New Orleans Revisited: Notes of a Native Daughter

Lynnell L. Thomas
University of Massachusetts Boston, lynnell.thomas@umb.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.umb.edu/amst_faculty_pubs

Part of the American Studies Commons, and the Tourism Commons

Recommended Citation
http://scholarworks.umb.edu/amst_faculty_pubs/5/

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the American Studies at ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in American Studies Faculty Publication Series by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact library.uasc@umb.edu.
“New Orleans Revisited: Notes of a Native Daughter”

by

Lynnell L. Thomas

University of Massachusetts Boston

Pre-publication version of article published in The Black Scholar, Vol. 45, No. 3.
New Orleans Revisited: Notes of a Native Daughter

*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. 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.”

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. 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. 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. 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.

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
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.” 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.” 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. 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.\textsuperscript{15}

\textit{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.


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.*

