After Katrina: Projecting Racial, Transnational and Environmental Futures Beyond the 'American Century'

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<http://blogs.bbk.ac.uk/afterkatrina/>

Project Summary

Extreme weather events are commonplace in the United States but the legacy of Hurricane Katrina still reverberates throughout contemporary political, cultural and academic debate. The aftermath of Katrina as it unfolded in New Orleans not only raised key questions about race and national identity in 21st century America but it also raised the spectre of climate change in relation to a city built largely below sea level and increasingly exposed to hurricanes as a result of rapidly depleting barrier islands. This project suggests that post-Katrina New Orleans, which has so vividly captured and displayed key aspects of US history, provides us with a vital lens through which to project a future beyond the 'American century'.

New Orleans has long posed as a kind of mirror-image of the triumphalist narrative of US identity as it developed in the twentieth century. The twentieth century saw the transformation of New Orleans from a bustling economic centre to a weak, service-based economy dominated by tourism. This has meant that the city has come to be associated with the time of leisure as opposed to that of work, a feature which has exacerbated its image in the popular and literary imagination as a place of decline and obsolescence - one that is in marked tension with the idea of relentless progress central to US national ideology. The advent of Hurricane Katrina, and the drowned black bodies that it brought to world attention, and which bore witness to the catastrophic consequences of US racial and environmental history, was in one sense a literal and horrifying fulfilment of the gothic fantasies that have long hovered over the city. In this way, and by invoking key internal fractures within the US, post-Katrina New Orleans emerges as a key site for analysis of the discourse of US decline that has been gaining ground since 9/11.

This project thus asks: if Katrina is a 'teachable moment' (Barack Obama), how might it be drawn upon to better understand what the waning of US power means for the contemporary world? While post-Katrina New Orleans has lent some of the most desperate and dystopian imagery to the discourse of US decline, arguably it has also invoked the possibility of a re-awakening of democracy at the grassroots. The significance of the resurgence of community organizations in post-Katrina New Orleans calling for racial and environmental justice is demonstrated in the vast outpouring of creative and critical projects that reflect these developments.

In analysing these emerging forms of social engagement and their interaction with post-Katrina artistic and cultural production, this project suggests that thinking 'after Katrina' might offer an alternative approach to thinking 'post-9/11'. This alternative can help us to re-orient our understanding of the changing status of the United States away from pessimistic renderings of the decline of a superpower towards a vision of a transnational, multi-racial nation in which New Orleans might represent the somewhat paradoxical template for the future.