

# HURRICANE ERGO SUM

BY KATRINA VOSS

HURRICANE  
KATRINA  
SPECIAL SECTION

“What is not named in a culture very likely goes unnoticed by the majority of its people. The converse is also true: people pay greater attention to things that have been given names.”—DAVID SLAWSON

**A**t best, sharing a name with a deadly and destructive hurricane is the sort of serendipitous event that can accelerate a broadcast meteorologist to the highest tier on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. At worst, it’s an instant and quite undeserved identity crisis. A name is, after all, a definition or a symbol. It appears in bold embossed cursive on birth announcements; it is the prominent line on a resume or business card; it is the first information we give to a stranger, and we get our feelings hurt when people forget it.

Needless to say, this is not how I had imagined my name going down in weather history.

In reality, Katrina is not my given name. I was born Kathleen O’Neil Voss after my maternal great-grandmother Kathleen O’Neil. In 1999, when I joined The Weather Channel Latin America as a Spanish-speaking broadcaster, the director of the now-defunct division encouraged me to use a different first name. The “th” of “Kathleen” does not exist as a pronounceable phoneme in Latin-American Spanish. I had to find something easier on both the tongue and the memory of the community that was to be my audience.

I thus considered my Irish name’s actual Spanish equivalent, “Catalina,” but that sounded cumbersome and somewhat grandiose for a 5-foot-1 weathercaster. Then, my parents gave me the suggestion that stuck. My father had always wanted a German name for his daughter. When I was little, my mother, to tease him, had invented the pet name for me, “Katrina.” Appropriately, those who had created me thus recreated me, as Katrina Voss. Little did I know six years ago that I would be sharing my name with the Genghis Khan of hurricanes.

Weeks before it became clear that Hurricane Katrina would usurp Camille’s throne for lowest barometric pressure, months before Katrina would

take her rightful place among hurricane history’s elite, the name sat innocently in a list between “José” and “Lee.” As the weeks wore on, and “Arlene,” “Bret,” and “Cindy” fell into the past, I was occasionally reminded of my namesake’s approach by my drollest colleagues.

Several days before Katrina’s first landfall north of Miami on Thursday, 25 August 2005, what was once jovial teasing had already tapered into sympathetic nods. Then, in the warm womb of the Gulf of Mexico, Katrina reached Category 5 status with maximum sustained winds of 175 mph. History has since confirmed, of course, that meteorologists were not just crying wolf. This *was* the wolf. This was the Big Bad Wolf.

For months after my namesake’s eventual demise, I slunk around work in a cloud of shame. When my coworkers called me by name, the sounds would tumble awkwardly off their tongues and they felt compelled to add a wink and a joke, or a sad, apologetic smile. At times, amidst my cohorts’ cautious glances, I would feel like the mother whose kid is misbehaving at Wal-Mart: *Do they pity her, or do they blame her for not making the hateful moppet behave?* Then, I would shake myself back to reality, chiding myself for my ridiculous narcissism, but wondering if there were people named Camille, Mitch, or Andrew who had the same absurd reveries.

Once the dust had settled, as it were, a fellow meteorologist, Trish Fehlinger, advanced a bizarre philosophical quandary. As we looked over the 2005 and 2006 lists, she ruminated on the absence of a Hurricane Trish. Even if “Trish” were to appear on the list, she added, it is unlikely we would make it all the way to the “T” storm (at least not in most hurricane seasons, with 2005 being a notable exception). Thus, I had to wonder about the psychological impact on a Vicky, Van, Wilfred, or Wendy. Were they relieved they would probably never see a jumble of red bearing their names on an infrared picture? Or, like Trish, did they become despondent from June to November, craving the sense of inclusion that comes from finding one’s own moniker attached to a clump of clouds?

Growing up with “Voss” as a last name, I became quite attuned to the dynamics of alphabetization. I pouted when last in line for an oatmeal cookie after recess, but when poetry recitation came along, I could likewise rejoice in the extra day of preparation my surname occasionally afforded me.

In those weeks leading up to Katrina’s devastation of New Orleans, my brother Charles, who likewise grew up with the last name Voss, wrote me an e-mail extolling the virtues of “backward alphabetization” that his teachers occasionally mandated. On days the alphabet was reversed, he exalted, the hateful Bradbury girl knew what it was like to be last in the lunch line.

Whether a blessing or a curse, infrequent use or consummate dismissal of late-alphabet names for tropical systems<sup>1</sup> does bring up an interesting question of fairness, and one that has been raised in the past by groups protesting the exclusion of certain forenames. Most notably, in the 1970s, feminist groups asked, should only women be associated with the *Sturm und Drang* of Nature’s destructive forces? Then, around the same time that men’s names were added to the list, the use of strictly Anglo names was abandoned in the interests of inclusion, employing Hispanic and French names in addition to Anglo names for storms in the Atlantic Basin. Moreover, in recent years, NOAA has felt a push to include African-American names in the lists.

But there may be something beyond tedious political correctness at work here. Perhaps by naming, and specifically, by using names that are familiar in our respective cultures, we are expressing our desire to control, or at best to *understand*, nature. After all, all of the seven basins for tropical development now use names.<sup>2</sup> Those storms that form in the Hawaiian region use Hawaiian names.<sup>3</sup> The 14 nations affected

by typhoons use a rotating list with contributions from each language or culture. The list includes personal names, astrological signs, and names of flowers and animals. Name assignment in the North Indian Ocean is also culturally and linguistically equitable, with eight nations (Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Myanmar, Oman, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Thailand) each contributing two names to each of four rotating lists.

What’s more, meteorological agencies even make a point of changing a storm’s name to respect a change in its geographic identity. In these instances of resilient basin crossover, a storm, like a rogue government operative, acquires a new alias and passport. When a cyclone emigrates from waters in Australia’s region of responsibility (east of 90°E longitude) to the southwest Indian Ocean, its original name and its new southwest Indian Ocean name are temporarily combined into a composite name.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, if a named Atlantic basin storm weakens to a tropical disturbance, then reintensifies after an exodus to Pacific waters, it is given the next name on the list of Eastern Pacific storms.<sup>5</sup> Hurricane Hattie, which devastated Belize City,<sup>6</sup> is said to have done just that . . . twice, according to some (much challenged) sources. In 1961, after forming in waters off the Panama Canal, the so-called “hurricane with three names” supposedly emigrated from its Atlantic birth-waters into the Pacific as a weakened tropical entity. After convalescing in Pacific waters, Hattie was said to have reincarnated as Tropical Storm Simone, which then slipped across the Isthmus of

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<sup>1</sup> Q, U, X, Y, and Z do not appear on the Atlantic basin storm lists, and while T, V, and W names do appear, in any given year a person with an A or B name is much more likely to share a name with a tropical storm.

<sup>2</sup> North Indian cyclones were previously identified by a code such as BOB0301 (Bay of Bengal’s first storm of 2003). In 2004, a meeting of the Panel on Tropical Cyclones for the Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea set in motion a process to use proper names for storms forming in the region. First to bear an official name was Severe Cyclonic Storm Onil, which formed in October of 2004 in the Arabian Sea.

<sup>3</sup> Because the Hawaiian language alphabet is comprised of only 12 letters (as converted to a Latin alphabet), each of the four hurricane name lists for the Central Pacific is only 12 names long.

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<sup>4</sup> Much like a married neo-feminist’s half-hearted compromise, the new name is hyphenated. Nicky, an example of such a case, formed in March of 2004 near the Cocos Islands. Moving westward, Nicky was renamed Nicky-Helma after crossing 90°E longitude. Later that month, Oscar developed between the Cocos and Christmas Islands and later became Oscar-Itseng after migrating into La Réunion’s area of responsibility. Similarly, in April of 2005, Adeline left her western Australian birth waters, becoming Adeline-Juliet upon entry into the southwest Indian Ocean.

<sup>5</sup> Until the late 1990s, even those storms retaining tropical depression status (or stronger) would be given a new name after crossing into the Pacific. However, the new policy preserves the original name of a storm, providing it does not weaken to a tropical disturbance.

<sup>6</sup> After Belize City’s encounter with Hattie, the government was relocated to Belmopán, 76 meters above sea level and 82 kilometers (51 miles) west of Belize City.

Tehuantepec and hobbled into the Gulf of Mexico, only to reach tropical storm status again, this time as Inga. The story is likely quite untrue.<sup>7</sup> But regardless of its veracity, the tale of Hattie's shenanigans reveals something rather spooky. Like the "shell game" street magic of itinerant conjurers, Hattie, Simone, and Inga befuddled a few generations with a little sleight-of-hand. Names, and thus identities, are intimately tied to (and intimately confused by) timing, direction, and location.

Indeed, it would seem that our compulsion to name—and thus anthropomorphize—weather and all its whims is common, if not universal and timeless. Weather as subject matter seems relatively benign by today's standards. (Unlike sports, a discussion of weather rarely starts barroom brawls, nor inspires grown men to pickle themselves in beer and wave foam fingers around in public.) Yet weather has long been the unrivalled governor of whole communities, the maker of myths, and the shaper of folklore. And rightly so; after all, there was a time when every human felt a constant and intimate connection between the sky and his next breath. For many spiritual traditions, weather has been the very embodiment of the divine, or at a minimum, its expression, communication, and will. It follows that weather would bear a proper name. In the Greek traditions, Zeus brings thunder, while in Latin and Etruscan folklore, Jove rules the fluid and colorful skies. The name of the Japanese deity Raiden means "fire and lightning." The Norse goddess Ran, "The Ravager," drowns sailors in treacherous sea storms. Oya, African goddess of weather, is hailed as the "Lady of Storms," while for the Caribbean native populations, Guabancex is the goddess of weather, water, and wind.

If there is a lesson to be learned from anthropomorphizing (or gynemorphizing) natural events in the modern world, it is the following: Even in the post-elementary-school world, there are both long waits for cookies *and* auspicious assignment extensions. That is, inclusion of certain names can mean a quandary of troublesome metaphors.

(Who wants to be associated with economic devastation and beach erosion?) But exclusion can prompt resentment or outright offense. Is my brother's egalitarian solution of backward alphabetization possible at the National Hurricane Center? Could we occasionally reverse nomenclature inequity by pushing the Albertos and Andreas of years to come to the end of the line? Perhaps then in less active tropical seasons, the Valeries and Williams out there would, depending on their points of view, either enjoy a sense of inclusion or shoulder the burden of morose existential wanderings like the rest of us.

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<sup>7</sup> According to the *Monthly Weather Review's* report of the 1961 hurricane season, Hattie dissipated in the mountains of Guatemala, with Tropical Storm Simone having already formed in the Pacific. Thus Hattie's remnants cannot be linked to Simone, nor can Simone's be conclusively tied to Inga. At any rate, the lofty title, "hurricane with three names," is misleading, as neither Simone nor Inga reached hurricane status.