

Edith Cowan University
Research Online

ECU Publications 2013

1-1-2013

New Orleans: A disaster waiting to happen?

Rodney J. Giblett

Edith Cowan University, r.giblett@ecu.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks2013>



Part of the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), and the [Nature and Society Relations Commons](#)

Giblett, R. J. (2013). New Orleans: A disaster waiting to happen?. *M/C Journal. A Journal of Media and Culture*, 16(1). Available [here](#)

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.

<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks2013/840>

M/C Journal, Vol 16, No 1 (2013)

New Orleans: A Disaster Waiting to Happen?

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 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 occurrence; people 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 poorly-drained and flood-susceptible territory 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 sluggish 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 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 “personified the Mississippi as a nurturing mother” because the river “hugged New Orleans to its ‘broad bosom’” (79). Supposedly this mother was the benign, malign, and patriarchal Mother Nature of the leveed 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 wetland delta as womb. Because of its location at the “mouth” of the Mississippi River, New Orleans for Flint was “historically the most important port in the United States” (230). Yet by the late 1860s the river was seen by New Orleanians, Kelman argues, only as “an alimentary canal, filled with raw waste and decaying animal carcasses” (124). The “mouth” of the river had ceased to be womb and had become anus; the delta had ceased to be womb and had become bowel. The living body of the earth was dying. The river, Kelman concludes, was “not sublime” and had become “an interstate highway” (146). The Angel of Geography sees the single catastrophe of wetlands enacted in the ways in which the earth is figured in a politics of spaces and places. Ascribing the qualities of one place to another to valorise one place and denigrate another and to figure one pejoratively or euphemistically (as in this case) is “placist” (Giblett, *Landscapes* 8 and 36). Deconstructing and decolonising placism and its use of such figures can lead to a more eco-friendly figuration of spaces and places. New Orleans is one place to do so.

What Colten calls “the swampy mire behind New Orleans” was drained in the first 40 years of the twentieth century (46). Colten concludes that, “by the 1930s, drainage and landfilling efforts had successfully reclaimed wetland between the city and the lake, and in the post-war years similar campaigns dewatered marshlands for tract housing eastward and westward from the city” (140–1). For Wilson “much of New Orleans’s history can be seen as a continuing battle with the swamp” (86). New Orleans was a frontline in the modern war against wetlands, the kind of war that Fascists such as Mussolini liked to fight because they were so easy to win (see Giblett, *Postmodern Wetlands* 115). Many campaigns were fought against wetlands using the modern weapons of monstrous dredgers. The city had struck what Kelman calls “a Faustian bargain with the levees-only policy” (168). In other words, it had sold its soul to the devil of modern industrial technology in exchange for temporary power. New Orleans tried to dominate wetlands with the ironic result that not only “efforts to drain the city dominate early New Orleans history into the present day” as Wilson (86) puts it, but also that these efforts occasionally failed with devastating results. The city became dominated by the waters it had sought to dominate in an irony of history and geography not lost on the student of wetlands.

Katrina was the means that reversed the domination of wetlands by the city. Flint argues that “Katrina’s wake-up call made it unconscionable to keep building on fragile coastlines [...] and in floodplains” (232–3). And in swamps, I would add. Colten “traces the public’s abandonment of the belief that the city is no place for a swamp” (163). The city is also no place for the artificial swamp of the aftermath of Katrina depicted by Polidori. As the history of New Orleans attests, the swamp is no place for a city in the first place when it is being built, and the city is no place for a swamp in the second place when it is being ravaged by a hurricane and storm surges. City is antithetical and inimical to swamp. They are mutually exclusive. New Orleans for Wilson is “a city *on* a swamp” (90 my emphasis). In the 1927 flood (Wilson 111), for Kelman “one of the worst flood years in history” (157), and in the 2005 hurricane, the worst flood year so far in its history, New Orleans was transformed into a city *of* a swamp. The 1927 flood was at the time, and as Kelman puts it, “the worst ‘natural’ disaster in U.S. history” (161), only to be surpassed by the 2005 flood in New Orleans and the 2012 floods in north-eastern U.S. in the wake of Superstorm Sandy in which the drained marshlands of New York and New Jersey returned with a vengeance. In all these cases the swamp outside the city, or before the city, came into the city, became now. The swamp in the past returned in the present; the absent swamp asserted its presence. The historical barriers between city and swamp were removed.

Katrina

Katrina for Kelman (xviii) was not 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 behind levees, 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, water-logged. 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 precarious site” (xix). Yet Katrina was not only the product of three centuries of urbanisation of New Orleans’ precarious and precious *watershed*, but also the product of three centuries of American urbanisation of the precarious and precious *airshed* through pollution with greenhouse gases.

The watery 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, a feral quaking zone of the elements of air, earth and water that had been in the native quaking zone of swamps now ran amok in a watery wasteland (see Giblett, *Landscape*s 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 the geographical location and catastrophe of a feral 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 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*, 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 (Giblett, *Postmodern Wetlands* 142–143; *Canadian Wetlands* "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 ceasing to be returning the city to its, and the, beginning but this time inflected as a human-made "swamp," a feral quaking zone (Giblett, *Landscape*s 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. 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, which was followed by human disasters" (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" (426). 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 city and its drowning or displaced 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 that "nearly one million acres of buffering wetlands in southern Louisiana disappeared between 1990 and 2005" (9). They "disappeared" as the result, not of some sort of sleight of hand or mega-conjuring trick, nor of erosion from sea-intrusion (though that contributed), but of deliberate human practice. Brinkley relates how "too many Americans saw these swamps and coastal wetlands as wastelands" (9). Wastelands needed to be redeemed into enclave estates of condos and strip developments. In a historical irony that is not lost on students of wetlands and their history, destroying wetlands can create the wasteland of flooded cities and a single catastrophe of history and geography, such as New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

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 misshapeness 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 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 a 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, rivers, 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, rebuilt/d cities and rehabilitate(d) wetlands. "Katrina" is a salutary instance of the cultural and natural operating together in the one single catastrophe and creativity of divine and human history and geography.

References

- Allen, Robert. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*. 8th ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.
- Benjamin, Walter. "On the Concept of History." *Selected Writings Volume 4: 1938–1940*. Eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2003. 389–400.
- Brinkley, Douglas. *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast*. New York: William Morrow, 2006.
- Colten, Craig. *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2006.
- Coogan, Michael, Marc Brettler, Carol Newsom, and PHEME Perkins, eds. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*. 4th ed. New York: Oxford UP, 2010.
- Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge, 1966.
- Flint, Anthony. *This Land: The Battle over Sprawl and the Future of America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2006.
- Giblett, Rod. *Postmodern Wetlands: Culture, History, Ecology*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1996.
- . *The Body of Nature and Culture*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- . *Landscape of Culture and Nature*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- . *People and Places of Nature and Culture*. Bristol: Intellect Books, 2011.
- . *Canadian Wetlands: Place and People*. Bristol: Intellect Books, forthcoming 2014.
- Hirst, Paul, and Penny Woolley. "The Social Formation and Maintenance of Human Attributes." *Social Relations and Human Attributes*. London: Tavistock, 1982. 23–31.
- Kelman, Ari. *A River and its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2006.

Muecke, Stephen. "Hurricane Katrina and the Rhetoric of Natural Disasters." *Fresh Water: New Perspectives on Water in Australia*. Eds. Emily Potter, Alison Mackinnon, Stephen McKenzie and Jennifer McKay. Carlton: Melbourne UP, 2005. 259–71.

Polidori, Robert. *After the Flood*. Göttingen: Steidl, 2006.

Smith, P.D. *City: A Guidebook for the Urban Age*. London: Bloomsbury, 2012.

Wilson, Anthony. *Shadow and Shelter: The Swamp in Southern Culture*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2006.