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INTRODUCTION

“Truth Crushed to Earth Will Rise Again”

Katrina and Its Aftermath

JEREMY I. LEVITT AND MATTHEW C. WHITAKER

What we saw unfold in the days after the hurricane was the most naked manifestation of social policy towards the poor, where the message for decades has been: “You are on your own.” Well, they really were on their own for five days in that Superdome, and it was Darwinism in action—the survival of the fittest. People said: “It looks like something out of the Third World.” Well, New Orleans was Third World long before the hurricane.—CORNEL WEST, “Exiles from a City and from a Nation,” *Observer*, September 11, 2005

Hurricane Katrina was one of the deadliest and most costly hurricanes in U.S. history. It was the sixth strongest Atlantic hurricane ever recorded and the third strongest on record that reached the continental United States. Katrina formed on August 23, 2005, during the Atlantic hurricane season. It devastated much of the north-central Gulf Coast of the United States. The most severe loss of life and property damage occurred in New Orleans, Louisiana, which was largely devoured by floodwaters after the levee system suffered a calamitous failure. Katrina’s floodwater exposed as much

as it covered, however. The storm caused destruction not only in New Orleans, but across the entire Mississippi coast and into Alabama (as far as a hundred miles from the storm's center), uncovering weaknesses, prejudices, and inequalities throughout the Gulf Coast and within the whole of American society.¹

Katrina was the eleventh tropical storm, fifth hurricane, third major hurricane, and second Category 5 hurricane of the 2005 Atlantic hurricane season. It formed over the Bahamas on August 23, 2005, and made its way past southern Florida as a moderate Category 1 hurricane, where it caused some deaths and flooding, before growing rapidly in size and strength in the Gulf of Mexico, where it became one of the more powerful hurricanes recorded at sea. The storm weakened somewhat before hitting land for a second and third time, on the morning of August 29, in southern Louisiana and at the Louisiana/Mississippi state line, respectively, as a Category 3 storm. The storm surge caused catastrophic destruction along the Gulf Coast. In Louisiana, the flood protection system in New Orleans failed in fifty-three different places. Nearly every levee in metro New Orleans breached as Hurricane Katrina's 140-mile-an-hour gale force winds, torrential rain, and thunderous floodwaters rolled eastward through the city, flooding 80 percent of the city and many areas of neighboring parishes for weeks. Along the Mississippi coast, Katrina overwhelmed the cities of Bay St. Louis, Biloxi, Gulfport, Long Beach, Ocean Springs, Pascagoula, Pass Christian, and Waveland.²

More than a million Gulf Coast residents were displaced by Katrina, relocating in cities in all fifty states. Many of Katrina's so-called refugees were living well below the poverty line before the storm struck, which made them extremely vulnerable to the storm's wrath and the many human failures that followed. At least 1,836 people were killed by Hurricane Katrina and in the subsequent human floods that ravaged the Gulf Coast, making it the deadliest in

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the United States since the Okeechobee Hurricane in 1928 and the hurricane that hit the island city of Galveston, Texas, in 1900. Katrina caused an estimated \$81.2 billion in damage, making it the costliest natural disaster in U.S. history.

Criticism of the federal, state, and local governments' reaction to the storm was widespread and resulted in an investigation by the U.S. Congress and the resignation of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) director Michael Brown. The storm also prompted Congressional review of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the failure of the levee protection system. Hurricane Katrina revealed as much about American society and the inextricable link between race, class, gender, and age in our nation as it did about nature's fury. Indeed, Katrina uncovered not only the devastating penalty for structural racism and classism but also their loathsome underbelly. As the world watched the coverage of Hurricane Katrina and its desolation in horror, America's racial inequality and shocking levels of poverty, vulnerability, and displacement, particularly among African Americans, were laid bare before the world.³

The purpose of this book is to offer a critical assessment of the local, national, and international impact of Hurricane Katrina on the lives of African Americans in the social, cultural, political, economic, environmental, religious, and legal spheres. The chapters in this collection are multidisciplinary and comparative, and draw principally from the following disciplines: law, political science, history, economics, sociology, and religion. The chapters introduce polemic and critical ideas and question the efficacy of the national and global responses to Katrina's central victims, African Americans. The essays, which reveal the multifarious impacts of Hurricane Katrina on black people, combine research and advocacy by some of the most experienced scholars and activists working on cutting-edge Katrina-related issues of race, ethnicity, and class of

real-world significance. This book underscores the extent to which black people and others were and are being impacted by the natural and human-engineered forces that have engendered and maintained intense suffering associated with Katrina and its aftermath.

Although this introduction places Katrina in its proper historical context, the current socioeconomic condition of Katrina's victims will be the primary focus of this book. Since Katrina, in fact, its survivors continue to be confronted by the racial, economic, and political injustices that marginalized their existence before the storm; discrimination placed them squarely in harm's way during the hurricane and continues to undermine their ability to rebuild their often shattered and scattered lives after the storm. This reality requires political leaders, scholars, and activists to address these problems assertively and in intelligent and practical ways. Failure to engage these issues has created and enabled political obfuscation, cutthroat capitalism, unchecked market forces, avarice, racism, classism, sexism, and basic apathy to undermine relief and rebuilding efforts in housing, education, employment, contracting, and infrastructure.⁴

Such neglect has also adversely affected many people, particularly immigrants who have come to the United States seeking work in the Gulf Coast redevelopment industry. They are also facing manipulation, xenophobia, and racism and are arguably allowing themselves to be used in perpetuation. Following Hurricane Katrina, the Gulf Coast region played host to the arrival of larger numbers of immigrant and non-immigrant workers who were lured to the area by contractors with promises of well-paying jobs and housing. Yet, in New Orleans and throughout the Gulf Coast region, many found themselves mired in poverty without shelter, advocates, or representation. The Advancement Project, the National Immigration Law Center, and the New Orleans Worker Justice Coalition demonstrated how complicated and divisive these issues were when

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they revealed that African American survivors were often denied employment opportunities, even as migrant and especially immigrant workers secured jobs (positions that were often quite exploitive and unsafe).⁵

The most enduring and jarring stories associated with Hurricane Katrina, however, are the abject poverty and racism that has marked the region for generations. Television cameras from around the world captured indelible images of people walking, floating, and sometimes drowning in contaminated water. Once the water receded, the same cameras captured frightening images of dead bodies on deserted streets, crowds of people dying slowly of hunger and dehydration, and people fainting and thrashing about in pain for want of desperately needed medication for chronic illness. As Michael Eric Dyson recently observed:

Photo snaps and film shots captured legions of men and women huddling in groups or hugging corners, crying in wild-eyed desperation for help, for any help, from somebody, anybody, who would listen to their unanswered pleas. The filth and squalor of their confinement—defecating where they stood or sat, or, more likely, dropped, bathed in a brutal wash of dredge and sickening pollutants that choked the air with ungodly stench—grieved the camera lenses that recorded their plight.

Scores of people took to the streets dotted by deserted shops and restaurants, scavenging for food, water, and clothing. The hordes were multiracial in orientation, but the overwhelming majority of the displaced and disinherited were black. At first glance, many people would have assumed that the sight they were seeing was taking place in some other corner of the so-called Third World, such as Liberia, Rwanda, or Sierra Leone. Many people asked, could this be happening in the United States of America? Could the wealthiest and most powerful country in the world abandon some of its

poorest citizens at a time when they needed their government the most?⁶

It is precisely these questions, and others, that this anthology answers. What formed the pre- and post-Katrina Gulf Coast? What were the public and private sectors' responses to the disaster? How should a post-Katrina America be constructed? How do we get there? Since Hurricane Katrina has become synonymous with socioeconomic circumstances that mark many communities throughout the country, what lessons can be learned from pre- and post-Katrina failures that will help ameliorate many of the problems associated with pre- and post-Katrina America? The pre-Katrina Gulf Coast, especially New Orleans, like many other American regions and cities, was characterized by racism, racial segregation, and acute poverty levels well before the storm. The antebellum and post-Civil War South, particularly New Orleans, was populated by indigenous peoples, enslaved people of African descent, free blacks, Creoles of various hues and status, and whites, including Cajuns and European ethnics, who embodied the area's native, African, Spanish, French, and English roots.⁷

Despite the multiracial nature of the New Orleans heritage, the metropolis has been characterized by acute racial segregation. People of African descent were marketed, sold, purchased, exchanged, and treated as chattel. Black people were raped, mutilated, ridiculed as aberrant and inferior, and denied the freedoms set forth in the Declaration of Independence that America claimed to embrace. Even after legal slavery ended in the United States in 1865, black people, by virtue of their race and class, were relegated to sharecropping and other wage-earning forms of work and forced to live in the poorest areas of New Orleans. At the time of Katrina, according to the Brookings Institution, New Orleans was one of the most racially segregated among the largest U.S. metropolitan cities. Moreover, post-World War II suburbanization and white flight

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from the city's core led to the African Americanization of New Orleans. As the city became blacker, it also became poorer as blacks were systematically denied work and a living wage. In 1960 New Orleans was 37 percent black; in 1970 it was 43 percent black; in 1980 it was 55 percent black; in 1990 it was 62 percent black, and in 2000 it was over 67 percent black.⁸

The poverty rate was 28 percent in New Orleans in 2000, compared to 12 percent for the nation. By the time Katrina hit New Orleans, the city claimed the second highest percentage of its residents (38 percent) living in high-poverty census tracts, in which more than 40 percent of its residents were living at or below the poverty line. In addition, the city's black poverty rate was 35 percent, three times the rate of 11 percent for whites. White people who remained in New Orleans fled to areas such as Jefferson Parish, which is 70 percent white; St. Bernard Parish, which is 88 percent white; and St. Tammany Parish, which is 87 percent white. "By 2000," the Brookings Institution argues, "the city of New Orleans had become highly segregated by race and developed high concentrations of poverty. . . . [B]lacks and whites were living in quite literally different worlds before the storm hit."⁹

Such racial disparities and poverty are the result of individual choices and actions. They are also the result of a long history of institutional structures and arrangements that have helped create our contemporary sociopolitical and economic order. Slavery and its racialized effects on wealth accumulation, family life, and white attitudes toward and treatment of people of African descent are the historical root causes of black poverty in New Orleans. Another century of legalized segregation, informal barriers to racial equality, and so-called progressive policies such as the New Deal actually sustained and exacerbated racial inequality. Social Security excluded agricultural workers and domestics, occupations that were dominated by African Americans. Federal housing programs

severely restricted their aid to people of color, which reinforced racial segregation. The celebrated G.I. Bill that was passed following World War II offered extremely restricted housing and education assistance to black people, even as it subsidized upward mobility for millions of whites. It must be noted that when African Americans did receive these benefits, schools, housing authorities, and employers, more often than not, did not allow blacks to freely exercise them.¹⁰

History does not repeat itself, but it certainly rhymes, and the socioeconomic pulse of race and class discrimination continues to reverberate. For example, poor people, regardless of color, are often ignored, marginalized, and exploited. People of color, especially women of color, however, often find themselves disproportionately represented among the poor and dispossessed. Even as racial discrimination was eliminated officially between 1954 and 1970, the government and the private sector circumvented anti-discrimination laws. “Redlining” by loan-granting institutions, for example, is still widespread, and de facto school segregation since *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* has led to gross inequities in educational opportunities. Employment and housing discrimination remains, prejudicial zoning regulations endure, racialized bank lending and real estate practices flourish, while federally financed highways that privilege predominantly white suburbs and tax breaks for wealthier home owners facilitate this inequitable system. Disparities in lending and health care along race lines thrive, and the criminal justice system practices ardent favoritism in terms of sentencing patterns and incarceration rates. These matters are of utmost importance because extreme poverty and racial segregation undercuts opportunity, and as sociologist Douglas Massey maintains, “any process that concentrates poverty with racially isolated neighborhoods will simultaneously increase the odds of socio-economic failure.”¹¹

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Regrettably, there are "haves" and "have-nots," and race, which is inextricably linked to class, still plays a significant role in determining the social status (and corresponding opportunities) into which all of us are born. The haves in New Orleans and the Greater Gulf Coast, therefore, had the resources to escape or withstand Katrina's wrath, while the have-nots were fully exposed to destruction, displacement, injury, and death. As Hartman and Squires argue:

[The wealthy have] access to personal transportation or plane and train fare, money for temporary housing, and in some cases second homes. Guests trapped in one luxury New Orleans hotel were saved when that chain hired a fleet of buses to get them out. Patients in one hospital were saved when a doctor who knew Al Gore contacted the former Vice President, who was able to cut through government red tape and charter two planes that took them to safety. This is what is meant by the catch phrase "social capital," a resource most unevenly distributed by class and race.

Racial segregation has engineered a situation in which wealthier whites have secured homes in suburban areas, while black people have few if any options to live anywhere other than the inner city, where, in the case of New Orleans, the worst flooding occurred.¹²

Insofar as poor people and people of color are disproportionately dependent upon public services, including public transportation, the consequences of the failure of public services prior to and following Katrina were not "color blind" or impartial with regard to color and class. These groups had extremely inadequate private resources to draw from in times of chaos. This is not only true during catastrophic events like Katrina, but during times of personal trauma associated with sickness, physical impairment, and familial tragedy. Indeed, as James Carr, senior vice president of research for the Fannie Mae Foundation argued, if New Orleans had been a more inclusive community with regard to race and class, the city's

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