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Voices from the Storm

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Biographical Citation

Christopher Manning is an associate professor of history at Loyola University Chicago and author of William L. Dawson and the Limits of Black Electoral Leadership (Northern Illinois University Press, 2009). He received his Ph.D. from Northwestern University in 2003 and is currently working on a project provisionally titled NOLA: An Oral History of the Hurricane Katrina Volunteers.
Voices from the Storm


Hurricane Katrina laid bare deep inequalities in American life. The aftermath of the storm revealed the deep fissures of race, class, age and gender in American society. Oral historical scholarship developed quickly to tell survivors’ stories in their own words, while other works provided details on the human causes of the catastrophe.¹ Still others traced the Bush administration’s mishandling of the storm but added a longer-term, often racially tinged analysis of the neglect of the Gulf region.² Because of its recent nature and massive media coverage, Katrina has sparked a palpable emotional reaction in much of this scholarship—a pattern that is apparent even as intellectuals begin to analyze the city’s long-term
rehabilitation effort. Nevertheless, scholars are attempting to employ increasingly sophisticated theoretical models in their analyses and increasingly they argue that the recovery process followed a neoliberal orientation that has worsened inequality in New Orleans. 3

In a memoir extremely supportive of former New Orleans mayor C. Ray Nagin, Edward Blakely casts blame widely for New Orleans’ incomplete state of recovery. His introduction spells out his principle points of assessment. Severe infrastructure problems brought New Orleans to “death’s door” long before the storm hit. He argues that New Orleans was a “small” city and “impervious to outside” ideas. Moreover, the city’s fractious civic and political leadership refused to talk past any old disagreements to allow for real movement forward (p. 4–7).

Usage of such language did not endear Dr. Blakely to New Orleanians and his critics condemned My Storm. Writers from the New Orleans Times Picayune characterized Blakely as having a “superiority complex” 4 and made light of his many gaffes, including writing that New Orleans was the birthplace of Tina Turner, who was in fact born in Tennessee. 5

Despite these flubs, Blakely’s account makes insightful observations. Blakely reveals several warning signs that he witnessed during early unofficial visits in 2005 and 2006, including ill-informed Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) representatives who
suspected that New Orleans was too corrupt to control its own recuperation, several competing “official” recovery plans, and recurring racial tensions (p. 18–22).

Blakeley consistently states that the city lacked any centralized leadership for the recovery. At the outset of his tenure as recovery czar in 2007 Blakely was not briefed on the specifics of his role by the mayor, and he quickly realized his negative position (p. 36). In addition to his awkward status, Blakely also had to navigate through and unify three competing recovery plans. The Bring New Orleans Back plan used the infamous green dots to indicate zones of depopulation designated to become green space, usually in African American communities. The black community and the city council responded by sponsoring a competing blueprint. Finally, the Greater New Orleans Foundation developed a synthesized plan, which still drew suspicion from the African American community. While the city lost precious time debating the multiple plans, Blakely laments that from a planning standpoint volunteer gutting and rebuilding efforts worsened the central problem: the need for a database systematically indicating conditions by neighborhood (p. 50).

Blakeley articulates several arguments regarding the problematic characteristics of pre–Katrina New Orleans. Mayor Nagin, he contends, simply did not possess the management tools to properly deploy his staff for disaster management. Furthermore, Nagin gave neither Blakely nor
other members of his staff any directives on how to work together to make relief happen. Surprisingly, Blakely later writes, “He is one of the best bosses I ever had, and my list of bosses is long” (p. 63). Moreover, Blakely writes that the local government was far too structurally fractured to effect positive change (p. 65–71).

Most significantly, Blakely argues that “the New Orleans’ recovery was largely about the politics of money and who controlled it: city or state, black or white, rich or poor, downtown or neighborhoods” (p. 76). He contends that the state ineffectively micromanaged the distribution of federal recovery funds to New Orleans (p. 77). He also argues that neither the private sector nor non-for-profit groups were the appropriate vehicles for recovery. In the case of the former, there is too much motivation for profit and in the latter too much potential for corrupted leadership (p. 80).

Blakely outlines a set of comprehensive suggestions for rehabilitating the city. He maintains that a more holistic approach than fixing levees should be enacted—a position he holds consistently throughout the book. Instead of trying to hold the water back, the city needs to develop plans for more effective waterflow, to use tax incentives move citizens to less flood prone areas in the north and east of the city, and to invest heavily in wetlands restoration.
While Blakely’s memoir displays a defensiveness and a deficiency of analytical rigor, the articles in In the Wake of Hurricane Katrina range in subject matter from art to politics. Some suffer from a lack of focus. The collection of wide ranging articles attempts to posit Hurricane Katrina and the programs enacted in response to it within historical patterns of race, class and gender–based inequality, but lacks a central theme or argument that could give the individual essays direction.

Editor Clyde Woods, for example, presents a poem in the introduction with no contextualization:

I’m a ask you this one more time
Is you crazy, deaf or blind
You don’t see them folks, in them boats,
The kids without shoes. Man it’s people dyin’ (p. 2)

These lines obviously critiqued responses to the storm. Who is speaking and what this speaker is a part of, however, is absent. Yet this information is extremely relevant. The poetry is part of a lyric from the Freedom Land Project, created by BMike and the 2–Cent Project. Organized in 2005, the 2–Cent Project provided young black New Orleanians a platform for expressing their ideas through cutting edge entertainment. The Freedom Land Project brought together New Orleans’ hottest young hip–hop artists and was on a scale of importance similar to KRS 1’s “Self– Destruction,” which united east coast rap stars in 1989 to condemn black on black violence.
Similar lapses in articulating key arguments occur throughout the introduction. Bourbonism, for example, is one of its key theoretical constructs, but it is imprecisely explained. Woods briefly tells the reader that Bourbonism originated out of political analyses of pre–Revolutionary France and has subsequently been applied to analyses of ruling regimes in the South. He then argues that Bourbonism/Neo–Bourbonism/Neoliberalism (terms he seems to use interchangeably) grew in parallel with what he calls the Blues tradition whose “principle concern is not the creation of a new hierarchy, but working class leadership, social vision, sustainable communities, social justice and the construction of a new commons.” This line of argumentation is valid, but with such limited introduction and contextualization, it can strike the reader as overreaching, particularly when he claims that New Orleans and the blues tradition have “been at the center of global innovations in philosophy, religion, culture and social change since the 1830s” (p. 4). Southern Louisiana, for example, was “the test case” for Reconstruction and the New Orleans Renaissance occurred eighty years before the Harlem Renaissance (p. 8–12).

The initial articles in In The Wake of Hurricane Katrina attempt to connect the outcomes of Hurricane Katrina to long–term historical patterns through very specific historical moments, but they prove unsuccessful. In “Justice Mocked: Violence and Accountability in New Orleans,” for example, Lakisha Michelle Simmons provides an excellent examination of the gender and racial dynamics surrounding both the murder of Hattie McCray by an off–duty white New Orleans police officer and the press coverage of the subsequent trial. Nevertheless, Simmons only directs a small portion of her essay to the relationship of the trial with the gendered dynamics evident in Katrina, leaving the reader to wonder if the comparison was useful in the first place.
Nevertheless, some articles standout. Rachel Luft’s “Beyond Disaster Exceptionalism” examines the evolution of “grassroots social justice” organizations, identifying their stages of development by way of analysis to their responses to Hurricanes Katrina and Gustav. Luft defines grassroots organizations as groups that are “grounded in a local community, where the constituency is composed of people without access to many resources…the leadership comes out of the constituency, and the group operates with minimal infrastructure” (p. 75). She argues that the first wave of grass roots organizations developed from pre-storm social networks and focused on “crisis organizing”–the distribution of supplies, gutting and bioremediation of homes, etc. All of them articulated principles of “participatory democracy, self-determination, and accountability” (p. 77). Her examination of the second wave reveals that newer organizations also conceived of their work as connected to the devastation wrought by Katrina, but the new groups, including the New Orleans Women’s Health Clinic, the New Orleans Women’s Health and Justice Initiative, and the New Orleans Center for Racial Justice, focused on social justice issues and possessed a more diverse cadre of leaders (p. 78). She concludes, “If the state found in Hurricane Katrina an opportunity to remake social policy, then grassroots organizers recognized in the ensuing social disaster the need to hone new strategies of grassroots resistance” (p. 97).

Jordan T. Camp and Zeni Kish challenge portrayals of Katrina in the mass media. Camp argues that the government and mass media created a “narrative of criminality” regarding the storm to support existing patterns of criminalizing the black poor, removing the welfare state, and privatizing the penal system (p. 276) Meanwhile, Kish examines the ways in which hip-hop artists undermined portrayals of Katrina as an exceptional event and drew attention to the “inequities that
have supported human tragedies...throughout history.” These artists, like the members of the Freedom Land Project, spoke for the people whose lives were devalued and marginalized during the storm (p. 263).

Tourism, much of it drawn from the city’s rich African American heritage, makes up the predominate segment of New Orleans’ economy. Yet scholarship has not adequately studied the interaction between constructions of blackness and the transformation of tourism in the post-Katrina environment. Anna Hartnell and Lynell L. Thomas demonstrate in each of their articles that Katrina shifted tourist narratives towards an analysis of environmental degradation and racial inequality. Yet these issues compete against an older, powerful narrative that de–historicized race in New Orleans. They contend that it is not certain that tourism will continue draw attention to the difficult social issues laid bare by the storm (p. 297–322, 323–344).

The collection of articles in The Neoliberal Deluge focus on the impact of neoliberalism on New Orleans. These authors fully define the term, reveal its growth within national and international contexts, and articulate its impact on New Orleans’ recent history–immediately before and after Katrina. Editor Cedric Johnson begins with a first-rate definition of neoliberalism:

Neoliberalism is essentially the ideological rejection of the planner state (both the Soviet state socialist model and the Keynesian
welfare state alternative) and the activist promotion of a new order of market rule (p. xxi)

Woods contends that neoliberalism does not espouse laissez fair principles as articulated in classical liberalism. Rather neoliberals utilize free–market rhetoric to spread capitalistic ideology into all aspects of society. In so doing they explicitly attack any aspects governmental social welfare, labor regulations, and environmental that hinder the development of markets. Neoliberalism has become the ascendant ideology, championed by both parties since the Regan era, Woods contends. He then tightens the lens to the overriding influence of market–based decisions on the geographical development of New Orleans in the 1960s and 1970s as well as New Orleans' inability to develop effective economic bases beyond tourism in these same decades (p. xxii–xxx). Woods notes that neoliberalism influenced policies that bore some responsibility for the flooding in New Orleans when the Bush administration divested funding from federal infrastructure and flood protection, despite explicit warnings against doing so by flooding experts (p. xxxi).

The essays in The Neo Liberal Deluge originate from different intellectual disciplines but all challenge the alleged benefits of neoliberalism and reveal disparities caused by its manifestation in post–
Katrina New Orleans. Chris Russill and Chad Lavin argue that the federal government attempted to contain the events of Katrina within a neoliberal framework by using the narrative of the “tipping point”–the notion that a crisis exceeds the ability of the government to respond (p. 4–12). Russill and Lavin illustrate the widespread adoption of this theory as pretext for government incompetence in a range of disasters before Katrina, from the 1995 Chicago heat-wave to the United States’ 2003 invasion of Iraq. The media has rarely questioned the concept and it has generally functioned well to deflect government accountability in crisis moments. During Katrina, however, the press interrogated the government’s contention that Katrina outstripped their ability to react appropriately. Faced with this challenge, the tipping point narrative collapsed, but proponents of neoliberalism resorted to arguments regarding personal responsibility, restoration of law and order, and the need for private organizations to fill the gaps left by government (p. 26).

Several essays move from the crisis itself to consideration of New Orleans as an urban environment after the storm. Adrienne Dixon uses critical race theory for example, to argue that the emerging hybrid school model in New Orleans (charter, public, and private) restricts educational opportunities. First she notes that critical race theory focuses on the conditions of inequality instead of on the mere opportunity to gain equality through process (p. 131, 132). Using this theoretical frame it
becomes clear that while the expansion of charter schools in New Orleans represents more opportunities for parents on paper, in reality it has led to a reduction in workers’ right for teachers and a limited accessibility to the best schools by the city’s poorest parents (p. 144-146).

Cedric Johnson captures the irony that occurs when individuals of goodwill work within, and therefore reinforce, neoliberal structures. Johnson argues that Brad Pitt’s Make it Right Foundation (MIR) is commendable, but its private-sector funded, design-oriented, suburban style homes do nothing to challenge the neoliberal structures that rendered New Orleans’ Lower 9th Ward so vulnerable to Katrina in the first place. The MIR utilized cutting-edge, sustainable building processes and included features such as “roof escape hatches” in case of flooding, for instance, but such features shifted the responsibility for flood protection away from the state to the individual homeowner (p. 189). Instead of focusing on individual homes, Johnson posits a three-part rehabilitation plan that combines “the ethical assertion of ‘right to return’ with sensible planning strategies that could address flood hazards and create vibrant neighborhood life” (p. 218). His plan sounds viable, but given Blakely’s condemnation of New Orleans’ political sector and his description of the highly competitive components of New Orleans’ civic and activist communities, Johnson needs to indicate what networks between civic organizations and the state would need to develop to execute his plan.
In Driven from New Orleans John Arena delves even more deeply into the interrelationships between grassroots organizations than Johnson. Arena provides a long-term analysis of neoliberalism relative to the struggle to prevent the closure of public housing from the early 1980s through the late 2000s. Essentially, Arena seeks to understand how a vibrant cadre of public housing activists became proponents of private redevelopment and participants in the gentrification of neighborhoods formerly dominated by the working class. He contends that the gradual movement of activist leaders to the non–profit sector lies at the heart of this transformation. Furthermore, Arena contends that non–profits provide a crucial service to the neoliberal agenda by facilitating the privatization of public housing and aiding those displaced by it—thereby removing state responsibility for the welfare of its poorest citizens.

Arena’s introduction defines the book’s important theoretical concepts, including neoliberalism, gentrification, and revanchism, which he describes an international pattern of taking central public space away from the urban poor and transforming it into areas of capitalist accumulation. He then situates the spread of neoliberal policies in New Orleans and activists’ challenge of them within wider national and international contexts (p. xxii–xxvii). Consequently, while the reader is
focused on developments in New Orleans they retain awareness that what occurred in New Orleans was but one battle among many.

Arena draws off his time as an activist to demonstrate how public housing proponents created a strong voice for their community regarding the accessibility and upkeep of public housing, while having some success in fending of attempts at privatization. The benefits from Arena’s insider status become apparent here for he knows every name, every organization and every nuanced relationship among organizations. Although the detail at times is overwhelming, Arena’s narrative proves immensely useful for anyone seeking deep knowledge of the subject.

The St. Thomas Resident Council (STRC), a tenant organization, primarily led this fight. Arena writes that the council, composed predominantly of African–American women, “had a reputation among residents, city officials, and activists as one of the most combative tenant organizations in New Orleans” (p. 12). Arena points to STRC’s role through the 1970s and early 1980s in confronting local authorities regarding the quantity and quality of public housing (p. 12), before describing the development of a new black urban regime–black political leadership charged by their white business supporters with removing poor blacks from highly desired areas of the city. Utilizing their centralized community, marshaling their vibrant spirit, and networking
with local, liberal policy makers STRC led a successful effort to rebuff the new regime in the late 1980s (p. 29–55).

Here Arena notes the beginning of the transformation of community leaders and their strategies. Reflecting a national pattern, tenant leaders began to espouse notions of “self-help.” This meant moving away from older demands on government to empowering tenants to be responsible for the maintenance of public housing (p. 61).

Unfortunately Arena does not use his oral testimonies to deeply explore the motivations of individual groups and leaders to transform their organizational model and reorient their relationships to the political apparatus (local political leaders and foundations). Instead, Arena uses conspiratorial and petty language to describe STRC’s shift to the non-profit model. He points to a move towards the language of self-help that grew nationally through the spread of neoliberal ideology. In so doing the proponents of neoliberalism become part of an evil cabal, duping groups like the STRC into following a philosophy that violated their own interests. He describes, for example, a Washington D.C. tenant activist Kimi Gray who strongly influenced the STRC’s transformation, as being “trotted out” as a “showpiece” for self-help. (p. 58). This sort of language unnecessary, for Arena has more than enough evidence demonstrating that STRC’s non-profit status begins a series of compromises with local
authorities and real estate interests that moved them away from their successful confrontational origins to the political mainstream.

Arena contends that the national and local governments—President Bill Clinton and New Orleans’ Mayor William Morial—agreed that public housing needed to be reduced and that a combination of coercive and consensus based measures could facilitate its gradual removal. Arena deploys a vast range of evidence to show how the state arrayed its powers to shrink public housing. An important coercive measure was the HOPE VI legislation to eradicate severely distressed housing through economic development rather than the maintenance and improvement of existing housing stock (p. 90). Conservative policy makers relied upon William Julius Wilson’s arguments that decried overcrowding the black poor into isolated urban ghettos as a rationale to dismantle public housing. As policies developed at the Congressional level to push public housing aside, expansions of local police powers and increased evictions of tenants weakened the community from within (p. 87–88, 98).

While his list of coercive measures is broad, deep, and convincing, his description of consensus–based measures begs the question of individual agency. Applications for HOPE VI grants required resident cooperation. Arena argues that STRC and another non–profit, the St. Thomas Irish Channel Consortium (STICC), worked to fit resident demands within the parameters of the grant application (p. 107). Yet
despite their participation, the residents possessed only a symbolic presence in a process that was driven by non-profit advisors and consultants.

Again Arena does not outline the agency and decision-making processes of those involved on the non-profit side, although he executed interviews in which these topics could have been explored. They come off, at best, as victims. He interviews one non-profit grant writer, for example, who explained his surprise upon learning that the numbers of replacement housing were decreased without full consultation of all the parties involved—a revelation that demonstrates the conspiratorial nature of the process. He does nothing, however, to show why this writer trusted the granting process in the first place or why this writer chose to advocate for the public welfare through grant writing rather than confrontational tactics—a choice that Arena implies is a tragic. Thus Arena demonstrates how the fracturing of the activist community combined with non-profit collusion to play key roles in the ultimate removal of the St. Thomas homes.

Arena further examines the struggles over whether to retain several of New Orleans’ remaining public housing projects after the storm. He concludes that although resistance against development existed, most opposition forces were too constrained by complicity with the non-profit world to provide a significant challenge. Arena borrows from Naomi
Klein’s theory of “disaster capitalism” to argue that Katrina provided neoliberal forces in New Orleans the opportunity to execute a nearly 30-year old agenda to remove large portions of the city’s public housing, but he adds to her concept by noting that non-profits greatly facilitated this program.

In 2004, Community, Concern, and Compassion (C3) blocked a HOPE VI application that would have destroyed the Iberville projects. He argues that C3’s independence from the limitations placed by foundations and its ability to draw attention to race and class issues were pivotal to its success (p. 153–157). After Katrina several organizations, including the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund, Common Ground Collective, and C3 joined forces to protect public housing, but several characteristics of these resistance groups weakened their resolve. Identity politics, the notion that only people who share the same background as the individuals represented by an organization can serve as leaders, split the coalition (p. 163). This topic is important and deserves further study within the confines of New Orleans, for it has also been identified a critical misstep within the ranks of the Common Ground Collective in Scott Crow’s Black Flags and Windmills. Second, in what Arena attributes to a misplaced nostalgia for Jim Crow, local non-profit groups partnered in the process of redeveloping the La Fitte homes with the goal of creating a mixed-income community, which had been the case for African Americans
forced to live in segregated areas. This argument would have been greatly improved had it included an in-depth analysis of local participants to understand their goals and experiences for working with the process as well as their evaluation of the results of their work.

Thus although it had a heritage of resistance, the activist community in New Orleans could not mount a strong challenge to the demolition of significant portions of public housing after the storm. Arena describes a period of “intense struggle” as activists in the newly created umbrella group, the Coalition to Stop Demolitions, attempted to block plans to raze over 80 percent of the city’s public housing, most of which suffered minimal storm damage and could have provided shelter to the city’s growing homeless population. Using words like “heroic” to describe the confrontational protests against the demolition and “betrayal” to depict the decision of non-profits to stay out of the protests, Arena’s personal connection to the movement is clear. For Arena, those engaged in the valiant, but ultimately ineffective, direct action protests against the bulldozers represented the will of public housing residents, while the leaders of the non-profits who opted for a voice in shaping the outcome of removing public housing protected their own bases of power and gave legitimacy for neoliberal development forces.
Driven From New Orleans represents a transitional stage in Katrina and post-Katrina scholarship. Massive media coverage of the city’s deep inequality and government ineptitude during the storm combined with the tremendous numbers of volunteers who participated in the rehabilitation of the city, has made the event extremely personal as can be seen in Arena, Blakely and the work of other writers. Meanwhile, the disaster stimulated a vast array of responses from hip-hop consortiums to the formation of new non-profit organizations. Scholars have struggled to discuss all of these formations and neoliberalism dominates debate, as exemplified by The Neoliberal Deluge. Only time will tell if another theoretical construct will possess the same explanatory power.

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2 Examples here include: Michael Eric Dyson, Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster (New York: Basic Books, 2006); Spike Lee, When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts. HBO, 2006. DVD.


4 This is evident in his book when he writes that he brought inspiration to the people of New Orleans by riding his bike through their neighborhoods as he surveyed storm damage.