

Even Paranoids Have Enemies

Rumors of Levee Sabotage in New Orleans's Lower 9th Ward

Ari Kelman

University of California, Davis

This article explores the origin and implications of the rumor that government authorities intentionally destroyed the levee fronting New Orleans's lower 9th Ward during Hurricane Katrina. The author argues that these rumors should not be dismissed as fanciful conspiracy theories, but must instead be placed in the context of New Orleans's environmental history. That history includes numerous episodes in which commercial elites colluded with elected officials to place the city's poor and working classes in harm's way during urban disasters. As a result, the levee rumors during Hurricane Katrina may be understood as a form of resistance, a way in which displaced residents of the lower 9th Ward tried to shape the discourse about the causes and consequences of the hurricane, insisting that, rather than being understood as a so-called natural disaster, it must be understood as a human-constructed catastrophe.

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At the end of August 2005, Andrea Garland, a resident of New Orleans's Bywater neighborhood, sweltered in the heat near Waco, Texas. An antiwar activist, Garland protested the ongoing Iraq conflict with like-minded citizens, who camped near President Bush's Crawford getaway. As a way of spreading the good word, communicating with family and friends, and, presumably, whiling away long hours, Garland posted updates to her online diary, a so-called weblog, or "blog" for short, getyouracton.com. The entries at the start of August's last week offer a window into the righteous monotony of direct action: news of interest ("beautiful meteor showers" and possible clashes with a "white supremacist group"), reports on the group's state of mind ("everyone is sitting back and relaxing"), pleas for cash to support the cause ("tight on gas money"), public health updates ("Buddy and Anne got to take showers in the public campgrounds"), and swipes at the president's supporters ("Radical Rightwingers"). On August 28, though, Garland composed a rushed entry, noting that her posts were likely to become less frequent. A hurricane was bearing down on her hometown, she explained, and she would probably be distracted in the coming days. The storm was named Katrina. And Garland was right; she would have a lot on her mind because of the hurricane, as her thoughts turned from the horrifying carnage overseas to chaos much closer at hand.¹

On Friday, September 2, Garland posted a long entry, a "Letter to Family and Friends," on her blog. In it she described the destruction in New Orleans. She based her observations on conversations with people who had been in the city during the storm, as she had not yet

returned home. She focused especially on the devastation in her old neighborhood, which she explained stood just six blocks from the lower 9th Ward. The lower 9th, she noted, had already become infamous for its razing in the flood following the storm. Writing in homespun prose with what reads like a flat affect, she related, “Unfortunately, we have learned that the reason our part of the neighborhood flooded was not due to the hurricane, but rather to a misguided effort on the part of our government. Fearing that the flood waters would invade Uptown New Orleans (the wealthy, white part of town), they dynamited another hole in the levy on our side to let the flood waters in there and keeping them away from Uptown.” Without irony, she added, “Apparently they over did it with the dynamite.” Elected officials, then, had flooded large swaths of New Orleans, killing untold numbers of people.²

The rumor’s genealogy is likely more complicated than that, particularly if one seeks a single point of origin amidst the ruined landscape of post-Katrina New Orleans. Still, it seems Andrea Garland was among the first people publicly to claim that the levee protecting the lower 9th Ward had been intentionally destroyed. From there, though, the charge spread virally in the conspiracy theory hothouse that is the Internet, next hopped from cyberspace to television, then insinuated itself into political speeches, before finally achieving posterity as part of a documentary film. As the rumor made this trip, across time and space, from one media to the next, it lost standing in the public eye. What originally had been a local narrative, an understandable outpouring of rage over the impact of a preventable disaster, became a national joke, dismissed by most observers as just another conspiracy theory. Which is a shame, because the origins of the accusation are more complex and telling than such disdainful readings allow. The levee rumors, accurate or not, emerged not just from the immediate destruction of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath but from long chapters of New Orleans’s environmental history; from the social geography of settlement patterns in the city; and from contests over the production, control, and meaning of the levee across three centuries.

The story of Katrina’s impact on New Orleans reads like an overwrought script treatment for a disaster movie, almost too tragic to be believed. Around 6 a.m. on August 29, 2005, the storm hit the Gulf Coast, making landfall for the second time—it had already killed several people in the greater Miami area four days earlier, one of the many forgotten narratives of this expansive calamity. Some time before 8 a.m. on the 29th, brackish water began pouring into New Orleans. Before soaking the city, though, the flood, pushed by the storm up from the gulf through a series of smaller waterways, arrived in Lake Pontchartrain, at New Orleans’s rear. The engorged lake then overflowed into some of the canals that crisscross New Orleans, including the so-called Industrial Canal, an artificial waterway linking Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi River. The Industrial Canal also forms the lower 9th Ward’s western boundary.³

The lower 9th Ward makes up just small part of the city, especially given the outsized attention the neighborhood received following Katrina. Less than a mile and a half from east to west, and two miles from north to south, it is the downriver, “lower” in the local vernacular, portion of the city’s 9th Ward. Saint Bernard Parish sits to the east. The Mississippi River roils by to the south. Florida Avenue bounds the neighborhood’s northern side. And again, the Industrial Canal constitutes its western edge. The lower 9th is one of the city’s newest neighborhoods. Throughout the nineteenth century, most people who settled there lived near the river, on the highest available ground. New Orleanians considered even that area both remote from the city center and dangerous because of a huge cypress swamp lying just inland. Early

in the twentieth century, though, after drainage technologies reclaimed the wetlands, people, typically African Americans and recent white immigrants to the city, began occupying the low ground away from the Mississippi. The lower 9th still remained relatively isolated, a trait some local observers believe fostered an independent spirit of activism there. The community, for instance, helped lead New Orleans's school desegregation movement. Which, in turn, led to white flight in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. What had been a racially diverse area then became overwhelmingly African American.⁴

The mayhem on August 29 turned apocalyptic, a biblical flood, for the lower 9th as the day wore on. By late morning a toxic soup, as much as ten feet deep, submerged large parts of the neighborhood. Although reports at the time suggested that Katrina's massive storm surge had overtopped the levees, the Industrial Canal actually had breached in two spots: one close to Florida Avenue, the other further inland, near Claiborne Avenue. So instead of water gradually filling the area, a torrent stripped the landscape clean. The flood swept away cars, trees, and people. Tearing entire homes from their foundations, the raging water then randomly plopped them down at odd angles, far removed from their proper site. By day's end, the flood had erased much of the lower 9th, leaving in its wake a scene of unimaginable devastation.

With water still pouring into parts of New Orleans, recriminations began swirling, like another storm, around the city. A game of political hot potato ensued, with officials at all levels doing their best to deflect blame. President Bush, vacationing at his Crawford ranch at the time, first underestimated the carnage, then took in a birds-eye view of the Gulf Coast from Air Force One without landing to view the scene firsthand. The president lauded the performance of his FEMA director—"Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job"—before backtracking and finally insisting that Louisiana state and New Orleans city authorities were responsible for the destruction he still had not witnessed personally. Some members of congress, notably the Speaker of the House at the time, Illinois Republican Dennis Hastert, also blamed the victims, wondering aloud if it made sense to rebuild New Orleans and speculating that instead parts of the city "could be bulldozed." On September 1, New Orleans's Mayor Ray Nagin rebutted such comments in a now-famous radio interview. Giving voice to widespread outrage, Nagin suggested the federal government had abdicated its responsibilities. Louisiana's governor, Kathleen Blanco, meanwhile, seemed paralyzed by the magnitude of the devastation.⁵

As it became clear that Katrina was not merely an environmental catastrophe but also a political disaster, a perfect storm that might claim as many careers as it had lives, the charges and countercharges continued flying from Washington to the Gulf Coast before boomeranging back to the Beltway. The accusations ranged from the accurate to the absurd, from the thoughtful to the racist: President Bush had tapped a horse show expert to run the nation's disaster relief, cronyism with deadly consequences; New Orleans had slipped into a state of anarchy, with gangs of looters and rapists roaming the streets; Mayor Nagin had lost control of his city and himself; Governor Blanco lacked the resolve to lead Louisiana through perilous times; and so on, and so on.

Amidst such disparate claims, most of the elected officials involved, regardless of party affiliation, shared one thing in common: a rhetorical trope they apparently hoped would insulate them from culpability. President Bush, Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff, Mayor Nagin, and countless others all mislabeled the hurricane a "natural" disaster. In doing

so, they suggested the horror was beyond human control. Observing the sodden city, Ted Steinberg and other critics responded that this was neither a novel nor likely unintentional mistake. Calling disasters “natural” is a time-dishonored way of shunting blame for calamity onto the nonhuman world, allowing those in power to throw up their hands and say, collectively, “We were helpless in the face of the unchecked power of Mother Nature.” Structural inequalities, poor planning, mismanagement, all of which typically result in suffering being heaped upon the poor, the working classes, and communities of color during disasters, then go unmitigated. The status quo reigns, because natural, not social, factors are blamed for devastation. Although informed critics like Steinberg pointed this out—arguing that even if the hurricane was natural, a complex enough issue given climate change, the flood and death toll resulted from flawed engineering, an evacuation plan that left the poor and disabled behind, and tardy rescue efforts—besieged political figures drowned out this commentary.⁶

It was in that moment that residents of the 9th Ward entered the discussion, at least temporarily recasting the discourse from the bottom up. With parts of the city still under water, people like Andrea Garland raised their own questions about the origins of the Katrina debacle. Scholars typically suggest that conspiracy theories emerge from distrust of government. Elected officials have often misled the American people, the argument goes, and then time and again have been unmasked for these deceptions. Conspiracy theorists, as a result, doubt their government for good reasons and extrapolate from there, often blaming federal authorities for all manner of either unexplained or inexplicable events: NASA staged the moon landing, the FBI collaborated in the Kennedy assassination, the Air Force concealed evidence of encounters with extraterrestrial life in New Mexico, and so on. Patricia Turner, the leading expert on rumors and urban legends within the African American community, adds that for black people conspiracy theories are “tools of resistance for many of the folk who share them.” African Americans, in other words, circulate conspiracy theories as a way of countering oppression and maintaining some control over their environment.⁷

So it was with the levee rumors. All New Orleanians had good reason at the start of September 2005 to doubt the government, particularly at the federal level. President Bush seemed more focused on protecting his administration than the battered Gulf Coast. The media had caught him in a series of obfuscations and half-truths in the wake of the storm, including his absurd nationally televised claim that “I don’t think anybody anticipated the break of the levees.” As many New Orleanians knew, though, experts *had* foreseen the levee breach, a threat that had been well documented, including in a series of articles, “Washing Away,” which had run in the city’s largest paper, the *Times Picayune*, three years earlier. Individuals like Andrea Garland, among the president’s most committed critics, did not have to be convinced that federal authority could not be trusted. But Katrina transformed even the most credulous New Orleanians into skeptics. As for the city’s uprooted working classes and African American residents of the lower 9th Ward, they watched as their historically rooted anxieties played out in real time during Katrina. After they were evacuated, armed troops would not allow them to return to their homes to search through the waterlogged remains of their shattered lives. And Speaker Hastert’s intemperate comments fueled worries among people who viewed bulldozers as symbols of the looming menace of forced urban renewal.⁸

In addition to such broad worries about governmental dishonesty, local historical factors also helped midwife the levee rumors: powerful collective memories of past disasters in the city, the anxiety that has always surrounded flooding in New Orleans, and ongoing worries

about the levees designed to keep it dry. Water has often submerged large parts of the city, including the lower 9th Ward in 1965, when Hurricane Betsy's storm surge inundated the district. And the levee has been intentionally destroyed before, most infamously in 1927, when a cabal of wealthy New Orleanians protected their interests at the expense of their poorer neighbors. As a result, politicians' efforts to naturalize a disaster so overtly unnatural in origin heaped insult atop mortal injury for displaced New Orleanians, who, as Turner suggests, used conspiracy theories to galvanize their community and subvert a dominant discourse that minimized their plight while threatening their recovery. Suffering conferred upon these people, many of whom had recently been clinging to slivers of dry land as the deluge swept away their belongings, their loved ones, their communities, a measure of moral authority. Now they wondered if the Industrial Canal's levee failure had been less natural even than Ted Steinberg and others intimated. Perhaps, they suggested, the levee had been sabotaged. Perhaps elite New Orleanians had sacrificed the lower 9th and its largely poor and African American population so that other districts of the city, wealthier and whiter districts, could be preserved throughout the hurricane and flood.

On September 5, these accusations moved, beyond the self-selecting audience that frequents relatively obscure blogs, to television. That evening, ABC News's David Muir ran a story in which Joe Edwards Jr., a 9th Ward resident, insisted that the city had demolished the Industrial Canal levee. In response to Muir's prompting, Edwards said, "They blew it." The next day, charges whose genesis lay with people like Garland and Edwards, individuals directly affected by the disaster, spread throughout the World Wide Web. Now heavily trafficked political sites, including DailyKos, picked up the thread, not as a novelty but as an open question: had the levee been demolished as part of a land grab, to protect the city's relatively white and affluent uptown neighborhood, or to preserve the French Quarter and its tourists dollars? Around that same time, even mainstream political commentators derided the federal disaster response as embarrassing. Twenty-four-hour news channels beamed nonstop images into viewers' homes of New Orleanians pleading for help from rooftops. Mayor Nagin and Governor Blanco spoke of the dead as possibly numbering in the thousands. Exaggerated stories of the horror that had unfolded in the Superdome and Convention Center shocked the world. And all of New Orleans remained both militarized and almost entirely cut off from the rest of the nation. In short, it seemed that anything might be possible, no matter how grim or farfetched.⁹

A week later, on September 12, the rumors' stature shifted, gaining even more notoriety but losing credibility. Speaking in Charlotte, North Carolina, the leader of the Nation of Islam, Minister Louis Farrakhan, cited a "very reliable source" in claiming that the levee "may have been blown up to destroy the Black part of town and keep the White part dry." DailyKos is one thing, Minister Farrakhan quite another. A racial lightning rod and media magnet practiced in guerilla public relations, Farrakhan's involvement raised the story's profile. Conservative media outlets, especially, began conflating all charges of levee sabotage under the rubric of Farrakhan's speech. Rush Limbaugh, for instance, singled out Farrakhan and his claims for a predictable blend of derision and bluster. Fox's blow-dried shoutfest, *Hannity and Colmes*, also lampooned Farrakhan's involvement in the levee story the week of September 19. In doing so, the show's cohosts, Sean Hannity and Alan Colmes, ignored broader questions about the levee's unnatural destruction and the fate of the lower 9th Ward. They focused instead on Farrakhan's history of incendiary comments. In effect,

Hannity and Colmes naturalized the levee rumors, placing them within a racialized discourse notorious for flights of fancy.¹⁰

The levee sabotage discussion had previously bubbled up from the thick muck covering much of the lower 9th Ward. It had been spontaneous and indigenous to New Orleans. And it had turned on at least three pivots: anger, rooted in the city's long history of racial injustice, dating back at least as far as New Orleans's centrality in the antebellum slave trade; resentment over socioeconomic inequities, concentrated in one of the most impoverished neighborhoods of the nation's ninth poorest metropolis; and the city's long and tragic disaster history, a narrative of repeated environmental injustices in which the poor and communities of color often suffered disproportionately. Minister Farrakhan's involvement, though, allowed conservative pundits to shift and simplify the discussion, in the process robbing it of any legitimacy. Suddenly, the allegations of demolition hinged only on questions of race, rather than class and history too, and for white conservatives the so-called reverse racism of the Nation of Islam.

Less than a month after Minister Farrakhan's Charlotte speech, Spike Lee, filming his documentary, *When the Levees Broke*, in New Orleans, jumped into the controversy with both feet. In an interview on CNN, Daryn Kagan asked Lee whether he subscribed to the theory that the levee had been intentionally destroyed—in this iteration of the rumor by federal authorities. Lee, drawing on his interactions with uprooted residents of the lower 9th Ward, replied that he would not “put anything past the United States government,” before suggesting that elite New Orleanians were using the mayhem as a pretext for dispossessing poor African Americans. Ten days later, Lee appeared on Bill Maher's HBO talk show, generating even more controversy. Lee explained to Maher the depth of anxiety among displaced New Orleanians and argued that the levee rumors were “not farfetched.” He then had a long back-and-forth with the other guests booked on the show that evening, ABC reporter Michel Martin and MSNBC's bowtied conservative talking head Tucker Carlson. Carlson, in one of the evening's harshest exchanges, accused Lee of “feed[ing] the paranoia and the craziness.” The filmmaker rejoined by raising the specter of the Tuskegee syphilis experiments, the lingering impact of flooding after Hurricane Betsy, and historical memories of the 1927 flood.¹¹

Although his efforts went unnoticed at the time—with Carlson whining, “I'm not going to sit here for your history lesson”—Lee tried not only to highlight the national precedents for deadly conspiracies against African Americans but also the particularly cruel facets of New Orleans's history of catastrophe. Rather than allowing critics to cast the levee controversy as a rant associated with polarizing figures occupying the national stage, like Minister Farrakhan or himself, Lee, in sum, worked to resituate the rumors in the community of their origin: the lower 9th Ward. Some New Orleanians did the same. In an interview with New Orleans's African American newspaper, *Louisiana Weekly*, Reynold Fenelon, a cabdriver in the city, returned to the theme of unnatural disaster. “Mother Nature is one thing, but this goes beyond Mother Nature,” he contended. “They blew that levee. I believe the Canal Street levee broke [another breach] but they blew that one by the 9th ward.” With large swaths of the city still soggy, and discussions of rebuilding just under way, Fenelon tried to reclaim a discussion that had been seized by elites and root it back in his community. And as quickly as that, he also dismissed claims that the disaster had been, by any measure, natural.¹²

It did not work. The story had become so closely associated with Minister Farrakhan and, by then, Spike Lee, that it was an impossible task to return it to the people of New

Orleans. National attention remained fixed on the place the levee rumors would occupy within *When the Levees Broke*. And so, as Katrina's first anniversary neared, and with it the film's premier in New Orleans and then on HBO, the levee charges lingered in the public eye. Film critics, who nearly universally praised Lee's decision to forgo traditional voice-over narration in favor of allowing his subjects to speak for themselves, as well as the elegiac qualities of his documentary, still tripped on the levee rumors, dismissing them as conspiratorial nonsense. In doing so, these observers missed a critical point: Lee, as on Bill Maher's show, did not endorse the discussion so much as place it in historical context while giving its exponents a platform from which to express their outrage. Context, in this case, meant environmental history: of the significance of the levee in New Orleans, of urban morphology and settlement, of the 1927 flood, and of Hurricane Betsy.¹³

The levee in New Orleans is a lifeboat aboard a sinking ship; without it people will die. And this has always been so. Indeed, New Orleans would not exist absent the levee. When the French founded the city, in 1718, they settled entirely on the Mississippi River's natural levee, land deposited across millennia through a geomorphological process known as dynamic sedimentation. Levee formation happened something like this: historically, the Mississippi overflowed in the springtime, after snowmelt in its upper valley caused first its tributaries and then the trunk stream to swell; after water left the confining riverbanks, the resulting inundation's current slackened suddenly; the flood, lacking sufficient kinetic energy to suspend solid material, deposited the mud, sand, and loam it had carried from throughout the continent's midsection. Over time, long sedimentary ramps formed flanking the river as a result: the natural levees. It was on that land, in a crescent-shaped meander approximately one hundred miles upstream from the gulf, that French colonists planned a metropolis they believed God and nature, working together, had destined for greatness. They called their city New Orleans.¹⁴

From the first, though, environmental hazards clouded colonists' grand visions of commercial empire. The high ground of the river's natural levee, on which the French built their city, sloped downward a mile and a half away from the Mississippi, gradually losing fifteen feet of elevation across that distance. From there, at the city's rear, huge wetlands, known locally as the "backswamp," stretched several damp miles to the shore of Lake Pontchartrain. New Orleans, then, was a shallow bowl surrounded by a high lip of levees. Although the city jutted above the nearby wetlands and bayous, the Mississippi, particularly when it rose during flood seasons, loomed over New Orleans. So New Orleanians attempted to improve the levee from the earliest period of the city's history. After a flood nearly swept New Orleans away in 1719, for instance, engineers began supplementing the natural levee as a way of keeping the city dry. By 1727, workers had built an earthen mound, eighteen feet wide and a yard high, along a mile of the riverfront. Still New Orleans flooded, including huge inundations in 1735, 1775, and 1783. Laborers struggled throughout the colonial period, building up the artificial levee. By the time the United States purchased Louisiana from France, in 1803, an improved levee snaked its way between Baton Rouge and New Orleans.¹⁵

Across the nineteenth century, those public works were neither effective enough to prevent periodic flooding nor to ameliorate a pervasive sense of potential calamity hanging in the humid air around the city. New Orleanians, consequently, had something of a schizophrenic relationship with the river. They revered it as a benefactor, rightly seeing its waters as their city's commercial lifeblood. But they also knew that if the stream rose high enough

or their rudimentary flood control technologies failed, the Mississippi might wash them away. And because it was the only thing standing between them and sure destruction, the city's residents often focused their worries on the artificial levee. A traveler visiting New Orleans on the eve of the Civil War summed up the scene and the city's fears. "The Mississippi was more than bank full," he wrote. "It was a fearful sight to see the vast river, more than a mile wide, rising inch by inch until it reached the top of the levee, when hundreds of ships and steamers were floating far above the level of the streets—as high, indeed, as the roofs of the houses in the back streets of town. What a deluge, if the dyke had given way!"¹⁶

At the same time, perceptions of the levee varied considerably within different communities in New Orleans, as the embankment became a tool of social control and a symbol of entrenched racial and socioeconomic hierarchies in the city. African Americans, especially, viewed the levee not as a municipal savior but with dread. In the years leading to the Civil War, slavers docked their ships at New Orleans's waterfront, pointing their prows toward the city's markets. They then offloaded human cargo onto the levee, the first site greeting individuals who would be sold from there into enduring hardship. So although the levee, because of its multiracial, polyglot crowds, sometimes served as a place where slaves could lose themselves, boarding riverboats and fleeing for freedom in the North, it remained a site associated with exploitation. That perception deepened after the city regularized levee construction early in the American period, and the Conseil de Ville (city council) began using slaves and convict labor for construction. African Americans, then, often did the backbreaking work of building the levee, inscribing that space with even more tragic resonance.¹⁷

Race alone did not determine how people perceived the levee; class, too, played a role. When New Orleans flooded throughout the nineteenth century, the poor and working people typically suffered the most. In 1849, for example, the levee failed upriver at the Sauve plantation. Water poured into the city, collecting on the low ground, terrain usually occupied by the least affluent New Orleanians. Eventually, more than two hundred blocks flooded, forcing ten thousand people from their homes. The water lingered in parts of the city's bowl for six weeks. Years later, the novelist and social critic George Washington Cable, for whom New Orleans always served as lovable punching bag, noted these disparities of experience along the socioeconomic spectrum. Wealthy neighborhoods were "not engulfed," Cable wrote. "Life is not endangered; trade goes on in its main districts mostly dry-shod, and the merchant goes and comes between his home and his counting-room as usual in the tinkling street-cars, merely catching glimpses of the water down the cross-streets. . . . The humbler classes, on the other hand, suffer severely." And in the end "the rich and the authorities, having defaulted in the ounce of prevention, come forward with their ineffectual pound of cure; relief committees are formed and skiffs ply back and forth distributing bread to the thus doubly humbled and doubly damaged poor." Scenes like these became seeds, later watered by innumerable other floods, that eventually grew into rumors after Katrina.¹⁸

Environmental inequalities spread at the start of the twentieth century, when the city began employing industrial technologies, along with federal funding, in constructing ever-higher levees and reclaiming local wetlands. For nearly two centuries, New Orleans had been confined to a narrow strip of land atop the Mississippi's natural levee, the so-called sliver by the river. Starting in 1900, though, a web of gravity-fed canals linked to pumping stations, accompanied by new levees, promised that the city could finally drain the backswamp while

keeping the river and lake from overflowing into newly urbanized districts. In many respects, the plan worked. New Orleans constructed its levees and elaborate drainage system, powerful symbols of Progressive city planning. By 1915, higher levees and newly drained land meant that low-lying sections of the city, previously covered by wetlands, could be settled. In 1890, New Orleans's tax rolls included \$132 million worth of property; by 1914, that number had nearly doubled.¹⁹

There was just one problem: as the levee rose and new districts of the city sprang up, urban-environmental feedback loops resulted in problems planners and engineers had not foreseen. Higher levees and accelerating upstream development shunted more water into the Mississippi every year, raising river heights and increasing the risk of flooding in New Orleans. Improved levees also trapped moisture within the city, requiring pumps to push unwanted water, including from the torrential rains that sometimes fell on the region, out of the city. If the pumps failed, in other words, New Orleans would fill to the brim with water, which the levees trapped inside the metropolis's confines. And the first districts to flood usually would be the newest, built on the lowest land, terrain whose vanished wetlands had once served New Orleans as a sponge, lapping up excess water.²⁰

New Orleanians, in sum, were becoming ever more reliant on technological solutions to protect them from constraints inherent in their environment. And the poor and people of color often paid the price for this dependence. Districts like the 9th Ward typically flooded when a hard rain fell. In part this was so because of topography; the lower 9th Ward, particularly, lies on some of the lowest ground in the metropolitan area. Worse still, the neighborhood, far from the central business district and home to people who often lacked voices in the city's overheated political conversations, has some of the least effective drainage apparatus in New Orleans. So time and again, the lower 9th's residents demanded improved infrastructure, insisting that the city not ignore their needs. And just as often their community filled with water, as storms overwhelmed the pumps designed to keep the bowl dry. All of which resulted in more and lingering resentment accompanying the city's expansion, as well as a sense among some of its least affluent citizens that during floods, they got wet while elites stayed dry.²¹

All of this careless urban planning and shortsighted engineering came to a head in the spring of 1927, when the city's disproportionate and horrifying response to the threat of catastrophic flooding rooted long-standing anxieties about the levee in grim historical facts. Lingering memories of the 1927 flood in the city, in turn, inform the current rumors surrounding the ostensible planned destruction of the levee during Katrina.

With an unprecedented flood making its way downstream toward the city, on April 15, 1927, Good Friday, a massive downpour dumped nearly fifteen inches of rain on New Orleans. Confronting more precipitation in a day than the city usually received in its wettest month, the drainage system failed. New Orleans, as it had often throughout its history, began filling with water. But this inundation was different, if not in kind or quantity, then in its impact. Rising water, a catastrophe for people residing on low ground, became a public relations disaster for the wealthiest New Orleanians, though they usually lived on high. It mattered neither that the river still ran behind the intact levee nor that the flood in the city came from the Good Friday storm. With the engorged river upstream garnering front-page headlines nationwide, the city's commercial community worried that even if the levee held locally, skittish investors might nonetheless pull their money, causing an irredeemable financial

calamity. As a result, advertising executives, bankers, newspaper editors, and other elite professionals formed the ad hoc Citizens Flood Relief Committee (CFRC). And although engineers and meteorologists assured them that the city's defenses would hold, because inferior levees upriver were likelier to fail, members of the CFRC concluded that they needed to take action. Without legal authority to do so, they decided to blow up the levee twenty miles downstream of the city.²²

After promising compensation to the residents of St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parishes, who would be displaced by the carefully planned disaster, the CFRC's members turned the levee's destruction into a public spectacle. In doing so, they unwittingly lodged tableaux of greed, outsized urban power, and unchecked class privilege into the historical consciousness of the region's population. First came a week of conflict with the people of the doomed parishes, including episodes of gunplay along the levee. Next came a forced evacuation, generating images of families taking to the road with all of their possessions loaded onto sagging trucks. After that, explosions, and then a scene, described by St. Bernard Parish's Sheriff L. A. Mereaux as a "public execution," of water rushing from the demolished levee into the soon-to-be ruined parishes. By that time, a river levee far upstream from New Orleans, near Mound Landing, Mississippi, had already collapsed, as predicted. Still the planned flood poured from the breach below New Orleans, sweeping away homes and the agricultural and trapping lands upon which many local people depended economically. In the wake of the flood, the CFRC proved less generous with reparations than it had promised, prompting the flood victims to file a series of lawsuits and guaranteeing bad blood for generations to come. The message was clear: elite New Orleanians would protect themselves, no matter the cost, even if that meant manufacturing a flood.²³

The fear sown by the CFRC's fateful choice to destroy the levee, the complicity of officials at all levels of government in that decision, and the flood that resulted flowed through time, arriving in 1965, when Hurricane Betsy struck New Orleans on September 9. Then, as in 2005, wind pushed a huge storm surge up from the Gulf of Mexico into Lake Pontchartrain. Then, as in 2005, Pontchartrain overflowed into the Industrial Canal. Then, as in 2005, the levees protecting the lower 9th Ward—as well as several other districts of the city—failed, leading to catastrophic flooding. Then, as in 2005, some residents of the lower 9th insisted that the levees had been dynamited, that their district of New Orleans had been sacrificed, much as St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parishes had been in 1927, so that wealthier districts of the city would remain dry. And then, as in 2005, it did not matter that flooding leveled even some of the city's most affluent and whitest neighborhoods, including the Lakefront District. In 2005, many residents of the 9th Ward looked back four decades, to Hurricane Betsy, recalling that the Corps of Engineers had promised that new and improved levees would ensure that such a disaster would never happen again. Bad memories like these and of other horrible chapters of the city's disaster history provided the context in which rumors of the levee's intentional destruction circulated throughout the 9th Ward after Katrina.²⁴

Andrea Garland, it turns out, was among the lucky ones. Her house, though damaged by the flood, survived the storm. Just two weeks after Katrina made landfall on the Gulf Coast, Garland returned to New Orleans, where she began rebuilding her life and community. Despite her relative good fortune, what she found in the 9th Ward deepened her certitude that the levee had been intentionally demolished: armed troops patrolling the area and keeping people from their homes; piecemeal, at best, relief efforts; and little planning for

the future, save for the “developers” “salivating at the ‘new’ New Orleans they will build.” And so, ten days after returning to her waterlogged home, Garland visited the scene of the crime, the Florida Avenue levee, where she found “no left over sticks of dynamite lying there, no obvious signs.” Acknowledging skepticism about her theory, she still would “stand by what I have heard—reports from a source who I have every reason to believe, and more and more mention of people who lived in the lower 9th claim to have heard explosions.” And yet she remained hopeful, because “this city is born of hardship, and survives not despite, but because of it.” “There is no place like home and we are not going to watch it being taken from us.”²⁵

All of which brings us back to those rumors, rumors labeled dangerous, racist, and irrational by many observers. But as Andrea Garland’s blog demonstrates, residents of the lower 9th Ward did not perpetuate the levee rumors because they are irrational, because they want to infuriate right-wing pundits, or because they hate people who are white or wealthy. Rather, they did so because they faced real danger and survived. They did so because their homes washed away, because much of their neighborhood remains in a shambles, and because the fabric of their community, at least as long as they were scattered across the country, had been torn. They did so because they wanted those things repaired, because they wanted to return. They did so because, in the future, they want their homes, their neighborhood, and their community to be safer. They did so because they knew that the disaster they survived was unnatural, and that as long as people insisted otherwise, little would change to ensure that such a thing would not happen again. They did so, then, because they were trying to diminish the danger, because they were seeking environmental justice. And yes, they did so because they believed that they, and people like them, have been wronged by their government—not just during and after Katrina, but throughout the city’s and nation’s history. They did so, in sum, because bitter experience had taught them that even paranoids have enemies.

Notes

1. See various posts at <http://getyouracton.com/blog/?m=200508>. “Beautiful meteor showers” can be found in the entry, “Evening Update from Camp Casey 1,” August 26, 2005. “White supremacist groups” can be found in the entry, “Morning Update from Camp Casey!” August 26, 2005. “Everyone is sitting back and relaxing” can be found in the entry, “Morning Update from Camp Casey!” August 26, 2005. “Tight on gas money” can be found in the entry, “Please help my friend get to Camp Casey!” August 26, 2005. “Buddy and Anne got to take showers in the public campgrounds” can be found in the entry, “Evening Update from Camp Casey 1,” August 26, 2005. “Radical Rightwingers” can be found in the entry, “Evening update from Camp Casey,” August 27, 2005. For news of Katrina, see “Hurricanes & Update,” August 28, 2005.

2. All quotes can be found in the entry, “Friday Morning Letter to Family and Friends,” September 2, 2005, at <http://www.getyouracton.com/blog/?p=63>.

3. The two best sources for information on the day-to-day news of Hurricane Katrina remain contemporary updates, posted throughout the storm and during its aftermath by the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* on its Web site and the extraordinary coverage of the disaster in the *New York Times*. The former has been archived at <http://www.nola.com/katrina/updates/>. The latter is easily available online at the paper’s Web site: <http://www.nytimes.com/>. A useful interactive timeline, one of many available, of the disaster can also be found at <http://thinkprogress.org/katrina-timeline>.

4. An outstanding and easily accessible collection of data on New Orleans’s neighborhoods can be found at <http://www.gnocdc.org/index.html>. For information on the Lower Ninth Ward particularly, see <http://www.gnocdc.org/orleans/8/22/snapshot.html>.

5. Given the popular outcry about President Bush's belated visit to the Gulf Coast, it is surprising that photos of him viewing Katrina's devastation from the comfort of Air Force One can still be viewed at http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/08/images/20050831_p083105pm-0117jas-515h.html. Maureen Dowd mocked the president for lauding Michael Brown in "United States of Shame," *New York Times*, September 3, 2005. Hastert's glib comment, and his failed effort to walk back that sound bite, appear in "Hastert Tries Damage Control after Remarks Hit a Nerve," *Washington Post*, September 3, 2005. On September 1, 2005, Nagin appeared live with Garland Robinette on WWL Radio. The relevant part of the interview can be heard at <http://www.atypical.net/mm/nagin.mp3>.

6. As late as President Bush's address to the nation from Jackson Square on September 15, 2005, he still clung to the rhetoric of a natural disaster, though commentators had debunked such fictions by then. For the text of that speech, see <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/09/20050915-8.html>. More than a month after the storm, on October 19, 2005, Secretary Chertoff testified before the House of Representatives Special Committee on Katrina. He, too, still clung to the language of a natural disaster as to a life preserver in trying to keep his department above water. The complete text of his testimony can be found at http://72.14.253.104/search?q=cache:L_zvd4671LgJ:katrina.house.gov/hearings/10_19_05/chertoff_state101905.DOC+michael+chertoff+%22natural+disaster%22&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=7&gl=us&client=safari. Nagin called Katrina a natural disaster in his WWL interview: <http://www.atypical.net/mm/nagin.mp3>. Steinberg's quotes initially appeared in "Man-Made Mistakes Increase Devastation of 'Natural' Disasters," *Wall Street Journal*, September 2, 2005 and "Where Most See a Weather System, Some See Divine Retribution," *Washington Post*, September 4, 2005. See also Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), xi-68.

7. Turner's quote appears in Patricia A. Turner, *I Heard It through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), xvi. See also Anita M. Waters, "Conspiracy Theories as Ethnosociologies: Explanation and Intention in African American Political Culture," *Journal of Black Studies* 28 (September 1997): 112-25.

8. President Bush made his gaffe on September 1, 2005, in an interview with Diane Sawyer on ABC television's *Good Morning America*. For the most chilling, but by no means the only, prediction of the disaster following Katrina, see: "Washing Away," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, June 23-27, 2002.

9. The story can be viewed in its entirety at the conspiracy theory Web site [prisonplanet.com](http://www.prisonplanet.com): <http://www.prisonplanet.com/articles/september2005/120905explosivesblew.htm>. For the discussion on [DailyKos.com](http://www.dailykos.com), see <http://www.dailykos.com/storyonly/2005/9/7/01752/03876>.

10. The first reports of Farrakhan's speech appeared on WCNC, an NBC affiliate in Charlotte, the evening of September 12, 2005. Farrakhan's quote and significant pieces of the speech can be found at <http://www.wncn.com/news/topstories/stories/091205-ad-wcnc-farrakhan.4fb21767.html>. Limbaugh's response, an extended rant about the ways in which African Americans were hurting their own cause, is at <http://www.wcnc.com/news/topstories/stories/091205-ad-wcnc-farrakhan.4fb21767.html>. For Hannity's race-baiting, see http://www.newshounds.us/2005/09/21/more_racebaiting_on_hannity_colmes.php.

11. A complete rough transcript of Daryn Kagan's CNN interview with Spike Lee can be found at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0510/11/lt.02.html>. A portion of Bill Maher's interview with Lee, Tucker Carlson, and Michel Martin can be viewed at <http://youtube.com/watch?v=U14iTFQOtJs>.

12. Carlson's rant can be seen at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0510/11/lt.02.html>. See also "Rumors Continue to Flood the Blogosphere," *Louisiana Weekly*, February 20, 2006.

13. The best and most poignant example of this sort of rave review, tempered by anxiety over the inclusion, meaning, and potential impact of the levee rumors, appeared in the *New Orleans Times Picayune*: "On the Air," *New Orleans Times Picayune*, August 16, 2006.

14. On levee formation, see Charles R. Kolb and Jack R. Van Lopik, "Depositional Environments of the Mississippi River Deltaic Plain," in Martha Lou Shirley, ed., *Deltas in Their Geologic Framework* (Houston, TX: Houston Geologic Society, 1969), 17; and Roger T. Saucier, *Geomorphology and Quaternary Geologic History of the Lower Mississippi Valley* (Vicksburg, VA: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Waterways Experiment Station, 1994), 136-41. On the levee, topography, and the French settlement of New Orleans, see Ari Kelman, *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 1-49, 157-96; Tristram Kidder, "Making the City Inevitable: Native Americans and the Geography of New Orleans," in Craig Colten, ed., *Transforming New Orleans and Its Environs: Centuries of Change* (Pittsburgh,

PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 9-21; and Christopher Morris, "Impenetrable but Easy: The French Transformation of the Lower Mississippi Valley and the Founding of New Orleans," in Colten, *Transforming New Orleans*, 22-44.

15. On flooding and levee construction early in the city's history, see Donald W. Davis, "Historical Perspective on Crevasses, Levees, and the Mississippi River," in Colten, *Transforming New Orleans*, 84-106; Benjamin G. Humphreys, *Floods and Levees of the Mississippi River* (Washington, DC: The Mississippi River Levee Association, 1914), 17-20; and Kelman, *A River and Its City*, 157-70.

16. Quote appears in Thomas Low Nichols, *Forty Years of American Life, 1821-1861* (New York: Stackpole Sons, n.d.), 129.

17. See Letters, Petitions, Reports of the City Engineer, and Work Orders for May 12, 14, 1806; March 3, 1807; March 24, 1807; October 30, 1807; December 28, 1812; February 2, 1819; November 15, 1828; and September 30, 1831, in Municipal Papers, Kuntz Collections, MSS 600, Special Collections, Manuscript Division, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

18. On Sauve's Crevasse and the lingering impact of the 1849 flood, see Craig Colten, *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 26-27; Davis, "Historical Perspectives on Crevasses," 96-97; Kelman, *A River and Its City*, 162-70; and George E. Waring and George Washington Cable, "History and Present Condition of New Orleans, Louisiana," in *Tenth Census, Report on the Social Condition of Cities*, XIX, part 2 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1887), 249. The Cable quote appears in George Washington Cable, *Creoles of Louisiana* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1884), 271.

19. The best set of primary sources for understanding the drainage system's growth is *Semi-annual Report of the Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans* (various years). See also Colten, *An Unnatural Metropolis*, 140-92; and Ari Kelman, "The Cat became the Companion of the Crawfish": The Struggle to Reclaim New Orleans's Wetlands," *Historical Geography* 32 (Fall 2004): 157-80. The statistic on assessed taxable property can be found in Martin Behrman, *New Orleans: A History of Three Great Public Utilities* (New Orleans, LA: Brando Print, 1914), 5.

20. On the unintended consequences of draining the city, see Colten, *Unnatural Metropolis*, 140-92; and Kelman, "The Cat became the Companion of the Crawfish," 171-80. For rising river heights, see John Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 157-75; and Kelman, *A River and Its City*, 161-70.

21. See Colten, *Unnatural Metropolis*, 154-55.

22. On the Good Friday storm, the 1927 flood, and the decision to dynamite the levee below the city, see Barry, *Rising Tide*, 189-257, 340-99; and Kelman, *A River and Its City*, 157-96.

23. *Ibid.*, and "public execution" can be found in Kelman, *A River and Its City*, 183.

24. After Katrina, 9th Ward resident Mia Adams recalled the impact of Betsy on her community. The interview can be heard at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4826455>. See also Colten, *Unnatural Metropolis*, 154; "Answers: Hurricane Betsy Hit Florida, Smashed New Orleans in 1965," *USA Today*, October 21, 2003; and "Under the Gun: Schiro Famed, Nagin Blamed for Hurricane Response," *New Orleans City Business*, August 14, 2006.

25. The quotes "developers . . . salivating at the 'new' New Orleans they will build," "this city is born of hardship, and survives not despite, but because of it," and "there is no place like home and we are not going to watch it being taken from us" all can be found in the entry "Going Home," September 11, 2005, <http://getyouracton.com/blog/?m=200509>. "There were no left over sticks of dynamite lying there . . ." and "stand by what I have heard" can be found in the entry "New Orleans to D.C. and back again," September 27, 2005, <http://getyouracton.com/blog/?m=200509>.

Ari Kelman is an associate professor in the history department at the University of California, Davis. His first book, *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans* (University of California Press, 2003), won the 2004 Abbott Lowell Cummings prize. Professor Kelman's writing has appeared in a number of scholarly and popular journals, including *Slate*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, *The Nation*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, the *Journal of American History*, and many others. He is currently writing a book about the struggle to memorialize the Sand Creek Massacre.

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