
As a former New Orleanian, who lived through Hurricane Katrina, I clearly recall the days and months after the catastrophe, when members of Congress visited the city, expressed their condolences, and debated over the extent to which the city should be rebuilt. But like many in New Orleans, I was preoccupied by my own recovery and paid scant attention to how and why these members of Congress were convinced to visit the Gulf Coast in the first place. Emmanuel David’s book *Women of the Storm* provides an ethnographic account of the efforts of a tenacious group of New Orleans women—most chosen from the city’s elite—to convince legislators to visit the city and support both federal funding for rebuilding and also the larger, more costly project of coastal restoration.

During its intensive period of work, beginning only four or five months after Katrina made landfall, the group made three trips to Washington, DC, to meet with legislators, chartering a flight each time. Working in pairs, they secured meetings with each of the 535 members of Congress and gave them a hand-written invitation to visit New Orleans and view the devastation left by the storm and levee failures. In the end, they were able to convince 57 Senators and 142 members of Congress to visit, did many media interviews, and otherwise served as ambassadors for the city and its ongoing recovery needs. They also championed important, albeit controversial legislation aimed at using royalties from offshore drilling (which the state of Louisiana had been denied for decades) to fund coastal restoration initiatives.

The book is based upon David’s ten years of fieldwork in New Orleans, many interviews, and trips to Washington with the group. This level of engagement for a
researcher, particularly one not living in New Orleans, is quite remarkable—a feat that I’ve only seen once before, in Alice Fothergill and Lori Peek’s (2015) *Children of Katrina*, which exhibited a similar sustained, long-term commitment to disaster-affected people. In my previous work, I have often been critical of the tendency for disaster research to be “in and out” projects conducted by non-local researchers (see Barber and Haney 2016), so *Women of the Storm* provides a welcome exception. It also allows for a vivid dissection of the group’s motivations, reservations, strategies, successes, and failures. This alone makes the book worth reading, but *Women of the Storm* is also a fascinating look at how the social capital of elite women functions for instrumental purposes, as well as how class, race, and gender intersect in the activities and decisions of an emergent group such as WOS. As David so rightly points out, the activities of elite women are understudied in the context of disaster.

Although David’s book grew out of Hurricane Katrina, it is not really a book about Katrina. The focus is squarely on the group of women—described by some as “persistent, tenacious, and utterly charming” (p. 138)—and their efforts to attract attention and money to their region. As David recounts, the group’s leader, Anne Milling, a long-time local philanthropist and tireless volunteer, leveraged her social capital to recruit women who were well positioned, and with what she viewed as the right amount of sophistication and southern charm. Although drawn mostly from the city’s elite, the group made efforts to be as racially inclusive as possible, reaching out to prominent women from various ethnic groups (though WOS was nevertheless a majority-white organization advocating on behalf of a majority-black city), including world-famous chef Leah Chase and neighborhood organizer LaToya Cantrell (who was just recently elected the first woman Mayor of New Orleans). The book follows a recent trend in sociology of studying the lived experiences and social world of elites (Harrington 2016; Khan 2012; Rivera 2015), a literature to which this book clearly contributes. The group’s actual
activities are only one piece of the picture painted by the book; it is also a beautiful and captivating look at how the women involved with WOS make meaning of their lives, and of Hurricane Katrina, as well as the ways they interpret the actions of others and produce narratives about themselves and about WOS. In this sense, the book is a masterful look at processes of meaning-making in the aftermath of disaster. As the women David interviewed work to rebuild their city, they simultaneously rebuilt themselves.

I did find WOS’s lack of class inclusiveness rather peculiar, however. On the one hand, it was clearly strategic; well-connected, educated, and professionally successful women possessed the necessary human, social, and cultural capital necessary to convince public officials to visit New Orleans. They took an explicitly non-confrontational approach to invite these legislators, instead relying on charm, persistence, and two-way dialogue. Who better to convince elites than other elites? At the same time, one cannot help but wonder whether wealthy New Orleans women can be relied upon to advocate for the same issues viewed as important by the city’s sizable lower-income population (including right-of-return, resisting school privatization, the reinstatement of the city’s public housing projects, racial justice, and so on). Fortunately, work on groups pushing these issues is already undertaken by researchers such as Rachel Luft (2008, 2009) who studies the emergence of movement organizations like Common Ground Collective and the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund, which originated in the city’s lower-income and majority-black neighborhoods. There seemed to be an uneasy tension in the book around this issue, as Women of the Storm spoke of advocating for all New Orleanians, while at the same time exerting much energy reminding all who would listen that Katrina affected the wealthy too—even implying that the wealthy had been forgotten in coverage of the disaster and its aftermath.

If there is any criticism to be made of *Women of the Storm*, it is three-fold. First, as I mentioned above, I was hoping that the book would interrogate the extent to which
the objectives of Women of the Storm overlapped with the needs of New Orleans lower-income community or, alternatively, the extent to which the women advocated for funding and policy changes that would disproportionately serve the city’s elite. Particularly given that WOS received funding from several large corporations, their message necessarily lacked a critical or radical, or even justice-oriented, edge.

Second, and perhaps most importantly, while the book analyzes the creation, goals, activities, and successes of an emergent social movement organization, it stops short by not discussing what happened to Women of the Storm; does the organization still exist? Did they dissipate? If so, why? Given that the organization emerged with particular objectives, did the organization lose momentum once some of those objectives had been achieved? To what extent did class and racial cleavages contribute to the group’s dissipation? David demonstrates how many of the women leveraged their experiences with Katrina into advocacy work around the BP oil spill, how they ventured in national politics by attending the Democratic National Convention in Denver, and so on. Still, beyond these activities, I would welcome more clarity around the organization’s trajectory and eventual breakup.

Finally, I found myself curious about the trajectories of individual members’ participation in the group. David’s book centres largely around the activities of the group’s leader, Anne Milling, and a small core of elite white women, including Olivia Manning, mother of NFL stars Eli and Peyton, as well as Rita Benson LeBlanc, owner of the New Orleans Saints. Important as those figures are to the group’s momentum and influence, I would be curious about the motivations that brought others into the group, how their level of activity and interest waxed and waned, as well as whether these women remained in any activist organizations following departure from Women of the Storm. As Catherine Corrigall-Brown (2011) shows us in Patterns of Protest: Trajectories of Participation in Social Movements, participants in social movements take a number of
different trajectories, including various levels of continued engagement through time. Using a social movement framework such as this would enhance the book’s usefulness for building theory around the creation and sustenance of social movements in the aftermath of disaster, and I believe this provides fertile ground for future research.

Although I do wish the book had addressed these three points above, no single manuscript can accomplish everything. What David has produced, however, is one of the first analyses of the activism of wealthy women in the aftermath of disaster. This unique contribution to the literature should allow Women of the Storm to attract the attention of researchers, teachers, and community groups of all sorts. It models dedicated, reflexive fieldwork and provides analyses that are empirically grounded yet theoretically rich. David’s excellent book should be included on the bookshelf of every scholar of disaster, gender, elites, and social movements.

References

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