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Floodlines: Community and Resistance from Katrina to the Jena Six (Review)

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Review: Jordan Flaherty. *Floodlines: Community and Resistance from Katrina to the Jena Six*. (Haymarket Books, 2010)

Doreen Piano, University of New Orleans

While many Katrina-related books have highlighted the egregious national government negligence in the immediate aftermath of the levee breaks in New Orleans, Jordan Flaherty's *Floodlines: Community and Resistance from Katrina to the Jena Six* is more concerned with how local government decisions, such as the closing of Charity Hospital, the razing of public housing, and the firing of nearly all New Orleans schoolteachers, have plagued the recovery of the city five years later. As a New Orleans activist and citizen-journalist since 2001, Flaherty is familiar with how New Orleans' most vulnerable populations—urban youth, immigrants, public housing residents, and prisoners—have been subjected to discriminatory practices for decades. Thus, he examines post-Katrina policies within the city's history of political corruption, police brutality, and abandonment of public education and affordable healthcare. However, not content to critique oppressive institutions and policies, Flaherty weaves a narrative of resistance and hope throughout the book, revealing a long history of organized struggle within African American communities. *Floodlines'* relevance to community literacy and service learning scholars lies in its meticulous documentation of how grassroots social justice organizations responded quickly and adeptly to the recovery process and how their attempts were thwarted not just by corrupt local and national decision-makers but also by well-meaning outsiders such as white volunteers, NGOs, and foundations.



Whether Flaherty is writing about spoken word poet Sunni Patterson, transgender bounce performer Freedia, song and dance performances by Mardi Gras Indians, or second line processions, he illustrates how performance, story circles, poetry, and music all act as collective forms of resistance within New Orleans, contributing to community sustenance and materially embodying social change. Additionally, alternative civic infrastructures, such as bookstores, community centers, theatres, even architectural urban features like porch stoops, construct spaces within historically oppressed communities where culture and politics intersect. The ineluctable relationship between place, identity, and cultural practices has a rhetorical aspect to it in that this interaction manifests particular kinds of resistance. Flaherty explains, “Organizing in New Orleans looks different than it does in other places. It is more about building community and family, about sharing stories and meals” (19-20).

Flaherty’s nuanced reading of resistance practices as a blending of cultural traditions and community politics continues in Chapter 5, “Dollar Day in New Orleans: Money and Relief,” where he critiques how East and West Coast foundations and NGOs, when given enormous amounts of money for the rebuilding effort, ignored input by local community organizers and leaders who understood how this funding could be used effectively and efficiently. Frustrated by what INCITE, a national anti-violence organization run by women of color, has termed the “nonprofit industrial complex,” New Orleans based activists and scholars drafted a letter to national foundations and nonprofits claiming that “the support we need has not arrived, or has been seriously limited, or has been based upon conditions that became an enormous burden for us” (274). Flaherty’s analysis of the local/national tensions that erupted among progressive-minded organizations provides an important case study for academics striving to create meaningful and productive links between community organizations and academic literacy and service-learning initiatives. Echoing the cautions of Paula Mathieu and others who have written on the ethics of service, Flaherty raises the specter of how well-



meaning intentions—especially in the aftermath of disaster—can easily founder due to a lack of engagement with community leaders working to change the material conditions of those most in need through long-range planning, not simply addressing their immediate concerns. Moreover, Flaherty’s critique of insider/outsider tensions extends to the thousands of volunteers who arrived to help rebuild the city, working for Common Ground and other radical social justice organizations, and brought with them not only incredible resources and energy but also much cultural ignorance and unexamined racial privilege.

Flaherty consciously models writing as social action by foregrounding the words and actions of community activists, artists, and organizers who have been working in the trenches. “My hope,” he writes, “is to describe an ethos of steadfast resistance, and to pay tribute to the people who have cultivated and shaped that way of life” (1-2). Interrogating his own positionality as a white activist, he concedes that he may “be benefiting from others’ struggles,” and yet by writing this book he has tried “to find systems of accountability by engaging in dialogue and action with the people whose struggles are depicted in this book” (2-3). Throughout the book, Flaherty maintains this accountability by using his own ‘Katrina survivor,’ narrative to frame the injustices he witnessed, underscoring how his race and gender privilege allowed him not only access to places where African Americans were denied but prevented him from harassment, imprisonment, and even bodily harm during the chaos of late August 2005.

Along with the HBO series *Treme*, Spike Lee’s *When the Levees Broke*, and Dave Eggers’ *Zeitoun*, *Floodlines* uncovers submerged post-Katrina narratives that many media outlets ignored or overlooked, such as police violence directed toward prisoners and unarmed citizens. (Five years later, NOPD officers finally have been indicted for these murders.) Moreover, Flaherty questions dominant narratives the media produced such as the prevailing image of young, black men after the storm as “perpetrators of violence.” For example, in Chapter 7, “Serve and Protect: Criminalizing



the Survivors,” Flaherty describes many of these young men as “untold heroes” who were “first responders”—finding boats or trudging through waist-high water to rescue survivors in their neighborhoods. Even though the evidence for this is anecdotal, throughout the chapter, Flaherty builds a strong case for the rampant police brutality and systemic racism that has contributed to a “cradle-to-prison pipeline” for a majority of low-income, African American youth.

Additionally, in Chapter 4, “Wonder How We Doin’: The Blank Slate,” Flaherty scrutinizes the privatization of public education that began with dismantling a strong teachers’ union and hiring well-meaning, young, predominantly white Teach For America volunteers to replace laid-off teachers. Included with statistical data that reveals inflated reports of improvement in test scores and money spent per student under the Recovery School District, Flaherty interjects voices of African American activists, students and educators who have been most affected by this reform. No doubt, the New Orleans’ public school system pre-Katrina, with 63% of its schools deemed “academically unacceptable,” was in need of an overhaul, but replacing it with a free market approach has left parents, former schoolteachers, community leaders, and students out of the decision-making processes.

If I were to wish for one more chapter in *Floodlines*, it would cover the shameful decisions made by higher education administrators at this time. At my institution, I witnessed programs lanced and departments hobbled due to faculty furloughs and forced retirements, and students rightly confused and angry about what had happened to their majors. Scenarios such as this were common at nearly every New Orleans’ higher education institution, resulting in censure by the AAUP. While Tulane’s Ph.D. in English was being cut, the school’s president mandated a service-learning initiative for all incoming students. The pressure on faculty to forge hastily made connections to community groups would be provocative enough material to investigate, especially in light of Tulane’s



recent attempt to prevent Sodexo service workers from organizing a labor union.

Despite this omission, *Floodlines*' strength lies in comprehensively capturing critical moments in New Orleans' already complicated social and political history that are applicable elsewhere. What happened in New Orleans could, and, to a certain extent, is happening elsewhere: the social issues magnified by the levee breaks, while extreme, have surfaced in other urban areas where debt-saturated states are divesting in public education, social services, and affordable healthcare. These impending crises, along with Flaherty's detailed analysis of how well-meaning but culturally naïve outsider non-profit organizations can contribute to marginalizing already vulnerable communities, should be enough reason for socially committed scholars to read this book.