



5DFLDOLJHG 'LVDVWHU 3DWULDUFK\ \$Q ,QWHUVHFV  
7HQ <HDUV DIWHU +XUULFDQH .DWULQD

5DFKHO ( /XIW

)HPLQLVW )RUPDWLRQV 9ROXPH ,VVXH 6XPF S

3XEOLVKHG E\ -RKQV +RSNLQV 8QLYHUVLW\ 3UHV

→ )RU DGGLWLRQDO LQIRUPDWLRQ DERXW WKLV DUWLFOH  
KWWSV PXVH MKX HGX DUWLFOH

# **Racialized Disaster Patriarchy: An Intersectional Model for Understanding Disaster Ten Years after Hurricane Katrina**

**Rachel E. Luft**

while the catastrophe was unfolding and those that have explored the ongoing aftermath, have frequently pointed to the glaring racial and economic inequality that contextualized the catastrophe.<sup>1</sup> The emphasis has been a critical corrective to the pervasive racist colorblindness that helped produce such devastating consequences. Unfortunately, however, most of the discourse has also been limited by its neglect of substantive feminist, intersectional analysis. In this article I





With support from the Social Science Research Council, I interviewed or held focus groups with forty-one movement leaders or activists, plus seven others who worked in non-profit or related capacities, for a total of forty-eight. There were eighteen Black women, eight Black men, twelve white women, one white genderqueer person, six white men, two Latinas, and one Latino. Thirty were themselves hurricane survivors, and eighteen were non-locals who came to New Orleans after the hurricane.

### **Down With Patriarchy. Bring Back Patriarchy**

The concept of patriarchy had its peak in the second wave of the women's







economic, social, environmental and political choices about human and environmental development” (2010, 15). Race appears in disaster literature as a category of “social vulnerability,” predominantly in scholarship on the global South; disaster studies of the United States rarely employ critical race theory. Only since the 1990s has the constructionist approach to disaster and social vulnerability been systematically deepened by critical feminist interventions that bring an explicitly gendered lens. The trailblazing research of gender and disaster scholars has revealed the highly gendered construction and experience of so-called natural disaster (Enarson and Morrow 1998; Bystydzienski, Suchland, and Wanzo 2013.) As with the larger field, feminist disaster literature primarily addresses race outside of the US context.

While gender and disaster research has been a significant advance, most of the literature has focused on how differently gendered people—almost always women and men in a gender binary, and overwhelmingly women in a field that still equates gender with females<sup>4</sup>—experience disaster differently. Rarely has it gone beyond the gender of people to examine the gendered meanings of decisions, arrangements, and practices. Most gender and disaster literature, in other words, puts gendered bodies at the center, rather than centering gender

(Enarson, Fothergill, and Peek 2006, 135). Policy sometimes facilitates this; because FEMA distributes emergency funds to households and not to individuals, for example, abusive or estranged male partners are able to receive women's share of critical post-disaster life support. While we do not have measures of

construction. Between 2005 and 2007, women's incomes on average increased by just 3.7 percent, while men's incomes increased by 19 percent (Wilinger 2008, 7).

The convergence of post-disaster elements—heavily compromised basic infrastructure as well as whole sectors that were significantly damaged—meant there were more obstacles facing women's return than men's. Rates of return have been overwhelmingly described in racial and economic terms (Adams 2013; Rose and Tuggle 2010). But it was Black women in particular who returned to the city in smaller numbers than other groups; for many dozens of thousands, the displacement is ongoing (Helmuth and Henrici 2010).

### The Gendered (Intersectional) Construction of Recovery

Disaster recovery refers to the collection of policies and practices that remake institutions and the social contract after crisis. As Klein and others have demonstrated, recovery is the stage of disaster in which disaster capitalism accomplishes most of its work, literally laying the foundation for long term social remaking (Gunewardena and Schuller 2008). At the center of the analysis is the way in which disaster becomes an opportunity for severe and accelerated social engineering. Important work in the last decade has demonstrated how disaster capitalism is deeply racialized (see especially Adams 2013). Disaster patriarchy builds on disaster capitalism by demonstrating how disaster capitalism is also gendered, not in additive but in interactive ways. The official recovery of New Orleans—by which I mean institutionally driven state, corporate, and non-profit efforts—had significant gendered, intersectional effects.

In this section I focus on the radical dismantling of the public sphere after Katrina as an exemplar of recovery processes. Though feminist scholars have long pointed to the public sector as a gendered domain, the gendered implications of Katrina's devolution have rarely been noted (for exceptions see Pardee 2014 and the Institute for Women's Policy Research [<http://www.iwpr.org/>]). What follows is a brief overview of the primary public sites of post-Katrina remaking: public housing, public health care, and public education. Within months of the hurricane the groundwork was laid, in each case, for their dissolution. The dismembering of these sectors had severe consequences for women's lives and for gendered, racialized arrangements.

The big four housing developments

The determination by 1018.6(a.5(i)-11)16(e4.1(1(6f)0.39(e)-3.3(d)17.29(t s(r)-1.4(i)-12(T

and national politicians alike, in December 2007 the New Orleans City Council voted to support HUD's ruling. The decision meant that the developments would be out of commission for the duration of the renovation, would see a drop in net housing, and an even greater drop in housing at deep affordability.

The determination to turn a sizeable portion of New Orleans's public housing into mixed-income units was one part of a multi-pronged, decentralized housing recovery response driven by public-private partnerships that determined



disproportionately affected women as those who mediate children's education (Buras 2013). Camille Wilson Cooper demonstrates that "the notion of positioned school choice conceptualizes a highly subjective parental school choice process that is inextricably linked to choice makers' race, class, and gender backgrounds" (2005, 175).

The wholesale termination of 7,500 school district employees in December 2005 affected a labor pool that was overwhelmingly Black women. Despite union membership and contract protections, the employees were red. In January 2014 the Louisiana Court of Appeals confirmed that the teachers were unlawfully terminated (Flaherty 2014).

Constituency and employment have to do with gender as identity, with the lives of women. More nuanced are questions regarding the gendered dimensions of contemporary education policy itself. Amy Stambach and Miriam David note how "few studies have considered the gender politics of parents' incorporation [in charter schools] or the fact that school-choice programs are formulated in ways that often reveal gendered and social-classed assumptions about families, employment, markets, and education" (2005, 1633). They argue that "[school choice] is symbolically and pragmatically gendered in significant ways. . . . The use of allegorical imagery in theoretical approaches to choice programming . . . forces us to think about how and when gender becomes a basis of new forms of inclusion and exclusion" (1650). Stambach and David respond to the neglect of gender analysis by identifying a range of feminist issues embedded in school choice policy and practices, such as the masculinization of the turn to market-based approaches, arguing that "gender pervasively underlies the history and present-day contours of parent-school relations and school-choice policies in the United States" (1636).

Gender-neutral analysis, even on the part of scholars and activists who bring otherwise excellent race- and class-conscious critiques of the transforma-

core structures of daily life. This occurs for individuals and also for the symbolic meanings that run through them.

There are two orders of gendered practice here: post-disaster gendered policy and the occlusion of the gendered dimension. While the recovery has also been largely colorblind, critical scholarship and activism have sought to expose its









In this critical statement, Griffin highlights the substantive effects of gender repression in organizing in terms of civil death, both the human and strategic effects of denying people's existence. In light of pervasive cultural images of Black welfare queens, a public housing defense strategy that sought to reframe Black motherhood—mothers trying to return home after the hurricane—rather than ignore the gender component of the demonization might have produced different outcomes. Ursula Price explained, “I think if we did our messaging better—like a conversation about mothers with children instead of you know, lazy black people—[it] might have been a more interesting conversation.”<sup>10</sup> She is suggesting a frame-bridging that proactively re-narrates dominant images instead of sidestepping them.

Gender-neutral grievance articulation was one manifestation of the repression of gendered analysis, and it created a vacuum in the Movement for a Just Reconstruction. What filled the space was the second kind of symbolic gendered work: an organizing culture and tactics that were heavily masculinized, though again cloaked in gender-neutral garb. Khalil Shahyd, a Black man who was born and raised in Louisiana gave an overview:

There was this emphasis on this sort of confrontational, this combative organizing strategy and not really on the process of actually building communities back up that have been devastated by a flood. . . . [B]y the time I got there in March [2006] all of the women of color had just left the office because they just couldn't take [some of the male leadership] because they were just being bullies.<sup>11</sup>

Shahyd and others separately produced similar typologies of post-Katrina movement practices to exemplify what they called patriarchal or masculine strategy and tactics: emphasis on large public demonstrations or protest,

distinguish them from the gender identity or sex of the actor: “I’m not talking about patriarchy and gender specific to individuals and specific to body parts . . . but also particular to the strategies and the tactics that are used.”<sup>14</sup> When she described non-locals, including some women, as practicing patriarchal politics I asked her to clarify:

RL: What about that was patriarchal, why do you use the term patriarchy to describe women and northerners imposing an agenda that wasn’t about—

KB: Because the key word that you just used, imposing, is part of a patriarchal modality, right. Patriarchy is about imposing and controlling and pushing, it’s about force and it’s sometimes done in a very gentle way.<sup>15</sup>

Distinguishing gendered politics from gender identity makes it possible to read power and gender apart from the presence or absence of gendered bodies. There were senior Black women organizers who were well respected and had authority within the movement. They worked within male-led organizations or headed their own. While sympathetic to some of these gender concerns, they rarely led with them, rarely emphasized an anti-patriarchal or feminist agenda. Barrow put it this way: “Women and a non-masculinist approach [are] incorporated. . . . It’s not a threat, it’s not oppositional, it’s not working in alliance, it is just engulfed in it. . . . So the women who did participate in any leadership role were allowed to . . . because they were able to be engulfed by the patriarchal leaders.”<sup>16</sup> This statement refers not to complete absorption, for these women leaders were influential in the movement, but rather to the repression—engulfing—of anti-patriarchal concerns.

A consequence of the suppression of gender analysis and feminist practice was obstacles to intersectional organizing. There was direct and indirect (4.9(e)-1.3(e))

a disability, or a dyke, or somebody who's gender non-conforming, in order for them to be able to access what they need, what do we have to build?<sup>18</sup>

Feminist, intersectional organizing in disaster/patriarchy

The tragedy of racialized patriarchy in the post-Katrina justice movement is not that some Black and white men were sexist and that some Black and white women and movement networks facilitated this. The tragedy is that the intersectional political vision and practice of local women of color was unsupported and derailed at an historical moment that deeply needed this work. I have sought here to identify some of the obstacles to that feminist, intersectional organizing. I end this section by noting that despite the structural odds against it, the Movement for a Just Reconstruction after Hurricane Katrina did produce



**Rachel E. Luft** is Associate Professor of Sociology and Women and Gender Studies at Seattle University. Her primary areas of research specialization are race, gender, intersectionality, social movements, and disaster. For six years following Hurricane Katrina, which struck while she was teaching at the University of New Orleans, she was a participant observer in the grassroots social movement that emerged in response to the disaster. Much of her research and writing since then has focused on the racial and gender politics of New Orleans-based community organizing and movement mobilization. Her work has been published in *American Quarterly*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *The National Women's Studies Association Journal*, and several collected volumes.

### Notes

1. See Adams 2013; Woods 2010; Flaherty 2010; Luft 2008; South End Press 2007; "Hurricane Katrina" 2006.

2. For example, see Erikson and Peek 2011.

3. I use the terms "disaster patriarchy" and "racialized disaster patriarchy" interchangeably. One of the objectives of my resurrection of the term patriarchy is to demonstrate the way in which it is always already racialized and thereby to encourage the reformation and reclamation of the term as an intersectional description of systemic racialized gender inequality. Because of patriarchy's historical [mis]representation as a

## References

- Adams, Vincanne. 2013. *Markets of Sorrow, Labors of Faith: New Orleans in the Wake of Katrina*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Arvin, Maile, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill. 2013. "Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections Between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy." *Feminist Formations*





- Diaspora, edited by Lori Peek, and Lynn Weber, 233–55. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- . 2012. “Disaster Patriarchy and Hurricane Katrina: Seeking (Intersectional) Justice in Calamitous Times.” Paper presented at the American Sociological Association, Denver, CO, August 18.
- . 2016. “Men and Masculinities in the Social Movement for a Just Reconstruction After Hurricane Katrina.” In *Men, Masculinities and Disaster: Revisiting the Gendered Terrain of Disaster*, edited by Elaine Enarson and Bob Pease. New York: Routledge Press.
- Luft, Rachel E., and Jane Ward. 2009. “Toward an Intersectionality Just Out of Reach: Confronting Challenges to Intersectional Practice.” In *Advances in Gender Research. Special Volume: Intersectionality*, edited by Vasilikie Demos and Marcia Textler Segal, 9–37. Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Limited (JAI).
- Luft, Rachel E., with Shana Griffin. 2008. “A Status Report on Housing in New Orleans After Katrina: An Intersectional Analysis.” In *Katrina and the Women of New Orleans*, edited by Beth Willinger, 50–53. New Orleans: Newcomb College Center for Research on Women, Tulane University.
- Mann, Susan Archer. 2013. “Third Wave Feminism’s Unhappy Marriage of Poststructuralism and Intersectionality Theory.” *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 4: 54–73.
- Nelson, Ashley. 2005. *The Combination*. New Orleans: The Neighborhood Story Project.
- Ott, K. Brad. 2012. “The Closure of New Orleans’ Charity Hospital after Hurricane Katrina: A Case of Disaster Capitalism.” MA thesis, University of New Orleans.
- Pacholok, Shelley. 2013. *Into the Fire: Disaster and the Remaking of Gender*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Pardee, Jessica Warner. 2014. *Surviving Katrina: The Experiences of Low-Income African American Women*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- Phillips, Brenda D., Deborah S. K. Thomas, Alice Fothergill, Lynn Blinn-Pike, eds. 2010. *Social Vulnerability to Disasters*. Boca Raton: Taylor & Francis Group.
- Plyer, Allison. 2014. “Facts for Features: Katrina Impact.” New Orleans: The Data Center.
- Quigley, Bill, and Sara H. Godchaux. 2015. “Locked Out and Torn Down: Public Housing Post Katrina.” Retrieved February 20, 2016. <https://billquigley.wordpress.com/2015/06/08/locked-out-and-torn-down-public-housing-post-katrina/>

- Weber, Lynn, and Lori Peek, eds. 2012. *Displaced: Life in the Katrina Diaspora*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Wilinger, Beth. 2008. "Summary of Findings." In *Katrina and the Women of New Orleans*, edited by Beth Wilinger, 5–10. New Orleans: Newcomb College Center for Research on Women, Tulane University.
- Wisner, Ben, Piers Blaikie, Terry Cannon, and Ian Davis. [1994] 2004. *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability and Disasters*. New York: Routledge.
- Woods, Clyde, ed. 2010. *In the Wake of Katrina: New Paradigms and Social Visions*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.