HOW WE CAME BACK

Voices from Post-Katrina New Orleans

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George Mason University
Arlington, Virginia

Book cover and interior design by Joanna Andreasson
Typesetting by Thomas J. Piwowar & Associates, Inc.
Editorial services by Publications Professionals LLC

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Storr, Nona Martin.
How we came back : voices from post-Katrina New Orleans / by Nona Martin Storr, Emily Chamlee-Wright, and Virgil Henry Storr.
pages cm
ISBN 978-1-942951-14-8 (paperback) -- ISBN 978-1-942951-15-5 (kindle ebook)
1. Neighborhoods--Louisiana--New Orleans--History--21st century. 2. Hurricane Katrina, 2005--Social aspects--Louisiana--New Orleans. 3. Urban renewal--Louisiana--New Orleans--History--21st century. 4. Disaster relief--Louisiana--New Orleans--History--21st century. 5. Community life--Louisiana--New Orleans--History--21st century. 6. Disaster victims--Louisiana--New Orleans--Biography. 7. New Orleans (La.)--Biography. 8. New Orleans (La.)--Social conditions--21st century. 9. New Orleans (La.)--Social life and customs--21st century.
I. Chamlee-Wright, Emily, 1966- II. Storr, Virgil Henry, 1975- III. Title.
F379.N56A276 2015
976.3'35064--dc23
2015009192

Printed in the United States of America

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Foreword
THE ANATOMY OF RECOVERY

Nona Martin Storr, Emily Chamlee-Wright, and Virgil Henry Storr have compiled an intimate and detailed account of the trials and tribulations the people of New Orleans encountered in trying to rebuild their businesses, their churches, their communities, their families, and ultimately their lives after Hurricane Katrina. *How We Came Back* is a collection of oral histories that explores how individuals strive to resume "normal" life after a disaster.

As the principal investor of the broader project of which this volume is a part, I could not be prouder. When I started my social science career as an economist in the field of Sovietology, one of my strongest influences methodologically was Alain Besançon's essay "Anatomy of a Spectre." As he argued,

> The Soviet economy is the subject of a considerable volume of scholarly work which occupies numerous study centers in Europe and the United States and which provides material for a vast literature and various academic journals. *But those born in the Soviet Union or those who approach Soviet society through history, literature, travel or through listening to what the émigrés have to say, find that they cannot*

> *recognize what the economists describe.* There seems to be an unbridgeable gap between this system, conceived through measurements and figures, and the other system, without measurements or figures, which they have come to know through intuition and their own actual experience.*

With the encouragement of my advisor at George Mason University, economist Don Lavoie, I started to think of ways to analytically combine a form of rational choice institutionalism (praxeology broadly understood) with more narrative and interpretative empirical work (*Verstehen* broadly understood). This approach to understanding social phenomena respects the past and recognizes the value of listening to the stories people tell themselves and tell others about themselves. It also recognizes the importance of economic ethnography, which is critical to pursuing what economist and historian Deirdre McCloskey has described as an "empirical yet Austrian economics." This approach maintains the argumentative structure of rational choice institutionalism, but it uses that analytical framework to interpret human action from the purposes, plans, and understanding of the actors themselves in their unique circumstances. We must listen and learn from those on the ground.

In addition to Besançon's work in Sovietology, which suggested ethnography as a viable empirical strategy, I was also deeply influenced by the work of Nobel Prize–winning economist Elinor Ostrom on the nature of the rules in use as opposed to the stated, formal rules that constitute the working institutions in the rational choice institutionalism framework. She, too, focused on the informal sector on the ground.

The informal economy became a major theme of my research on the workings of the Soviet-type economy as well as the starting point for the analysis of that system's reform

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* Alain Besançon, "Anatomy of a Spectre," *Survey* (October 1980): 143–59, emphasis added.

that occupied my research efforts for much of the 1990s. The lessons from the Soviet experience expand beyond the fields of Sovietology and comparative economic systems. They lead to radically rethinking the entire project of political economy and the economics of everyday life.

Virgil Storr and I wrote a paper about what we called at the time "post-classical political economy." We emphasized the triple embeddedness of social action, in which the economic and financial aspects of human action overlap with the political and legal aspects as well as the social and cultural aspects. A proper political economy analysis, we argued, cannot ignore the embeddedness of human action and the pattern of exchange and production relationships that emerges in that context. Outcomes, in short, are context dependent. Like Ostrom, we don't deny that we can learn from more formal structures in theory, or from more controlled settings in our empirics, but we insist, like Besançon and Ostrom, that a lot can be learned from the folks on the ground. Indeed, we need to listen and learn from the voices on the ground before we analyze and diagnose their situations with the aid of our theoretical framework, and we need to evaluate the analytic narratives we construct against this ultimate empirical check: the beliefs, thoughts, aspirations, and meanings of those living the experience we are trying to analyze.

Influenced by this perspective, shortly after 2000, the Mercatus Center at George Mason University formed a research team to examine the role of institutions in economic development and the political economy of transitioning economies. For several years, we had research teams in less developed countries and in transitioning economies. Members of the research team published journal articles, dissertations, and books addressing issues in countries from the Czech Republic to China, from emerging markets to failed and weak states. From 2000 through 2005, this group was very productive, and we learned a lot from our on-the-ground research about the

political economy of everyday life and the prospects and perils of economic reform efforts.

The critical next move was to examine disasters and disaster recovery using the tools of economics. "Disaster economics" is a sub-branch of development economics. In August 2005, as we saw the horrific events caused by Hurricane Katrina's landfall on the Gulf Coast, we committed to studying the recovery process over the next five years to learn what we could about how resilient communities were, how they rebuild social relationships that have literally washed away, and how this rebuilding occurs at the intersection of economic and financial institutions, political and legal institutions, and social and cultural institutions. The paper that Storr and I published in 2002 in the *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, "Post-classical Political Economy," created the intellectual framework that guided our studies from 2005 through 2010 dealing with the post-Katrina shuffling and reshuffling of the economic, political, and social spaces in New Orleans.

Like our earlier work, we had teams in the Greater New Orleans region focusing on various aspects of the recovery. Some focused on the interaction of the political and legal systems in the economic recovery. Others studied the interaction between private-sector commerce and the economic recovery, including the role of big-box stores such as Wal-Mart. Still others studied the way communities work to get the population to move back, as in Chamlee-Wright's examination of the leadership exhibited in the schools and churches.

Again, our research effort produced published journal articles, some that employ a conventional economics form and others that depart radically from the mainstream methodology. But all our studies challenged the conventional wisdom about "right action" in the wake of the storm.

The received wisdom, as embodied in the mainstream media coverage in the months following Hurricane Katrina, was that the Gulf Coast had only just began to recover. This proclamation

was not based on a fair assessment of the facts. Hard-hit communities faced serious problems, no doubt. But recovery was occurring at the neighborhood level early on; views of recovery based on political jurisdictions did not reflect accurately the quality or sustainability of the recovery. We discovered that the ability of disaster victims to leverage social capital as well as the leadership emanating from the voluntary sector was critical to promoting community recovery. Our desire to study the recovery process in an intimate and in-depth manner led us to create this oral history.

Across the Gulf Coast, people affected by Katrina have shown us how people acquire knowledge and how people perceive government, businesses, and community efforts. Our social scientific research, based on more than 450 hours of interviews with people from the Gulf Coast, is critical to better understanding how people, businesses, and communities prepare for and rebuild after disasters and to better understanding the role that the for-profit, nonprofit, and public sectors play in everyday social and economic interactions.

Community organizations, businesses, nonprofit groups, and religious institutions help families make informed decisions about rebuilding. Reopened businesses, resumed church services, and similar phenomena send positive signals that communities are coming back. Residents making decisions about returning rely heavily on these signals in the face of conflicting or incorrect signals from authorities.

Despite the immense scope of this disaster, individuals and communities found hope and help in the immensely generous philanthropic contributions of informal networks of voluntary social action, such as religious organizations, as well as in established nonprofits. Social entrepreneurs play a vital role in disaster recovery efforts, providing the materials, services, and information that people need to rebuild their lives and filling in the frequently immense gaps left by government-provided services. The centralization of compassion, more often than

not, distorts or even displaces the self-governing properties of civil society.

In *Democracy in America,* sociologist and political theorist Alexis de Tocqueville writes,

> There is nothing, in my opinion, that merits our attention more than the intellectual and moral associations of America. The political and industrial associations of the Americans easily fall within our grasp, but the others escape us; and, if we discover them, we understand them badly, because we have hardly ever seen anything analogous. You must recognize, however, that the intellectual and moral associations are as necessary as the political and industrial ones to the American people, and perhaps more. In democratic countries, the science of association is the mother science; the progress of all the others depends on the progress of the former.†

Tocqueville's observation holds true today. Real, democratic self-governance resides in the communities where citizens are willing and capable co-producers of civil society. The face-to-face forces of reputation and community membership not only coordinate highly effective small-scale projects that support those in need, they also provide a sense of community and identity to us all.

How We Came Back is a testament to the resilience and power of a self-governing citizenry and the trials and tribulations they endure in dealing with the "cares of thinking and all the troubles of living," as Tocqueville put it. Its stories offer a fascinating window into the self-governing capacity of a people and the truly democratic way of life, even in the aftermath of

† Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: Historical-Critical Edition of De la démocratie en Amérique*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer, vol. 3 (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010).

horrific devastation. Acts of courage, acts of compassion, and acts of cooperation are all required to rebuild a community and the lives that constitute that community.

Listen and learn.

Peter Boettke

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Introduction
WHAT STORIES OF RETURN CAN TEACH US

This volume presents 17 oral histories of Hurricane Katrina survivors from four very different communities in New Orleans, namely, the Ninth Ward; Central City; the Gentilly Woods, Gentilly Terrace, and Pontchartrain Park neighborhoods; and the Mary Queen of Vietnam (MQVN) community in Village de l'Est. These survivors and their neighborhoods had dissimilar pre-Katrina, Katrina, and post-Katrina experiences. And their oral histories speak to the dissimilarities and offer rich descriptions of what these communities were like before Katrina; how these individuals and their families survived Katrina; and most important, how these individuals, their families, and their communities came back after the devastation of Katrina. Collectively, they show that individuals and communities can be surprisingly resilient in the wake of disaster.

At five in the morning on August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina, one of the strongest and costliest hurricanes in the United States' history, made landfall in southern Louisiana. The storm and the storm-related flooding that followed it displaced half a million people and caused more than $100 billion in damage in the Greater New Orleans region. Recovering from a disaster of this magnitude would be a daunting challenge. Still, within a few years after Katrina, hundreds of thousands had returned and

were rebuilding their homes. How they came back is, to say the least, something of a puzzle.

The oral histories of Katrina survivors presented here were collected as part of a multiyear investigation of community rebound in the Greater New Orleans region after Katrina. That investigation resulted in several efforts to find answers to the questions posed by this post-disaster environment.[1] Why, for example, do we observe some communities rebounding quickly and others lagging? Even after we accounted for obvious factors, such as degree of damage, median income, flood insurance, and other standard explanations of recovery, we found that much of the variance remains unexplained. Why, despite overwhelming obstacles, are some residents, even in the most impoverished and severely damaged areas, exhibiting robust signs of individual and community rebound? What are the socially embedded resources that communities are drawing on to develop effective recovery strategies? Recovering from a disaster almost always requires individuals to tap their social networks for material and emotional support. Why, despite the commitment of significant government resources, have many of the official forms of assistance been met with such disappointing results?

Although we have drawn on social scientific theory and analysis to address these questions, we knew that only by talking with people who were experiencing the challenges of post-disaster recovery firsthand would we be able to address these questions adequately. But, somewhat ironically, much of our work that addresses such questions abstracts the fullness and continuity of individual narratives to identify patterns that extend across neighborhoods and communities. The present volume has afforded the opportunity to swing the pendulum in the other direction and to focus on the individual narrative in greater detail.

This volume, thus, makes a deliberate attempt to let the Katrina survivors that we met speak for themselves. Their stories are sometimes sad, sometimes horrific, sometimes surreal,

occasionally funny, and almost always uplifting as they catalogue people overcoming tremendous odds to rebuild their lives and their communities. They often speak about loss (their loss of property and their loss of neighbors, friends, and loved ones); about their hopes and fears before, during, and after the storm; and about the difficulties of returning and rebuilding.

Although we made every effort in this volume to put the voices of those who have returned to post-Katrina New Orleans at the center, we are mindful that framing is an inevitable part of what we do as narrators, no matter how light-handed that narration might be. The fact, for instance, that we have bundled particular individual stories within community-based chapters asserts that physical place, neighborhood, and community are part of the story. Although we have reason to believe that this is indeed the case generally,[2] we recognize that individual lives are rarely, if ever, perfect and unqualified demonstrations of such patterns. As important as it is to identify patterns that help us understand the process of post-disaster recovery, social scientific explanations also tend to direct attention away from the tension, contradiction, and messiness that exist at the individual level. For example, though Richard and April, whose oral histories appear in the Ninth Ward chapter, are staking their personal and financial futures on the New Orleans recovery, they are deeply skeptical about the political and cultural health of the city. Similarly, as you will read in the Gentilly Woods, Gentilly Terrace, and Pontchartrain Park chapter, Easton's return to New Orleans had more to do with his wife's sense that there is no other place as good as New Orleans than his sense of belonging. Likewise, Joyce, a Central City resident, admitted that she will stay in the city, not because it is what she would prefer, but because she knows her husband and her mother would feel lost in any other place. While sense of place is an important pattern that helps explain community rebound in New Orleans, individual narratives remind us to recognize the tensions within and around such patterns.

Further, though this collection of oral histories places firsthand accounts at the center, there is no escaping the perspectives we as editors bring to this project. The perspective of the oral historian cannot help but privilege certain voices over others; in this case, we have privileged the voices of those who experienced the calamities of disaster firsthand. Surely in this privileging we gain certain kinds of insight that would otherwise be closed off. But, by doing so, we reduce the emphasis on other kinds of insight, such as the insights drawn from, say, experts trained in post-disaster recovery. Moreover, the perspective of the social scientist is surely at work whenever we direct attention to clues within firsthand accounts that suggest a causal connection—in particular, a connection between individual behavior and broader social patterns.

Rather than defend ourselves against harboring such biases, or make an attempt to minimize the importance of such biases, we think it more productive (and more honest) to admit them freely. Doing so gives us an opportunity to explore some of the lessons that surface when we are able to (a) present fuller and more detailed personal narratives, as opposed to the snippets of narrative customarily featured in qualitative social scientific research, and (b) view these narratives from the perspectives that have informed the larger project.

One of the advantages fuller, more detailed narratives afford is the opportunity to see that an event such as Hurricane Katrina, even for all its significance, represents continuity as much as discontinuity in the lives and histories of individuals and communities. In the absence of a fuller story, it is easy to forget that people caught in the throes of Katrina and post-Katrina recovery had lives—sometimes idyllic lives, sometimes deeply troubled lives; more often than not, complicated lives—before the storm. And though Katrina has loomed large in the years since the storm, many of those complicating factors—young children, aging parents, a new marriage, health problems, career ambitions, the

death of a loved one, marital strain, and so on—have mixed with, shaped, and colored post-Katrina life.

Individual narratives enable us to see better the ways in which pre-Katrina life set the stage for how people responded in the aftermath of the storm. For example, Elizabeth and Ervin's story (in the Ninth Ward chapter) and Saundra's story (in the Central City chapter) enable us to see how their attachment to New Orleans made their return all but inevitable. Further, fuller narratives allow us to see not only that people move on with the business of ordinary life in the midst of chaos, but how they move on: Richard and April quit their jobs to focus their effort on rebuilding rental properties; Mary (in the MQVN chapter) suddenly finds herself leading a community development corporation as its executive director; Melvin (in the Ninth Ward chapter) recognizes that the first order of business in making his life whole is to be reunited with his dog, Bandit. In one sense, how people move forward in the wake of disaster is something of a mystery. But their narratives help us lift the shroud by allowing us to see how a person's past sets the stage for effective and meaningful action.

Having access to fuller, more detailed narratives also gives us a window into the personal resilience that is at the heart of successful rebound and recovery. Examples of such personal resilience and clues to its source can certainly be found in the narratives presented in this volume. The fact that Miriam (in the Ninth Ward chapter), a woman with few financial resources, was able to survive the storm, the chaos of the convention center, and evacuation, and to move back and rebuild her life and home in the city she loves is noteworthy by any standard. But when viewed in the broader context of a life history that includes the loss of three children, two at the hands of another son, Miriam's actions appear nothing less than heroic. Gentilly Woods resident Lydia's positive outlook about the prospects for her community is heartening given the devastation it has endured. But again, viewed from the broader perspective of a woman who has

lost her closest friend and her husband since the storm and is left to care for an adult child with significant disabilities, such positivity seems worthy of our attention if we are to understand the connection between personal resilience and post-disaster recovery. In Miriam's case, resilience is born of an ability to adapt her behavior to any new set of circumstances in which she finds herself, whether it is becoming an Indian runner in the convention center or finding a way to set fear aside and protect herself and her property in the first harrowing days of returning to her home. For Lydia, the ability to see almost any setback as an opportunity and a blessing—a torn-up house is the vehicle for connecting to good-hearted people she would otherwise never meet (and acquiring hardwood floors she would otherwise never have)—seems to be at least part of her foundation for resilience.

Just as individual narratives can shed light on personal qualities of resilience at the individual level, personal narratives can also shed light on potential sources of community resilience. For example, able-bodied retirees like Elizabeth and Ervin played a vital (though mostly unsung) role in the recovery process by devoting full-time effort, pensions, and any accumulated assets to the task of rebuilding, often at the critical early stage of the recovery process in which people waiting on the sidelines were looking for concrete signs that normal life was returning to the neighborhood. Similarly, mutual support offered within families, such as the roving gutting brigade Pontchartrain Park resident Michael, his cousins, and his siblings assembled, filled a critical logistical need they and members of their family were facing and injected forward momentum into, not one, but seven neighborhoods within a brief span of time. Father Vien's use of the church facilities, personnel, and volunteers to orchestrate supply distribution, communication within the community, and negotiation with service providers beyond the community enabled a swift recovery within the MQVN neighborhood. As our broader research confirms, early and disproportionately

large effects of individual efforts such as these were often critical to the recovery process.[3]

Clarity of purpose is another element that helps explain the connection between individual resilience and community resilience—and again, one that is best revealed through personal narrative. If neighborhoods are to rebound, at least some within the community must possess a certainty that taking on the hardships of rebuilding is worthwhile. Without at least a few stakeholders possessing this level of certainty, no one ever takes the first critical steps that signal the future viability of the community. But what gives rise to this kind of certainty in a context that seems to conspire against it at every turn? The personal narratives that connect past and present help us understand at least some of the sources of this kind of deep confidence. For example, Kim's narrative (presented in the Ninth Ward chapter) reveals a continuous thread that connects her sense of purpose in the community pre-Katrina, her ability to withstand the uncertainty of her husband's fate immediately following the storm, and her husband's determination to rebuild their business after the storm. This thread was the belief that divine intent was guiding her steps at every juncture. She believes she is playing a critical part in God's plan to restore a neighborhood in which the good life can once again be found. Similarly, even with the many obstacles and frustrations they faced, April and Richard were certain of the correctness of their decision to return, or in April's words, "We both feel like this is where God wants us to be right now and we wouldn't feel comfortable going somewhere else just because it seems easier."

The oral histories presented here teach us about what Katrina victims have had to overcome and how they and their communities have rebounded after the storm. They remind us that though disaster tears the social fabric, the threads can often be used in new ways that meet immediate needs, rebuild homes, and restore communities.