New Orleans: A disaster waiting to happen?

Rodney J. Giblett

*Edith Cowan University, r.giblett@ecu.edu.au*
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 Perh. 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 unlivable 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 them 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 (Rowe 30). Human dying 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:

While other cities have occupied wetlands, few have the combination of a locating of New Orleans, the Mississippi, and the swamps. 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 sluggish Chicago River did not drain the massive territory of the Mississippi. (5)

"Occupied" is arguably a euphemism for dredging, draining, filling, and reclaming 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 largest watercourse" (199). Perhaps it is also the continent's most tamed and leveed watercourse. Earlier Kelman related how a prominent local commentator in 1847 perceived 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 sluggish Mississippi. (5)

New Orleans was a frontline in the modern war against swamps, the kind of war that Fascists such as Mussolini liked to fight because they were so easy to win (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 sluggish Mississippi. (5)

After the Flood

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.
The interpretive geographical location of New Orleans, its history of drainage and levee-building, the fossil-fuel dependence of modern industrial capitalist economies, poor relief efforts and the storm combined to produce the perfect disaster of Katrina. Land, water, and air were mixed in an artificial quaking zone of elements not in their normal places and the outcome was not an end, but the beginning of a new and different historical order. The storm and flood, the destruction of wetlands can create the wasteland of flooded cities and a single catastrophic history and geography, such as New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane 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 wrought 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 congregate around the name "Katrina," including those of photographer Robert Polidori in his book of photographs, After the Flood, 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, Postmodern Wetlands 142–143; Giblett, Landscapes 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 ending, 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 and catastrophe of a feral quaking zone. Humans were thrown into this maestral 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.

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" (313). 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. It was not merely an event in the history of weather patterns in the U.S. For Brinkley "the hurricane disaster was followed by the flood disaster" (249). These three disasters for Brinkley add up to "the overall disaster, the sinking of New Orleans, [which] was a man-made disaster, resulting from poorly designed and managed levees and floodwalls" (246). The result was that for Brinkley "the man-made misery was worse than the storm" (597). The flood and the misery amount to what Brinkley calls "the Great Deluge [which] was a disaster that the country brought on itself" (619). The storm could also be seen as a disaster that the country brought on itself through the use of fossil fuels.

The overall disaster comprising the hurricane the flood, the sinking of land and water, and its air toxicifying or displacing inhabitants was preceded and made possible by the disasters of dredging wetlands and of global warming. Brinkley cites the work of Kerry Emanuel and concludes that "global warming makes bad hurricanes worse" (74). Draining wetlands also makes bad hurricanes worse as "miles of coastal wetlands could reduce hurricane storm surges by over three or four feet" (Brinkley 10). Miles of coastal wetlands, however, had been destroyed. Brinkley relates how "too many Americans saw these swamps and coastal wetlands as wastelands" (9). Wastelands needed to be redeemed or enlivened or droughts or floods, and wetlands interrelating and inter-relating together as entities and agents. Rather than a series of acts and sites of creativity and destruction that catastrophically 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, destruction of wetlands and of global warming. Brinkley cites the work of Kerry Emanuel and concludes that "global warming makes bad hurricanes worse" (74). Draining wetlands and of global warming. Brinkley cites the work of Kerry Emanuel and concludes that "global warming makes bad hurricanes worse" (74). Draining wetlands also makes bad hurricanes worse as "miles of coastal wetlands could reduce hurricane storm surges by over three or four feet" (Brinkley 10). Miles of coastal wetlands, however, had been destroyed. Brinkley relates how "too many Americans saw these swamps and coastal wetlands as wastelands" (9). Wastelands needed to be redeemed or enlivened or droughts or floods, and wetlands interrelating and inter-relating together as entities and agents. Rather than a series of acts and sites of creativity and destruction that catastrophically

Conclusion

New Orleans, as Kelman writes in his post-Katrina preface, "has a horrible disaster history" (vii) in the sense that it has a history of horrible disasters. It also has a horrible 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. that mark the history of New Orleans, the Angel of History sees one 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, flooding, ice, and wetlands interrelating 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 History sees one single process and place which keeps (re)creating 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 depression and creativity of human and natural history and geography.

References


