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A Katrina Lexicon

Richard Campanella July 2015

This is an edited excerpt from a chapter by Richard Campanella in “The Katrina Effect: On the Nature of Catastrophe,” edited by William M. Taylor, M. P. Levine, O. Rooksby, and J.-K. Sobott, published by Bloomsbury. The original chapter contains, among other things, an appendix listing over a hundred metaphors and other linguistic devices deployed as part of the lexicon of Katrina.



Popular T-shirt, circa 2006. [[Tim González](#)]

Disasters, which by definition are social experiences, invigorate the human need to communicate. This is clearly the case during the rescue phase, when mismatched radio frequencies or murmurs from beneath the rubble can spell the difference between life and death. But our speech grows even more trenchant during the recovery and rebuilding phases, as grievances are addressed, restitutions (if any) are negotiated, claims to victimhood are laid (or questioned), and players maneuver for position in a supposed zero-sum game, where one’s successful recompense lowers the chances of another’s. This agitated discourse yields a vocabulary of names, idioms, metaphors, acronyms, jargon, rhetorical devices, and narratives—few of them universally shared and many ferociously contested even years later.

Here I examine the lexicon of Hurricane Katrina during its first ten years as a “spoken language”—a dialect—of greater New Orleans and the Gulf South region of the United States, with an emphasis on how speakers have disputed the naming (onomatology) of the incident, how they have crafted metaphors and other linguistic devices to discuss post-trauma topics, and how people outside of the victim/stakeholder population have used Katrina rhetorically to advance other agendas. As a geographer who has studied and [written about](#) New Orleans for two decades as well as a New Orleanian who witnessed the catastrophe and participated in the recovery, I have played the roles of speaker, documenter, and coiner of the Katrina lexicon. I am well aware that the writing of this article requires that I hopscotch between and among these roles, and in some cases that I “resolve” the very linguistic tensions I present as unresolved, including the use of the word “Katrina” in the title.

Don’t Call it Katrina!

“Apocalypse” was the word I found myself attaching to the events I witnessed that week. They began when a hurricane officially named Katrina made landfall on August 29, 2005, but because the situation deteriorated

immeasurably with each subsequent day, Monday's tempest seemed rather detached from the catastrophe that surrounded us by Friday. Another word: "Surreal." The language of apocalypse peppered my conversations with distraught neighbors and family until we finally escaped on September 2. Only then, over the car radio, did I begin to consume external media representations of the horrors. They all called it "Hurricane Katrina." Shortly thereafter, I heard the now-widespread temporal markers "pre-Katrina" and "post-Katrina," and then "pre-K" and "post-K." I soon abandoned "apocalypse" and, like most people, adopted the nationalized "Katrina" vocabulary. Such is the nature of language: each individual conforms to a common sign before communication may proceed. We all knew "The Big One" would hit some day, and now we knew its name: *Katrina*.

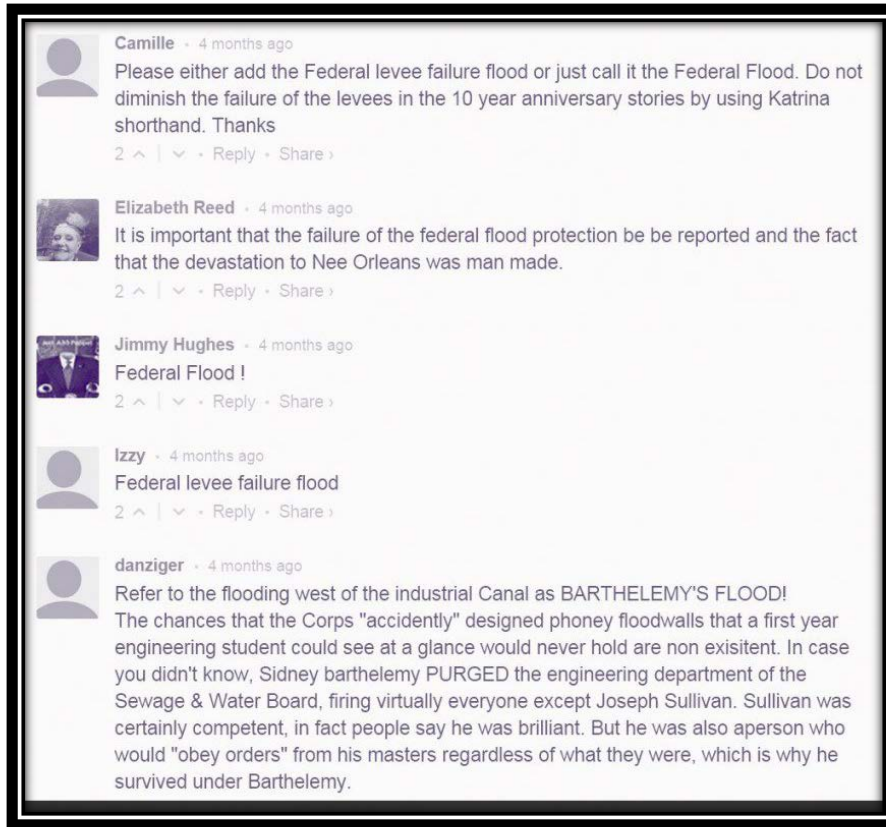
Later that September, forensic engineers reported shocking news, which would cause a rethinking of the emerging shorthand. The flood, it turned out, was not the result of a worthy system overwhelmed by the unimaginable: a Category 5 mega-storm bearing down on the city at the worst possible speed, size, and angle. Rather, a patchwork of under-engineered and poorly maintained levees had failed fundamentally to manage a declining Category 2 storm, whose strongest winds and waves had actually spared New Orleans.

Subsequent reports assured there was blame to go around, from scandalous dereliction of duty on the part of local inspectors, to decades of congressional underfunding and jurisdictional infighting, to inchoate evacuation and shelter planning by city government. But the lion's share of culpability lay with federal authorities, principally the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the department responsible for what we once called the levee or flood "protection system." Scorn previously heaped on the Bush administration for the belated arrival of FEMA found a second federal villain in the Army Corps.

Scattered across the nation, refugees (or rather, "evacuees"; more on that later) registered their outrage to anyone who would listen. They shook their fists at those who suggested that the physical devastation was "inevitable," or that personal responsibility, individual behavior, or moral depravity played a role in the social mayhem. Many victims pointedly reminded listeners that it was not nature that nearly killed the city, but incompetent federal authorities. In the fall of 2005, defenders of New Orleans developed a new verbal ritual, which lives on to this day. I call it the *onomatological scold*, and it goes something like this: *Don't call it Katrina!*

The onomatological scold aims to wrest control of this historiography from the misinformed (or, more ominously, the misinforming) and place it in the hands of victims and advocates for the city. Scolders first and foremost protest any use of the term "natural disaster" to describe what they insist was a man-made catastrophe. (Some go further and suggest malicious premeditation, although most scolders distance themselves from conspiracy theorists, so that dubious paranoia will not taint their otherwise strong argument.) The citizen watchdog group [Levees.Org](#) has made an organizational policy of pouncing on hapless public figures who use "natural disaster" and "Katrina" in the same sentence, and sternly admonishing them via letters to the editor, online comments, and live Q&A sessions.

Scolders' second tactic logically extends the first: If it wasn't a natural disaster, why name it after a natural event? They thus protest the shorthand use of "Hurricane Katrina" or "Katrina," although no consensus has emerged on a proper alternative. Some speakers use "The Federal Flood" or "The Federal Levee Failures of 2005"; others reach tenuously for awkward phrases such as "the events of August 29, 2005." Levees.Org prefers the plural "The Federal Floods," and runs a [Facebook page](#) under that name. ¹



Readers respond to a post by Eve Troeh, news director of a local public radio station,

in which she asks for advice about reporting on the 10th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. [WWNO]

But calling the 2005 catastrophe “The Federal Flood” shunts aside a critically important historical-geographical backstory—that is, a hundred-plus years of anthropogenic coastal erosion and soil subsidence which made a surge-drive deluge more likely to happen—and puts all the blame for the terrible consequences only on its last subchapter, the failed engineering. It commits the mistake of recentism, in which we ahistorically privilege certain events simply because they occurred within the domain of our cognizance.

Reminding people of The Hundred-Year Backstory does not exonerate the Army Corps, but it does fairly contextualize the department’s failures while properly (I believe) expanding the ranks of the culpable—to include those who excavated those canals, those who profited from (as well as purchased) that oil and gas, those who benefitted from those riverfront levees and drained swamplands, and those who benefitted from climate-changing industrialization. The levels of culpability are by no means equalized, but, like cogs in an engine, not all gears need to be equally sized to yield a collective result. A century of tinkering with environmental processes, locally and worldwide, made the task of preventing outside water from entering into the levee-rimmed metropolis of New Orleans ever more difficult and expensive, even as anthropogenic soil subsidence made that task ever more important. These axes of urban risk rendered New Orleans particularly vulnerable to human error, and when that error involved key floodwalls and levees, innocent people paid with their lives. It was a tragedy a century in the making, and it had both natural and human elements. “Natural disaster” versus “man-made disaster” is falsely dichotomous.

An Imperfect Name

So what shall we call this whole bloody affair? It’s worth noting that humans do not regularly inscribe causation and culpability into the onomastics of disaster. If we did, World War II would be called the War of Fascist Aggression, the Johnstown Flood of 1889 would be called the State of Pennsylvania Dam Failure, and 9-11 would

be named for anything but its date. When levee breaches occurred in New Orleans historically, they were called *crevasses* (the French word for break, crack, or fissure, adopted into English as a synonym for the cognate “crevice”) and identified by the location and year of occurrence, though never the culpable party: for example, the Carrollton Crevasse of 1816, Sauv  Crevasse of 1849, Bonnet Carre Crevasse of 1871, and Caernarvon Crevasse of 1922. When we do embed statements into disaster names, we end up polarizing the memory. Consider, for example, the hundreds of thousands of Americans who died during 1861-1865: Northerners preferred to call this slaughter the Civil War because they refused to recognize the South as a foreign country, while Southerners called it The War Between the States or The War of Northern Aggression because they insisted states had the right to secede. Perhaps we ought to call it The War Over Slavery, and if social media were around at the time, advocates would likely promulgate their favored moniker with a hashtag and a scolding.

Having no interest in declaring what others should call the 2005 event, I address the above question by sharing what I myself call it. I use a number of names and phrases, depending on context, with “the Katrina flood” predominating. But I make no apologies for often resorting to “Katrina” alone, as in the title of this article. I never use “The Federal Flood,” because it sounds shrill, smacks of agenda (and potentially raises suspicions of boosterism and politicking), neglects The Hundred-Year Backstory in favor of the recent (no small matter when you’re a historical geographer), privileges the New Orleans portion of a three-state disaster, and thins the ranks of the culpable to its end members. Of course, “Katrina” also omits the backstory, not to mention the engineering failures. But “Katrina” does rightfully identify the trigger mechanism that activated all subsequent events, and we should remember we would not be having this discussion were it not for that so-named storm. It was also the only variable that manifested as a specific phenomenon on a specific date rather than as the result of gradual processes years in the making.

“Katrina” has other advantages. Its hard consonants and trisyllabic cadence strike the ear with a certain gravitas, one all too well earned. It also travels well: a unique proper noun recognizable transnationally, Katrina cannot be confused with other hurricanes or floods or levee failures. “Federal Flood,” on the other hand, is generic and inherently domestic (there are lots of floods and lots of federal authorities; why should a Malaysian or a Kenyan or a Russian presume we mean this one?). And any name containing the phrase “levee failures” presupposes that everyone knows what a levee is and what happens when it fails. “Katrina” is imperfect, but so are the alternatives, and imperfection and imprecision abound in the language of names.

That imprecision, I argue, comes with a consolation prize. The very ambivalence about what to call this event engages participants in a healthy discussion of underlying problems and future challenges. It forces the telling of complex backstories involving history, geography, sociology, politics, language, and, yes, engineering. “Katrina” fails to fully explain, but it succeeds in communicating that explanation is needed. It helps lift the veil on deep, dark undercurrents, and broadens the circumscribed perspectives that result when peeved pedants win the argument.

Lifting veils, shining light, revealing truths: as it turns out, these happen to be imbedded in the original Greek meaning of the word that resounded during that terrible week. *Apocalypse*.

The “Chocolate City” and the “Great Footprint Debate”

At its core, trauma suddenly transforms the known to the unknown. We try to reverse this through language, to comprehend the abnormal and the alien by associating it with the normal and the familiar. The favored rhetorical device to perform this linkage after Katrina was the metaphor, and the postdiluvian discussion was, well, awash in them. Not just metaphors, but similes, hyperbole, alliterations, acronyms, analogies in general, and personifications (anthropomorphisms) galore helped demystify the “math and aftermath,” and while few would win literary prizes, all served a purpose: accessible communication during difficult times. I draw the following examples of Katrina metaphors (in quotes) from countless sources, written, heard, spoken, and broadcast through various media, particularly the internet.

The “monster” storm “churned” across the Gulf of Mexico and “pounded” the coastline as low pressure and high winds lifted and pushed ocean waters inland toward populated areas. The century-long deterioration of 1800 square miles of coastal “buffer” had eliminated the wetland’s capacity to “absorb” this storm “surge,” while the erosion of the offshore islands removed what otherwise would have served as “speed bumps.” Instead, man-made waterways, such as the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet Canal (“MR-GO”), formed a veritable “hurricane superhighway,” which “ushered in” the surge courtesy a “funnel” formed by its junction with the Intracoastal Waterway. Pressure increased on floodwalls of the Industrial Canal, and two major sections collapsed from below. Thick concrete walls splayed out as the high water pushed through, a scenario that I’ve described in field trips with awkward similes: “like a football team running into a Cyclone fence,” the ensuing torrent of water “like the Colorado River.” The federal levees were breached, and the natural disaster advanced into a human catastrophe.

Once the outside water entered the levee system—an “enemy” penetrating the “fortress”—it became impounded by the “bowls” or “saucers,” half below sea level, that characterize the anthropogenic elevation of New Orleans. (Borrowing an analogy from engineer James S. Janssen, I compare the city’s topography to one of those Blue Plate Special platters with the sectioning ridges; the inner ones represent the natural Metairie/Gentilly Ridge and the outer rim is the river, lakefront, and canal levees, the last of which failed. ⁵) Saltwater mixed with the petroleum of a hundred thousand cars plus industrial and domestic chemicals to create a “toxic gumbo.”

A hundred thousand people were stranded, and roughly a tenth of those took “refuge” (which proved to be anything but) in the Superdome, beneath its “shredded” roof. This was New Orleans at its “nadir.” One group of citizens attempting to walk across the Crescent City Connection Bridge to the unflooded suburb of Gretna was aggressively intercepted by authorities with weapons drawn. The “Bridge to Gretna Incident” and other racialized confrontations were elevated into symbols that metaphorically bespoke three hundred years of ugly history. Likewise, the two badly damaged neighborhoods closest to the biggest breaches, Lakeview and the Lower Ninth Ward (“ground zero”), came to symbolize the disparities as well as the commonalities of victimhood. A novelist could not have penned more loaded toponyms: one mostly white and middle-class, with a lovely “view” of the “lake”; the other mostly black and working-class, in the “lower” (meaning hydrologically but implying topographically and socioeconomically) “ninth” (as in way, way down the list) “ward” (an archaic word devoid of pleasant connotations).

It took an entire week to evacuate everyone, an unforgivable delay resulting from federal, state, and local authorities not being on the same “wavelengths,” figuratively as well as literally: their radios were actually set to different frequencies. Ragged refugees arrived exhausted into Houston, Atlanta, everywhere, and upon absorbing media accounts of the calamity, rigorously protested use of the “Third-World” term “refugees,” in favor of “evacuees.” Roughly five hundred perished on Katrina day; five hundred more died that week and an equal number throughout September, as the nationwide “diaspora” of New Orleanians took shape.

In the “wake” of Katrina, a number of social, geographical, and linguistic patterns began to form. It was the autumn of 2005, and it was an emotional and uncertain time even for the luckiest of New Orleanians—the relative few whose homes evaded the floodwaters. These “diehards” returned home feeling like “pioneers” in a “frontier” city, where services were primitive, males outnumbered females, and children were all but nonexistent. Awaiting them and their scrambled lives was a packed schedule of public meetings on how, and where, and indeed whether, to rebuild New Orleans. Passions were high: Strangers broke into heartfelt conversation, neighbors engaged in tender empathy, and nearly everyone had a Katrina narrative and a rebuilding strategy begging to be shared. Conversations began with a tearful “So how’d you make out?” and ended with an all-too-earnest “Stay safe!” T-shirts emblazoned with “ReNew Orleans” were ubiquitous, and that determined sentiment was the unanimous consensus of locals. During the reliably theatrical Q&A segment of meetings, well-meaning citizens strode up to microphones and solemnly advised the audience that recovery “was a marathon, not a sprint.” Others breathlessly marveled that the flood had “wiped the slate clean,” affording, finally, an opportunity to get things right.

No one argued about the marathon metaphor, but many took issue with the “clean slate.” Despite being demonstrably false, viewing the ruins as a *tabula rasa* had the sinister power to invite “carpet-bagging”

opportunism while everything was “up in the air,” and “uprooted” “stakeholders” were conveniently “scattered” to “the four corners of the country.” Some worried openly about “elites” and “uptown bluebloods” regaining control and “whitening” or racially “cleansing” the community; others spoke of “A Tale of Two Cities,” which ostensibly meant flooded versus unflooded, but also signaled social and racial disparities.

Most of the people actually able to attend Mayor Ray Nagin’s “[Bring New Orleans Back](#)” (itself a metaphor) Commission meetings and related efforts lived in the historic districts of the East Bank, which due to its topography and hydrology did not flood. A phrase circulated to describe this stretch of riverfront land: “The Sliver by the River,” which hinted just how small this area was compared to the flood zone, and thus how lucky its residents ought to feel. Not-so-fortunate denizens of the “bowls,” meanwhile, were subject to the indignity of the “look and leave” policy, which mandated that flood victims could do no more than approach and view their wrecked homes. So traumatized, they resented what they were hearing from unflooded folks at the planning meetings, and, looking askance at the generally higher socio-economic position of the Sliver by the River, they coined another name: “The Isle of Denial.” That metaphor rang a number of bells. The flood had made the city a literal island, and everyone throughout the region had suffered feelings of being abandoned by their nation, like an island broken away from the continent. Historically, “isle” recalled that history lesson from 1762, when the King of France depicted the city as the “Isle of Orleans,” thus detaching it from the mainland and allowing the colony to be ceded to the friendly Spanish rather than the hated English. Given the response of the American government during Katrina, locals now joked about returning to the French.

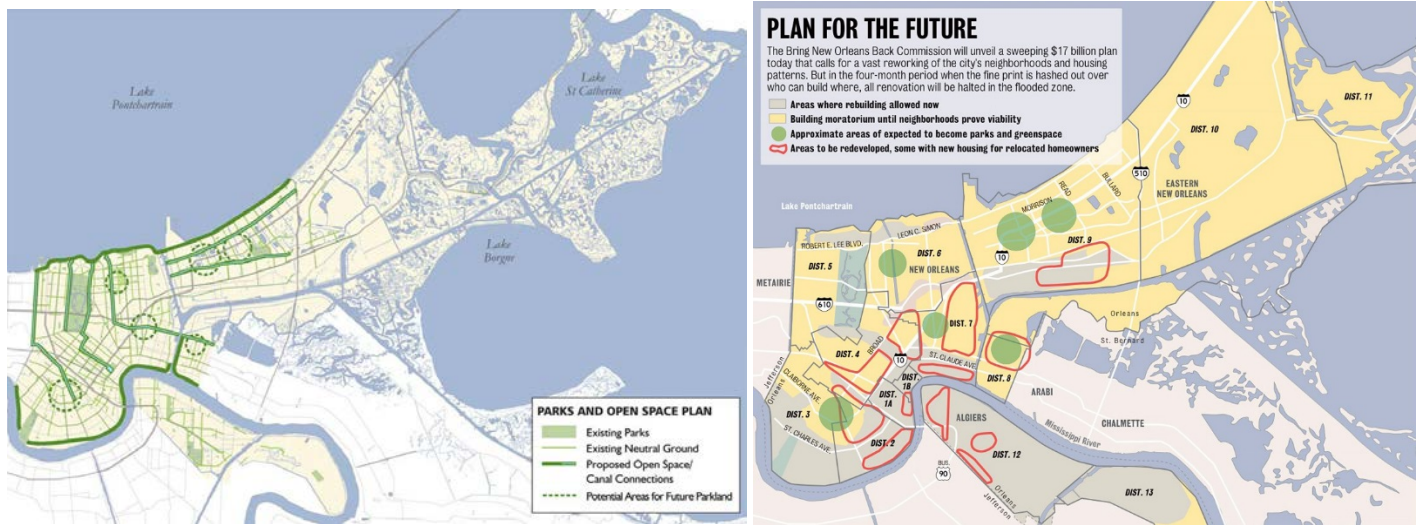
Each dawn that autumn presented adventures through “unchartered waters,” and the choppiest of all involved the “The Great Footprint Debate.” Should the entire city be restored, the argument went, or should the city “shrink” its “urban footprint,” rebuilding on higher ground and depopulating “far-flung,” heavily damaged neighborhoods so that as “green space” they may “buffer” the urban core from future storms? Experts warned that if the city was not consolidated it might see the dreaded “Jack o’ Lantern Effect,” with blocks repopulated irregularly, like the teeth in a Halloween pumpkin. Others called it a “salt-and-pepper pattern” or predicted a “checkerboard city”—the same metaphors, incidentally, that have been used to describe the city’s ethnic settlement patterns.

“Greenspacing” had by this time gained favor among environmentally conscious types nationwide, and locally those folks tended to live on the Sliver by the River. Historic maps on the front page of the *Times-Picayune* evidenced that, in fact, New Orleans had been surrounded by vibrant wetlands in centuries past; only later, during that Hundred-Year Backstory, were they drained, developed, and subsided, and it was no coincidence that the flood had impounded in those same areas—a calamity of “modernity,” not “antiquity.” How idyllic to return them to nature for the betterment of the environment *and* the preservation of historic New Orleans! Emerging national sensibilities lent credence to the proposal, as this was the era when once-abstract themes such as sustainability, resilience, and climate change increasingly registered in the public psyche. Planners, ecologists, and geographers, including me, lectured on the dangers of “hardening” fluvial deltas with “structural solutions,” such as levees and canals, and the benefits of “softening” the urban periphery with “multiple lines of defense.” Tactics in that strategy included a vast “apron” of wetlands integrated with “non-structural” solutions, such as living in “higher density on higher ground” and building on piers “above the grade.”

But for every voice advocating the closure of certain neighborhoods, there were many more who were not only skeptical of the notion, but outraged by it. Their argument was emboldened by a simple map, which became a powerful metaphor. New Orleanians to this day call it “The Green Dot Map” and shake their heads wistfully at its mere mention.

The Green Dot Map came out of a late-night session of the Urban Planning (Land Use) Committee of the Bring New Orleans Back Commission, as members burned the midnight oil preparing for the scheduled release of their final recommendations on January 11, 2006. They titled their report *Action Plan for New Orleans: The New American City*, a name explicitly designed to rebut the city’s hackneyed foreign mystique and to remind everyone this was a modern, domestic project entailing fellow American citizens. The 69 slides of [the PowerPoint presentation](#) deployed a dizzying array of platitudes and proclamations that seemed eager to placate everyone, at

the expense of brevity and lucidity. Audience members hungry for a clear answer on the footprint question, which loomed large over all other issues, grew agitated at a recommended moratorium on building permits for heavily damaged neighborhoods. The moratorium would last until May 2006, during which time residents would be charged with demonstrating their neighborhood's "viability." Further insight came in the form of a map, deep inside the presentation, labelled "Parks and Open Space Plan." At the bottom of its legend was a dashed-green line indicating "Areas for Future Parkland," which corresponded to a series of six large perforated circles in low-lying residential neighborhoods. ⁶ Here, finally, there appeared to be an answer.



The ur-Green Dot map from the Bring New Orleans Back Commission Action Plan (left), and the now-famous version published in the *Times-Picayune*, January 11, 2006, at right.

The next morning, the *Times-Picayune* featured the map on its front page. The newspaper's adaptation transformed the dashed circles, which suggested a certain level of conjecture, into semi-opaque green dots labeled as "approximate areas of [sic] expected to become parks and greenspace." The dots spanned so much terrain with such apparent cartographic confidence that many readers interpreted them as discrete polygons, rather than as dimensionless abstractions that suggested the possibility of some new neighborhood parks. *If my house lies within those "green dots,"* readers presumed, *it will be "greenspaced" into wetlands.* The map was in fact more a product of cartographic redolence and late-night sloppiness than anything even close to sanctioned footprint shrinkage. But that's not how citizens read it, and their response was livid. Said one man to the committee chairman, whose day job as a major real estate investor was viewed skeptically: "Mr. Joe Canizaro, I don't know you, but I hate you. You've been in the background trying to scheme to get our land[!]" ⁷

4 MONTHS TO DECIDE, blared the *Times-Picayune* headline: "Nagin panel says hardest hit areas must prove viability; City's footprint may shrink." ⁸ The infamous Green Dot Map entered the local lexicon, even as it motivated residents of heavily damaged areas to commence demonstrating "viability" in order to save their neighborhoods. "Green space," an amenity elsewhere in urban America, became a blasphemy in postdiluvian New Orleans.

What ensued was an extraordinary display of civic engagement. Starting in early 2006, neighborhood associations convened and set forth to document their environs, learn about their past, envision their future, and adamantly declare their viability. Members launched websites, issued press releases, and erected inspiring signs on once-flooded lawns: *Broadmoor Lives! I Am Coming Home! I Will Rebuild!* and the greatest of all metaphors, *I Am New Orleans!* So many "grassroots" groups formed that "umbrella" organizations arose to advise and coordinate them. Many neighborhood associations eventually produced fine plans and, more importantly, empowered citizens to meet their neighbors and learn the language of place and space. Much was at stake, and it was up to them to put it into words.

It would be an exaggeration to say that the Green Dot Map killed footprint shrinkage; lack of a fund to swiftly and fairly compensate homeowners, not to mention the legal complexity, probably doomed it from the start. It did not help that divisions of race and class had fractured the recovery debate, as African Americans feared that disproportionate emigration after Katrina would cost them electoral influence—a “perfect political storm”—in addition to its other deprivations. The Green Dot Map did, however, focus and mobilize opposition and give it a rallying cry, and it was this that ended The Great Footprint Debate and led to the unceremonious disbanding of the BNOB Commission. In a later editorial, a *Times-Picayune* columnist reflected on “the Curse of the Green Dot”:

In a move that will go down as one of the great miscalculations of post-Katrina planning, [the BNOB Commission] designated the off-limits areas with green dots. ... ‘People felt threatened when they saw the green dot,’ LaToya Cantrell, president of the Broadmoor Improvement Association, would say. ‘All hell broke loose.’ ... City Councilwoman Cynthia Willard-Lewis ... said the green dots made many of her African-American constituents flash back to the civil rights era, thinking they would need to fight for equal access all over again. The maps, she said soon after they were unveiled, ‘are causing people to lose hope.’ ⁹

With neighborhood closures now “off the table,” the question of how to fund the rebuilding of the entire city was “on the radar screen.” Flood victims (homeowners, that is, not renters) would be allotted up to \$150,000, minus insurance and FEMA payments, to either rebuild in place or sell the property to the state. The federally funded, state-managed program went by the metaphor “[Road Home](#),” and in an ill-advised onomastic exercise, Louisiana’s governor named it after herself: “Governor Kathleen Blanco’s Road Home Program.” A hapless contractor soon found itself “in over its head” with thousands of complex claims, and “Road Home” joined “Green Dot” on the list of postdiluvian epithets. Governor Blanco decided not to run for reelection.

At the city level, Mayor Nagin won a second term, in part through an assurance to black voters that New Orleans would remain a “[Chocolate City](#).” The Great Footprint Debate gave way to a *laissez-faire* rebuilding stance, which held, in essence, *let people return and rebuild as they can and as they wish, and we’ll act on the patterns as they fall in place*. The entire urban footprint *could* come back, but how it would look and work remained unanswered. Additional planning efforts spearheaded by the city council demanded more time and attention from confused citizens, as did the foundation-supported [Unified New Orleans Plan](#) (UNOP), which released its *Citywide Strategic Recovery and Rebuilding Plan* around the same time Mayor Nagin hired Dr. Edward Blakely to lead the city’s Office of Recovery Management. “Recovery czar” Blakely soon proposed yet another plan—“Plandemonium!,” some joked—this one featuring 17 alliteratively named “re-build,” “re-develop,” and “re-new” nodes, where infrastructure and amenities would be substantially overhauled. Weary citizens once again convened to wrap their heads around this latest plan, and figure out how it might relate to prior ones. Blakely’s language did not help his cause: naturally curt and outspoken, the czar made enemies with the plebes by calling them a “Third-World country,” and set himself up for derision when he promised “cranes on the skyline” years before they would arrive.

Instead of massive new construction, New Orleanians got tiny incremental advances slowed by the “chicken and egg problem,” in which businesses and institutions would not come back until residents did, but residents would not come back until businesses and institutions did. People spoke of “flatlining” population return rates and worried about a “recovery plateau.” In heavily damaged areas, a “Lot Next Door Program” (a literalism, not a metaphor) was initiated to let those who returned purchase the adjacent lots of those who did not—dental work, you could say, on the Jack o’ Lantern Effect. By 2008, the wrecked landscape was starting to be assimilated into the recovered landscape. Stability was emerging, yet everything seemed different and all too often worse. A phrase was coined to capture the paradox: “new normal.”

The cultural and economic “New Orleans renaissance” of the 2010s came partly from the determination and “sweat equity” of its people. But it would have come a whole lot slower, if at all, were it not for over \$70 billion in federal aid that flowed through everything from the Road Home Program to Community Development Block Grants to new school construction to a vastly improved “risk reduction system” (the wise new name for what was

once known as the flood protection system, and a language lesson if ever there was one). In a historical serendipity, these fiscal resources arrived as the rest of the nation fell into the Great Recession, when employment rates plunged and foreclosure rates soared just about everywhere except New Orleans.

The renaissance was also strengthened by a generation of well-educated progressive millennials, bored with bourgeois suburbia, [starved for authenticity](#), and eager to participate in something big, something important. With a penchant for gritty urbanism and little to lose, they headed to the Gulf Coast in two waves—the first right after Katrina, a cavalcade of volunteers, planners, designers, researchers, contractors; the second, a larger and more-established tech-savvy lot during the 2010s. We called them the “brain gain,” as opposed to the “brain drain”; they called themselves “YURPS” (Young Urban Recovery Professionals). “Deep-rooted” natives saw them as “transplants” and welcomed them less warmly as their numbers grew and their cultural and economic heft increased. Disproportionately, the newcomers settled in the Sliver by the River, expanding a predominantly white, affluent area that I dubbed the “white teapot” for its kettle-like geographical shape—a term that has since caught on.

Now the hottest topic of debate is not footprint shrinkage but gentrification, and New Orleans has become the talk of the nation for its digital media, film production, and tech startups. And it all happened just in time, because Americans elsewhere have generally fallen ill with a bad case of “Katrina fatigue”—or, as some might correct them, “Federal Floods Fatigue.”

Katrina as Trope

Sustained usage over a decade has positioned “Katrina” permanently in the transnational lexicon. In part this comes from the sheer magnitude of the tragedy, cast against so storied and lovely a city. More so, Katrina’s lasting legacy derives, for better or worse, from its utility as a convenient trope marshalled for matters far beyond wind and water. Speakers with varied agendas have breathed new life into this old story by enlisting Katrina to fight other fights, in venues ranging from pulpits to presidential campaigns, from keynote speeches to street protests. (How much so? Consider that most incoming freshmen at the New Orleans university where I teach know Katrina “the trope” much better than Katrina the actual incident. They were children when it happened, they come from all over the nation, and through media, internet, and high school lesson plans, they’ve been subjected to ten years of figurative Katrina and hardly any of the literal narrative.) Katrina’s power as trope also derives from the bitter irony of the incident: behold, a Third-World disaster not only occurring *in* a First-World nation but *caused* by it—the leader of the free world, no less! Enemies of the American nation could barely contain their glee, and skeptics of American exceptionalism struggled to bite their tongues.

And what exactly are they saying?

First, there is Katrina as government failure: “Broken Levees, Broken Promises,” ¹⁰ as the title of a Southern Poverty Law Center white paper put it. This trope is deployed not simply to renounce the particular under-performance of specific agencies or officials, but rather to repudiate the systematic mediocrity that comes when government is designed to be small and missioned to be reactionary. “We were promised compassionate conservatism,” said presidential candidate Barack Obama in a typical example of this usage, “and all we got was Katrina and wiretaps.” ¹¹

Another use of Katrina is to calibrate a really big disaster, for example, Hurricane Sandy as “New York’s Katrina” (which drove scolders in New Orleans crazy, as there was no federal levee failure). The BP oil spill—which bore its own onomatological problems—got tagged “Obama’s Katrina,” on account of its magnitude plus the fact that the government permitted it to happen and proved unable to fix it. But that trope did not stick, partly because it did not fit and partly because the Left was not about to let the Right off the hook over Katrina. Both sides called the 2008 mortgage crisis “a financial Katrina,” and blamed the other for the ensuing recession, while the Right revived “Obama’s Katrina” for the rollout of the buggy Affordable Care Act website in 2013. Outraged writers

retorted by calling that figure of speech “horrible, flawed, lazy,” “toothless, and “offensive,” ¹² while *The Nation* took a more rhetorical angle, lecturing readers “Katrina is Not a Metaphor.” ¹³ If only language were so easily controlled.

Katrina as evidence of climate change is another popular trope; it’s become a cliché to run B-roll hurricane footage during environmental documentaries (e.g. *An Inconvenient Truth*) and to refer to the freakish power of the storm as a “wake-up call” about global warming. Expanding to broader environmental themes, speakers of the Katrina lexicon use New Orleans itself as a metaphor (“a prophetic city,” “the canary in the coal mine,” “on the frontlines”) demonstrating in 2005 what coastal cities worldwide will confront in 2105. Many use the city liberally as source material for two of the most popular themes in academia today: resilience and sustainability, of both the environmental and cultural varieties.

Then there’s Katrina as evidence of racism, social disparity, and economic inequity: witness Spike Lee’s *When the Levees Broke*, which could have been titled *When Society Failed*, and the many times Katrina was invoked during the transition of American executive and legislative power from the Right to the Left in the years after the storm. Senator Barack Obama leveraged Katrina as part of a post-racial vision: “For we have a choice in this country,” he said in his now-famous Philadelphia speech on race relations. “We can tackle race only as spectacle ... as we did in the aftermath of Katrina. ... [Or] we can come together and say, ‘Not this time.’ This time we want to talk about the crumbling schools that are stealing the future of black children and white children and Asian children and Hispanic children and Native American children.” ¹⁴ Candidate Hillary Clinton, for her part, stirred up a veritable gumbo of metaphors while running against Obama: “When we see nooses hung in a school yard,” she told preachers at a 2008 Baptist conference, “when the screams of Selma and Montgomery are clouded by the nightmare of Katrina and Rita, that is the opposite of love. When some members of God’s household have every advantage while others are shut out ... that is the opposite of love.” ¹⁵ President George W. Bush himself acknowledged in his autobiography that he believed his handling of Katrina had forever cost him the support of the wavering center.

The trope of Katrina as divine retribution surfaces among a small number of speakers across a surprisingly wide range of viewpoints, from Christian conservatives to Israeli Zionists to Al-Qaeda terrorists to Mayor Nagin. In light of the 2010s “renaissance,” some pundits have tacitly suggested that Katrina may have been the best thing that ever happened to the city—a proposition that, needless to say, enrages those with the unrelenting passions of the onomatological scolders.

Globally, Katrina is invoked as evidence of national decline, a milestone at the end of American Century marking an era of rampant debt, decaying infrastructure, and adventurist wars of choice. Republican candidate Ron Paul, who as a libertarian on the 2008 campaign trail pulled no punches on Katrina despite the black eye it gave his party, said, “We are obligated to learn something from the tragedy of Katrina about the misallocation of funds away from our infrastructure to the rebuilding of Iraq after first destroying it.” ¹⁶

As a corollary, Katrina is presented as evidence of the need for strong government, a rallying cry for “change” (the winning campaign slogan) toward a New America. “When a disaster strikes—a Katrina, a shooting, or a six-alarm blaze,” Obama reminded his audience, “it’s City Hall we lean on, it’s City Hall we call first, and City Hall we depend on. ... Because whether it’s a small town or a big city, the government that people count on most is the one that’s closest to the people.” ¹⁷ Advocates of limited government, meanwhile, pointed to the substantial charitable giving and volunteerism inspired by Katrina, not to mention the hundreds of thousands of flood victims who demonstrated personal resilience in rebuilding their homes, as evidence that Americans have always “pulled themselves up from their bootstraps” with little need for government “hand-holding.” The Left responded with a counter-trope: Katrina as *Neoliberal Deluge*, as the title of an academic anthology put it—an exercise of Naomi Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine*, in which disaster affords opportunity for power to profit at the expense of the greater good. ¹⁸

Barn-raising aside, Republican candidate John McCain knew all too well that the Katrina albatross weighed heavily around the Right's neck, and he seemed content to let the storm be a storm. He invoked it only rarely on the campaign trail, once to laud bipartisanship in "bringing real hope to poor neighborhoods ... after Katrina," and another time to marvel that "offshore drilling [has become] safe enough these days that not even Hurricanes Katrina and Rita could cause significant spillage from the battered rigs off the coasts of New Orleans and Houston."¹⁹

Six months later, he lost the election.

Two years later, the BP Deepwater Horizon rig exploded and spilled 200 million gallons of crude oil off the coasts of New Orleans and Houston.

And now, ten years after the disaster so monumental that we couldn't agree on what to call it, the language of Katrina has spread around the world.

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Notes

1. Levees.org for many years held an ultimately unsuccessful yard-sign campaign demanding congressional hearings on the levee failures, and, despite its official insistence on using "The Federal Floods," promoted its cause under the handle "8/29 Commission." The campaign name reflects an attempt to associate the Katrina flood with the 9-11 terrorist attacks by adopting a date-based moniker. It also demonstrates that even the most strident onomatological scolders, who adhere to and promulgate strict naming protocols, are willing to tweak their own rules to achieve a mission. [↵](#)
2. Email communication to author, April 21, 2014. See also, [the self-guided bike tour](#). [↵](#)
3. Dita Trckova, "Metaphorical Representation of a Natural Phenomenon in Newspaper Discourse on Natural Catastrophes," *Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis Across Disciplines* 5, no. 2 (2012): 135-151. [↵](#)
4. John McPhee, *The Control of Nature* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), 5. [↵](#)
5. James S. Janssen, *Building New Orleans: The Engineer's Role* (New Orleans: Waldemar S Nelson & Co, 1987), 21. [↵](#)
6. Bring New Orleans Back Commission: Urban Planning Committee, *Action Plan for New Orleans: The New American City*, January 11, 2006. [\[pdf\]](#) [↵](#)
7. Gordon Russell and Frank Donze, "Rebuilding Proposal Gets Mixed Reception; Critics Vocal, But Many Prefer to Watch and Wait," *The Times-Picayune*, January 12, 2006, 1. [↵](#)
8. Frank Donze and Gordon Russell, "4 Months to Decide: Nagin Panel Says Hardest Hit Areas Must Prove Viability," *The Times-Picayune*, January 11, 2006, 1. [↵](#)
9. Stephanie Grace, "Will Plan Lift the Curse of the Green Dot?" *The Times-Picayune*, April 1, 2007, 7. [↵](#)
10. Southern Poverty Law Center, *Broken Levees, Broken Promises: New Orleans' Migrant Workers In their Own Words*. [\[pdf\]](#) [↵](#)
11. Barack Obama, "[Remarks at the Democratic National Committee Fall Meeting in Washington, D.C.](#)," November 30, 2007. [↵](#)
12. Jon Terbush, "[Obamacare is Hurricane Katrina: Today's Horrible, Flawed, Lazy Political Metaphor](#)," *The Week*, November 15, 2013. [↵](#)
13. Melissa Harris-Perry, "[Katrina is Not a Metaphor](#)," *The Nation*, July 14, 2010. [↵](#)
14. Barack Obama, "[A More Perfect Union](#)," speech given at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, March 18, 2008. Special thanks to my student Ellen R. Bartow-Gillies for assistance in finding this and other Katrina references in political speeches. [↵](#)
15. Hillary Clinton, "[Remarks at Baptist Convention in Atlanta](#)," January 31, 2008. [↵](#)
16. Ron Paul, *Congressional Record* 151:15, September 8, 2005, [H7805](#). [↵](#)
17. Barack Obama, "A Metropolitan Strategy for America's Future," speech given at the U.S. Conference of Mayors, Miami, Florida, June 21, 2008. [\[pdf\]](#) [↵](#)

18. Cedric Johnson, ed. *The Neoliberal Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, Late Capitalism, and the Remaking of New Orleans* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). See Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Toronto: Knopf, 2007). ↵
19. John McCain, [speech given to National Urban League](#), Arlington, Virginia, August 1 2008; McCain, [speech on energy and climate](#) given in Houston, Texas, June 17, 2008. ↵

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