

GEOGRAPHICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE “NEW” NEW ORLEANS IN THE POST–HURRICANE KATRINA ERA

MERRILL L. JOHNSON

People can be forgiven for growing weary of the headline “Hurricane Katrina, the Costliest Natural Disaster in U.S. History.” Compassion fatigue has set in among caring people who are desperate for a headline that announces a return to “normal.” And then there are the inevitable questions about what the new normal may be, why people would live in such an environmentally endangered place in the first place, and what insanity would cause them to want to rebuild in the same location. The purpose of this brief essay is to comment on what happened to the New Orleans Metropolitan Area, to look at why such a tragedy was hardly unexpected, and to speculate on some of the geographical possibilities of a post-Katrina New Orleans. These comments are by necessity preliminary and incomplete, based on early reports from journalists and researchers and on personal experience.

WHAT HAPPENED?

By the morning of Friday, 26 August, Hurricane Katrina was heading northward into the Gulf of Mexico, with a predicted landfall on the Florida Panhandle. Throughout the day, the projected course of the storm shifted to the west, so that by Friday evening the target zone was approaching the New Orleans area. This was far from the first time that New Orleans had been in the bull’s-eye, but earlier storms had veered away from the city at the last minute or turned out to be only a nuisance. This time felt different. Given the category 5 status of the storm—meaning that winds of more than 155 miles per hour and a storm surge generally of at least 18 feet could be expected—and the steering currents guiding it, a growing sense of dread descended on New Orleans that Katrina might be the “Big One.”

New Orleans has every reason to fear the Big One. Much of the city lies below sea level and is surrounded by hurricane-protection levees. The only areas above sea level within the city itself are on the natural levees along the Mississippi River, on old river distributaries such as the Gentilly and Metairie Ridges, and on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain, much of which is artificially created land. In most of these locations “high ground” is defined as anything above sea level; the truly “alpine” parts of the city rise to about 15 feet next to the river (Figures 1 and 2). The remainder of the city was built by draining wetlands and clearing land for development, which led to soil subsidence and life below sea level for many neighborhoods. Rainstorms are a constant threat; rainwater is removed from below-sea-level areas using 180 miles of canals, 22 pumping stations, and a water-removal capability of 30 billion gallons a day (Campanella 2002; Lewis 2003; Colten 2005; Pittman 2005, 12).

* Dr. JOHNSON is an associate dean of the College of Liberal Arts, the director of Latin American Outreach, and a professor of geography at the University of New Orleans, New Orleans, Louisiana 70148.