

APRÈS LE DÉLUGE
New Orleans and the New Environmental History

RICHARD CAMPANELLA, *Time and Place in New Orleans: Past Geographies in the Present Day*. Gretna, La.: Pelican, 2002, pp. 204, illustrations, maps, notes, index, \$45 cloth.

ARI KELMAN, *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, pp. xiii, 283, illustrations, maps, notes, index, \$29.95 cloth.

PEIRCE F. LEWIS, *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002, pp. 208, illustrations, maps, notes, index, \$49.50, cloth, \$19.50 paper.

For historians, the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans in the late summer of 2005 probably serves as a grim confirmation of what many of them already believed: that environmental history may be the most relevant new form of historical inquiry for the twenty-first century. Already, a distinct “new” environmental history had garnered increasing attention and praise throughout the profession during the past decade or so, in large part because of ambitious and compelling works by able practitioners such as William Cronon, Richard White, and others. But even though another of its talented doyens, Ted Steinberg, recently complained that the field remained “on the margins” of the wider historical profession, the very prominence of Steinberg’s “Forum” article in the flagship journal of the discipline belies that characterization. In fact, environmental history’s recent acceptance into the mainstream of the American historical profession merely culminates the steady momentum it has gathered since its initial stirrings during the 1970s—gains that the Katrina catastrophe is understandably likely to further solidify.¹

It is surprising, however, that this embrace of environmental history has occurred in a relative critical vacuum, especially in light of the skepticism that greeted other emergent forms of historical inquiry during the post–World War II decades. (Here, one thinks of cliometrics in the 1960s, the new social history in the 1970s, and cultural studies in the 1980s.) Steinberg himself was hard-pressed to provide any examples of sustained criticism of the genre that might

help prove its ostensible marginalization. Actually, as the field has grown more conceptually ambitious of late (Steinberg, for example, explicitly seeks to ensconce nature as a fourth paradigmatic “axis” alongside the widely accepted trinity of race, class, and gender), debates over the methods appropriate to environmental-historical inquiry and its relationship to other long-established fields, such as urban history, have remained confined largely to internal disputes among its burgeoning number of specialists.² Although these discussions are usually conducted at an impressive level of theoretical sophistication, nonspecialists in the field have thus far appeared reluctant to intervene in, critique, or even comment on these debates. Instead, historians of a traditional bent have seemed content to admire environmental history for its macrohistorical bravado (a favorite example being Jared Diamond’s best-selling *Guns, Germs, and Steel* [1997]), a stance in keeping with their oft-expressed laments regarding contemporary historians’ obfuscations of the Big Picture of the past. Practitioners of that hard-to-define but influential cluster of heterodox approaches to history, such as Marxism, feminism, and post-modernism, have also taken a kid-gloves approach to the new environmental history, many of them falling over one another in attempting to hitch their wagons to the field’s rising star.

Ari Kelman’s study of New Orleans, *A River and Its City*, constitutes a well-written, sophisticated example of this ascendant historical subdiscipline. In many ways, his work on the evolution of “public space” at the New Orleans riverfront presents us with an opportunity to assess the new environmental history at its best—but also at its slipperiest. Some of these pitfalls become clearer when Kelman’s book is compared with two other recent works on New Orleans written from a more conventional, social scientific perspective. Peirce F. Lewis is an eminent urban geographer whose book, *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape*, is felicitously written but unconventionally structured: more than half the volume consists of a short, classic monograph that he first published thirty years ago, with an appended “Book Two” that discusses changes in the city during the subsequent quarter century. Richard Campanella, author of the meticulously illustrated *Time and Place in New Orleans*, serves as the assistant director for environmental analysis at the Center for Bio-environmental Research, which is cosponsored by Tulane and Xavier universities in New Orleans. By shrewdly using the tools of modern historical geography, from satellite photography to population distribution analysis, both Lewis and Campanella provide a plethora of insights into the development of the Crescent City and its regional ecosystem, including prescient speculations on the catastrophic storm surge that has now come to pass.³ Somewhat surprisingly, however, such insights are often lacking where we might most expect them, in the work of the environmental historian Kelman. Indeed, despite the intellectual daring of Kelman’s overall enterprise, the less glamorous approaches to place offered by both Lewis and Campanella ultimately manage to convey a much wider range of the problems that have affected New

Orleans development up through the current crisis, as well as the interconnectedness of these factors.

Although Lewis lamented early on in his original work that there existed “an uncommon scarcity of serious scholarly work” on New Orleans (p. 4), subsequent decades have witnessed an excellent and burgeoning literature on the city’s history. But to some extent, Lewis’s statement still rings true, a state of affairs that may result in part from the very complexity of the city’s lengthy past. It is noteworthy that New Orleans has yet to find its contemporary biographer, as has been the case for many other cities of late, such as New York. But furthermore, New Orleans’ storied, multilayered history has long offered an abundance of often-obscure nesting places that have attracted more than its fair share of amateurs, dewy-eyed romantics, and assorted cranks, although they have sometimes also encouraged highly focused approaches by professionals like Kelman. In any case, the differences between the breadth of coverage provided by the two social scientists and the historian are apparent from the outset of each book. Both Lewis and Campanella first discuss at length the highly unique geological development of the city’s precarious eventual location at the base of the enormous Mississippi River system. Far from being “mere geologic antiquarianism” (p. 30), Lewis shows how such an understanding of the deltaic region has profound implications for present-day New Orleans. By contrast, Kelman breezes through this crucial natural history in the space of a few pages. Then, also unlike Lewis and Campanella, Kelman sidesteps nearly the entire first century of New Orleans after its initial colonization by the French in 1718 (not to mention native settlements prior to the European arrival), not beginning his study until the relatively late establishment of U.S. sovereignty in the early nineteenth century.

In a sort of “Henri Lefebvre meets Jürgen Habermas” approach, Kelman focuses his attention on the public space he identifies at the juncture between the natural and manmade landscapes of New Orleans: the Mississippi riverfront. His thesis is twofold: first, that the river “has been an active participant in the city’s development”; and, second, that the shifting nature of public space at the juncture of the river and the city was a crucial determinant of the course of New Orleans history (pp. 7-8). Kelman’s chapters describe a series of roughly chronological episodes from the perspective of “a river and its city”: the batture controversies following the Louisiana Purchase, the advent of steamboats during the antebellum period, the yellow fever epidemic of 1853, post-Civil War attempts to link river commerce with railroad development, the city’s efforts to avert disaster during the flood of 1927, and, in a brief epilogue, the failed proposal to build a riverfront expressway in the 1960s.

Although Kelman’s episodes are ordered sequentially in time, his book is somewhat unusual insofar as he makes minimal effort to link the events of one chapter with those in the next. As a result, while his discrete chapters generally provide well-researched case studies of particular aspects of New Orleans’ history, Kelman’s work as a whole coheres less satisfactorily. His apparent sacri-

fice of overarching narrative unity in favor of a looser episodic approach, however, may well reflect the new environmental history's wider skepticism toward the retrospective imposition of order on events. While a distrust of "master narratives" is one quality that much of the new environmental history shares with postmodernism, in fact it has an even longer pedigree. As Donald Worster pointed out with regard to the similar argumentative style of one of environmentalism's patron saints, Henry David Thoreau, "[T]ruth had to appear in momentary glimpses, though the resulting composite might deny conventional standards of logical coherence."⁴ A drawback of Kelman's episodic approach is that complicated but essential strands woven throughout the fabric of New Orleans' history, such as racial issues, tend to receive better treatment in the more comprehensive attempts to understand people and place offered by the historical geographers Lewis and Campanella. Lewis, for example, is particularly good at conveying how the city's geography affected late-blossoming residential segregation patterns in the city, whereas segregation does not even merit an index entry in Kelman's study (and African Americans only half a dozen). For his part, Campanella masterfully guides his readers on a wide-ranging historical tour of the entire New Orleans metropolitan area, and the hundreds of informative color graphics he has assembled are alone worth the price of his book.⁵ In Kelman's case, however, the lack of interconnections inherent to his episodic approach, combined with his exclusivist riparian spatial vantage point, effectively relegates too many vital aspects of New Orleans history to the sidelines.

Kelman tends to sprinkle buzzwords indicative of historiographical fashions of the moment throughout his book; we repeatedly hear of differences being "negotiated," spaces "contested," and boundaries "transgressed" (this last by the yellow fever-carrying mosquito, no less; see p. 101). Perhaps to his credit, Kelman usually does not waste time with elaborate justifications for such loaded terminology, although one might argue that such terms impart their own analytical momentum. For Kelman, the shifting, contingent, and socially constructed nature of public space serves a similarly prime conceptual function as does *identity* for many of his nonenvironmental contemporaries; and thus, he sticks gamely to using his various episodes to illustrate how the river produced changing conceptions of public space in New Orleans throughout time. But although this thesis seems couched vaguely enough so that it should not be particularly objectionable, the episodes Kelman describes often lead to more straightforward conclusions. For example, in his chapter on antebellum steamboats, he speculates on the basis of very thin evidence about a grand "vision of a riparian common" that he feels engineer Henry Shreve may have harbored, only to finally admit it more likely that Shreve "was just in it for the money" (pp. 57, 60). Similarly, in his otherwise excellent chapter on the batture controversies of the early nineteenth century, Kelman seems to realize that the conclusions most readers would draw from his account center around conflicting (or, shall we say, "contested") notions of property rights, not to

mention their overlap with Jeffersonian-era political rivalries (a point that Campanella also makes clear; see p. 62). Kelman, however, summarily dismisses such an interpretation as “overly modern,” insisting that the batture disputes instead be viewed less as a revealing early skirmish of the market revolution than as a more elemental struggle over “people’s relationship with the Mississippi and their ability to control the river” (p. 48). It is not clear that this vague reformulation is either more useful or more accurate as a historical analysis.

Kelman also maintains that “the river’s agency in producing urban space may be the most significant lesson” that can be learned from the batture controversies (p. 49). Kelman often invokes “agency,” a concept whose former cachet has lately slipped from conventional wisdom to outright cliché; indeed, the very title of his study displays his proclivity to consider the river itself as the most “dynamic actor” in Crescent City history (p. 48). The reasoning behind this stance is not, however, adequately explored, nor are its ontological consequences. Simply to declare that the river, or anything else in nature, is a causative agent is not enough to accrue “agency,” for that elides important aspects of what historians have commonly meant by the term. The attribution of agency to natural phenomena represents a crucial slippage in the way that recent generations of historians have used the concept, since for most of us, the notion implies volition—that is to say, quintessentially human behavior. Yet by obscuring that distinction, environmental historians—for Kelman is not alone in this—often veer dangerously close to anthropomorphic reasoning that is profoundly fallacious. (Indeed, we might regard the odd practice of assigning people’s names—until fairly recently, only those of women—to hurricanes as reflecting similar thinking in the wider culture.) In Kelman’s case, the river is frequently said to do things like “create,” “remind,” and “ignore,” along with other verbs used in active constructions, with the net effect of promoting, subtly but perhaps intentionally, a view of nature as a subjective, decisionist force.

This is a rather pernicious standpoint, at least potentially—although, again, Kelman is hardly its only progenitor. For all its social “constructedness,” for all its grandeur and unpredictability, nature simply does not exhibit, in any analytically meaningful sense, what most historians have heretofore meant by *agency*. Although he is unburdened by much in the way of academic theoretical baggage, the working scientist Campanella seems to display a healthy skepticism toward the grander claims of environmental history with regard to agency in his book, pausing more than once to condemn “environmental determinism.” Whereas Kelman asserts that “the river has been an actor in the production of urban space” (p. 16), Campanella, by contrast, insists that “the role of the river is indirect,” and thus “one should be wary of easy explanations” based on faulty historical logic (p. 13). Campanella is right, and historians should more carefully heed his common sense. Ultimately, the attribution of agency to environmental phenomena represents a confusing, somewhat off-

handed mix of metaphysical and materialist philosophies that does not do sufficient justice to either.

Although Kelman takes a friendly swipe at William Cronon's "masterpiece" on Chicago, *Nature's Metropolis* (1991), for being "almost exclusively focused on economic relationships" (p. 10), most of the episodes he describes—especially the bature controversy and transportation developments—seem to center around precisely those kinds of relationships, despite his efforts to gloss them otherwise. Yet at the same time, while there were clearly many aspects of New Orleans economic development that were affected by its geographical site and situation, these aspects often receive short shrift because of Kelman's obsessive focus on the river. This problem might have been abated had Kelman, like Lewis and Campanella, more carefully considered both the city and the river as parts of a wider regional ecosystem.⁶ Lewis, for example, elaborates the significance of New Orleans' site near the bottom of a distributary system rather than the opening of a riparian estuary, as with New York and the Hudson River. Just as importantly, New Orleans is not situated, like most grand port cities, at the hub of a natural embayment. In fact, it is essential to remember that the city lies not on the coast of Louisiana at all; rather, it is located 100-plus miles upriver from the Gulf of Mexico. This fact alone impeded the routine passage of oceangoing ships through the mid-nineteenth century, in part because sailing vessels required steady winds that grew increasingly scarce with travel inland. But furthermore, sedimentary deposits at the foot of the delta between New Orleans and the sea made access extraordinarily slow and difficult for deep-draft vessels until finally eased in the late nineteenth century by the construction of the Eads jetties downriver.

A strong case can be made that the prolonged engineering controversies over the Eads jetties were the most crucial event in the history of the city's relationship with the Mississippi River, but rather than devoting a chapter to them, Kelman summarizes them in a few pages (pp. 130-34).⁷ Both Lewis and Campanella make clear, however, that, prior to the jetties' construction, much of the extent to which New Orleans was able to take advantage of its site near the bottom of the Mississippi Valley was through the Gulf access offered by the two enormous lakes that loomed ominously over the city to its north and northeast, lakes Pontchartrain and Borgne. Both lakes were directly accessible not via the river but through the portage offered by the sluggish Bayou St. John and, later, by various canal improvements located on the margins of the old city. These approached New Orleans through its backside, not its riverfront, and the linking of the newer, upriver American quarter to the lakes via the New Basin Canal may help explain why, as Campanella maps in detail, the Cotton District of the city came to be clustered not on the riverfront but rather relatively far inland (p. 130). Not until the mid-twentieth century did engineers manage to fully integrate river traffic into a more effective Port of New Orleans system by means of a series of interlinked canals, spillways, and outlets that required adaptations to the lower delta for hundreds of miles surrounding the

city. In turn, these adaptations contributed to steady deltaic erosion below the city that left it more vulnerable to storm surges, but again, unlike Lewis or Campanella, Kelman never mentions the Industrial or Mississippi River–Gulf Outlet (MR-GO) canals that finally made New Orleans a modern, viable port facility—but also a prime target for catastrophic lakeside flooding—by the late twentieth century.

Furthermore, Lewis emphasizes the drawbacks of New Orleans' geographical situation as an "island city" (pp. 16-17). Old New Orleans was, to be sure, bounded on three sides by the river, but it is just as vital to realize that, from a slightly wider perspective, the city was also long surrounded by hundreds of square miles of mostly inhospitable woods and swamps. Kelman makes much of the development of New Orleans' "hinterlands" in the late nineteenth century, but he doesn't really use this term in its conventional sense of adjacent rural territory. For him, the Midwest and the Ohio Valley were New Orleans' hinterlands, which accounts for his underdeveloped, often-questionable emphasis on the city's role in the late nineteenth-century grain trade. As Lewis points out, however, New Orleans was long deprived of an actual, immediate hinterland (p. 33). The underpopulation of its adjacent rural areas meant that New Orleans' status as a mere entrepôt for the transshipment of exports, already partly impelled by the difficulty of its accessibility, was further reinforced by the lack of a strong captive market for imports in its relatively contiguous geographical region. In other words, New Orleans never enjoyed the full benefits of a developmental symbiosis between town and countryside that might have helped to generate self-sustaining economic growth. The absence of such a feedback loop between contiguous urban and rural areas, which has alone greatly influenced New Orleans' peculiar history of relative economic underdevelopment, goes unacknowledged by Kelman. Unlike New South cities such as Atlanta or Houston, New Orleans' geographic isolation inclined it to remain commercially parasitic, a vampire city (with a nod here to its famous writer-in-residence, Anne Rice) that sustained itself by skimming off the lifeblood of distant regions without contributing much to them in return.

The city's desperate ongoing battle to maintain its status as an entrepôt also severely limited the extent to which New Orleans developed its own manufacturing sector, part of a long-term failure to adequately diversify its economic base that remains true even today. Further exacerbating New Orleans' commercial disadvantages was the simultaneous growth of other cities in what Kelman refers to as New Orleans' hinterlands: Louisville and Cincinnati in the Ohio Valley, Chicago in the Midwest, and St. Louis and Memphis in the Mississippi Valley. New Orleans indeed served as the bulk-cargo destination of choice for some of these areas' agricultural products, although nowhere near as much of them, or as soon, as Kelman wants us to believe (pp. 134-36): the majority of midwestern farm products were shipped eastward by rail beginning in the mid-nineteenth century.⁸ Furthermore, the extent to which New Orleans could serve as a major conduit for imported goods, whether for its own

use or to be transshipped to interior markets, was circumscribed for many years by its relative inaccessibility to heavily laden inbound freighters, then later by the increasing ability of burgeoning interior cities to provide goods to their immediate hinterlands via the ever-expanding national rail network. For many decades, New Orleans' import trade remained largely confined to bulk products such as bananas and coffee, but as a distribution nexus for value-added products shipped into the interior, the city only sank steadily lower on an expanding list of alternatives during the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

For reasons including but not limited to its unusual river site, then, New Orleans seems to have been freighted with a fairly untenable long-term functional role in the hierarchy of American cities. Yet Kelman tends to emphasize, on the basis of little comparative evidence or context, the ostensible economic dynamism of nineteenth-century New Orleans, especially in the post-Civil War era.⁹ His account of rail development in the postbellum decades is in some respects better than Lewis's, but only Lewis seems to realize that, by comparison to other cities in both the North and South, railroads never proved as important an impetus to modernization to New Orleans as they did elsewhere. The city's very failure to agree on a central railroad terminus, which only Lewis notes explicitly, illustrated the inefficiency and corruption that plagued economic development in New Orleans for decades. As Lewis recognizes, the city's affairs long remained in the hands of a class of conservative, short-sighted merchant capitalists, supplemented by traditional planter elites from the nearby sugar regions and the burgeoning delta. Ironically, Kelman's overwhelming focus on the river unconsciously mimics the tunnel vision that led generations of haughty Crescent City merchants and armchair geographers to insist that the "natural advantages" offered New Orleans by the river made the city's commercial primacy inevitable. But although it was obviously a powerful material presence in New Orleans history, the river also represents an apt symbol of the slow, incremental changes in the city's relatively poor fortunes. The Mississippi River, in other words, often served less as a motor than as brakes on the long-term economic development of New Orleans.

It is interesting that, although Kelman makes perfunctory gestures toward the multicultural, Atlantic-world character of New Orleans, he fails to discuss the impact of the city's infamous slave markets on its development. The antebellum slave trade may have had little to do with the river per se, but it did have a great deal to do with the South and the Crescent City's standing within it. Although it is evident from their bibliographies that none of the authors here under review has delved thoroughly enough into the voluminous historiography on the American South, this neglect seems most egregious in the case of the historian Kelman, whose grasp of the city's significance in its wider, distinctive regional context seems unsure at best. Besides his neglect of racial issues, for example, Kelman refers to the infamous New South booster and newspaper editor as "Harry" W. Grady (p. 135 n. 48); he shies away from the

notoriously byzantine factionalism that crucially influenced state and municipal development during the Reconstruction and Gilded Age periods; and, most incredibly, he never mentions the city's role in the momentous *Slaughterhouse* cases of the early 1870s, which were originally spurred by the pollution of the Mississippi River by New Orleans meat-packing interests.¹⁰

The slave trade also helped establish early links between the city and the Caribbean, which blossomed by the late nineteenth century into close commercial ties with much of Central and South America—perhaps the city's true “hinterlands,” if we adopt Kelman's spatially extended sense of the term. Lewis notes that New Orleans had been “a compulsive dabbler” in Latin American affairs since the early nineteenth century (p. 57); by the early twentieth century, the United Fruit Company would exhibit a hegemony over the port's affairs that equaled that of King Cotton. Yet at the same time, New Orleans also found itself caught up in increasing competition for the burgeoning coastal and oceangoing trade along the developing Gulf Coast. This trade promoted the growth of other Gulf port cities that were more in the commercially aggressive New South mold, like Tampa–St. Petersburg, Galveston, and eventually Houston. As Lewis describes, its privileged position with respect to the Latin American trade helped keep New Orleans elites complacent about significantly upgrading the port's infrastructure during much of the twentieth century. When the city finally did begin major renovations to the port in the decades after World War II, however, it chose to rebuild the bulk of its facilities around the network of industrial canals to the east of the old city.

The incremental decision to relocate the improved port facilities downriver clearly helped facilitate the eventual creation of a riverfront promenade adjacent to the Vieux Carre. Kelman, however, has surprisingly little to say about the history of port development in New Orleans during the twentieth century, and in his epilogic chapter, he credits the Riverwalk entirely to an urban coalition of “freeway fighters” who successfully opposed building an elevated expressway along the river during the 1960s (p. 202). Their remarkable story is also intended to buttress Kelman's insistence that citizens had long “mourned the city's lost spatial connection with the river” that had resulted from commercial development beginning in the late nineteenth century (p. 123). But since he is unable to document any such widespread nascent environmental sensibility until the mid-twentieth century, Kelman blames the intervening absence of protest on other “spatial distractions” (p. 153), such as the opening of beautiful, popular Audubon Park on the site of that spectacular failure, the 1884 Cotton Exposition (which he would have us believe, on the basis of a single observer, was dominated by grain interests; p. 135); or the drainage of the city's back swamps in the early twentieth century, which made it possible to settle formerly uninhabitable areas of the city. Explaining the lack of environmental protest by claiming that people were “distracted” by other, substantive improvements to their surroundings, however, seems the conceptual equivalent of the old Marxist cop-out of blaming the lack of revolution in the

industrial West on ostensible “false consciousness” among proletarians enjoying a steady rise in their standards of living.

Lewis and Campanella both make clear that the drainage of the surrounding back swamps of New Orleans—which were the areas most inundated by the breaching of the lakeside levees during Hurricane Katrina—was one of the most impressive technological feats of the early twentieth century. The successful reclamation of its nearby swamplands ushered in a period of relative prosperity and growth for the city, although Lewis convincingly describes how it also had the side effect of promoting race-based residential segregation (pp. 65–68). The drainage of the city toward its northern lakeside merits only a couple of paragraphs by Kelman (pp. 153–55), presumably because it falls outside his rivercentric focus. But furthermore, to elaborate on it might have conflicted with another of Kelman’s predispositions, one that he also shares with many other environmental historians: a profound distrust of technology, or what Kelman prefers to call “artifice” (p. 54). The often-unforeseen consequences of human attempts to control and shape nature feature prominently in each of Kelman’s chapters, although perhaps out of deference to environmentalist unease with overtly declensionist narratives, Kelman eschewed putting it up front as part of his thesis. Yet despite their distrust of master narratives, new environmental historians frequently spin tales that emphasize human hubris in attempting to tame nature. Such fable telling seems to reveal a fundamental bias built into the very approach of much of the new environmental history that is deeply pessimistic and perhaps even antihumanist. (Some might argue that the Katrina disaster only confirms such skepticism and that no amount of engineering could ever fully protect the city from nature’s wrath. This is far from clear, however, since strong, viable plans to fortify New Orleans against a major storm had been agreed on during the past decade, only to languish due to a lack of federal interest in helping fund them. Post-Katrina aid and reconstruction efforts will now cost the federal government many times what a full-scale plan would have originally.)

In this same moralizing vein, Kelman also condemns the Progressive-era technocrats of the New Orleans Dock Board for overseeing the construction of wharfage that effectively sealed off the riverfront from its ostensible public. Yet, as historian James P. Baughman has shown, the relatively independent Dock Board deserves institutional credit for finally breaking the cycles of corruption and long-term stagnation associated with the Port of New Orleans in the early twentieth century, when the city’s balance of trade finally began to improve.¹¹ But its improved economic fortunes came at too great a cost, according to Kelman. “[W]hat about people who used the riverfront for recreation or as a spot to contemplate the city’s relationship with the Mississippi?” Kelman complains of the wharfage, admitting that “[s]uch questions would have seemed pointless to Dock Board members” (p. 145). Actually, they seem nearly pointless to me. Besides their drippy romanticism, and beyond the fact that Kelman provides no evidence that any such concerned, nature-deprived

citizens existed, his questions imply a counterfactual situation in which a city that almost certainly would not have been established where, when, and how it was apart from commercial considerations should have ordered its affairs around a conception of the Mississippi River as a sublime amusement park.

Ironically, this is almost exactly what happened in the late twentieth century, when the warehouses were torn down, the port relocated, and the old riverfront thereby restored to the public. Now, however, the “public” consists of low-paid local service employees catering to visitors who can view the river’s majesty from the balcony of a shopping mall—and even then, the now-notorious, sprawling convention center complex manages to seal off most riverfront access except in a few heavily surveilled areas. To borrow some jargon myself, by the late twentieth century the Mississippi riverfront in New Orleans had become the focal point of a simulacrum, a commodified experience conducive mainly to dozens of ancillary marketing schemes rather than good taste, much less communing with nature, all socially constructed around a vacuous, misguided nostalgia for the commercial hustle-bustle of days long gone. Of course, this collective memory of old New Orleans and its river was only made safe for tourist consumption by sterilizing and draining it of most of its actual historical content, most notably its class and racial character. So much for democratic public space. Does Kelman disagree with this bleak characterization? Not entirely, although in some respects he acts as an apologist for the situation: in keeping with his earlier drift, he holds up riverfront hippie minstrels as an example to prove that “corporate control of that space is not absolute” and is still “contested” (p. 219).

It might be worthwhile, in closing, to speculate further about some of the reasons why environmental history has enjoyed such a free pass to date from usually critical historians. As Peter Novick has observed, “All historical writing is a product of a particular moment in time.”¹² While banal on its surface, this truism actually can help explain a great deal. Exactly which aspects of our “particular moment in time” make environmental history seem so apropos across formerly hostile ideological lines? How does environmental history manage to reflect the current historiographical zeitgeist so well for so many? The answers, some might hastily reply, should be tragically obvious to anyone who cares to look: the Katrina disaster alone illustrates the tenuous relationship between humans and their environment. If one widens the lens even further—say, to include the possible role of global climate change in creating storms of increasing frequency and intensity, or to examine deforestation, air and water pollution, or any number of similar ongoing abuses, both past and present—then the relevance of an environmental perspective to historians, as well as to their wider public, becomes manifestly clear.

Nevertheless, there may be more at work here than meets the eye, for the new environmental history often seems to be doing more than just advancing a reform agenda or mounting a social critique—instead, it seems to be grasping its way toward a philosophy. (Kelman himself notes environmentalism’s

resemblance to a “civic religion”; p. 214.) This is not particularly unusual; as Novick describes in his history of the profession, historiographical movements in the United States have frequently emerged from and aligned themselves with wider political and cultural trends. The new social history of the 1970s, for example, was clearly an intellectual by-product of the New Left of the 1960s, one that hearkened back to homegrown varieties of populism and socialism for inspiration and drew on the recent successes of the civil rights movement for its optimistic view of people’s potential to effect social change. Similarly considered, the new environmental history seems to present us with an academic concomitant to the libertarian, even anarchist, strains in the contemporary antiglobalization movement, with the American Transcendentalists—those nature-loving, archindividualist, radical skeptics—serving as its chief intellectual forebears. During our own “particular historical moment,” the various *marxisant* doctrines that long served many as a means to bundle history together into a meaningful whole are widely dismissed as discredited or passé by most historians. At the same time, the postmodernist new wave, with its radical antifoundationalism and hopeless defeatism, also seems to have crested and receded somewhat in recent years. For many, then, environmental history today offers the promise, albeit often barely articulated, of a new synthesis. It retains a hardheaded materialist view of history (for what could be more “real” than nature?) coated with a Teflon progressive patina (for who can object to concerns over the environment?). At the same time, its attitude toward issues like narrativity and agency remains at least sufficiently ambiguous to lend it credence among die-hard postmodernists. And the new environmental history does all this without succumbing to either the messy overdeterminations and shrill orthodoxies of class analysis, or the depressing nihilism and ivory-tower opacity of the linguistic turn.

As someone who recently watched with mounting horror as his hometown of New Orleans became the site of the costliest disaster in American history, and who was then forced to evacuate his own home in Galveston in the face of yet another advancing storm less than a month later, it is far from my intention to deny or downplay the immense presence of the environment in our lives. Yet I continue to find it unwise to privilege the subtly antihumanist perspective of much of the new environmental history, along with the precepts that often seem to accompany it: the attribution of quasi-human agency to nature; the rejection of conventional narrative form as a concession to nature’s fickle, capricious force; and the ingrained cynicism toward human efforts to anticipate, shape, and protect us against that power. In a post-Katrina article for the online journal *Slate*, Kelman came perilously close to a blame-the-victim mentality, opining rather smugly that “the sodden city has long placed itself in harm’s way” and that “New Orleans is [now] forced to remember that it is trapped in a cage of its own construction.”¹³ But such misplaced reminders tend to obscure the real tragedy behind the devastation that Hurricane Katrina wrought on New Orleans, which is that careful and sustained application of the

engineering “artifice” that Kelman so disdains probably could have averted the widely predicted catastrophe. Seen in this light, if a moral must be drawn from Katrina, it has less to do with the consequences of human hubris in dealing with nature than it does with a more straightforward political failure: government’s decades-long neglect of our crumbling urban infrastructures.

“It should be clearly understood,” Campanella avers bluntly, “that people, not place, created New Orleans” (p. 35), an understanding that challenges us to take useful responsibility for our role in “natural” disasters like Katrina. By contrast, tongue only partially in cheek, Kelman intones early on in his book that “the river gaveth and the river tooketh away” (p. 23). There is often more than a hint of such pseudo-theological fatalism among new environmental historians, not all of which can be written off as mere ironic trope. Their efforts to bestow something akin to a historical life-spirit to nature, and thus to justify an increased categorical status for the environment within history, are sometimes redolent of flawed early modern attempts at articulating materialist philosophies within the constraints of entrenched religious dogma (like those of Spinoza, whose formulation “Deus sive natura” is profoundly relevant to the environmental-historical project). Although catastrophes of Hurricane Katrina’s scale are certainly awe inspiring, they should not thereby tempt historians to cede too much analytical high ground to the environment as the “prime mover” of historical change. Instead, they should guard their objectivity and carefully evaluate the consequences of considering nature as a fourth “axis” alongside the social relations embodied in the anthropocentric concepts of race, class, and gender.

—Scott P. Marler
Rice University

NOTES

1. Ted Steinberg, “Down to Earth: Nature, Agency, and Power in History,” *American Historical Review* 107 (June 2002): 798-820, quotation on 799.

2. *Ibid.*, 802 n. 11.

3. Lewis devotes the closing chapter of his revised book to the threat to New Orleans from a major hurricane, wherein he also discusses the range of alternatives that might help protect the city, focusing particularly on the need to rebuild the deltaic wetlands southeast of the city, which had long helped blunt and absorb storms’ impact. Campanella also discusses the potential for a storm-driven disaster, but he speculates more widely on their effects than Lewis. For example, he writes that “a calamitous storm hitting southeastern Louisiana may play out an equivalent scenario on New Orleans and its upriver sister, Baton Rouge,” as that which occurred when Galveston was eclipsed by Houston in the wake of the 1900 hurricane that devastated the island port (p. 59 n. 93).

4. Donald Worster, *Nature’s Economy: The Roots of Ecology* (San Francisco, 1977), 98. Interestingly, Worster, one of the acknowledged founders of the subdiscipline, seems wary of some of the more ambitious recent attempts to extend its theoretical scope. Ongoing debates among environmental historians over “telling stories” from the perspective of nature can be seen in Donald Worster et al., “A Round Table: Environmental History,” *Journal of American History* 76 (March 1990): 1087-147; William Cronon, “A Place for

Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *Journal of American History* 78 (March 1992): 1347-76; and David E. Nye, "Technology, Nature, and American Origin Stories," *Environmental History* 8 (January 2003): 8-24.

5. Here must be mentioned something of the nature of the layout and design that his publishers foisted on Campanella's book. Oddly shaped, even for a coffee-table book, *Time and Place in New Orleans* is printed on a marvelous heavy, semiglossy stock that enhances the quality of its excellent illustrations, maps, and aerial photographs. Campanella's accompanying text, however, is shrunk to a sadistic pin-sized font, crammed into a single-spaced format, and run in parallel blocks about six inches wide apiece. I have never encountered a book that was so difficult, literally, to read.

6. This wider ecosystem of the lower Mississippi Delta also receives better overall treatment in the collection of essays edited by Craig E. Colten, *Transforming New Orleans and Its Environs: Centuries of Change* (Pittsburgh, 2000), to which Kelman contributed an essay on antebellum steamboat traffic.

7. The Eads jetties were so important to subsequent developments that John M. Barry devoted nearly a quarter of his excellent social history of the flood of 1927 to an account of their construction a half century before; John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (New York, 1997). See also George S. Pabis, "Delaying the Deluge: The Engineering Debate over Flood Control on the Lower Mississippi River, 1846-1861," *Journal of Southern History* 64 (August 1998): 421-54.

8. Morton J. Rothstein, among others, has demonstrated that "after 1840, the Great Lakes-Erie Canal route began effectively to replace river transportation to New Orleans," a trend that only accelerated with the rapid expansion of the rail network from the 1850s forward. Morton J. Rothstein, "Antebellum Wheat and Cotton Exports: A Contrast in Marketing Organization and Development," *Agricultural History* 40 (April 1966): 94. At the end of the nineteenth century, New Orleans' role in the national grain trade was minor: its receipts of grain amounted to fewer than 10 percent of those received at ports on the Atlantic seaboard. Despite Kelman's assertions to the contrary, cotton long remained king as far as New Orleans' exports were concerned, with the grain trade accounting for at most about a quarter of the value of the port's export business in 1899 (which is probably a high estimate). See U.S. Bureau of Statistics, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1899*, no. 22 (1899; reprint, New York, 1964), esp. 136, 145, 364, 366.

9. For a recent examination of postbellum business conservatism in New Orleans that runs counter to Kelman's view, see Michael A. Ross, "Resisting the New South: Commercial Crisis and Decline in New Orleans, 1865-85," *American Nineteenth-Century History* 4 (Spring 2003): 59-76. See also Harry A. Mitchell, "The Development of New Orleans as a Wholesale Trading Center," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 27 (October 1944): 933-63; and Lawrence H. Larsen, "New Orleans and the River Trade: Reinterpreting the Role of the Business Community," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 61 (Winter 1977-1978): 112-24.

10. See Michael A. Ross, "Justice Miller's Reconstruction: The *Slaughter-House* Cases, Health Codes, and Civil Rights in New Orleans, 1861-1873," *Journal of Southern History* 64 (November 1998): 649-76.

11. James P. Baughman, "Gateway to the Americas," in *The Past as Prelude: New Orleans, 1718-1968*, ed. Hodding Carter (New Orleans, 1968), 258-87.

12. Peter Novick, "That Noble Dream": *The Objectivity Question and the American Historical Profession* (New York, 1988), 488.

13. Ari Kelman, "City of Nature: New Orleans' Blessing; New Orleans' Curse," *Slate*, August 31, 2005, <http://www.slate.com/id/2125346/nav/tap2/%3E>.

Scott P. Marler served on the editorial staff of the *Journal of Southern History* from 2000 to 2004. A member of the Board of Governors of the Historical Society, he has published articles in *Louisiana History*, *Journal of the Historical Society*, and *Dictionary of American History*, among others, and is currently completing a dissertation on the merchant capitalists of nineteenth-century Louisiana at Rice University.