cognitive dissonance akin to gaslighting. As such, conspiracy theories among African-American survivors of Katrina cannot be examined without being contextualized in the legacy of racism, institutional violence and mistrust. This connection is firmly established in Renee Martin's testimony, "They planned the evacuation for some areas like I said, but they didn't plan it for a lot of other areas. It made me feel like a conspiracy at the time. It's a racist thing. All of us was overlooked. God didn't overlook us. We went through it." (*Voices from the* Storm, 114). This seems like a logical response to a feeling of betrayal and uncertainty – its victims are attempting to draw connections between events and explore causality. Importantly, Martin is drawing a distinction between herself and her state – she survived and made it "through," but the United States of America were of no help. Finally, one of the characteristics of new forms of risk, as defined by Beck, is diffuse culpability. That is a difficult concept to grapple with – it can often be easier to come up with an explanation that places the fault on one single

person and entity. This trait of environmental catastrophe allows for the abundance of conspiracy theories.

Unlike many New Orleanians, the majority of Soviet citizens had enormous faith in their government. But Chernobyl led to a meltdown of the Soviet state apparatus on a macro- and micro-level. This disintegration must be contextualized within the aggressive ideological framework every Soviet individual was steeped in from their very childhood. As it was a largely closed society, most people did not encounter critical appraisals of their state. Ironically, atomic power was one of the achievements the USSR was most proud of. Valentin Borisevich describes it as "The cult of physics" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 226). Grigoriy Grushevoi explains how utterly destabilizing Chernobyl was in the context of propaganda surrounding the "peaceful atom," as it was called: "We understood the world to look like this: the military atom was the menacing mushroom cloud, like in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, people turned to ash in one second, while the peaceful atom was a harmless lightbulb" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 150). The government could do no wrong because there was no room in public discourse for it to do something wrong. Natalia Baranouskaya confirms that the USSR undertook a concentrated effort to ensure that the public had enormous faith in atomic energy (35). As a result, Soviet citizens felt betrayed not just by their government, but also by physics itself. Zoya Bruk, an environmental conservation inspector, describes it this way, "Chernobyl blew up against the backdrop of a completely unprepared consciousness, against an absolute belief in technology" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 210). This sense of betrayal and shock enveloped the entire country, moving far beyond the Zone of fallout. This echoes Beck's argument that risk and trust are "intrinsically connected" (Beck, 6). Trust in the government evaporates if its institutions cannot adequately protect the citizens, and global dangers put states in this position because they are not equipped to respond to new forms of crisis.

"God, this is a battlefield:"[5] Evacuation, War Narratives and the Environment

The above words are Cynthia Delores Banks' reaction to the situation in the New Orleans superdome after the city had flooded. Why is the language of war so pervasive in the response to environmental destruction? A focus on the state response to crisis necessarily leads to an analysis of evacuation – the forced removal of a people from the place they call home. In general, evacuation is the responsibility of the state, and the vast majority of evacuations are the result of war. As such, the evacuation efforts in both countries employed military tools and strategies. However, the militaristic response to these events extended far beyond the treatment of their victims as refugees. This parallel between the United States and the USSR, despite their seemingly antithetical political systems, is striking: socialism and liberal democracy have been pitted against each other as polar opposites, and yet they responded to environmental disasters in eerily similar ways. Involving the military in response to ecological disaster has very interesting implications: suddenly, any crisis acquires an enemy and a savior; rescue efforts cease to be neutral. Moreover, both responses were colored by the specific and complex legacies of the use of force in both countries.

As Susan Sontag explains, war narratives are so ubiquitous and timeless that it is to be expected that many narrators operate within their framework. The testimonies of survivors of environmental crises demonstrate that, similarly to the way in which cancer is described and understood, the response to natural disaster is often expressed through the language of war. This parallel in response to environmental contamination and to health suggests yet another link between health and environmental crisis. This relationship can be seen as a reciprocal reaction to the metaphorical link between cancer and its environmental causes posited by Sontag: "cancer

[5] Cynthia Delores Banks, *Overcoming Katrina,* 66

signifies the rebellion of the injured ecosphere: Nature taking revenge on a wicked technocratic world" (*Illness as Metaphor,* 69-70).

Any discussion of war narratives in the Soviet Union, especially in its Western States, would be woefully incomplete without a look at World War II, or the Great Patriotic War, as it is called. The entire territory of the Zone was occupied by Nazi forces during World War II, which was seen as an enormous tragedy that needed to be confronted by a unified *people*. As such, war narratives in Belarus and Ukraine are intertwined with home, land and place. In addition, the Nazis were far more brutal on the Eastern front than on the Western front, so many of the survivors of Chernobyl remember the atrocities of that war. Although this is often overlooked in the United States, thanks to Cold War bias, the victory in World War II, which would not have been feasible without the USSR's efforts, was seen as proof of socialism's success. The significance of the Great Patriotic War in Soviet cultural understanding cannot be overestimated.

These narratives aren't even hidden as subtext in the oral testimonies: very many interviewees draw explicit parallels between the two events. Indeed, World War II and Chernobyl are in an interesting reciprocal relationship: one catastrophic and unprecedented event proved that socialism did work, while the other one overturned that notion. The narrators themselves put it most eloquently, "The War generation? They're so happy! They had the Victory. They won! That gave them this powerful life energy, if I am to use modern expressions, and an extremely powerful survival instinct. They were scared of nothing. They wanted to live, learn, have children. And us? We are scared of everything..." (Nadezhda Burakova, *Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 239). Burakova draws this sharp contrast because the trauma of World War II in the Belarussian cultural consciousness is the only thing that can come remotely close to approximating what Chernobyl meant. Burakova uses the symbols of warfare to try to make sense of the disaster. Sergei Sobolev,

an activist who fights for protection for the survivors of Chernobyl, also speaks in terms of war, in a very literal sense, "I think that [the liquidators] are heroes, not victims of this war that supposedly did not happen. They call it an accident, a catastrophe, but it was a war. Even the Chernobyl memorials look like war memorials…" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 181). As such, both the official and the individual response to Chernobyl, as reflected in oral testimony, treated it as a war. Interestingly, a resident of a village near the reactor calls Chernobyl the "war above all wars" and explains that "there's no place a person can hide. Not on the ground, nor in the water, nor in the sky" (Village Chorus*, Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 61). For this narrator, war required hiding from an enemy, and radiation is the ultimate enemy because there is nowhere to hide.

The language of heroics is quite clear, and most narrators who were not involved in the cleanup process draw that connection. However, the liquidators themselves tend to disagree. Some of the people recruited for cleanup had served in the military, and their perspectives are fascinating – they have personal experience in both settings, and thus can most vividly describe when traditional modes of understanding crumble, "After Afghanistan I came home and knew I would live! But after Chernobyl it's the other way around: it gets you once you're back home. I came back… And it's all only beginning…" (Soldiers' Chorus, *Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 88). It's telling that Alexievich chose to call this section, which is a collection of liquidators' testimonies, the Soldiers' Chorus. Importantly, this narrator making a conceptual link between armed service and home. As such, because the response to Chernobyl was so militarized, the accident disrupted not only the homes of people in the Zone, but also the homes of volunteers deployed to address the fallout. This narrator is once again reiterating that war and nuclear disaster are diametrically opposed, but along a new axis of comparison

The militarism of the response is also starkly evident in the methods used to evacuate the population. Many of the evacuees felt like they were in the midst of an armed conflict. For example, Katya P. describes leaving Pripyat like this, "We were evacuated soon after… My father brought that word from work, "We're being evacuated." Like in the books about the war…" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 120). Her father's use of the passive voice is telling – in a totalitarian state, the military apparatus is large and often used as a form of coercion. Katya P. is too young to remember World War II, but she still thinks in war narratives due to their pervasiveness in Soviet culture. In New Orleans, many narrators drew parallels between Hurricane Betsy (the last large hurricane) and Katrina. In a similar vein, the last time people in Belarus would have been evacuated en masse was the Great Patriotic War, so it makes sense that the state evacuation was reminiscent of that.

However, an added terror was mixed in when Pripyat was evacuated: the decision to evacuate was not made until over 24 hours after the accident, so thousands of residents were exposed to the fallout while in blissful ignorance of what was going on. The testimony of a Belarussian physicist who quickly realized the actual scope of the catastrophe is a particularly telling addition to this narrative, "I come back to Minsk and I see people in the street selling hand pies, ice cream, ground meat and pastries. They're all under a radioactive cloud…" (Vasily Nesterenko, *Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 262). The images of a war-like urgent evacuation, in military vehicles, with people leaving all their belongings behind, is completely incongruous next to the idyllic spring scenes Nesterenko describes. This catastrophe was a singular, unprecedented event, so war narratives often prove insufficient in describing it.

Evacuation was particularly painful for those who lived in rural areas and led a largely agrarian lifestyle. Belarussian folk culture has long had extremely strong ties to the land, as it was

seen as a sacred source of nourishment and life. As a result, roots, which are primarily tied to land, are paramount in Belarussian society. For a person living in rural Belarus, any move was seen as an enormous tragedy (Yelena Minyonok, personal communication, March 8th, 2017). This is reflected in the testimonies of villagers who have moved back to the Zone, "No one's going to trick us anymore, we're not moving from our place. There's no store, no hospital. No electricity. We use kerosene lamps and candles. But it's good. We're home" (Village Chorus, *Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 58). This notion of "our place," placed within the context of the significance of roots in Belarussian culture, helps explain why people would return to the contaminated zone.

Like the reaction to Chernobyl, the government response to Katrina also primarily consisted of deploying the military. Once it became painfully clear that FEMA and the municipal government were not managing to cope with the number of people left in the city, the US military was called in to assist with evacuation efforts. However, this political decision was laced with nuance and ambiguity. Firstly, Katrina occurred against the backdrop of the war in Iraq, which was extremely controversial and drained federal resources from addressing a domestic crisis like Katrina. Moreover, this decision was made on the federal level, with the input of George W. Bush. Michael Eric Dyson explains that much of the ineptitude in the response to Katrina can be attributed to chronic cronyism and that the legacy of institutional racism in the US leads to a political structure in which "the collective racial unconscious, and the rhythms, relations and rules of race, together constitute the framework for making decisions, even those that have apparently nothing to do with race" (20). In addition, no discussion of the use of government-based force in a predominantly Black city can be complete without being contextualized within centuries of police and military violence against Black Americans. As seen in their testimonies, it was Katrina

survivors that were painted as the enemy, not the flood. This narrative is compounded by the decision to halt evacuation efforts to control "looting," a choice that played into stereotypes of Black Americans as dangerous, aggressive, and criminal.

This approach caused a great deal of shock and a feeling of betrayal among Katrina survivors. As Michael Ignatieff explained in a New York Times article published a month after the hurricane first made landfall, "The most striking feature of the catastrophe is not that the contract didn't hold. […] Many municipal, state and federal officials, elected and appointed, forgot the duty of care they owed to their fellow citizens." Crucially, he goes on to explain a facet of this negligence that had been avoided – he terms this abandonment as a form of betrayal so incredibly appalling that a group of citizens accustomed to institutional oppression met it with astonishment and outrage.

The complex relationship between African-Americans and police in the United States heavily influenced the military response to Katrina and added yet another layer of complexity. This response was also reinforced by extensive media coverage and mainstream narrative framing of the event. The vast majority of people remaining in the city that needed to be evacuated were Black, which itself was a result of structural inequality that prevented African-Americans from leaving. Black people have long been criminalized in subtle and not-so-subtle ways by the state. Moreover, allegations of "looting" (later proven to have been blown massively out of proportion) impeded timely evacuation, after Mayor Nagin announced that the rescue teams would focus on curbing looting to "restore law and order" instead of evacuating stranded residents. Calls to restore some mythical "order" is often code for racist policing practices. They are dehumanizing and callous, as they imply that this nebulous notion of "law and order" is more valuable to the state than individuals' lives. This desire is reminiscent of Soviet attempts to curb panic after the accident

in Chernobyl – in both cases, governments were acting upon variables they could control without actually addressing the danger of the situation. In the context of Katrina, the military response carries with it the risk of intensified Black criminalization. Criminalization is necessarily tied to place in New Orleans – firstly, many narrators felt as if their claim to their homes was being called into question. Many were labeled as trespassers on their own land, which undermines their sense of home and identity. This racist criminalization adds to existing racialization of space in New Orleans.

The attitudes of Katrina survivors themselves towards looting are far more nuanced and layered. Daniel Finnigan explains, "But I'll be honest with you, whether we heard that or not we still would've taken stuff from stores. Because at that point it was a necessity. When something gets to be a necessity, you don't wait for the government to say it's ok, especially when they're still hundreds of miles away" (*Voices from the Storm,* 136). His logic is clear – it highlights the hypocrisy of a government that expects its citizens to be law-abiding and yet cannot provide basic assistance from them. However, Finnigan does disapprove of what he deems "unnecessary" looting, "you're seeing people coming by with things – tennis shoes, designer shirts, and food and water, or whatever, we thought none of that was necessary" (*Voices from the Storm,* 134). For him, looting is only acceptable in the case of personal necessity – however, he is far more outraged by the government's response than by those who chose to loot.

In *Come Hell or High Water,* Michael Eric Dyson explains that

> Such a framework, one that weaves white innocence and black guilt into the fabric of cultural myths and racial narratives, is deeply embedded in society and affects every major American institution, including the media. How black folk are 'framed' – how we are discussed, pictures, imagined, conjured to fit a negative idea of blackness, or called on to

> fill a slot reserved for the outlaw, thug, or savage – shapes how we are frowned on or favored in modern society. (*Come Hell or High Water,* 165).

Dyson calls this framing, but it can also be interpreted as a form of narrativization. These oral histories, especially those collected in *Overcoming Katrina,* serve a dual purpose: they both counteract reductionist and misguided framing and reveal that the people framed as such are very much aware of it. The racist and criminalizing framing that Dyson describes is deeply objectifying, and it is assumed to be invisible. Yet numerous testimonies refute this notion. The editors of *Overcoming Katrina* assert that "oral history more effectively explores questions of subjectivity" (Penner and Ferdinand, xxiii). Perhaps the resistance to objectification and stereotyped framing that can be discerned in oral histories is one of the most powerful examples of this quality.

Harold Toussaint describes the sense of dismay and hopelessness the rampant criminalization made him feel, "It was very discouraging to be treated as an enemy combatant rather than someone who needed to be rescued" (*Overcoming Katrina,* 53). In a similar vein, Cynthia Banks describes what changed for her after Katrina in this way, "There has been a great awakening for those who didn't know that these kind of inhumane mindsets exist. The way people were hovered over with guns like they were criminals, rather than victims" (*Overcoming Katrina,* 69). Banks' characterization of "inhumane mindsets" is interesting: firstly, she is drawing a firm connection between injustice, violence and inhumanity. Moreover, she is attributing this behavior to individual attitudes ("mindsets"), not institutional oppression. This makes sense, given that she confronted violent policemen who she saw as individuals. Banks goes on to further express her disbelief at the aftermath of the hurricane, "I had the opportunity to watch people hide food in America: during the storm, after the storm, right now. They don't know if they're going to have it tomorrow" (*Overcoming Katrina,* 69). For Banks, this is shocking because this is behavior that

she does not believe should occur "in America." It is associated with a kind of destruction and disorganization that she did not think was possible in the United States.

Many survivors of Katrina felt criminalized throughout the evacuation process. This was reinforced by media coverage that focused heavily on the "looting and marauding" in New Orleans after the storm. Eleanor Thornton describes her experience in the following way, "It was like they done dropped bombs on New Orleans or like we committed a crime. Being black, just being poor – I guess that's our crime" (*Overcoming Katrina,* 136). Thornton is drawing an explicit connection between her race and the way she was treated by the first responders, as well as a parallel between war and the hurricane. Sonya Hernandez talks about being "searched like we was about to go inside jail" when she entered the Superdome (*Voices from the Storm,* 89). In a similar vein, Denise Roubion-Johnson likened her time at a site for refugees to "being in a concentration camp" (*Overcoming Katrina,* 74). This serves as convincing proof of Luisa Passerini's assertion that race-based state violence in the United States is a form of totalitarian oppression (6). Moreover, institutionalized racism in the United States acquires even more of a totalitarian, dehumanizing cast when the federal government is confronted with crisis.

Perhaps one of the most poignant episodes of "military" confrontation in New Orleans was on the bridge to Gretna, MI. Some residents, having lost hope of being rescued, walked to a bridge between New Orleans and Gretna, only to be met by police forces who did not permit them to cross. As a result, they were stranded on this bridge in excruciating heat. Patricia Thompson, who tells her story in *Voices from the Storm,* was on the bridge, "They had police all over the place. They had military all over the place. FEMA was all over the place. And nobody was doing anything to help us. They were just there to keep us in line. They boxed us in that city. They wouldn't let us out. They said if we tried to get out, they'd shoot to kill" (113) Thompson goes on to explain that

this did not really surprise her, although she was outraged, "Let me tell you something. That is nothing new for New Orleans. The police been doing that. The police has been doing that" (113). The repetition of the last sentence is particularly interesting. Alessandro Portelli believes that repetition has is very significant in oral testimonies because it is a means of maintaining control of an ephemeral narrative, as oral discourse itself is "a constant losing and regaining of control" (*Death of Luigi Trastulli,* 278). Thompson's choice to repeat "The police been doing that" highlights this impression as elemental to her impression of the event.

Many narrators are baffled at the incongruity of being painted as the enemy. Katrina was not just surreal because of the magnitude of the hurricane or the degree of destruction – it was the resurfacing of blatant, shocking and dehumanizing racism. This is vividly reflected in Patricia Thompson's testimony. A policeman yelled racial slurs at her and threatened to shoot her when she tried to cross the street from the Superdome, and she "felt like [she] was in the Twilight zone" (*Voices from the Storm,* 128). Survivors of Chernobyl also use science fiction metaphors to describe the "new world" they found themselves in. For instance, Evgeny Brovkin compares a field near the reactor that was covered in dolomite to contain radioactivity to a "moon landscape" (*Voices from Chernobyl,* 105). Therefore, science fiction narratives take the survivors of unprecedented catastrophe out of their conventional notions of place and move them to a new realm, where laws of the earth don't apply.

Examining the testimonies of people who had experienced both conventional warfare and environmental catastrophe may also help reveal parallels between wars and the response. After all, the military nature of the response to Katrina had facets beyond the criminalization of its victims: the natural forces that led to the catastrophe were still seen as a necessitating a military response, and the evacuation is described by its witnesses as a "military operation" (Kalamu Ya Salaam,

Voices from the Storm, 218). Interestingly, many Vietnam war veterans draw parallels between their experiences at war and during Katrina. Father Jerome LeDoux thought that state rhetoric of the response to the hurricane "sounded like Vietnam" (*Voices from the Storm,* 101). His comparison is even more intriguing given that parallels were drawn between New Orleans after Katrina and the "third world." LeDoux's words fall firmly into the "this doesn't happen here" paradigm. They echo the shock of Cynthia Banks at seeing people scavenging for food in the United States. Many Vietnam veterans see Katrina as much worse than the war: for instance, Leonard Smith, who remained in the city during the storm, expressed indignation at the ineptitude of the response, "The thing about it is no boats came. It just amazed me. After being in the military, I know there is nowhere the military can't go: water, land, sea or whatever" (*Overcoming Katrina,* 31). Indeed, the military was called in to New Orleans only some time after it became clear that FEMA was not equipped to handle the evacuation and rescue missions.

Perhaps in anthropogenic catastrophe humans are indeed at war with nature. Maybe this new kind of opposition is a hallmark of the Anthropocene. This serves as a herald for the rise of a new language of combat, where the enemy is no longer human. Moreover, the responses of individuals to the military operation reveal that it is dehumanizing and objectifying. Both governments responded to the crisis in an aggressive, "totalitarian" manner, and there are more parallels between the Soviet and American responses than it would seem at first. Military operations lagged in both cases, suggesting that denial is another component of contemporary response to environmental destruction and global risk.

"Who am I in a new place?"[6] Home and Place in Chernobyl and New Orleans

Two populations were most severely affected by the accident at Chernobyl and forced to leave their homes – those living in the small city of Pripyat and those living in villages surrounding the reactor. The symbolic meaning of place is particularly significant in the narratives of the villagers, because of the cultural weight of this concept. In Belarussian culture, roots are very closely tied to land, and this is particularly important for those whose primary occupation is farming. For villagers in Belarus, the significance of their home is inextricable from the significance of the land it is on. This is because land is associated with nutrition and life and treated as a sacred space. As such, the notion that the land would suddenly become a source of toxicity goes against this entire worldview. This ethnographic analysis of Belarussian culture is actually echoed in the testimony of Zoya Bruk, a conservation inspector, "Peasants didn't invent Chernobyl. They have their own relationship with nature - trusting, not invasive, and it's been this way for hundreds, thousands of years" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 214). In Belarus, home and land are closely linked to health and identity.

The connection between home and health helps contextualizes mentions of home in testimonies by Belarussians and helps explain their return to the Zone. One villager explains, village chorus "Maybe it's poisoned, with radiation, but this is my homeland. No one needs us anywhere else. Even a bird cares about its nest" (Village Chorus, *Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 55). It's telling that this narrator used an aphorism to explain their attachment to the land, to emphasize how integral this notion is to their worldview. In addition, they posited home as refuge and a place of safety. A young girl told Alexievich how her grandmother said goodbye to her home when she had to leave, a complex ritual that clearly left an impression on this woman's granddaughter, "The

[6] Village Chorus, *Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 55

she bowed to the house… Then to the shed… She walked around the yard and bowed to each apple tree…" (Children's Chorus, *Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 280). For people living in villages, home acquires much vaster symbolic meaning because it is a source of life, livelihood, health, and stability, not simply shelter, and this is reflected in their testimonies. This was also obvious to the liquidators, who stepped into abandoned homes when they came to work in the zone, "People said goodbye to their homes like they were people" (Soldiers' Chorus, *Voices from Chernobyl,* 36).

Many first responders found the sight of hastily abandoned homes quite unsettling. One liquidator describes it like this, "You'd walk into a house – there were photographs on the wall, but no people. […] First of all, because you sensed that these people would be back any minute. And second, these things were connected somehow with death" (Soldiers' Chorus, *Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 35). The image of an abandoned home was profoundly unnatural. Conceptual links between photographs and identity frequently appear in these testimonies. Viktor Latun, a photographer who traveled inside the zone, was also drawn to photographs left in homes, "People left, but their photographs kept on living in their houses, as if they were their souls" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 242). In oral testimony about place, it is common for objects associated with home to be humanized in some way.

Discussion of photographs is also quite prevalent in the testimonies of Katrina survivors. For instance, Cynthia Banks highlights photos as one of the items that she lost after the hurricane, "I lost pictures of my mom who is dead now that I'll never be able to get back" (*Overcoming Katrina,* 68). She is echoed by Denise Roubion-Johnson, "Nobody asked to lose all of their pictures: pictures of my mother, pictures of my children as babies, pictures of my grandparents" (*Overcoming Katrina,* 78). The pervasiveness of this symbol may be linked to the function pictures

serve as a form of visual memory. It is to be expected that alternative forms of remembrance will play a prominent role that in oral histories, which are a form of creating and preserving memory.

The pain of losing one's home is amplified in the Soviet historical context: after Brezhnev came to power, peasants who worked on collective farms began to receive monetary salaries and got a day off. When asked what they did with the excess money, most responded that they expanded their homes and made their windows larger. Windows are particularly significant in Belarussian homes because they offer a way for the outside world to be seen from within, and larger windows were seen as a sign of success and accomplishment. In late April, when the accident occurred, windows would have been open. Many residents were asked to close windows as a precaution. The idea that open windows could be a form of danger in summer weather was another profoundly disorienting concept introduced after the accident. Narrators describe the fear open windows began to instill, "We come back home late on May First, and the wind had blown the window wide open… I remembered that much later…" (Zoya Bruk, *Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 209). For Bruk, the realization that the window posed an enormous danger only came later, as she was forming a memory of the event. Her mention of May 1st is significant – it was a major Soviet holiday, and festivities were not cancelled despite the accident, so as to prevent panic. Bruk knew this, so she is highlighting the surreal nature of her day by mentioning the date. The celebratory, ideological nature of May 1st, which is meant to honor the achievements of workers, is particularly absurd in aftermath of the accident.

As such, homes are integral to identity for the survivors of Chernobyl, but their significance cannot be separated from that of nature. The notion of a closed-up home as a refuge from a suddenly menacing natural world is incongruous. When listing what things changed after the catastrophe, Nina Zharkova, a schoolteacher, focuses on her students and their lives. This approach

makes sense: some of the effects of Chernobyl will unfold in the future, so the fate of children preoccupies many narrators: "Children grow up inside homes. Without going to the woods or the river…" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 137). Zharkova sees this as concerning and unnatural, and expresses concern for her students.

The irreversible nature of the damage is inconceivable to many. When Katya P. left Pripyat, she was sure she'd return, "No one believed that we would never return. That doesn't happen – people don't just never go home" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 121). This aspect of the evacuation also differentiates Chernobyl from World War II, after which evacuated people were able to return. Not only are homes humanized, but so are entire towns, "we didn't just lose a town, we lost our whole lives" (Nikolai Kalugin, *Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 32). Narrators' memories are often almost topographical in nature. One member of the People's chorus builds his testimony around a description of walking around his town, "I walk around my memories every day" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 187). This use of figurative language emphasizes the importance of place in constituting and grounding memory.

Survivors of Chernobyl were provided with apartments in Kiev, most of which were located in the same building or on the same street. Some narrators enjoyed this because it provided a sense of community, but in general survivors react to the provision of material benefits to compensate for suffering caused by Chernobyl with a degree of bitterness. Aleksandr Kudryagin, a liquidator, talks about one of his colleagues who put his health at risk to work for long periods on the reactor, "His bonus was a thousand rubles. That much money could buy two motorcycles then. Today he is on disability. I'm not surprised… But we paid for fear right away" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 236). His words highlight the glaring inadequacy of financial reparations for the health effects the liquidators experienced later in their lives.

Ludmilla Ignatenko, the widow of a firefighter, uses a similar tone when discussing the apartment she received upon her husband's death, "In Kiev they gave me an apartment. It was in a large building, where they put everyone from the atomic station. It was […] the kind Vasya and I had dreamed of [before this she lived in a dorm]. And I was going crazy in it!" (*Voices from Chernobyl,* 22). Like Kudryagin, she juxtaposes the ostensible value of items (in this case, a spacious home) that were preciously coveted before the accident with their current meaninglessness. Interestingly, Ignatenko goes on to describe that this apartment was strongly associated with her husband, "No matter where I looked, in every corner I saw him. His eyes… I started renovations just so I wouldn't be sitting around, to get distracted" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 27). As for many others, Ignatenko's memories of the event and its consequences are shaped, framed and reinforced by place.

Alexievich also interviewed one family of refugees from former Soviet Central Asian republics who settled in the Zone. Most of these re-settlers were ethnic Slavs who were driven out of Central Asian republics after perestroika and seen as imperialist invaders by the local population. Their role in the USSR's settlement and colonization of Central Asia is complicated by the relative lack of agency of individual Soviet citizens, and these narrators seem oblivious to why they would experience resentment and animosity from people who had lived in Central Asia for generations. These refugees likely did not choose to move to those republics, but found themselves the targets of anti-Soviet (read: anti-imperial) violence, to their profound confusion, "we're not Russian, we're Soviet! But the country I was born in is gone" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 77).

These narrators justify their move by explaining that the Zone is a politically and socially neutral area, "Why did we come here? To the land of Chernobyl? Because we're won't be kicked

out of here. Not from this land. It doesn't belong to anyone anymore, God took it. People left it" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 73). For them, nuclear meltdown negates ownership, and this land is more welcoming than the new, non-Soviet world, "Now our home is here. Chernobyl is our home. Our homeland… *Smiles suddenly.* The birds here are the same as ours. And Lenin's statue is right there…" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 77). The Zone remains as a sort of eternal piece of the Soviet Union, devoid of people but seemingly safe because of its familiarity. The zone can be thought of as a heterotopia in terms of its inhabitability, but it is also a form of heterotopia because it serves as an immortalized chunk of the Soviet Union and Belarus's history.

This perspective on the Zone is echoed and problematized by one of the liquidators, "There are still posters: 'Our goal is the happiness of all mankind.' 'The world proletariat will triumph.' 'The ideas of Lenin are immortal.' […] As if a warring tribe had left some base in a hurry and then gone into hiding. […] I became free in the Zone. Chernobyl blew my mind. It set me free" (Soldiers' Chorus, *Voices from Chernobyl,* 36). His use of war rhetoric is telling. For this liquidator, seeing the trappings of the USSR stripped of the people exposed its hypocrisy and deception. There is no way to know for sure what this liquidator was set free from by Chernobyl, but perhaps it was ideology and faith in the Soviet project. In a socialist state, place absorbs and produces ideology even if it is uninhabited. As such, this dimension of the Zone's significance highlights the inadequacy of a purely temporal approach to history, as argued by Edward Soja.

In *The Fight for Home,* Daniel Wolff explains that, after Katrina, there was a concerted effort, led by Ray Nagin, to "rebrand" New Orleans as a stylish, accessible, expensive tourist hub. In essence, this led to the mass removal of Black and low income residents from a city that had been majority Black before Katrina. Certain neighborhoods (overwhelmingly poor) were marked as "beyond repair," and left to gradually disintegrate. This was compounded by the fact that houses

of the Black and low income communities took the worst damage during Katrina, due to their geographic proximity to the breached levee and less sturdy construction. It was also particularly painful because New Orleans had one of the highest rates of homeownership among Black Americans in the country before the hurricane. Wolff describes this thinly veiled racist and classist tactic as a final blow on a population that had long endured high poverty rates and poor infrastructure. In addition, perhaps the American concept of the "ghetto" can itself be viewed as a form of heterotopia in the eyes of more privileged white citizens and mainstream media.

Crucially, Wolff's macro-level critique is sharply felt by individual residents. Many of the residents interviewed by Penner and Ferdinand in *Overcoming Katrina* lament the loss of their neighborhoods. Harold Toussaint believes that New Orleans will never be the same:

> I tried to walk along the river as I often did to smell the fresh roasted coffee beans, the night blooming jasmine, and to feel a true sense of place, the real freedom that New Orleans has, because New Orleans has unconditional growth on the soul level. We couldn't feel it anymore. I had to sneak in there to walk along the river. It felt dead, soulless and neglected, like nobody cares. (*Overcoming Katrina*, 58).

For Toussaint, the sense of home is ineffable and can only be described in poetic terms. Moreover, he chooses to imbue it with a soul and speak of it as a living being. Toussaint is not the only person who felt like New Orleans had died. Daniel Finnigan recalls the pain of coming to that realization, "they said, 'Man, your city's dead. You have to leave. You have to leave. Your city's dead.' And, you know, that hurts" (*Voices from the Storm,* 155). His words imply that New Orleans had once been alive, humanizing his home.

Kalamu Ya Salaam captures the irreversibility of Katrina's effects on New Orleans very eloquently, "Double displacement is the main issue. People were displaced by the hurricane,

moved out of the city. They wanted to come back. So, this double displacement works in this way: when you get back into the city, you find out where you are and who you are is not where you were and who you were. So you're initially displaced from the city, and then when you get back into the city, you're displaced from what your memory and assumptions about what the city is" (*Voices from the Storm,* 220). His mention of memory and assumptions is crucial in the context of oral history, which deals with subjectivity. Ya Salaam is a particularly interesting narrator because he had been involved in a great deal of activism – as such, he feels comfortable speaking for others in his oral testimony. He firmly links identity and location, "who you are is not where you are." Ya Salaam's use of figurative language to emphasize the destabilizing effects of Katrina is very important. For him, home and place were lost not just because of the natural disaster but because of the state and corporate response to the destruction. Ya Salaam brilliantly captures the social dimension of Hurricane Katrina in his testimony.

For the residents of New Orleans, there is something about their place that cannot be reduced to their family, the graves of their loved ones, media narratives about the city, or even their physical homes. In the words of Keith Ferdinand

> You're not mourning the loss of your '76 Buick. You're mourning the loss of friends and colleagues who may have died or been crippled, the everyday common things like the store you went to, the church you attend, and the gas station in New Orleans East that has been leveled. You mourn the loss of the city, your sense of your neighborhood. (*Overcoming Katrina,* 99)

Crucially, Ferdinand gives his home and his neighborhood the same significance as he gives to living beings. It is also interesting that he chooses to switch to second-person perspective – perhaps

it is an attempt to make his impressions more compelling precisely because the feeling he is describing is so difficult to convey.

This fraught relationship with home and the city of New Orleans in particular contrasts starkly with the far more optimistic and hopeful story told by Father Viet The Nguyen, an immigrant from Vietnam. Nguyen explains his desire to place FEMA trailers in a location of his choosing this way: "We have the right to live in our homes where we choose. That's the beauty of it, isn't it? Other countries – dictatorial, Communist – they tell people where to live and not to live. We are different from that. At our own peril we are here. At our own joy we are here." (*Voices from the Storm,* 190). But not everyone in the history of the United States has had the right to live in a place of their choosing. Nowhere is this more salient than in New Orleans, which was a predominantly Black city at the time of the hurricane. To say nothing of the era of slavery, Black Americans were subjected to redlining, economic and institutional racism and discrimination at a far greater degree. The narrative of homes in America being uniquely free, although clearly very meaningful for Nguyen, loses its universality under closer examination.

The inextricable link between access to housing and race in the United States and especially New Orleans partially explains the pluralism of response among African-American New Orleanians, some of whom took great pride in their neighborhoods and some of whom were thankful to have left New Orleans once and for all. Contrast, for instance, the words of Keith Ferdinand, "I could go to another town. But I'm from New Orleans and the Ninth Ward, not from out there somewhere in space" (*Overcoming Katrina,* 99), with those of Patricia Thompson, from St. Thomas, "I've been wanting to leave New Orleans. You're not treated right in New Orleans, you're not treated fair. New Orleans is the city that forgot to care, and the city that care had forgotten about" (*Voices from the Storm*, 214). The value of oral histories in interpreting this

disaster is that they allow for the coexistence of varied and sometimes contradictory narratives, thus underscoring nuance and ambiguity in the response to an event. For some, environmental justice is leaving and never looking back; for others, it's rebuilding their home as they would like to see it.

Some of this disparity in response can be explained by socioeconomic status, as Ferdinand was a highly successful heart surgeon before Katrina, while Thompson was living in poverty. The frank excitement of some New Orleanians upon having left the city forever and the disdain of others for the tourist-centered neighborhoods subvert the more appealing yet less nuanced narrative of saccharine nostalgia for the contrived image of a city. For example, Parnell Herbert explains, "I love New Orleans, I love the people of New Orleans, I love the culture of New Orleans, hell I love those raggedy buildings. The French Quarter, I've got no love for that" (*Overcoming Katrina,* 47). Oral histories, because they are so closely related to identity, serve to reveal the pluralism among sense of home within one community while situating these narratives within a broader context.

In Chernobyl, the long-term impact of the accident is quite clear – radioactive decay takes a very long time. In New Orleans, the effects are ostensibly less eternal. However, just like the Zone, certain neighborhoods in the city, which were predominantly poor and Black, were declared uninhabitable after the storm. Firstly, the notion of declaring a neighborhood uninhabitable purely because of a lack of funds to rebuild it seems to go against the very basic tenets of environmental justice. Furthermore, many narrators believe that, post-Katrina, New Orleans will never be the same and that which was lost is the sense of community they held most dear. In a world of environmental risk, not everyone is allowed the privilege of restoration of home, which can be posited as a key component of environmental justice and well-being.

"I'm lookin' at the stars findin' my way home, all the way home:"[7] Nature After Disaster

Ulrich Beck critiques the assumed duality between nature and society and instead asserts that the nature that ecologists are trying to save is itself culturally constructed and propped up with strategically deployed scientific evidence (21). This point of view underscores the oft forgotten subjectivity of science and provides a critique of existing approaches to environmental contamination and destruction, which is important in the context of Chernobyl and Katrina precisely because those approaches did not achieve environmental justice for their victims. Beck's deconstruction of the imagined divide between nature and society can be extended to argue that this constructed divide ceases to be a possibility in the context of the realization of world risk. Furthermore, Beck believes that nature becomes a "cultural concept" and thus acquires meanings and significance beyond its reality in the risk society (21).

In the case of Chernobyl, examining the testimonies of villagers is a particularly productive way to explore the deconstruction of this divide. After all, to people leading an agricultural way of life, society has never been separate from nature. These narrators' response to nature becoming a source of danger may illuminate the relationship between people and place after a nuclear meltdown. Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope is particularly applicable here, given the cyclical nature of an agricultural lifestyle. Moreover, Bakhtin specifically posited a "folkloric chronotope" as a fundamental narrative unit. The folkloric chronotope is particularly important for oral history, given the connection between oral history and the "folk narrative" (Portelli, *Death of Luigi Trastulli,* 49).

According to Bakhtin, the folkloric chronotope never pushes the boundaries of space and time (150). Therefore, Chernobyl, which literally overturned existing understandings of space and

[7] Anthony Letcher, *Voices from the Storm,* 95

time, is utterly incongruous with this method of understanding Besides, Bakhtin believes that time is cyclical in folklore (159), so it cannot be reconciled with the irreversibility of a catastrophe like Chernobyl. This explains the sense of incomprehensibility that pervades many of the testimonies. One of the liquidators recalls that the beauty of the surrounding landscape caused "the horror [to be] more horrible" (Arkady Filin, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 91). This paradox – beauty invoking a sense of horror because it hides the lethality of nature in the Zone – is a visual manifestation of the surreal nature of Chernobyl and of the subversion of conventional notions of space and time it caused.

Nature is expected to behave predictably. When it doesn't, space ceases to be a source of stability and constancy, overturning conventional notions of reality. Because of this, many narrators choose to focus on what confounds them in their descriptions of life after the accident. One of the narrators in the People's Chorus chooses to mention this, "I'll bring back a lilac branch from my homeland and it won't wilt for a whole year" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 192). Anna Badaeva, a villager, explains this destabilization in far greater detail, "now life is different, all of this fell apart. We thought it was indestructible, that it has been and would always be this way. And everything boiling in my pot was eternal. I would have never believed that it could change. But that's how it is…" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 68). Badaeva's point of view is also characteristic of the folkloric chronotope, because it defines time and space as eternal and constant. Her testimony demonstrates how the nuclear meltdown literally tore apart folkloric notions of time and space.

It's crucial that radiation was invisible, as this property shapes the way people frame their fear of radiation. For example, many choose to talk about its smell, "It smelled like an x-ray room. Smelled like iodine and some sort of acid… But people say radiation is odorless. I don't know…"

(Soldiers' Chorus, *Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 116). This is a way for this narrator to grapple with the nebulous and ephemeral concept of radiation. Many narrators mention smell to underscore the absurdity of the post-nuclear natural setting. For instance, Sergei Gurin, a filmmaker, says it shocked him the most when he went to the Zone, "the lilacs had no smell. The lilacs! And I got this feeling: everything around me is a lie. Like I was in a movie set… And my consciousness can't grasp this, there's nothing to base my thoughts off of, no schemas!" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 126).

Gurin's sense of cognitive disorientation is quite common, but not everyone responds to it in the way that he did. Some narrators use traditional markers of safety, health and stability to contest the notion that the Zone is contaminated, "Sometimes I'll close my eyes and go through the village – well, I say to them, what radiation? There's a butterfly flying, and bees are buzzing. And my Vaska's catching mice. (*Starts crying*.)" (Zinaida Kovalenko, *Voices from Chernobyl,* 31). Like the narrators who described the smell, Kovalenko is relying on senses other than sight to ascertain whether or not her home is safe. It is telling that Alexievich chooses to mention that Kovalenko started crying – an editorial comment on the emotional pain that her testimony brings up. Kovalenko's words imply that the trustworthiness of sight is undermined by Chernobyl. This may be why so many narrators were scared by the beauty of the Zone, "The worst part was, the least comprehensible part, everything was so – beautiful! That was the worst part. All around, it was just beautiful" (Soldiers' Chorus, *Voices from Chernobyl,* 38). Some people even compare radiation to a religious force, "God is everywhere, but no one can see Him. They're scaring us! But apples still grow in the orchard, leaves are on the trees, potatoes are growing in the field…" (Anna Badaeva, *Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 66). In this testimony, Badaeva is drawing an analogy

between a concept she understands well (the notion of God's presence in the world) and the new and unfamiliar idea of radiation.

People living in cities had a somewhat different reaction to the risk and danger that nature suddenly posed. Many speak of noticing the value and beauty of plants and animals for the first time, "We didn't use to notice this world around us, it was like the sky or air to us, like it had been given to us forever and did not depend on us. Forever. I used to love lying on my back in the woods and gazing at the sky, it made me feel so good that I would forget my name. And now? The woods are beautiful, there are lots of blueberries, but no one picks them" (Nina Zharkova, *Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 137). Similarly, a man who traveled to the zone after the accident describes his changing attitude towards animals, "Here's something else I'll say: birds, animals, ants – they've become dear to me. I never knew such feelings before. I couldn't have imagined" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 79). This changing relationship to nature is reflective of how the duality between nature and society disintegrates after ecological crisis.

In general, pets and wildlife are a crucial component of home for many narrators, both after Chernobyl and Katrina. Anna Badaeva, who remained in her village instead of evacuating, describes feeding other people's animals. Many did not want to leave their animals – however, this was not allowed because the animals themselves became a source of radioactivity. Sergei Gurin recalls a particularly painful scene he witnessed,

> So this little old lady comes out, holding an icon, her cat and a little bundle. That's all she's taking with her.
>
> "You can't bring the cat. It's not allowed. His fur is radioactive."
>
> "No, my children, I'm not leaving without my cat. How can I leave him? Leave him alone? He's my family." (Gurin, *Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 131)

It is telling that Gurin frames this memory almost as if it were a movie scene – he was approaching the Zone from the perspective of a filmmaker. The soldier's phrasing also subtly reveals how misinformation was spread among the survivors. Most people living in villagers never really learned how radiation worked, and it seemed that people in positions of authority were uninterested in elucidating that.

On the one hand, animals are humanized in accounts of Chernobyl – this phenomenon is particularly apparent in the testimonies of liquidators who were also forced to shoot stray dogs and cats as a source of radioactivity. Arkady Filin feels deep remorse for this, "I read some poet who said that animals are their own people. I killed them by the tens, hundreds, thousands, without even knowing their names. Destroyed their homes" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 109). Filin employs a different form of narrative and symbolic production – poetry – to help process what he was forced to do. In addition, he adds another dimension to the relationship between animals and home in the post-Chernobyl cultural consciousness: not only do animals and pets help constitute home symbolic value, they also deserve homes themselves. The right to a home is a fundamental component of their "humanity." Fear is another emotion used to draw connections between animals and humans. This is echoed in Anna Badaeva's description of radiation, "Radiation… it scares both people and animals… And birds too… and even trees are scared, but they're mute. Can't say anything" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 67). In granting animals names, fear, and home, the witnesses of Chernobyl are subtly delineating fundamental attributes of humanity.

For liquidators, the destruction of animals felt like the destruction of homes. This is evident in a testimony given by a group of hunters who were ordered to round up and shoot animals in the zone,

> We got there for the first time and the dogs were running around their homes. Guarding them. Waiting for the people. They were happy to see us, came running close to the human voice… Greeting us… We'd shoot in the homes, in sheds, in gardens. We'd drag them outside and load them in dump trucks. Of course, it's not pleasant. They couldn't understand why we were killing them. They were easy to kill. They're pets… They don't fear weapons or human voices… No, they run towards human voices… (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 113-114)

The pain and trauma of the response to accident is exacerbated by the trusting innocence of its victims. Perhaps this is why many narrators choose to focus on the experiences of animals and children – they are seen as not complicit in the destruction of the environment.

However, there are other ways in which animals are employed as a symbol in these oral histories. On the one hand, they can be humanized, but the comparison of humans to animals is often used to convey dehumanization, "they told me later that there was a column of people walking. And next to that there was a column of livestock. It was war!" (Anna Badaeva, *Voices from Chernobyl,* 28). This description of the evacuation also ties into war narratives. The simile employed by Badaeva underscores the totalizing nature of the government's response to the accident.

The testimonies of Katrina's survivors also extensively feature their pets – in the case of these two disasters, pets are seen as an important component of home. Tropes of innocence are also prevalent in discussions of animals in New Orleans. Pets can be posited as a link between society and nature. Many narrators humanize their pets and treat them as family members. In addition, the sight of dead animals is particularly painful because of their complete lack of responsibility for the disaster and control over their situation. In fact, the mistreatment of animals

during the hurricane led to the passing of a bill ensuring that animals protection services are allowed to conduct rescue work earlier on in a catastrophe.

Daniel Finnigan remained in the city during the flood, and spent a great deal of his time feeding animals,

> I fed all of the animals. […] you had animals trapped in yards who had to be let go, so I let them go. And I own up to that, full-on. I hope the owners of those animals understand that that's why I did it. Because SPCA [Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals] and the Humane Society weren't allowed in for three weeks. Your pets wouldn't have made it had I not freed them. I hope you can get them back somehow. (*Voices from the Storm,* 161-162).

It's intriguing that Finnigan switches to the second person, as if he wants to address the pets' owners. This seems like a way for him to alleviate his guilt for breaking into people's homes and violating their privacy in order to let animals live. In a post-Katrina world, notions of ownership and privacy are subverted so that animals can be saved. Finnigan goes on to say that he "was able to leave and feel okay about leaving" only once he had fed all of the dogs in his neighborhood (*Voices from the Storm,* 162). This choice also speaks to Finnigan's investment in the well-being of his entire neighborhood. For him, like many other New Orleanians, home is inseparable from community.

Many narrators mention their pets when they talk about what they lost due to the hurricane. Parnell Herbert says, "I lost my car and my dog; that was my biggest regret that I left my dog. He's a one-hundred-and-fifteen-pound, twelve-year-old Rottweiler like me. He's going to take care of himself too" (*Overcoming Katrina,* 46). Herbert underscores his strong, deeply personal and human relationship to his dog by comparing it to himself. Harold Toussaint recalls coming back,

"When I came back to look at my place in the Ninth Ward, I saw on it: '9/16 (was entered), one dog dead.' I buried my dog in the back yard" (*Overcoming Katrina,* 58). This impersonal report, which also disfigured his home (the markings of homes were large, bright and resembled vandalism) poses a stark contrast with the compassion and concern for animals evident in the testimonies of survivors.

The image of an enormous flood is associated with Biblical narratives, and some narrators describe seeing the water rise as the first sign that the hurricane's effects would be much broader than originally expected, "The storm had passed and everything seemed like it was all right, but the water kept rising" (Rhonda Sylvester, *Voices from the Storm,* 87). Abdulrahman Zeitoun agrees with this narrative, "I see the water like a river into the city, coming the wrong direction" (*Voices from the Storm,* 96). For some, the image of the water was even more sinister, "Everywhere [Black people] be, everywhere we walk, they flooded. It was like they had somebody funneling that water right exactly where they wanted it to go." (Eleanor Thornton, *Overcoming Katrina,* 140-141). There is a very clear understanding among Katrina's survivors that it was not just a natural disaster.

Like Chernobyl, Katrina led some survivors to have a greater awareness of the natural world. This phenomenon is not as common as it is in testimonies of Chernobyl, which is to be expected because most of the survivors lived in an urban environment and did not depend so directly on the land. Anthony Letcher describes watching the storm in the early days, "so me and my Aunt T on the porch, and we're just like chillin', just lookin' at all this hurricane, Katrina tearin' it up. We're right there just lookin' at it" (*Voices from the Storm,* 77). In addition, for some, living without electricity or access to resources made them feel closer to nature, which also serves to overturn the constructed dichotomy between nature and society.

However, the very fact that Hurricane Katrina was a social disaster turns this duality on its head. As eloquently captured by Renee Martin, "It's a horror story, really. It goes from being a storm by Mother Nature, or an act of god, into a horror. To me, it's a combination of having an act of Mother Nature and then an act of man" (*Voices from the Storm,* 115). Environmental catastrophe blurs constructed boundaries between nature and society. The victims of natural disaster draw a strong link between natural calamity and the structural forces (led and reinforced by human decision) that exacerbate it.

"Something or someone is constantly being buried before their eyes… Buried into the earth…"[8] Mourning in the Wake of Environmental Catastrophe

Both groups of narrators see burial and mourning as essential to their sense of home. Perhaps the best connection between the two concepts is evoked by the words of Father Viet The Nguyen, "Vietnamese, you have to keep in mind, are agricultural people, meaning we tie ourselves to the land. And when do we tie ourselves to the land? When we bury our loved ones in it. We have buried our people here. We are tied to it. That's how it becomes home" (Voices from the Storm, 37). Here, Nguyen is drawing a strong connection between land as a source of growth and sustenance and land as a place for mourning. Moreover, observing proper burial and mourning rites fosters a sense of home. This is echoed in the words of Zinaida Evdokimovna Kovalenko, "My owner [husband] is here… he's buried in the cemetery… if he weren't here, he'd be living in a different place. And I'd be with him (*suddenly becomes excited)* Why leave? It's nice here!" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva*, 47). When Alexievich interviews a group of re-settlers in a village, they mention that the evacuees all come back once a year on a religious holiday dedicated to honoring the dead (Radunitsa). It is also significant that Alexievich chooses to present their

[8] Nina Konstantinovna Zharkova, *Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 136

testimonies as a sort of chorus, which evokes their collective identity and serves as a powerful reminder of the pluralism of truth she seeks to demonstrate.

Burial rites' symbolic purpose is to posit the earth as a stable, eternal space, one that welcomes the dead. The notion of burial adds new significance to the idea of "taking root" in a place. Anthropologists have drawn symbolic connections between conceptions of death and plant lifecycles, as well as the flowing of water, two symbolic constructs that are useful in the context of both events. Many residents of the Chernobyl Zone led an agricultural way of life, and Hurricane Katrina is remembered by many as a massive flood (this part of the disaster is also what caused the most destruction). Moreover, anthropologists remark on the severe emotional consequences of exhumation, which "symbolizes the negation of death by a return of the ossified remains to their homes and families" (Robben, 8). The maintenance and preservation of stable and consistent death rituals is crucial because, according to Durkheim, prescribed mourning patterns help individuals express individual grief in a collective manner. Consistent rituals of grief are essential to healing and recovery from trauma.

However, narratives of burial can be more layered and complex, especially for African Americans. Ancestry for a group of people brought to a land against their will and in an extremely violent way is a fraught topic. On the one hand, having ancestors buried in the land can be a form of laying claim to location. For example, Harold Toussaint describes his rage at being mistreated by police in New Orleans in this manner, "I felt criminalized. I said to myself, 'You bastards, do you know how long my lineage is? How much blood I have in this soil?" (Overcoming Katrina, 58). Toussaint's imagery is extremely vivid – he is quite literally linking the bodies of his ancestors, and thus his body ("blood I have") to the earth around him. Moreover, he uses his lineage as a proof of his legitimacy in laying claim to his home and a refutation of being accused of

criminal activity, of being called a literal interloper on his own land. As such, for some residents of New Orleans, the notion of criminalization made them feel like their homes were being taken away from them.

However, not everyone wants to use it as a claim to legitimacy and justice. For instance, Parnell Herbert, when describing the city, mentions, "Our ancestors were forced over here. Their bodies are buried here, but their spirits were never enslaved" (Overcoming Katrina, 47). Herbert's words reveal a categorically different relationship to place and to the human body than Toussaint's. For Herbert, being buried on American soil is a form of violence and restriction that the body cannot overcome, but the soul can. As such, symbolic notions of burial can vary greatly, but they deploy concepts like land, earth, violence, the corporeal and the ethereal to assert a link between place and identity and to interpret traumatic events.

In the context of environmental catastrophe, the stable, eternal, peaceful notion of burial and home is violently subverted. This occurs via different means in Chernobyl and Katrina. In Chernobyl, the earth in the Zone, as it absorbs the nuclear fallout, becomes a source of toxicity and thus death. The mandatory evacuation order prevents people from giving proper respect to their dead elders. Nikolai Kalugin tells the story of how he returned to the Zone to steal his door, because "Our door – it's our talisman, it's a family relic. My father lay on this door. I don't know whose tradition this is, it's not like that everywhere, but my mother told me that the deceased must be placed on the door of his home. […] My whole life is written down on this door. How am I supposed to leave it?" (Voices from Chernobyl, 32). Not only does this story highlight the importance of observing proper death rites, but Kalugin's choice of symbolism reveals the narrative importance of home as a source of identity. Furthermore, some homes were buried to

protect against radiation (People's chorus, *Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 187). This event, and its mention, stacks symbol upon symbol: home, life, death and earth are all combined.

The destabilizing effects of the earth's contamination are even more profoundly felt in Belarus, due to the region's cultural practices. Liliya Kuzmenkova mentions the significance of the land in Belarussian culture in her testimony, "We are people of the earth, not the sky. The only crop we produce is potatoes. We keep digging them up and planting more and spend all our time staring down at the earth" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 248). This attitude is echoed in ethnographic studies of rural Belarussian populations. Yelena Minyonok explains that Belarus has historically been a predominantly agricultural society. She describes earth in the Belarussian cultural consciousness as serving a dual function: it acts as a source of food and life and also provides a home for the dead. Moreover, in the Belarussian rural belief system, which is an amalgam of Orthodox Christian and pagan practices, the earth becomes a sort of parallel universe in which the dead can live. This explains why ritual burial practices are the most enduring of all ancient Belarussian rituals, most of which have undergone some attrition as a result of industrialization and modernization. This folk conceptualization of the earth is also reminiscent of Foucault's heterotopia. The stability of this heterotopia is disrupted after the accident, distorting traditional understandings of everyday life.

The firefighters who died from acute radiation sickness could not be buried in normal graves because their bodies became a source of radioactive toxicity. This was one of the most traumatic aspects of the entire ordeal for Ludmilla Ignatenko, the widow of a firefighter. She meticulously describes how her husband's body was wrapped in a plastic bag and put in two different coffins. Ignatenko explains, "If anyone got indignant and wanted to take the coffin back home, they were told that they dead were now heroes, and that they no longer belonged to their

families. They were heroes of the State. They belonged to the State" (*Voices from Chernobyl*, 19). Even after their death, the firefighters were stripped of the basic human right of a proper burial and objectified, becoming property of the state.

The liquidators in Chernobyl were required to bury large chunks of the earth because they posed a radioactive danger. This image and experience violently subvert conventional notions of burial and are particularly poignant in that region of Ukraine and Belarus, because the earth there is extremely fertile and had been seen as a source of life and growth for centuries. The liquidators' discomfort at this practice is reflected in an effort to humanize the earth that was being buried. This is aided by the word they use for burial – хоронить (khoronit') – which is generally used when discussing funeral practices. It is distinct from the word used for the routine burial of an object: закапывать (zakapyvat'). Interestingly, this word is closely related in its etymology to the word for "preserve, keep:" сохранить (sokhranit'). For instance, Arkady Filin describes his work in this way, "We were burying [mourning] the earth… Cutting it off and rolling it up in these big sheets… I warned you… There was nothing heroic about it…" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 18). For Filin, the most important thing he needs to impart is a counter-narrative to the official heroism/war narrative paradigm. For him, the absurdity of this work serves as evidence for this alternate vision of events.

Burial plays a prominent role in the many of the liquidators' accounts. This is most evident in the Soldiers' Chorus*,* a section of Alexievich's book in which she compiles the testimonies of a number of soldiers. One includes graves as a crucial part of his description of the zone, "All that's left behind the barbed wire is earth… And graves…" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 92). His words can be interpreted to mean that the only irreducible things in a post-Chernobyl world are the earth and graves. Another liquidator describes how disorienting their work was, "Your mind would turn

over. The order of things was shaken. […] An old woman carries a basket of eggs, and next to her there's a soldier to make sure she buries them. The farmers were raising their precious potatoes, harvesting them very quietly, so we wouldn't notice, but in fact they had to be buried" (*Voices from Chernobyl,* 37). His words also illuminate one of the effects of the invisibility of the disaster, compounded by limits on free speech in the USSR: he knew that it was dangerous, but he could not alert the people who actually lived on the land, and they would not have believed him. A great number of Alexievich's interviewees struggle with feeling powerless in the face of an invisible danger and being unable to alert its victims.

Hurricane Katrina also subverted traditional burial practices: this is largely the result of the flooding, which caused many deaths and unearthed buried bodies. Nearly all the narrators recall the horrifying sight of bodies floating in the water, even those who evacuated. Pete Stevenson, who lived in the Lafitte Housing project and left the city on Sunday with his family, said, "What makes me feel the worst is the things that I done seen. Dead bodies floating up and down the streets haunt me. I didn't see it personally, but seeing it on TV was bad. Yes indeed! Seeing people floating down the streets of New Orleans and not knowing who they are" (Overcoming Katrina, 38). For Stevenson, this sight was extremely unnatural. His words also highlight a very distinct characteristic of Hurricane Katrina that shaped the public and government response – the extremely high level of media coverage received by the event. Chernobyl was not granted any comparable level of publicity, given that the media was controlled by the state in the USSR and that the state attempted to deny the event's very occurrence.

However, transparency alone does not always do justice to the survivors of environmental disasters. In this case, Stevenson's choice to say "not knowing who they are" is telling; the nameless, faceless and unnamed bodies of people of color have long been a common subject of

media images. This form of representation is dehumanizing and objectifying, and it is an extension of the negative racial framing described by Dyson. Moreover, Stevenson's relationship to these images is starkly different from that of an American viewer who was not from New Orleans. These are members of his community, people that he knew or could have known – this glaring discrepancy between the social, popular narrative he saw on TV and his own interpretation of the event is very destabilizing.

The image of an unburied body contrasts with accepted conventions or grieving and mourning. After Katrina, many people's remains were impossible to find or bury. For Harold Toussaint, this makes his community no longer feel like his home, "You can feel it in the air that they haven't buried the dead" (Overcoming Katrina, 58). For Toussaint, proper burial is far more important to a community than flashy tourist neighborhoods. For a group that has long harbored distrust for the government as a result of experiencing oppression, what constitutes home is not what the mayor or the state governor think of when they want to make New Orleans home again.

"They're Used to Poison. Just Like Us:"[9] Health and Home

After the accident at Chernobyl, when the earth became a source of health risk, the relationship between health and place changed. Suddenly, everything was poisonous. Some narrators define radiation as a "kind of death" (Anna Badaeva, *Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 65). This same survivor also said what serves as the title of this chapter – once your place becomes poison, you have no choice but to get accustomed to it.

The fear of invisible toxicity was often overpowered by far more immediate, traditional concerns, especially among villagers who were never appropriately informed of what has happening. Nevertheless, their changing health status alerts them to the fact that something is

[9] Anna Petrovna Badaeva, *Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 67

amiss, "I made it to the doctor's office. 'Honey, I can't walk. My joints ache.' 'Granny, get rid of your cow. The milk's poisonous. 'Oh no,' I'm crying. 'my legs hurt, my knees hurt, but I won't give away my cow. She feeds me'" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 59). Even though this narrator refuses to protect herself against the danger of radiation, she still brings this story up. It is deeply unsettling that her home and animals, which were always a source of life and nourishment, now cause her pain. Sontag explains that narrative responses to toxicity (like cancer) often invoke images of an enemy. She argues that this is an attempt to construct the disease as the ultimate Other (*Illness as Metaphor,* 68). Therefore, after a nuclear catastrophe the land and home go from being an extension of one's identity to being the Other, a violent reversal of conventional belief systems.

In light of this reversal, some narrators react far more aggressively. Katya P., a young girl who evacuated from Pripyat, describes leaving her home and the things that were in it, "I hated those things! That overcoat! I wasn't scared of them, you see, I hated them! All of it could have killed me! And my mother! I felt a sense of enmity…" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 122). Suddenly, objects representative of her home had become a risk to her health. Many narrators oscillate between fear and enmity in describing their surroundings, "We wanted to hide from the atom like from shrapnel. But it's everywhere… In the bread, in the salt… We eat and breathe radiation…" (Nikolai Zharkov, *Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 138). In the society of risk, health is jeopardized by the air.

Narratives of contagion are another crucial component of personal interpretations of health after Chernobyl. First of all, parallels can be drawn between the spread of radiation and the spread of infectious disease. Much of the stigmatization felt by survivors is described in terms of narratives of contagion. In the words of Nina Zharkova, "There's one diagnosis for everything – Chernobyl" (*Voices from Chernobyl,* 116). Much of diagnosis is an attempt to understand the

effects of an event, and this is evident in how common mentions of poor health status are in the testimonies. In addition, isolation is often drawn along lines of contagion. Nadezhda Vygovskaya tells the story of her son's first day in a new school in Moscow, "On the very next day he burst into the house in tears… He was seated at the same desk as another girl, and she didn't want to sit with him because he's radioactive and she could die" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 199). This ostracism often starts by operating in terms of contagion and then becomes less specific. Nadezhda Burakova explains her choice to live primarily with other Chernobyl survivors, "We have the same memory and the same fate… Everywhere else we're outsiders. Everyone gives us these wary sidelong glances…" (*Chernobyl'skaya Molitva,* 237). Being treated like they are contagious adds greatly to the social isolation already felt by the survivors of Chernobyl.

Interestingly, the survivors of hurricane Katrina also feel like they are seen as contagious, even though there is no way in which human bodies could spread the effects of a massive hurricane in the way that they can spread radiation. Harold Toussaint interprets the dehumanization and objectification he felt at the hands of the military as the treatment a contagious person would receive, "The military people that came from outside treated us like we were diseased or contaminated" (*Overcoming Katrina,* 54). This attitude plays into a type of narrative framing that has been very pervasive throughout US history – the association between racism and disease. Xenophobia and fear of contamination often go hand in hand, and government-based public health interventions have been known to target specific populations, reinforcing social divides and stereotypes (for example, the response to the HIV epidemic in the 1980s targeted gay men, Haitian immigrants, heroin users and hemophiliacs). Moreover, treating individuals like they are contagious is a form of social isolation. In the case of Katrina, this sort of objectification is a form of the racist framing defined by Dyson.

In another parallel with Chernobyl, post-Katrina descriptions of land and place also operate in terms of the toxicity of objects. This narrative is reinforced by the fact that the FEMA emergency trailers provided by the government contained dangerously high amounts of formaldehyde. Renee Martin did not want to return to her house in New Orleans (she now lives in Texas), "And when I went [to my house], I didn't even much try to save nothin'. I was more afraid to touch somethin' because I was afraid that I was gonna get somethin'. That's why I didn't touch none of the stuff, and I just left it there and come on out" (*Voices from the Storm,* 198). Her words are surprisingly similar to Katya P.'s description of her hatred for her personal belongings. Anthony Letcher also expresses concern about the destroyed homes, "All they got now, as far as the black poor people are concerned back there, is uncertainty. And mildew, they've got plenty of that out there. They ain't got nothing but poor black people out there, gettin' the stuff out their houses, breathing in toxins. That's real. That's real, man" (*Voices from the Storm,* 227). Letcher's repetition of the words "that's real" serves to amplify his sincerity and gravity. After both Chernobyl and Katrina, homes were transformed from sources of safety and identity to threats to health and well-being.

Finally, many survivors of Katrina reflect on the psychological and physical trauma of the event, especially with regards to children and others. The most detailed descriptions of ill health are usually not about the narrators themselves. For instance, Harold Toussaint recalls, "They're definitely traumatized as well. I was talking to a little boy here. We were playing football. It casually came up that he was on the rooftop for two or three days" (*Overcoming Katrina,* 58). Toussaint is particularly concerned that a child had to deal with those events. This concern is also prevalent in the testimonies of healthcare workers. Denise Roubion-Johnson, a healthcare administrator, explains, "My work is needed more now because so many women don't have insurance, and the stress of what's going on is making women sicker" (*Overcoming Katrina,* 77).

A great deal of this stress, in the words of the narrators themselves, is due to a feeling of displacement. Thus, the testimonies of Katrina survivors reinforce the symbolic and conceptual connection between home, identity and health.

Conclusion

In their introduction to *Overcoming Katrina,* Penner and Ferdinand argue that "oral history more effectively explores questions of subjectivity, which go to the heart of questions of identity and power" (xxiii). This aspect of oral history makes it an ideal methodology for examining the relationship between structural violence (a form of power) and place, which is co-constitutive of identity. Oral history accomplishes two goals in the aftermath of environmental crisis: providing a bottom-up perspective on axes of structural violence (this is what Paul Farmer calls for) and granting the victims of these events agency and ownership over their own history. Analyses that respect and elevate the voices and experiences of those who were marginalized and silenced can serve as a component of achieving environmental justice.

In addition, it is clear that the testimonies of the survivors of these events contain a great deal of information on their effects. As described by Petryna and Steingraber, most studies of climate change and contamination in the Anthropocene are conducted from within the very positivist, Enlightenment-based epistemological framework that led to their very emergence. In this technocratic context, some forms of knowledge (those belonging to scientists and individuals in positions of political power) are privileged above others. A thoughtful, in-depth survey of the lived experiences of individuals affected by these disasters provides us with a new epistemological approach to interpreting risk in the Anthropocene, while simultaneously serving to counteract existing political and academic hierarchies of power.

Furthermore, the Chernobyl disaster and Hurricane Katrina are by no means the last environmental crises to occur. Environmental crises are likely to become a fairly common occurrence in the Anthropocene. In light of this, comparative analyses of global ecological risk should serve to illuminate prevalent forms of structural violence in this new context and provide information on human reactions to these events. In addition, the structure of comparative analyses reveals the diversity and plurality of experience inherent in response to global and local crisis. Interdisciplinary and comparative approaches are particularly well-suited to the study of structural violence, due to its complexity and all-penetrating influence on society. An approach that blurs borders between scholarly disciplines is especially appropriate when studying events that render borders between nations meaningless as they spread through space.

Comparing the disaster in Chernobyl with Hurricane Katrina reveals that both governments were appallingly negligent of their citizens' needs, misdirected their attempts at control to the use of military force against these events' survivors, and were willing to go to nearly absurd lengths to minimize, conceal or misrepresent the scope of disaster. In addition, this analysis has shown the paramount importance of home and place to defining identity. Crucially, these definitions of home are informed by each event's specific cultural, social and historical context. Narrators in both cases operate in terms of symbols such as home, nature, place, burial, and war to process and interpret the trauma of environmental crisis.

Most importantly, as seen in the oral histories discussed above, oral history provides a diversity and plurality of truth that adds richness and depth to existing historical narratives. These histories operate in terms of unified thematic modes of understanding, but each testimony is situated within its specific context. Oral history helps illuminate the immense and often contradictory variety of lived experiences: it is to be expected that crisis in the Anthropocene,

which can seem surreal and is still poorly understood, would give rise to a number of interpretations among its witnesses. Oral histories reveal how incredibly varied the significance of home is in different contexts and to different individuals. This chorus of voices adds breadth and depth to dominant historical and scientific narratives in the Anthropocene.

Analysis of marginalized individuals' narratives also reveals how violently they depart from dominant, mainstream media and state narratives. These oral histories are rife with a sense of bewilderment – the modes of thinking we commonly employ to make sense of the world crumble when applied to ecological crisis. In addition, an incongruity between personal narrative and government narrative can lead to feelings of deep betrayal and confusion. Moreover, narratives are rarely neutral, as explained by Michael Eric Dyson, so state violence is often spurred on by the promotion of racist and reductionist narratives. Mainstream narratives quash individual, alternative stories, and oral history seeks to counteract this silencing.

The role of narrative in shaping social and policy responses to crisis cannot be underestimated. This is particularly apparent in the prevalence of war narratives in testimonies about both Chernobyl and Katrina. The government's militaristic response to both crises is co-constitutive of this phenomenon. Treating the earth as the enemy is violently incongruous with prior understandings of the earth as a source of solace, home, identity and sustenance. One of the ways in which the modern state fails to appropriately respond to global ecological risk is in its desire to treat the aftermath of environmental crises as a war.

It is clear from the government responses to Chernobyl and Katrina that narratives of war influence policy decisions in the aftermath of environmental disaster, even in drastically different political systems. But the survivors of these crises deploy a number of other narratives in their interpretation of the events. The symbolic weight of home, nature, pets, and ancestry can be more

significant than that of war in oral testimonies. Susan Sontag advocates for a greater awareness of the enormous power stories have in shaping our consciousness. In light of this, perhaps a more appropriate state response to environmental crises would be one that respected and elevated narratives of place and identity instead of resorting to the language and thus the actions of war. We cannot continue to Other the Earth, making it an enemy, because that approach causes a violent rupture in the link between identity and place. In the Anthropocene, the significance of *home* to identity and health must be made central in policy decisions.

Moreover, those who are most affected by ecological crises often have the least access to information about them, as evidenced in the oral testimonies. This analysis should serve as a call for improved scientific education and access to information. Forced ignorance is also a form of structural violence, especially because of the strong links between socioeconomic background and education level. Adequate responses to these new forms of crisis require a new approach to expertise.

A nuanced, narrative-based approach that seeks to listen to and elevate the lived experiences of survivors of environmental catastrophe should become an essential component of structural competency in healthcare and policy decisions. Even if we don't know the biological effects of contamination in the Anthropocene, much can be done to alleviate feelings of trauma and helplessness. It is a disservice to the survivors of these disasters to assume that only technocratic methods are worth using in the wake of catastrophe and to neglect the importance of creating and transmitting personal and collective memory. Respect for individual narrative leads to an awareness of the plurality and complexity of historical and spatial truth and grants dignity and agency to the survivors of environmental catastrophe.

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