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“New Orleans Revisited: Notes of a Native Daughter”

by

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Destination New Orleans

“Best Culinary Destination.” “Best City for Night Owls.” “Best NFL City to Party In.” “Best City for Girlfriend Getaways.” “Top National Halloween Destination.” “Best Destination in the U.S. and World for Nightlife.” “America’s Favorite City.”¹ And on. And on. The list of tourist destination rankings and accolades have mounted in the ten years since Hurricane Katrina threatened to decimate New Orleans’s tourism industry and, quite possibly – as some predicted and others hoped for – New Orleans itself. Things are different now. Recently, the *New York Times* proclaimed that New Orleans was “resilient and renewed, a decade after Katrina.” Listing New Orleans as one of 52 worldwide “destinations to go in 2015,” the article heralded the city for its rebirth at the tenth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, citing its burgeoning arts scene, a new state-of-the-art performance space, upscale restaurants and retail stores, and trendy hotels.² While these annual rankings and tourism superlatives likely have as much validity as the “Most Likely to...” appellations in high school yearbooks, there is no mistaking that New Orleans’s tourism industry is thriving once again. In 2013, the city hosted its first Super Bowl since Katrina; the Essence Music Festival broke attendance records; and over 9 million tourists, the highest number since the hurricane, visited New Orleans and spent an unprecedented 6.47 billion dollars, the highest spending total in the city’s history.³

Neo New Orleans

While tourism has assumed its place as the centerpiece of New Orleans’s post-Katrina recovery, it is by no means the only, or even the primary, reason for New Orleans’s celebrated rebirth. Post-Katrina New Orleans has become a laboratory for market-driven government and neoliberal restructuring. Through the privatization of public services and the incentivization of

private sector industry, New Orleans has accelerated its decades-old practice of outsourcing the common good(s): healthcare, education, criminal justice, and even humanitarian aid. The cumbersome new nomenclature of neoliberalism – “philanthrocapitalism,” “grassroots privatization,” “venture philanthropy,” “the business of charity,” “disaster capitalism,” “social entrepreneurship” – linguistically captures the awkwardness of the dubious union between private profit and public interest.⁴ Then again, a lot of people, from the powerful ones who have implemented these private sector public policies to the disempowered ones whose communities are most impacted by them, don’t seem to share my skepticism.

When New Orleans fired all of its public school teachers, disbanded the teacher’s union, and privatized its public schools, the city was touted as a national model for school reform. When all of the city’s public housing developments – even the structurally sound ones – were demolished after Katrina to make way for privatized mixed-income units, the protests of public housing activists were drowned out by praise from a bipartisan, cross-racial, and cross-class alliance of supporters who linked the razing of public housing and the consequent displacement of public housing residents with the purging of crime and concentrated poverty from the city. When the local and federal government, supported by the tourism industry, provided tax incentives and enacted policies that gentrified historic neighborhoods and commissioned voluntary associations, public-private partnerships, non-profit organizations, and religious groups to shoulder post-Katrina recovery and rebuilding efforts, tens of thousands of mostly white young transplants, trading in economic, cultural, civic, or spiritual capital, answered the call to help themselves while helping others.⁵

This neo New Orleans has experienced enviable population and economic growth, a surge in new businesses and industries, and a revitalization of local arts and culture in the midst

of a national recession.⁶ No longer simply the best destination for girlfriend getaways, neo New Orleans has gained attention for its social and economic transformation since Katrina with its anointments as “Most Livable City,” “Best City for Retirees”; one of the “Top 10 Cities for Young Entrepreneurs”; “Top U.S. City for Independent Filmmakers”; among “America's Best Cities for Singles”; “America’s Biggest Brain Magnet”; and “America’s Best City for School Reform.”⁷ To be honest, as someone familiar with New Orleans’s physical, cultural, racial, and economic landscape, having grown up in New Orleans East, attended schools uptown, watched my son play sports in Lakeview, and lived and worked in Gentilly before Hurricane Katrina, I find myself both bedazzled and befuddled by this neo New Orleans. And it’s not just because I see bike trails, vegetarian restaurants, dog parks, and white folks in places that I could have never imagined before Katrina.

In fact, as a New Orleanian it’s hard not to be impressed by, and even grateful for, the explosion of diverse new restaurants (a mind-boggling seventy percent increase since Katrina), the rejuvenation of local arts and culture, the conspicuous improvements to infrastructure, the investment in recreational facilities and public libraries; and the exciting innovations in urban sustainability.⁸ For those of us who recall the bleak aftermath of Katrina, each new T-wall levee, each new construction by Habitat for Humanity’s Musician’s Village or Brad Pitt’s Make It Right Foundation, each new mass market retailer in an underserved neighborhood appear to be encouraging barometers of safety, convenience, stability. Yet, just as soon as I think about joining in the celebration of New Orleans’s recovery, I’m reminded that stronger levees in New Orleans have made areas outside of the federal protection system more vulnerable to flooding and coastal erosion; that the meager number of housing units (eighty-two dwellings in Musician’s Village and 100 of a projected 150 Make It Right homes) has not even made a dent in

the shortage of affordable housing in post-Katrina New Orleans; and that the expansion of big box retailers with notoriously exploitative labor practices will do little to ameliorate New Orleans' soaring poverty rate. It's not hard to see that for all the new restaurants and new residents, it's the same old story.

After all, just because it's new, doesn't mean it's improved. Consider the five new teachers that my fifth-grade niece had in the span of four months at her charter school; or the continually-delayed opening of the new Orleans Parish Prison, which continues to violate inmates' constitutional rights in defiance of a federal consent decree; or the new statistics that show that income inequality between whites and blacks – already egregious before Hurricane Katrina – has grown since Katrina at a rate higher than the national average.⁹ These competing realities in neo New Orleans aren't simply a sign that there's more work to be done to achieve a more democratic society; it's the very work that is already being done that is contributing to or exacerbating these antidemocratic trends. The neoliberal approach to New Orleans's reconstruction has facilitated – even mandated – uneven development and an inequitable distribution of resources.¹⁰ While the city racks up accolades as a top tourist destination and entrepreneurial hub, neo New Orleans also continues to top lists for negative quality of life indicators, such as infant mortality and morbidity, mass incarceration, poverty, unaffordable housing, and violent crime, all borne disproportionately by black residents.¹¹

Inside Out New Orleans

My ambivalence about neo New Orleans stems in large measure from a double-consciousness, not the duality of being black and American, although that certainly plays a part. I'm speaking more of the tension between being a native of New Orleans and a scholar of New Orleans, of reflecting on the city as one who is of New Orleans but no longer in New Orleans. In

this regard, I feel more kinship with George Washington Cable than with W. E. B. Du Bois. Ostensibly, I have very little in common with Cable, the white son of slave owners, a Confederate veteran, a prolific novelist and social commentator whose criticism of racism and elitism in New Orleans Creole society after Reconstruction generated so much controversy, he relocated to Massachusetts. Yet, I also have written critically about New Orleans in the aftermath of what some have called the “Second Reconstruction;”¹² I did relocate from New Orleans to Massachusetts; and, as Cable’s own commentary on illicit cross-racial sex demonstrates, I can’t rule out slave owner ancestors. Those similarities aside, what resonates most for me about Cable was his status as a “native outsider.”¹³ This perspective gave him the ability – and the burden – to fully appreciate, and even celebrate, the complexities of New Orleans history and cultural traditions, while at the same time, analyzing and criticizing the economic, social, and political conditions that shaped the city’s history and culture.

To try to reconcile these competing viewpoints is to constantly see New Orleans from the inside out and, often, to be turned inside out because of it. For me, it’s been a struggle to try to compartmentalize my perspectives as an academic and as a denizen. In the ten years since Katrina, my work on and in New Orleans has been both intellectual and personal. It has involved exploring the continuities and ruptures of racial representation in popular narratives, historical memory, and public policy, and it has involved repairing houses, navigating post-Katrina bureaucracies, and reassessing home and community in the face of the death, destruction, and displacement that has affected my family, friends, and neighbors. Of course, the inside and out, the professional and personal, often overlap, even collide.

As a native New Orleanian and a scholar whose research interests include New Orleans history and culture, I am sometimes asked to host workshops or to make presentations to Boston

high school or college students preparing to embark on Spring Break service trips to New Orleans. These students rarely know much about New Orleans, except, occasionally, from what they've gleaned from a reading assignment or documentary about Katrina. But they've heard things. They're generally excited about the food, asking where they should go to find the best gumbo or how to pronounce *jambalaya*. They have questions about safety. They brace themselves stoically for the encounters with crime, poverty, and racism they have been told to expect. They confide, without irony, how they cannot imagine living in the south with so much racism, even as they sit in Boston classrooms and commute from neighborhoods still showing the effects of one of the nation's most violent episodes of resistance to school desegregation. I know that these students are compassionate, socially engaged, and genuine in their desire to fill the void left by government neglect.

Yet, I am also struck by the amount of money they fundraise or get from their parents to travel over a thousand miles – past countless other local communities and organizations in need of volunteers – to work for a few days, usually on an ad hoc project for which they are inadequately prepared, in a community that they know little about. They are confident about what they have to offer the people of New Orleans: time, labor, empathy. They are less willing to admit that they also expect something beyond good karma in return: service credit hours, a compelling narrative for the college essay, an extracurricular experience on the resume that makes them stronger job candidates.¹⁴ These students also expect to be transformed by putatively authentic New Orleans experiences. As one service trip organizer explained to me, students who had volunteered by planting beach grass to stop coastal erosion did not feel moved by the experience and did not return to Boston feeling inspired, whereas students who had volunteered in the Lower Ninth Ward, interacting with the residents and hearing their stories, made a

powerful connection to those people and the city. However, unlike the collaborative storytelling advanced by local grassroots organizations, this one-sided expectation places the burden on black New Orleanians to regale and redeem those who have come to serve.¹⁵

Memorial New Orleans

I find the prospect of the upcoming tenth anniversary memorializations and commemorations – wreath laying and ribbon cutting – equally burdensome. These milestones invite us to move forward by assessing where we are and reflecting on what we’ve lost. But some of us don’t need reminders. Katrina is not over for us, and the past ten years have been filled with daily disasters and quotidian catastrophes not neatly demarcated by anniversary ceremonies nor delimited by geographic boundaries.

My own grandmother, parents, aunts, and cousins are among the tens of thousands displaced by Katrina whose right to return was encumbered by inadequate healthcare, education, housing, public safety, and employment. Their absence from New Orleans is tangible. I see it in the vacant houses and sparsely populated neighborhoods where I grew up. Or the church – now closed – where I was baptized, made my First Communion, was married, and baptized my own son. I witness it in Baton Rouge, Atlanta, and Dallas, where fellow members of the Katrina diaspora try resiliently, though not always successfully, to reconstitute home. Even those who have returned to New Orleans have found home elusive. Without kinship networks, affordable housing, accessible mental health care, or quality public education, New Orleanians struggle to remake their lives in the storm’s aftermath. We draw on hallowed traditions in New Orleans to honor our dead. But now that they have been laid to rest, perhaps we would do better to commemorate the living.

¹ “City and CVB Awards,” *New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau*, accessed January 31, 2015, <http://www.neworleanscvb.com/press-media/press-kit/city-cvb-awards/>; “New Orleans Earns Top Spots in Destination Rankings Once Again,” *New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau*, November 18, 2014,

<http://www.neworleanscvb.com/articles/index.cfm?action=view&articleID=9115&menuID=160>

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² “52 Places to Go in 2015,” *The New York Times*, January 9, 2015,

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http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2015/01/new_orleans_makes_new_york_tim.html.

³ “New Orleans Achieves 9.28 Million Visitors in 2013,” *The City of New Orleans*, April 22, 2014, <http://www.nola.gov/mayor/press-releases/2014/20140422-tourism-numbers/>; “Mayor Landrieu Touts 2013 Success in Tourism, Special Events and Film,” *The City of New Orleans*, December 30, 2013, [http://www.nola.gov/mayor/press-releases/2013/20131230-tourism,-special-events-and-film-\(1\)/](http://www.nola.gov/mayor/press-releases/2013/20131230-tourism,-special-events-and-film-(1)/); “Mayor Landrieu, Essence Celebrate Largest Essence Festival Ever,” *The City of New Orleans*, July 8, 2013, <http://www.nola.gov/mayor/press-releases/2013/20130708-mayor-landrieu,-essence-celebrate-largest/>. Data for 2014 is not yet available.

⁴ “The Birth of Philanthrocapitalism,” *The Economist*, February 23, 2006,

<http://www.economist.com/node/5517656>; Cedric Johnson, “Introduction: The Neoliberal Deluge,” in *The Neoliberal Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, Late Capitalism, and the Remaking of New Orleans*, ed. Cedric Johnson (Minneapolis: Univ of Minnesota Press, 2011), xxxii;

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⁵ Bruce Alpert, “Sen. Mary Landrieu to Showcase New Orleans School System,” *NOLA.com*, March 1, 2012, http://www.nola.com/education/index.ssf/2012/03/sen_landrieu_to_showcase_nos_n.html;

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⁶ Allison Plyer, “Facts for Features: Katrina Recovery,” *The Data Center*, August 28, 2014, <http://www.datacenterresearch.org/data-resources/katrina/facts-for-features-katrina-recovery/>;
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⁷ Jed Lipinski, “New Orleans Named ‘Most Livable’ City by U.S. Conference of Mayors,” *NOLA.com*, June 21, 2014, http://www.nola.com/crime/index.ssf/2014/06/new_orleans_named_most_livable.html; “City and CVB Awards”; “New Orleans Earns Top Spots in Destination Rankings Once Again.”

⁸ Millie Ball, “There’s a Post-Katrina Joie de Vivre in New Orleans,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 22, 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/travel/la-tr-d-new-orleans-20140824-story.html#page=1>;
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⁹ Andy Grimm, “Court Order Would Set New Deadlines for Orleans Parish Prison Reforms,” *NOLA.com*, January 17, 2015, http://www.nola.com/crime/index.ssf/2015/01/court_order_sets_new_deadlines.html; Naomi Martin, “Orleans Parish Prison Federal Monitors Blast Lack of Progress,” *NOLA.com*, August 28, 2014, http://www.nola.com/crime/index.ssf/2014/08/orleans_parish_prison_federal_1.html;
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¹⁰ For studies that document the negative impact of neoliberal policies on New Orleans's most vulnerable communities, see Adams, *Markets of Sorrow, Labors of Faith*; Kevin Fox Gotham and Miriam Greenberg, *Crisis Cities: Disaster and Redevelopment in New York and New Orleans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Johnson, *The Neoliberal Deluge*; Clyde Adrian Woods, "Les Misérables of New Orleans: Trap Economics and the Asset Stripping Blues, Part 1," *American Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (September 23, 2009): 769–96.

¹¹ *New Orleans Community Health Profile* (New Orleans, LA: New Orleans Health Department, January 2013); Plyer et al., *The New Orleans Index at Eight: Measuring Greater New Orleans' Progress Toward Prosperity*.

¹² The term was coined by C. Vann Woodward in C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, Commemorative edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); See also, Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945-2006*, 3rd ed. (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007).

¹³ Alice Hall Petry, "Native Outsider: George Washington Cable," in *Literary New Orleans: Essays and Meditations*, ed. Richard S. Kennedy (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 1–7; See also, Suzanne W. Jones, "The Grandissimes and the Difficulty of Reconstructing New Orleans," *Literary New Orleans*, April 3, 2013, <https://urliteraryneworleans.wordpress.com/2013/04/03/the-grandissimes-and-the-difficulty-of-reconstructing-new-orleans/>.

¹⁴ Wanda Vrasti, “Giving Back (Without Giving Up) In Neoliberal Times,” *The Disorder Of Things*, August 15, 2012, <http://thedisorderofthings.com/2012/08/15/giving-back-without-giving-up-in-neoliberal-times/>; Wanda Vrasti, *Volunteer Tourism in the Global South: Giving Back in Neoliberal Times* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

¹⁵ Examples include The Neighborhood Story Project and Students at the Center. Rachel Breunlin, Abram Himmelstein, and Ashley Nelson, “‘Our Stories, Told By Us:’ The Neighborhood Story Project in New Orleans,” in *Telling Stories to Change the World: Global Voices on the Power of Narrative to Build Community and Make Social Justice Claims*, ed. Rickie Solinger, Madeline Fox, and Kayhan Irani (New York: Routledge, 2008), 75–90; “The Neighborhood Story Project,” *The Neighborhood Story Project*, accessed February 25, 2015, <http://www.neighborhoodstoryproject.org/about/#partners>; Catherine Michna, “Stories at the Center: Story Circles, Educational Organizing, and the Fate of Neighborhood Public Schools in New Orleans,” *American Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2009): 529–55, doi:10.1353/aq.0.0091; “Students at the Center (SAC),” *Students at the Center*, accessed February 23, 2015, <http://www.sacnola.com/>.