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Published by: Association for the Study of African American Life and History
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5323/jafriamerhist.99.3.0290
Accessed: 20-05-2016 04:33 UTC

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HURRICANE KATRINA: PERSPECTIVES ON WINNERS AND LOSERS

Amadu Jacky Kaba


Throughout the history of the United States, African Americans have tended to be the group most severely impacted by natural and man-made disasters or economic depressions and recessions. African Americans also tend to be the group last to recover (if at all) from such disasters. Social scientists Jennifer L. Hochschild and Vesla Weaver noted that “in September 2005 CNN reporter Wolf Blitzer remarked that the most devastated victims of Hurricane Katrina ‘are so poor and they are so black.’ . . . [Blitzer] presumably was referring to the fact that most displaced people were African American residents of New Orleans.”1 In their discussion of “Racial Apathy and Hurricane Katrina,” sociologists Tyrone A. Forman and Amanda E. Lewis declared, “During the crisis that followed Hurricane Katrina, many Americans expressed surprise at the dramatic levels of racial inequality captured in the images of large numbers of poor black people left behind in devastated New Orleans.”2

Journalist Bruce Nolan reported in June 2006 and March 2007 that white Americans, especially young couples, from across the country were offered various financial incentives to move to New Orleans to repopulate the city. The incentives included $1,000 moving grants and “a low-interest or interest-free home or business loan of up to $15,000.”3 This has not been the case, however, for African Americans who were the last to return because systematic efforts were being made to prevent them from returning. Sociologists Lynn Weber and Lori Peek, in their edited volume Displaced: Life in the Katrina Diaspora, summarized the situation as of 2010.

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Five years after Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans had returned to about 71 percent of its pre-Katrina size. . . . Both returning residents and new migrants to New Orleans after Katrina were more likely to be white and homeowners and have higher incomes and were less likely to be parents of children under age eighteen. Blacks, poor or lower-income residents, parents with young children, and renters were clearly less able—or less willing—to return to the new New Orleans . . . [and] with the demographic and cultural shifts in the city, many residents felt out of place in their former neighborhoods. And the contentious and highly politicized rebuilding process further amplified the sense of being unwanted—particularly among Black and poor New Orleanians, who were conspicuously absent from key post-disaster planning events. . . . As one African American former resident explained, “I felt I was being encouraged to not return. . . . They didn’t want us to come back so they could do what they want to do” (16–17).4

Two new books deal with the issues related to Hurricane Katrina and the reconstruction of the Crescent City. The first book is *Displaced*; the second is *Driven from New Orleans: How Nonprofits Betray Public Housing and Promote Privatization* by John Arena.5 *Displaced* is divided into three parts with fourteen chapters, including an introduction. Utilizing qualitative research methods, including interviews with their subjects, the editors of *Displaced* make important contributions to the understanding of both the negative and positive effects of Hurricane Katrina. The book also addresses the issue of affordable housing for poor and working-class people in urban areas. Almost all of the chapters in *Displaced* focus on the day-to-day experiences of the mostly poor and working-class black survivors of Katrina, displaced from New Orleans and other parts of the Gulf coast region, making up the “Katrina Diaspora” found throughout the United States.

In the forward of *Displaced*, historian Bonnie Thornton Dill points out that the six chapters in the first section examine “the community context and the interactions and encounters of displaced Gulf Coast residents in Colorado, Louisiana, Missouri, South Carolina, and Texas, where a number of the authors lived and worked. Their analyses show the difference that location makes in a community’s ability to welcome, accommodate, and provide resources that facilitate the adjustment of newcomers, many of whom become long-term residents” (x). The contributors to *Displaced* blame the “neoliberal” capitalist economy for the extreme poverty and inequality in the southern United States. Lynn Weber, for example, observed,

The extreme inequality in . . . [the Gulf Coast] states reflects a Southern legacy of a government/elite/corporate alliance that promoted slavery and the plantation system. . . . Since the political realignment of the 1980s, this alliance, which historically defined the Southern governing philosophy, came to dominate the nation as a whole. Often labeled “neoliberal,” and yet fundamentally conservative, this governing philosophy calls for cutting social spending deeply, including spending on welfare programs and benefits, and selling off government assets and functions to private corporations, while reducing or eliminating regulations on [corporate] profit accumulation (79).
Displaced highlights the issue of gender differences in the provision of social services to people in need. In “Community Organizing in the Katrina Diaspora: Race, Gender, and the Case of the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund,” Rachel E. Luft presents an excellent analysis of the disadvantages of relying solely on protest, rather than grants from private foundations, to obtain relief services. Luft argues that women organizers tend to combine both protest and working with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to provide services to people in need.

Driven from New Orleans contains seven chapters, and also utilizes interviews as major sources of information. Driven from New Orleans tells the story of the poor and minority residents of New Orleans, especially African Americans in the St. Thomas Housing Project, as they experienced pressure from the government, the private sector, and NGOs attempting to take away their affordable public housing apartments before and after Hurricane Katrina. Driven from New Orleans focuses primarily on the impact of neoliberal policies on the African American neighborhoods threatened by the actions of large corporate institutions, and abandoned by black politicians and grassroots leaders who end up turning against the vulnerable poor and working-class citizens they claim to represent. According to John Arena, organized protest was the only method that would make these agencies and individuals “do the right thing.”

Unfortunately, a key theme of Driven from New Orleans is that the decline in the number of protests and confrontations with the political system is the primary reason for the deteriorating conditions for poor and working-class people who lose out on affordable housing and various social services to the neoliberal elites. Arena argues, “In their progressive, antiracist form, the [neoliberal] bourgeoisie increasingly relies on [black leaders] to stabilize their rule. In the context of expanding privatization, poor people displacement, and state social service dismantlement, we can expect that foundations and their nonprofit acolytes will play an increasingly important role in helping to smooth the way for neoliberal restructuring and managing the social fallout” (85–86).

In “Democracy, Meritocracy, and the Cognitive Elite,” Laura Duhan Kaplan and Charles Kaplan commented on the issue of the responsibility of black elites to the black poor and working class.

The new reality is a version of meritocracy, in which a large but elite minority dominates economic and social decision making. Members of this elite are highly educated, having been recruited from a variety of social classes and ethnic groups through the sorting mechanism of education. Members of the elite, however, rarely advocate for the interests of the nonelite group from which they come, for their new lifestyle quickly removes them far from most of the concerns of the nonelites.6
Displaced and Driven from New Orleans intersect thematically in a number of important ways. For example, poor and working-class women are the primary subjects and the center of analysis in both books. As Bonnie Thornton Dill notes, “Displaced . . . is unique in the Katrina scholarship because it is written by and focuses primarily on women. All of the authors, with the exception of one co-author, are women . . .” (x). And John Arena makes it clear that women are the main focus of Driven from New Orleans. Both books also discuss the separation of African American families either directly due to Hurricane Katrina, or because government officials sent family members to different parts of the country, and Displaced compares it to the family separation that occurred during the era of slavery in the United States. In “We Need to Get Together with Each Other: Women’s Narratives of Help in Katrina’s Displacement,” Jacquelyn Litt points out that “‘Being Shipped’ is an evocative way to describe the ‘help’ the government finally provided the survivors in the Convention Center and the Superdome. Shipping people evokes the transporting of cargo, and it struck a special chord for some evacuees who were reminded of the treatment of African Americans during slavery—purposefully separating kin from kin” (173). Litt quotes one of the female Katrina subjects in her study:

A lot of people were on the loose. A lot of people asking about their families. A lot of people were running loose . . . babies, fathers . . . So many people shipped so far. It’s hard, because sometimes you were shipped to places and you didn’t want to be that far. You didn’t know anybody. You don’t know where you are. It’s hard” (172).

Litt includes a table that shows that of 680 Katrina residents in a shelter in Houston in 2007, 40 percent said that they were then separated from their immediate families and did not know their whereabouts.

In Driven from New Orleans, John Arena discusses another form of separation for African Americans, noting that African American women were the vast majority of the leaders of the St. Thomas Residence Council and other tenant organizations, and females were also the majority within the St. Thomas housing community itself. One reason for this is that a substantial proportion of the African American men were in jail or prison. In New Orleans, “the local jail population exploded from approximately one thousand inmates in the early 1970s to over six thousand by the year 2000” (12–13). Arena adds that “[p]unitive welfare regulations, such as ‘the no man in the house’ rule, made it difficult for adult ‘able-bodied’ men to officially live in the projects if their wife or companion was receiving public assistance” (12). This exponential increase in the prison population in New Orleans reflects the national trend of imprisoning larger and larger numbers of people convicted of property or other nonviolent offenses.
John Arena points out that agreements among federal government officials, black politicians, and NGOs to privatize public housing in New Orleans led to the eviction of thousands of people, the majority of them African American families that ended up being separated because they could not find adequate housing to accommodate all their members. In addition, harsh municipal laws were also used to evict entire families when any of their members, even the teenagers, were arrested. Arena points out, “The aggressive enforcement of one strike by HANO [Housing Authority of New Orleans], combined with weed and seed sweeps, the COPS [Community Oriented Policing] program, and aggressive policing, had a noticeable impact at St. Thomas in the latter half of the 1990s” (104–105).

In discussing the final eviction of African American tenants of the St. Thomas Housing Project, Arena writes of the sadness and disbelief especially of older, long-term residents when they were finally forced out in June 2001: “Those evicted included St. Thomas’s longest-residing African American tenant, Evelyn Melancon . . . who raised her seven children at St. Thomas, . . . ‘[she] never believed this day would come’” (117–118). Another resident described “the familial support that surrounded her . . . ‘everything was all right in St. Thomas’ thanks, in part, to the support system she could rely on—a safety net that evictions and demolition untethered” (10).

A similar example is presented in Displaced. In her chapter “The Women of Renaissance Village: From Homes in New Orleans to a Trailer Park in Baker, Louisiana,” Beverly J. Mason describes the expanded conceptualization of family within African American communities.

Before Katrina struck, women in New Orleans, like their counterparts in other urban areas, largely defined themselves by their families, neighborhoods, social clubs, churches, local schools, and a host of informal institutions. New Orleans was known as “home,” the city that African Americans seldom left. . . . The city was a complex web of informal networks built on decades of interaction and grounded in extended families that actively participated in the well-being of their members. New Orleans may dedicate more days annually to revelry and celebration than any other American city, so weekend gatherings and holiday festivities often brought large families together. The women in this study—Black adult and aging and working-class, armed with an undying love and responsibility for “their people,” and grounded in devout, yet practical, religious beliefs—spent their lives building and maintaining social networks for themselves and their families. They were the broad-shouldered women on whom so much of New Orleans has always depended. Women’s networks included blood relatives, fictive kin, and extended families created through their children’s marriages and.childbearing, the death of acquaintances, and neighbors that women had known for “donkey years” (generations) (184–185).

Both Displaced and Driven from New Orleans, and many other scholarly publications, note the negative media portrayal of Katrina’s black working-class survivors.11 In Driven from New Orleans, John Arena points out, “The airwaves were
filled with unsubstantiated reports of black men carrying out rapes and other atrocities at the Convention Center and the Superdome, the city’s two main evacuation centers, and shooting at rescue helicopters, while attempts to obtain food, water, and other necessities were indiscriminately labeled ‘looting.’ These claims of wanton violence . . . were later debunked . . . .” (158). In *Displaced*, Lynn Weber and Lori Peek note that “while evacuees received a warm and compassionate reception in most local contexts, tensions also marked the early stages of the post-disaster relocation. Media depictions of African American New Orleanians as marauding gangs of violent, out-of-control thugs and looters cast a cloud of suspicion over the entire population of Katrina survivors” (15). Lori Peek related the experience of an African American single mother from New Orleans who took her two daughters to Colorado and refused FEMA or American Red Cross support. However, after she rented a home and her neighbors found out that they were Katrina evacuees, she said, “They gave me hell. . . . They sent the police to my house and said I have a lot of traffic in and out. They accused us of selling drugs and prostitution” (37–38).

Children tend to be affected the most during natural disasters or when a family loses its housing. Both *Displaced* and *Driven from New Orleans* highlight the experiences of children, especially African American children. In *Displaced*, Alice Fothergill and Lori Peek’s “Permanent Temporariness: Displaced Children in Louisiana” examines children’s traumatic experiences during Hurricane Katrina itself, positive and negative experiences while displaced and after they returned home, and their fears and concerns about housing for themselves and their families. Fothergill and Peek point out that by 2007 “between 81,595 and 94,650 formally displaced children returned to their home state or home communities, while approximately 70,000 children remained displaced.” They note that displaced children “faced communities with high crime rates, short supply of affordable housing, and fewer classroom spaces and qualified public school teachers” (119).

With regard to the trauma of Hurricane Katrina itself, Fothergill and Peek interviewed African American students in a middle school, and one teenager described how terrified he was when the city flooded: “That water was dirty. We [were] walking from my house on the bridge, and they had my sister’s hand, my sister was eight months, and I was holding her. . . .” (123). Fothergill and Peek also note that “children frequently talked about friends who were permanently displaced to places like Arkansas, California, Georgia, Kansas, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Nevada, Tennessee, and Texas. One boy, who was in second grade when Katrina made landfall, returned to New Orleans after the storm, but his best friend relocated to Atlanta.” When the boy finally contacted his friend, [he] “asked him if he was gonna come back, like when he grows up, and he said, ‘Maybe’” (137). Other children interviewed claimed that they were victims of prejudice and discrimination against “Katrina refugees.”12
In “The Basement of Extreme Poverty: Katrina Survivors and Poverty Programs,” Laura Lein and her colleagues also point out that in Austin, Texas, “[s]ome [Katrina] evacuee youth also entered the criminal justice system. Louise was worried about her children. As her housing changed, her son moved from one school to another and started getting into trouble.”

[I’ve] been going backwards and forth with courts with him. It’s not nothing pertaining to school, like playing hooky, sassing teachers, or cutting class, no. The first time he went off of campus, went out with some boys and smoked some marijuana. Came back on campus [and] they smelled it (59–60).

Fothergill and Peek interviewed some children who had positive school experiences while displaced. Indeed, one boy declared that at school in Houston, the other students like him and the way he dressed. He said, “[T]hey would actually come to school dressed like how I was dressed. . . . I didn’t want to leave that school. I didn’t want to leave for nothing” (129). However, a female student is quoted as saying that in a Texas school, “A girl was friends with me for a whole week without knowing where I was from. Once I told her where I was from, she just completely stopped hanging out with me. That’s weird. I was like, ‘You can’t do that just because I’m from New Orleans’” (127).

In a multiracial and multicultural society such as the United States, solidarity in advocating for those in need of any type of support can be very important. Both Displaced and Driven from New Orleans discuss the phenomenon of whites and other non-blacks advocating or protesting on behalf of African Americans and other displaced people. In her foreword to Displaced, Bonnie Dill specifically notes that the majority of the contributors to the anthology are not African American. She observed, “[N]oteworthy in . . . this particular volume is that the racial and class dynamics being studied are reflected in the very conduct of the research itself. For not only are the authors predominantly women, they are overwhelmingly white and middle-class women, with one African American and two Latinos in the group, while the vast majority of the displaced women they write about are black, with only a small number of whites and Latinas” (xi).

In Driven from New Orleans, John Arena discusses the tensions within the interracial grassroots movement fighting for the “right of return” of New Orleans public housing residents displaced by Katrina. Arena writes that “[w]ith the displacement of most public housing residents . . . it was more important than ever for white and other non-public housing folks to raise their voices.” In contrast, some activists, usually those affiliated with nonprofit organizations, criticized white members for taking the lead roles in the public housing movement. For example, Arena quotes Mayaba Liebenthal, an organizer with Critical Resistance, a nonprofit prison abolition group, who argues that “the white folks . . . need to
back off. . . . This habit of speaking on behalf of those ‘less fortunate’ is becoming more than just comically irritating but offensive and damaging to actual change. . . . [F]or me this [is] about very practical issues, organize from where you personally and actually are” (162–163). Arena, who is white, acknowledged the complaint and notes, “Exponents of identity politics place emphasis on ‘differences as the central truth of political life’ and therefore stress, to cite Liebenthal’s manifesto, organizing ‘from where you are.’ . . . That is, organizing should be based on a particular racial, gender, sexual orientation, ability, or other oppression (or privilege, depending on where you stand)” (163). In the photos Arena included in *Driven from New Orleans*, we see whites protesting on behalf of minority residents, and even going to jail for doing so.

*Displaced* and *Driven from New Orleans* contribute to the expanding body of literature on Hurricane Katrina by focusing on the plight of the poor, African American refugees who make up the Katrina Diaspora. However, poor and working-class people have been driven from the central locations in major cities undergoing “gentrification” over the last three decades. Historian Clarence Lang suggests that “additional scholarship is necessary to identify the relationship between black suburbanization and white central-city gentrification, and how these dual developments reflect the shifting spatial locations of concentrated poverty and reinvestment in metropolitan regions.”¹³ The works under review should be of value to social scientists as they attempt to explain the increasing difficulties for upward mobility among the poor and racial minority groups in the United States.¹⁴ These studies also help to provide the social context for understanding how institutions and organizations react to disasters and displacement and how various disadvantaged groups in American society are impacted.

**NOTES**


8 Also see chapter one by Lynn Weber and Lori Peek, 11–17; also see Michael S. Rendall, “Breakup of New Orleans Households After Hurricane Katrina,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 73 (June 2011): 654–668.


