

Introduction

Katrina, Ten Years Later

Published almost a decade after one of the most devastating disasters in US history, this cluster of essays on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina reflects on the hurricane, the measures that could have been taken to prevent the massive devastation caused by it, and the immediate and long-term responses by the government, private industry, and civil society. How has Katrina left a permanent mark not only on the Gulf South but also on our larger national imaginary? What lessons, if any, have we learned, and what actions and policies have we adopted to better mitigate against future disasters? Haunting though the images may be, the flooded homes and emergency rescues from rooftops were not the only impact Katrina had—it altered fundamental social contracts in cities such as New Orleans, from public education to public housing. It also awakened a new activism focused on issues ranging from calls for better levee protection to addressing the loss of wetlands in coastal communities.

Stephen A. Nelson, a geoscientist at Tulane University in New Orleans, starts off the discussion by providing correctives to five pervasive myths about Katrina: that the levees were breached the day after Katrina hit the city (they were breached on the same day), that it was the river that flooded the city (the river levees remained intact), that the corruption of the local levee boards was responsible for the negligence of the levees (it was an engineering failure on the part of the US Army Corps of Engineers), that Katrina was a storm so large that it could not possibly have been planned for (the storm was within the calculations of the levee system, with a force below what the levees had allegedly been designed to protect), and that the city was doomed to begin with since it was below sea level (some but not all parts of the city are below sea level). Nelson's point in the essay and in the many voluntary tours that he leads for students and visitors to the city is not just to debunk these myths but to also ask why they are so pervasive. One reason, he suggests, was the power of the early media reports that remain in collective memory even after they were challenged, revised, or repudiated.

Attention to media coverage, then, is central to the ways in which the world at large witnessed the hurricane and the debates that it generated. That is the focus of Ray Taras's piece on Cuban and Mexican newspaper coverage of Katrina. Both significant actors in the broader region of the Gulf South, and both having intimate experience of devastating hurricanes, Cuba and Mexico were critical of the ways in which the George W. Bush administration handled Katrina. Newspaper coverage of Katrina in these countries pointed to the post-Katrina rescue and recovery efforts as an example of the ineffective policies of a neoliberal state. Indeed, as the next essay by Graham Owen indicates, much of the post-Katrina recovery of New Orleans was lauded as a market-driven phenomenon heralded by the "familiar neoliberal rebranding of frontier self-reliance, of 'personal responsibility' as the foundation of rebuilding." Owen charts citizens' difficulties in moving back to the devastated city in the aftermath of the hurricane, the flawed decision-making process on which areas were to be rebuilt and which not, and the emphasis on individual volunteer work cast in a heroic register as indicative of what he sees as a maladaptive process. The emphasis on individual volunteerism, philanthropy, and social entrepreneurship in the post-Katrina environment has taken away the burden of responsibility from where it should properly belong—the government—which, Owen argues, has failed to live up to its commitments in its social contract with its citizens.

The next two essays by Jennie Lightweis-Goff and T. R. Johnson move us to more localized and personal takes on an issue that has gained significant political valence in post-Katrina New Orleans. Both "white professionals" living in the Bywater neighborhood of New Orleans, they each reflect on the politics of race and class and their effects in the localized spaces of urban geographies. Lightweis-Goff challenges us to rethink the very terms of the debate on gentrification, pointing out that often even well-intentioned left-leaning individuals end up blaming the victims of economic inequity for neighborhood gentrification, leaving untouched the exploitative practices of large mortgage and financial institutions. Class concerns are often eclipsed in discussions of gentrification, and she reminds us that although gentrification is often used as a synonym for displacement of longer-term residents, the link between them is not uncontested.

T. R. Johnson, a professor of English but also a well-known host of a jazz show on the local New Orleans radio station WWOZ, speaks to the power of music in healing wounds and overcoming traumatic

experiences. Returning home to his largely empty Bywater neighborhood in the immediate aftermath of Katrina and playing the music of Miles Davis on his iPod's speakers, Johnson finds an African American man sitting on the front stoop of his house listening to the music. On subsequent nights he finds a number of strangers—all African American—gathering on his front steps also listening to the music. Trying to understand the role of music in forging a connection, Johnson is cognizant of the long history of racial division that marks this occasion—they, he writes, “were almost certainly the descendants of slaves. My grandfather’s grandfather owned slaves.” The essay meditates on the role of African American music in the history of slavery and emancipation, and the relationship of this music to white individuals who often were the brokers in its distribution and reception beyond the community. Reading the evenings in which he unwittingly served as a distributor of music not in his role as a jazz show radio host but, rather, as a white homeowner in a now racially mixed but formerly predominantly African American neighborhood, Johnson notes, “Jazz has always been the site of uneasy encounter between people of different backgrounds, an art of harmony and dissonance, surprising resolutions and deferrals, tensions released and renewed, in perfect metaphor for its racial politics. . . . The sort of music I was playing probably signaled that my stoop was a relatively safe place.”

The final essay by Marguerite Nguyen sheds light on the history of the Vietnamese American community in eastern New Orleans and its displacement and subsequent resilience after both Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Despite being one of the most concentrated communities of Vietnamese Americans in the United States, the community has often been sidelined in discussions of Katrina. Nguyen gives us a brief history of the arrival of refugees from Vietnam in the seventies, their resettlement in New Orleans, and the ways in which they adapted their farming techniques in the new landscape. She charts the community’s effort to be included in the city’s plans for redevelopment after Katrina, as opposed to having its neighborhood turned into green space or, worse, into a dumping ground for the city’s waste. The challenges posed by both Katrina and the oil disaster in the Gulf prompted a multigenerational activist effort on the part of the community, an effort that Nguyen tracks through the aquaponics farming efforts of the VEGGI Farmer’s Cooperative. This cooperative, led by a young volunteer from California, sources freshly produced food from the local farms to restaurants in New Orleans. The

effort is as much about creating jobs and sustaining the economic well-being of the community as about responding in effective ways to the challenges posed by the environment and particularly the post-oil spill pollution.

The essays collected here make no pretense of coverage. There are many more institutions and issues affected by Katrina that could have been addressed and indeed have already been studied by many others who have written in its aftermath in the past decade. The essays gathered here, instead, are invitations to further thought and debate. As we think back on the past decade, we take stock of the successes and failures and look forward to forging a better city and region for future generations.