New Orleans: A disaster waiting to happen?

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While other cities have occupied wetlands, few have the combination of location and geography of New Orleans. Portions of Washington, D.C. occupied wetlands, but there was ample solid ground above the reach of the Potomac (River’s) worst floods. Chicago’s founders platted their city on a wetland site, but the Chicago River did not drain the massive territory of the Mississippi. (5)

"Occupied" is arguably a euphemism for dredging, draining, filling, and reclaiming wetlands. Occupation also conjures up visions of an occupying army, which may be appropriate in the case of New Orleans as the Army Corps of Engineers have spearheaded much of the militarisation by dredging and draining wetlands in New Orleans and elsewhere in the U.S.

The location for the city was not propitious. Wilson describes how "the city itself was constructed on an uneven patch of relatively high ground in the midst of a vast swamp" (86). New Orleans for Kelman is "surrounded by a wet world composed of terrain that is not quite land" (22) with the Mississippi River delta on one side and Lake Pontchartrain and the "backswamps" on the other, though the latter were later drained. The Mississippi River for Kelman is "the continent’s most famed and lamented swamp" (86). New Orleans for Kelman "is surrounded by a wet world composed of terrain that is not quite land" (22) with the Mississippi River delta on one side and Lake Pontchartrain and the "backswamps" on the other, though the latter were later drained. The Mississippi River for Kelman is "the continent’s most famed and largest watercourse" (199). Perhaps it is also the continent’s most tamed and levelled watercourse. Earlier Kelman related how a prominent local commentator in 1847 "personified the Mississippi as a nurturing mother" because the river "hugged New Orleans to its "breast bosom" (79). Supposedly this mother was the benign, malign, and patriarchal Mother Nature of the levied river and not the recalcitrant, matrifocal Great Goddess of the swamps that threatened to break the levees and flood the city (see Giblett, Postmodern Wetlands; People and Places, especially Chapter 1).

The Mississippi as the mother of all American rivers gave birth to the city of New Orleans at her "mouth," or more precisely at the other end of her anatomy with the city of New Orleans (both its infrastructure and residents), point to the cultural construction and production of the disaster. The city is a disaster waiting to happen (Giblett, Landscapes 16–17). The city is not meant to be; the city is built by us to be a disaster. The city is the site of a disaster. The city is a disaster. The city is a natural disaster. Katrina hit the city.

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Rod Giblett

Abstract

Introduction

New Orleans is one of a number of infamous swamp cities—cities built in swamps, near them or on land "reclaimed" from them, such as London, Paris, Venice, Boston, Chicago, Washington, Petersburg, and Perth. New Orleans seemed to be winning the battle against the swamps until Hurricane Katrina of 2005, or at least participating in an uneasy truce between its unviable location and the forces of the weather to the point that the former was forgotten until the latter intruded as a stark reminder of its history and geography. Around the name "Katrina" a whole series of events and images congregate, including those of photographer Robert Polidori in his monumental book, After the Flood. Katrina, and the exacerbating factors of global warming and drained wetlands, and their impacts, especially on the city of New Orleans (both its infrastructure and residents), point to the cultural construction and production of the disaster.

This suite of occurrences is a salutary instance of the difficulties of trying to maintain a hard and fast divide between nature and culture (Hirst and Woolley 23; Giblett, Body 16–17) and the need to think and live together (Giblett, People and Places). A hurricane is in some sense a natural event, but in the age of global warming it is also a cultural occurrence; a flood produced by a river breaking its banks is a natural event, but a flood caused by breached levees and drained wetlands is a cultural event, a mudslide is a natural event, but people dying by drowning in a large and iconic American city created by drainage of wetlands is a cultural disaster of urban planning and relief logistics; and a city set in a swamp is natural and cultural, with the cultural usually antithetical to the natural. "Katrina" is a salutary instance of the cultural and natural operating together in and as "one single catastrophe" of history, as Benjamin (392) put it, and of geography I would add in the will to fill, drain, or reclaim wetlands. Rather than a series of catastrophes proceeding one after the other through history, Benjamin's (392) "Angel of History" sees one single catastrophe of history. This single catastrophe, however, occurs not only in time, in history, but also in space, in a place, in geography. The "Angel of Geography" sees one single catastrophe of geography of wetlands dredged, filled, and reclaimed, cities set in them and cities being re-reclaimed by them in storms and floods. In the case of "Katrina," the catastrophe of history and geography is tied up with the creation, destruction, and recreation of New Orleans in its swampy location on the Mississippi delta.

New Orleans

New Orleans is not only "the nation’s quintessential river city" as Kelman (199) puts it, but also one of a number of infamous swamp cities. In his post-Katrina preface to his study of New Orleans as what he calls "an unnatural metropolis," Colten notes:...

"Katrina" is a natural event. Hence the necessity of the levee system, the need to fill and reclaim the swamp with "clean" water. This system was designed to make land out of water, to fill and reclaim the swamp. The assumption was that the water was not just "mud and muck" but "pure water," which makes it not only an artificial swamp but a very natural phenomenon. The levees are built on the assumption that the water is not there by right, but by the deliberate action of human beings to fill and reclaim the swamp.

Kelman (199) observes: "Katrina" is a natural disaster. Katrina produced "water out of place" (Kelman x). In other words, and in Mary Douglas’s terms for whom dirt is matter out of place (Douglas 2), this water was dirt. It was not merely that the water was dirty in colour or composition but that the water was in the wrong place, in the buildings and streets, and not in the swamp, as Polidori graphically illustrates in his photographs. Bodies were also out of place with "corpses floating in dirty water" (Kelman x) (though Polidori does not photograph these, unlike Dean Sewell in Aceh in the aftermath of the Asian tsunami in what I call an Orientalist pornography of death (Giblett, Landscapes 158)). Dead bodies became dirt: visible, smelly, waterlogged. Colten argues that "human actions [...] make an extreme event into a disaster [...]. The extreme event that became a disaster was not just the result of Katrina but the product of three centuries of urbanization in a precariously situated city" (xix). Yet Katrina was not only the product of three centuries of urbanization of New Orleans’ precarious and precarious watershed, but also the product of three centuries of American urbanisation of the precarious and precisely precarious shored up through pollution with greenhouse gases.
The geographical location of New Orleans, its history of drainage and levee-building, the fossil-fuel dependence of modern industrial capitalism, poor relief efforts and the storm combine to produce the perfect disaster of Katrina. Land, water, and air were mixed in an artificial quaking zone of elements not in their natural state of separation. The quaking zone of the elements of air and water that had been in the native quaking zone of swamps now ran amok in a water wasteland (see Giblett, Landscapes of Culture and Nature, especially Chapter 1). Water was on the land and in the air. In the beginning God, when created the heavens and the earth, darkness and chaos moved over the face of the waters, and the earth was without form and void in the geographical location of a native quaking zone. In the beginning, when humans are recreating the heavens and the earth, darkness and chaos move over the face of the waters, and the earth is without form and void in the geographical location of a native quaking zone. Humans were thrown into this maelstrom where they quaked in fear and survived or died. Humans are now recreating the city of New Orleans in the aftermath of "Katrina." In the beginning of the history of the city, humans created the city; from the disastrous destruction of some cities, humans are recreating the city.

It is difficult to make sense of "Katrina." Smith relates that, "as well as killing some 1500 people, the bill for the devastation brought by Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans [...] was US$200 billion, making it the most costly disaster in American history," more than "9/11" (303; see also Flint 230). A whole series of events and images conglomerate around the name "Katrina," including those of photographer Robert Polidori in his book of photographs, After the Flood, with its overtones of divine punishment for human sin as with the biblical flood (Coogan et al. Genesis, Chapters 6–7). The flood returns the earth to the beginning when God created heaven and earth, when "the earth was without form and darkness moved [...] upon the face of the waters" (Coogan et al. Genesis Chapter 1, Verse 2)—God's first, and arguably best, work (Kelman 234–35, Postmodern Wetlands 142–143; cf. Colin's Preface). The single catastrophe of history and geography begins here and now in the act of creation on the first day and in dividing land from water as God also did on the second day (Coogan et al. Genesis Chapter 1, Verse 7)—God's second, and arguably second best, work. New Orleans began in the chaos of land and water. This chaos recurs in later disasters, such as "Katrina," which merely repeat the creation and catastrophe of the beginning in the eternal recurrence of the same. New Orleans developed by dividing land from water and is periodically flooded by the division continued by its mistakes ("Katrina" to its, a feral quaking zone (Giblett, Landscapes Chapter 1). Catastrophe and creativity are locked together from the beginning. The creation of the world as wetland and the separation of land and water was a catastrophic action on God's part. Its repetition in the draining or filling of wetlands is a catastrophic event for the heavens and earth, and humans, as is the unseparation of land and water in floods.

What Muecke calls the rhetoric of "natural disaster" (259, 263) looms large in accounts of "Katrina." In an escalating scale of hyperbole, "Katrina" for Brinkley was a "natural disaster" (5, 60, 77), the "worst natural disaster in modern U.S. history" (62), "the biggest natural disaster in recent American history" (273), and the "worst natural disaster in modern American history" (331). Yet a hurricane in and by itself is not a disaster. It is a natural event. Perhaps all that could simply be said is that "Katrina" was one of the most powerful storms ever recorded in U.S. history (Brinkley 73). Yet to be recorded in U.S. history "Katrina" had to be more than just a storm. It had also to be more than merely what Muecke calls an "oceanic disaster" (259) out to sea. It had to have made land-fall, and it had to have had human impact.

In the overall disaster comprising the hurricane the flood, the sinking city and its drowning or displaced inhabitants was preceded and made possible by the disasters of New Orleans as Kelman writes in his post-Katrina preface, "has a horrible disaster history" (xii) in the sense that it has a history of horrible disasters. It also has a catastrophic history and geography. Humans were recreated in this maelstrom where they quaked in fear and survived or died. Humans are now recreating the city of New Orleans in the aftermath of "Katrina." In the beginning of the history of the city, humans created the city; from the disastrous destruction of some cities, humans are recreating the city.

In searching for a trope to explain these events Brinkley turns to the tried and true figure of the monster, usually feminised, and "Katrina" is no exception. For him, "Hurricane Katrina had been a palpable monster, an alien beast" (Brinkley xiv), "a monstrous hurricane" (72), "a monster hurricane" (115), and "the monster storm" (Brinkley 453 and Flint 230). A monster, according to The Concise Oxford Dictionary (Allen 768), is: (a) "an imaginary creature, usually large and frightening, composed of incongruous elements; or (b) a large or ugly or misshapen animal or thing." Katrina was not imaginary, though it or she was and has been imagined in a number of ways, including as a monster. "She" was certainly large and frightening. "She" was composed of the elements of air and water. These may be incongruous elements in the normal course of events but not for a hurricane. "She" certainly caused ugliness and misshapenness to those caught in her wake of havoc, but aerial photographs show her to be a perfectly shaped hurricane, albeit with a deep and destructive throat imaginable as an orally sadistic monster.

Conclusion

New Orleans, as Kelman writes in his post-Katrina preface, "has a horrible disaster history" (xii) in the sense that it has a history of horrible disasters. It also has a horrific history of the single disaster of its swampy location. Rather than "a chain of events that appears before us," "the Angel of History" for Benjamin "sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage" (392). Rather than a series of disasters of the founding, drainage, disease, death, floods, hurricanes, etc., the history of New Orleans, the Angel of History sees one single catastrophic history, not just of New Orleans but preceding and post-dating it. This catastrophic history and geography began in the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, darkness and chaos moved over the face of the waters, the earth was without form and void, and when God divided the land from the water, and is ending in industrial capitalism and its technologies, weather, climate, cities, floods, disease, hurricanes, and wetlands intertwining and inter-relating together as entities and agents. Rather than a series of acts and sites of creativity and destruction that appear before us, the Angel of Geography sees one single process and place which keeps (re)creating order out of chaos and chaos out of order. This geography and history began at the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, and the wetland, and divided land from water, and continues when and as humans drain(ed) wetlands, create(d) cities, destroy(ed) cities, rebuild(ed) cities and rehabilitate(d) wetlands. "Katrina" is a salutary instance of the cultural and natural operating together in the one single catastrophic and creativity of human and human history and geography.

References


