

# **The Katrina Disaster & The Politics of Disavowal**

part 1 of 2

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## Forgetting Commemoration

About a week ago, New Orleans went through the ten-year commemoration of the Hurricane Katrina disaster. In fact, there were several quite divergent modes of commemoration. At one end of the spectrum there was the Tenth Annual Katrina March and Second-line, the most serious political event of the day, which sponsored speeches and performances at the site of the levee break in the devastated and still depopulated Lower Ninth Ward. It had a significant turnout, though certainly under a thousand participants.

At the other extreme was the *Krewe* of O.A.K., which practiced a kind of “commemorating by not commemorating” in its annual Mid-Summer Mardi Gras parade and celebration. O.A.K. stands for “Outrageous and Kinky,” in addition to “Oak St.,” its starting point at the Maple Leaf Bar. The parade, noted for its wild costumes and zany ambience, attracted perhaps 10,000 to this Carrollton neighborhood event. According to the *Times-Picayune*, the Krewe chose the theme “Tie Dye Me Up,” to evoke the famous “Summer of Love,” and “bring good vibes to this annual parade.” It added: “No mention of the ‘K’ word, please.”

Most of the “Katrina 10” activities fell somewhere between the two extremes, but tended more in the direction of the Krewe of O.A.K., in that they were overwhelmingly in a *celebratory mode*. This was certainly true of the official commemoration that was sponsored by the city administration and local businesses. It focused on recovery, economic and educational successes, and, above all, the remarkable “resilience” of the local community. It presented an upbeat official narrative that erased many of the ongoing problems and tragedies of the city, in addition to effacing many of the most significant struggles and achievements of the community, when these did not fit into the official story. The major concerns here will be this official narrative, which pictures the city’s post-Katrina history through the distorting lens of a politics of disavowal, and the many realities that this narrative disavows.

What then, is “disavowal?” It is in fact something that is quite common in everyday experience, and which we have all experienced many times. We often face two psychological processes in which truth is negated. One of these, “denial,” is a defense mechanism in which the truth can never be consciously recognized or spoken. Denial is *silence*. The other process, “disavowal,” is a defense mechanism in which the truth is at times recognized or spoken, but is systemically forgotten or silenced at every decisive moment, when it really counts. Disavowal is *re-silence*. The Hurricane Katrina Ten-Year Anniversary has been primarily a celebration of disavowal and re-silencing.

## Resilience Kills

Much of this re-silencing has gone under the banner of “resilience.” While this term has been used throughout the post-Katrina period, it has become a kind of watchword and rallying-cry for the official commemoration and the politics of disavowal that it expresses. Even beyond its ideological uses, it is in some ways a strange term to use to describe post-Katrina New Orleans. Resilience is defined as “The capability of a strained body to recover its size and shape” and “an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Full definition of Resilience” in *MerriamWebster Dictionary*; online at <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/resilience>.

Neither of these definitions describes post-Katrina New Orleans terribly well. As for the “strained body” part, consider this. If someone had a serious accident or disease and after ten years is alive and doing tolerably well—except at only three-fourths of his or her original size—we wouldn’t think of that as the most admirable of recoveries. There are also problems with the “easily” part. Harry Shearer deserves much credit for defying the forces of complacency and self-satisfaction and boldly popularizing the term “the Big Uneasy.”<sup>2</sup> Whether New Orleanians have fully recovered or not, the last ten years have not been particularly “easy” for most of them. Maybe these long years weren’t so hard for those who had the good fortune to be extremely wealthy, delusional, comatose, or dead. But for a large segment of the rest, they have been difficult and even excruciating.

But the major problem with the term is its ideological use. In Post-Katrina New Orleans, “resilience” is associated with tendencies toward regression and mindless compliance. The voice of resilience says, “Congratulations, you’re still here! (Those of you who are still here),” and asks, “How about doing a second line, or cooking up some gumbo for the tourists?” It asks, a bit more delicately, “How about making their beds, cleaning their toilets, serving their food and drinks, maybe even selling them some drugs, and doing a special dance for them at the club.” It urges, above all, “Be resilient. Be exactly what you are expected to be.”

The ideology of resilience ignores the extraordinary creative achievements and visionary aspirations of New Orleanians in the post-Katrina period, and celebrates survival, bare life. It focuses instead on the community’s continued existence as a site for imposition of corporate-state hierarchically-formulated development plans. All the compliments to the people of New Orleans for being resilient are a bit condescending and demeaning. After all, it’s not the greatest tribute to people to compliment them on their ability to survive. “Thank you for not just giving up and dying *en masse*. If you had done that, it would have been somewhat of an embarrassment to the greatest country in the world.”

The real post-Katrina story is not a story of resilience. More on this later, but if you want to see the real post-Katrina story, check out the film *Big Charity*.<sup>3</sup> It’s an account of heroic courage and dedication to saving lives and caring for the community. It’s a story of crimes against humanity that are systematically repressed and forgotten. If you want to see the real post-Katrina story (in this case, of the larger region of Southeast Louisiana), check out the film *My Louisiana Love*.<sup>4</sup> It’s the story of passionate struggle for the beloved community and the beloved land. It’s another story of crimes against humanity, and also against nature, that are systematically repressed and forgotten. Both sides of this story, the nobility of struggle and dedication on the one hand, and the criminality and betrayal on the other, are lost in the fog of resilience. They are lost in the resilencing process. They are lost in the Official Story. It is versions of this Official Story that were presented by former President Bush, President Obama, and Mayor Landrieu as part of the official Katrina commemoration.

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<sup>2</sup> See the website for his film *The Big Uneasy*; online at <http://www.thebiguneasy.com/>.

<sup>3</sup> See the website for *Big Charity: The Death of America’s Oldest Hospital*; online at <http://www.bigcharityfilm.com/>.

<sup>4</sup> Website for *My Louisiana Love*; online at <http://www.mylouisianalove.com/>.

## The Official Story: The Bush Version

According to Former President George W. Bush's typically blunt and non-nuanced judgment, "New Orleans is back, and better than ever." In fact, he is *amazed* by what has happened in New Orleans. This is not so astounding, since he specializes in being amazed. He was amazed by the atrocities of September 11, 2001, claiming that "nobody could have predicted" that there would be an attack on the World Trade Center—though about ten years before there had been an attack on the World Trade Center. Hint! He was amazed by the post-Katrina flood in 2005, exclaiming that no one could have "anticipated the breach of the levees"—though several experts actually did, and it had already happened in recent memory during Hurricane Betsy.<sup>5</sup> Hint!

So we should not be surprised, much less amazed, by Bush's reaction to Post-Katrina New Orleans in 2015: "Isn't it amazing?" What amazes him is that "the storm nearly destroyed New Orleans and yet, now, New Orleans is the beacon for school reform,"<sup>6</sup> But what alternative universe does he inhabit? On Planet W, "the storm nearly destroyed New Orleans?" But what storm? Hurricane Katrina didn't hit New Orleans and even what missed New Orleans had lost much of its force by the time its winds came our way. The disaster was not a storm, but rather flooding caused by criminal governmental and corporate negligence. Furthermore, over a quarter of New Orleans was not damaged at all by the storm and flooding and most of the rest could have recovered relatively easily given a reasonable level of response and support.<sup>7</sup> What should be truly astounding is that the victimizers of the city made the recovery so difficult for the victims. Bush should also not be amazed by the quasi-privatization of the school system, since his own administration was responsible for promoting exactly the kind of predatory opportunism and disaster capitalism that produced that system.

Does Bush remember *anything* about what actually happened? Please excuse the foolish question. Of course, he has no idea, and he's counting on everyone else to forget, if they ever knew. As he twice implores of his listeners, "*I hope you remember what I remember.*" This recalls the delusional wife-killer Fred Madison in *Lost Highway*, David Lynch's classic story of monumental forgetfulness. As Fred announces, unconsciously diagnosing his delusional rewriting of history, "I like to remember things my own way." Similarly, Bush's voice is the voice of denial. Never even reaching the level of *re-silence*, it is just dumb silence about anything that counts.

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<sup>5</sup> Hurricane Betsy was a larger hurricane than Hurricane Katrina and hit New Orleans directly, with the latter passing slightly west of the city. .

<sup>6</sup> Cain Burdeau and Jeff Amy "George W. Bush Visits Disaster Zone, 10 Years After Katrina" (Associated Press, Aug. 28, 2015); online at [http://hosted.ap.org/dynamic/stories/U/US\\_KATRINA\\_BUSH?SITE=AP&SECTION=HOME&TEMPLATE=DEFAULT](http://hosted.ap.org/dynamic/stories/U/US_KATRINA_BUSH?SITE=AP&SECTION=HOME&TEMPLATE=DEFAULT).

<sup>7</sup> It is significant, and not widely known, that 28% of housing units in the city were not damaged, and 58% were not damaged seriously. See Rachel E. Luft with Shana Griffin, "A Status Report on Housing in New Orleans after Katrina: An Intersectional Analysis" in Beth Willinger, ed. *Katrina and the Women of New Orleans* ( New Orleans: Newcomb College Center for Research on Women, Dec. 2008); online at <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:jd9AwzZZSWgJ:https://tulane.edu/newcomb/upload/NCCROWreport08-chapter5.pdf+&cd=8&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us>.

## The Official Story: The Obama Version

Curiously, the same day that Obama visited New Orleans I got an email from him saying, “Let me be perfectly frank—I’m emailing to ask you for \$5 . . . .”<sup>8</sup> My first thought was, “Why don’t you pass by so I can give you the \$5 in person! That would give me a chance to be perfectly frank too, and explain how things in post-Katrina New Orleans are not quite as rosy as you’ve been painting them to be.” I was about to send the email to Air Force One, and then it occurred to me that Obama’s problem is not really a lack of information, as his Katrina speech in fact confirmed.

Admittedly, Obama’s speech was infinitely better than the ramblings of Bush, whose unfortunate native tongue is English As A Second Language. Obama usually manages to combine a certain amount of intelligent and lucid analysis (even if it is often intelligently and lucidly deceptive) with a calculated folksiness aimed at mitigating any sins of excessive sophistication and erudition.

Folksiness prevailed in his Katrina anniversary address, which gets the award for more clichés per sentence than any speech ever given here, and perhaps anywhere else on Planet Earth. In just the first paragraph, he managed to dispose of many of the obligatory local references, including “Where y’at,” “the Big Easy,” “the weather in August,” “shrimp po’ boy,” “Parkway Bakery and Tavern,” “Rebirth,” “the Maple Leaf,” “Mardi Gras,” and “what’s Carnival for.”<sup>9</sup>

But the agenda was basically about re-silencing. Obama enthusiastically promoted the neo-liberal corporate capitalist project, including the quasi-privatization and de-democratization of the local schools. He actually cited some damning statistics about child poverty and economic inequality in New Orleans. And he noted that the city “had for too long been plagued by structural inequalities.” “Had been” before Hurricane Katrina, that is.

But this brief moment of quasi-recognition was lost in the deluge of upbeat generalization. He told the city that “the progress that you have made is remarkable” in achieving, among other things, a “more just New Orleans.” In case we didn’t get his point, he added, “The progress you’ve made is remarkable.” So we are told that post-Katrina New Orleans is not only a model of opportunity for entrepreneurs and developers, as the Chamber of Commerce will enthusiastically inform us, but also a model for progress in *justice*.

Obama’s voice is clearly the voice of disavowal. He knows the truth, and he can even tell you that he knows it. But this truth is consigned to footnotes and asides to a larger ideological pseudo-truth that is to be the focus of our attention. The truth is there only to be strategically forgotten. The dominant discourse remains the verbose but empty speech of re-silencing. So much for *les Menteurs en Chef*.

## The Official Story: The Landrieu Version

Next, the local political and corporate establishment, led by mayor Mitch Landrieu, joined in the celebration. For the anniversary, Landrieu and Walmart, along with other corporate entities, co-sponsored a “Citywide Day of Service.” It’s unfortunate that the community couldn’t organize

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<sup>8</sup> Barack Obama, “important (don’t delete).” An email from Barack Obama at dccc@dccc.org to John Clark at clark@loyno.edu (Thu 8/27/2015 11:59 AM).

<sup>9</sup> “Transcript of President Obama’s Katrina speech” in *NOLA.com* (August 28, 2015); online at [http://www.nola.com/katrina/index.ssf/2015/08/transcript\\_of\\_president\\_obamas.html](http://www.nola.com/katrina/index.ssf/2015/08/transcript_of_president_obamas.html). Fortunately somebody caught him before he told the crowd “jockamo fee nané.”

a large-scale volunteer effort itself, as it did after Katrina, when our state and corporate masters largely abandoned the city, except as opportunities emerged for incarceration and then exploitation. The mayor's version of a "Day of Service" was four hours of service projects in the morning, followed by an hour of speeches and celebration, and then a break, before three more hours of speeches and celebration.

From Landrieu's perspective, there was much to celebrate. On his "Katrina 10: Resilient New Orleans" web site he claims that the Katrina disaster turned out to be a positive opportunity and as a result "New Orleans has turned itself around and has built the city that we should've built the first time."<sup>10</sup> Presumably the city had to wait 287 years for the current experiment in neo-liberal social engineering to arrive. Landrieu's boosterish assessment of Post-Katrina New Orleans can be summed up in his depiction of it as "America's best comeback story." In a blatant attempt to mislead readers, he boasts that "the New Orleans region has now returned to approximately 95 percent of its pre-Katrina population."<sup>11</sup> In fact, as a recent report shows, "New Orleans is now at about 78 percent of its population before the storm" and the recent growth rate has been 1.4%.<sup>12</sup> Aggregating the population with surrounding parishes is a transparent ploy to confuse the public.

Many have not come back to New Orleans because of lack of opportunities here and because the dominant model of development has created obstacles to their return. To make them disappear through fake statistics is an outrage. Landrieu obviously didn't grasp the ludicrous but painful irony of calling the post-Katrina era, in which almost a quarter of the population did not return, "the best *comeback story*" in US history!

Landrieu's voice is the voice of denial, deception and delusion. Let's be explicit about what is denied, silenced and re-silenced.

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<sup>10</sup> Polly Mosendz, "New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu on the 10th Anniversary of Hurricane Katrina" in *Newsweek* (August 29, 2015); online at <http://www.newsweek.com/new-orleans-mayor-mitch-landrieu-10th-anniversary-hurricane-katrina-367046>.

<sup>11</sup> Mitchell J. Landrieu, "About the Project," in *Katrina 10: Resilient New Orleans*; online at <http://katrina10.org/about-the-project/>.

<sup>12</sup> Jeff Adelson, "New Orleans area population still growing post-Katrina, but slowly: Post-Katrina increase slows to a plateau," in *The New Orleans Advocate* (March 28, 2015); online at <http://www.theneworleansadvocate.com/news/11941581-172/new-orleans-area-population-still>.

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