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New Orleans: “The Swamp is No Place for a City”

New Orleans is one of a number of infamous swamp cities—cities built in swamps, near them, or on land “reclaimed” from them, such as London, Paris, Venice, Boston, Chicago, Washington, St. Petersburg, and Perth. New Orleans seemed to be winning the war against the swamps until hurricane Katrina of 2005, or at least participating in an uneasy truce between its unviable location and the forces of the weather to the point that the former was forgotten until the latter intruded as a stark reminder of its history and geography, and it lost this particular battle. A whole series of events and images congregate around the name “Katrina,” including those of photographer Robert Polidori (2006) in his monumental book, *After the Flood*. Katrina, as well as the exacerbating factors of global warming and drained wetlands, and their impacts, especially on the city of New Orleans (both its infrastructure and residents), point to the cultural construction and production of the disaster.

This suite of occurrences is a salutary instance of the difficulties of trying to maintain a hard and fast divide between nature and culture (Hirst and Woolley, 1982: 23; Giblett, 2008a: 16–17) and a timely reminder of the need to think and live them together (Giblett, 2011: chapter 1). A hurricane is in some sense a natural event, but in the age of global warming and climate change it is also a cultural occurrence; a flood produced by a river breaking its banks is a natural event, but a flood caused by breeched levees and drained wetlands is a cultural occurrence; people dying is a natural event, but people dying by drowning in a large and iconic American city created by drainage of wetlands is a cultural disaster of urban planning and relief logistics; and a city set in

a swamp is natural and cultural, with the cultural usually antithetical to the natural.

New Orleans is not only “the nation’s quintessential river city,” as Kelman ([2003] 2006: 199) puts it, sitting “at the bottom of the Mississippi drainage of the interior of North American continent,” as Solnit and Snedeker (2013: v) put it, but also one of a number of infamous swamp cities “resting on the pillow softness of river-delivered muck [and] mud” and “at the center of the American unconscious” (as they also put it). In his post-Katrina preface to his study of New Orleans as what he calls “an unnatural metropolis,” Colten ([2005] 2006: 5) notes that

while other cities have occupied wetlands, few have the combination of poorly-drained and flood-susceptible territory of New Orleans. Portions of Washington, D.C., occupied wetlands, but there was ample solid ground above the reach of the Potomac [River’s] worst floods. Chicago’s founders platted their city on a wetland site, but the sluggish Chicago River did not drain the massive territory of the Mississippi.

“Occupied” is arguably a euphemism for dredging, draining, filling, and reclaiming wetlands. Occupation also conjures up visions of an occupying army, which may be appropriate in the case of New Orleans as the Army Corps of Engineers have spearheaded much of the militarization by dredging and draining of wetlands in New Orleans and elsewhere in the United States.

The location for the city was not propitious. Powell (2012: 2) says “the site was dreadful,” which is fitting as it goes with the central character of Dred in Harriett Beecher Stowe eponymously entitled novel of that name set in the Great Dismal Swamp. Swampy sites are dreadful and dismal in standard swamp speak and not just confined or limited to nineteenth-century novels. Wilson (2006: 86) describes how “the city itself was constructed on an uneven patch of relatively high ground in the midst of a vast swamp.” Not surprisingly, New Orleans for Solnit and Snedeker (2013: 1) is “a city of amorphous boundaries, where land is forever turning into water, water devours land, and a thousand degrees of marshy, muddy, oozing in-between exist.” As a result, for them, “all that is solid dissolves into water,” much of which “seems to exist in an amorphous state of muddiness and murkiness” (2). This is the process

of desublimation, the counter to sublimation in which all that is solid melts into air.

Along similar lines to Solnit and Snedeker, New Orleans for Kelman ([2003] 2006: 22) “is surrounded by a wet world composed of terrain that is not quite land” with the Mississippi River delta on one side and Lake Pontchartrain and the “backswamps” on the other, though the latter were later drained. The Mississippi River for Kelman is “the continent’s most famed and largest watercourse” (199). Perhaps it is also the continent’s most tamed and leveed watercourse. For Powell (2012: 3 and 58) it is “North America’s mightiest river” and “one of history’s great arteries of commerce.” Earlier Kelman (79) related how a prominent local commentator in 1847 “personified the Mississippi as a nurturing mother” because the river “hugged New Orleans to its ‘broad bosom.’” Supposedly this mother was the benign and malign patriarchal Mother Nature of the leveed river and not the recalcitrant, matrifocal Great Goddess or Mother of the swamps that threatened to break the levees and flood the city (see Giblett, 1996; 2011: especially chapter 1).

The Mississippi as the mother of all American rivers gave birth to the city of New Orleans at her “mouth,” or more precisely at the other end of her anatomy in the wetland delta of her cloaca. In his history of New Orleans, Powell (2012) repeatedly uses the cliché of “the mouth” of the Mississippi seemingly oblivious to the fact that he is talking about the other end of animal anatomy, even when describing how bad weather kept the Spaniard La Salle from “entering the mouth.” As noted in the chapter on Petersburg, this is a misnomer (as water and solid matter flow out at this point and do not enter in here as they do with the mouth) and so is a mistaken view of anatomy.

Because of its location at the “mouth” of the Mississippi River, New Orleans for Flint (2006: 230) was “historically the most important port in the United States.” Yet by the late 1860s the river was seen by New Orleaners, Kelman ([2003] 2006: 124) argues, only as “an alimentary canal, filled with raw waste and decaying animal carcasses.” This is a very depleted and poverty-stricken view of the river and of the body of the earth. The river and the body of the earth need the other internal organs of the kidneys or liver of wetlands in order to be viable and vital. By viewing the river as an alimentary canal for the import of nutrients and export of wastes, the “mouth” of the river had ceased to be womb and had become anus; the delta had ceased to be womb and had

become bowel. The living body of the earth was dying. The river, Kelman, concludes was “not sublime” and had become “an interstate highway” (146). Solnit and Snedeker (2013: 82) are less coy than Kelman and Powell when they state that “way down where all the effluvia of the continent drains out, all the toxins and manure and muck of a great river system flowing through agricultural and industrial lands, way down there underneath in the softness of the alluvial soil, is the cloaca or pudendum of the continent . . . ‘Pudendum’ a word for the female genitalia, comes from a Latin word for shame.” Rather than the swamp being shameful in its native and precontact state, it is the polluted river and swamp cloaca that is shameful in its present feral state.

The Angel of Geography sees the single catastrophe of drained, dredged, or filled wetlands enacted in the ways in which the earth is figured in a politics of spaces and places. Ascribing the qualities of one place to another to valorize one place and denigrate another and to figure one pejoratively or euphemistically (as in this case) is “placist” (Giblett, 2009: 8 and 36). Deconstructing and decolonizing placism and its use of such figures can lead to a more eco-friendly figuration of spaces and places.

New Orleans is one place to do so and Solnit and Snedeker also provide one way of doing so. Rather than the mouth (or the anus) of the body of North America, Solnit and Snedeker (2013: 2)

think of New Orleans as a liver, an expanse of soggy land doing some of what a liver does, filtering poisons, keeping the body going, necessary to survival and infinitely fragile, hard to pull out of context, and nowadays deteriorating from more poisons than it can absorb, including the ongoing toxins of the petroleum industry and the colossal overdose delivered by the 2010 BP blowout.

The liver “is delicate, spongy tissue” and it can “shred” when it is operated on and “rip” when it is stitched (2). Similarly around New Orleans “the land is soft and marshy” and industry is “ripping and shredding the land into nonexistence.”

This ripping and shredding has been going on since the beginnings of the city. Early New Orleans for Powell (2012: 60) “may have been one of the most deliberately planned towns in all of colonial North America.” Quebec City would certainly be a rival contender for this appellation, whereas Washington

may have been one of the most deliberately planned towns in all of post-colonial North America. The first French Quarter of New Orleans was laid out in 1721 in a rectilinear grid in order to enact what Powell (2012: 61) calls “the Renaissance ideal of the city as an emblem of imperial power, set apart from the countryside by geometry and pageantry.” More precisely, the grid was the instrument for dividing city from swamp. This was the case not only with New Orleans but also with all the other swamp cities and marsh metropolises discussed in the present book.

The urban form, as Powell (2012: 63) goes on to argue, was also the instrument for “the colonization of the Americas,” and of nature and its swamps, which are in fact one and the same thing as Franz Fanon (1967: 201), the pioneer theorist of decolonization, saw that

hostile nature, obstinate and fundamentally rebellious, is in fact represented in the colonies by the bush, by mosquitoes [from swamps], natives and fever [from mosquito bites], and colonization is a success when all this indocile nature has finally been tamed. Railways across the bush, the draining of swamps and a native population which is non-existent politically and economically are in fact one and the same thing.

In the era of so-called postcolonialism, it is necessary to ask the question: what process of decolonization has been carried out in relation to the colonization of spaces and places, like wetlands, by maps (from which they are absent or on which they are present, reduced to surface and frozen in time), by settlers, and by urban development? Decolonization will not be fully achieved until space and places are decolonized, and not only external, terrestrial, and extraterrestrial space and places, but also internal, corporeal space and places, especially those regions of the human body—the “nether regions”—associated with the dark and dank regions of the earth—the nether(wet)lands.

The grid-plan town was not only the instrument for dividing city from swamp but also inscribed on the *tabula rasa* of the drained and/or filled swamp, or on what Powell (2012: 62) calls “the veritable clean slate” of “the wilderness.” Arguably the masculinist concept/metaphor of wilderness is the instrument for rendering the space beyond frontiers as a clean slate on which the city could be inscribed on the surface of the body of the earth and

in its depths of swamps of the Great Mother of the earth. “The urban development history of New Orleans” is what Richard Campanella (in Solnit and Snedeker, 2013: 13) calls “essentially the story of overlaying orderly orthogonality on unruly curvaceousness” of what he calls the “dynamic, fluid, soft, warm, humid [and] tempestuous” Mississippi Delta. Alternatively it is the story of inscribing the static, solid, hard, dry, and rationalist masculine grid-plan city on unruly maternal swamps. For Campanella (in Solnit and Snedeker, 2013: 16) “hard lines and orthogonal angles introduced order to disorder, civilization to wilderness, godliness to the heathen,” and cleanliness to dirtiness, healthiness to unhealthiness, I would add, though these distinctions were easy to maintain in theory but not so easy to maintain in practice.

The distinction between the living and the dead was the hardest to maintain. “Just as New Orleans is a place of unclear boundaries between land and water,” for Solnit and Snedeker (2013: 34), “so it is a place where the boundaries between life and death are thin.” As a result for them, it is “a city of the living that is also a city of the dead.” Historically New Orleans acquired a bad reputation for what James Alexander (1833: 28) in the early nineteenth century called “the insalubrity of the climate.” In the then current miasmatic theory of disease this led to residents “inhal[ing] deadly vapours” that arose from “a greenish scum of vegetable matter” floating on pools of water as well as breathing in “pestilential effluvia from the slimy banks of the river, and from the creeks and cypress swamps, the haunts of loathsome alligators and snakes.” As a result, “New Orleans is called the ‘Wet Grave’” (29–30). In 1853 approximately 10,000 people died of yellow fever and some quarters of New Orleans had become known as a “wet graveyard” (Kelman, [2003] 2006: 88). New Orleans, the haunt of monstrous alligators, what Colten ([2005] 2006: 171) calls “the emblematic megafauna of the Louisiana wetlands” (and of other southern American wetlands one might add) in the nineteenth century became the haunt of what Colten also calls “the monstrous 1853 yellow fever epidemic” (47) and in the twentieth-first century of the monstrous 2005 hurricane Katrina; New Orleans was a wet grave in both periods and the grim reaper in both cases was depicted as monstrous. In between, drainage took place to make New Orleans a more salubrious place and to try to keep the monsters at bay.

In 1883 Mark Twain (1985: 304), for Powell (2012: 5) the river's "most illustrious biographer," observed at the end of chapter 41 of *Life on the Mississippi* entitled "The Metropolis of the South" that the people of New Orleans cannot have wells, "neither can they conveniently have cellars, [n]or graves ... the town being built upon 'made' ground; so they do without both, and few of the living complain, and none of the others." Ground is made out of swamp as with a number of other "swamp cities." In the following chapter Twain (1985: 306) goes on to discuss the cemeteries and then tries to get off the topic of graveyards as it is "grotesque, ghastly, horrible." Indeed graveyards are grotesque, not least because the grotesque relates to death and the lower bodily stratum as Bakhtin called it, and swamps are the grotesque lower earthly stratum (Giblett, 1996). Rather than the marsh metropolis of the south, for Kelman ([2003] 2006: title of chapter 3 and 104) New Orleans was "the necropolis of the South" with its cemeteries, "the so-called cities of the dead." The cemeteries were located in what Colten ([2005] 2006: 66 and 70) coyly calls "the rear of the city—the zone of discard" so that New Orleans earned the reputation of being "the death hole of Dixie." "The back of town" for Powell (2012: 99) is what "New Orleans's netherworld of poverty and poor drainage has always been called," just like London with its nether world as we saw in a previous chapter.

What Colten ([2005] 2006: 46) calls "the swampy mire behind New Orleans" was drained in the first 40 years of the twentieth century. Colten relates that "by the 1930s, drainage and landfilling efforts had successfully reclaimed wetland between the city and the lake, and in the post-war years similar campaigns dewatered marshlands for tract housing eastward and westward from the city" (140–141). For Wilson (2006: 86) "much of New Orleans's history can be seen as a continuing battle with the swamp." New Orleans was a frontline in the modern war against wetlands, the kind of war that Fascists such as Mussolini liked to fight because they were so easy to win in the short term (see Giblett, 1996: 115). Many campaigns were fought against wetlands using the modern weapons of monstrous dredgers. The city had struck what Kelman ([2005] 2006: 168) calls "a Faustian bargain with the levees-only policy." In other words, it had sold its soul to the devil of modern industrial technology in exchange for temporary power over water. New Orleans tried to dominate water and wetlands with the ironic result that not

only “efforts to drain the city dominate early New Orleans history into the present day” as Wilson (2006: 86) puts it, but also these efforts occasionally failed with devastating results as with Katrina. The city became dominated by the waters it had sought to dominate in an irony of history and geography not lost on students of wetlands. The waters the city had repressed returned in a flood in an irony of culture not lost on psychoanalytic ecologists.

Nor are these ironies lost on novelists such as Dave Eggers (2009: 94) in his best-selling *Zeitoun* (pronounced “zay-toon”) in which he has his eponymous central character describe the aftermath of Katrina: “as far as he could see in any direction the city was under water. Though every resident of New Orleans imagines great floods, knows that such a thing is possible in a city surrounded by water and ill-conceived levees, the sight ... was beyond anything he had imagined. He could only think of Judgment Day, of Noah and forty days of rain.” Katrina was divine punishment for the sins of the levees, not the sins of the city. The leveed waters returned with a vengeance. In “this sort of apocalypse” (95) *Zeitoun* is a kind of Noah with his trusty canoe serving as latter-day ark saving people and animals from the great flood.

Katrina was the means that reversed the domination of wetlands by the city. Flint (2006: 232–233) argues that “Katrina’s wake-up call made it unconscionable to keep building on fragile coastlines ... and in floodplains.” And in swamps, I would add. Colten ([2005] 2006: 163) “traces the public’s abandonment of the belief that the city is no place for a swamp.” The city is also no place for the artificial swamp of the aftermath of Katrina depicted photographically by Robert Polidori (2006). As the history of New Orleans attests, the swamp is no place for a city in the first place when it is being built, and the city is no place for a swamp in the second place when it is being ravaged by a hurricane and storm surges. The city is antithetical and inimical to the swamp. They are mutually exclusive. New Orleans for Wilson (2006: 90; my emphasis) is “a city *on* a swamp.” In the 1927 flood, for Kelman ([2003] 2006: 157) “one of the worst flood years in history,” and in the 2005 hurricane, the worst flood year so far in its history, New Orleans was transformed into a city *of* a swamp (Wilson, 2006: 111). The 1927 flood was at the time, and as Kelman ([2003] 2006: 161) puts it, “the worst ‘natural’ disaster in U.S. history” to date only to be surpassed by the 2005 flood in New Orleans and the 2012 floods in northeastern United States in the wake of Superstorm “Sandy” in

which the drained marshlands of New York and New Jersey returned with a vengeance and wreaked havoc. In all these cases the swamp outside the city, or before the city, in the past, came into the city, became now, present in the present. The swamp in the past returned in the present; the absent swamp asserted its presence. The historical and geographical barriers between city and swamp were removed.

In all these cases the swamp outside the city, or before the city, came into the city, became now. The swamp in the past returned in the present; the absent swamp asserted its presence. The natural, historical barriers between city and swamp were removed. "Cypress wetlands used to act as reservoir for floodwater, but no longer" (Kelman, [2003] 2006: xvi) as they had been drained. The Cypress swamp for Longfellow ([1895] 2004: 65) in his nineteenth-century tale of Evangeline was like an ancient cathedral. Draining the cypress swamp was tantamount to destroying the cathedral, in particular, destroying the natural bulwark and buttresses that the cathedral provided against the waters without. Cathedral destruction is a cultural disaster as the bombing of cathedrals, such as Coventry Cathedral, in World War II shows. The destruction of the cypress swamp was a cultural disaster that led to the disaster of the aftermath of Katrina.

Katrina for Kelman ([2003] 2006: xviii) was not a natural disaster. Katrina produced "water ... out of place" (x). In other words, and in Mary Douglas's (1966: 2) terms, for whom dirt is matter out of place, this water was dirt. It was not merely that the water was dirty in color or composition but that the water was in the wrong place, in the buildings and streets, and not behind levees, as Polidori (2006) graphically illustrates in his photographs. Bodies were also out of place with "corpses floating in dirty water" (Kelman, [2003] 2006: x) (though Polidori does not photograph these, unlike Dean Sewell in Aceh in the aftermath of the Asian tsunami in what I call an Orientalist pornography of death [Giblett, 2009: 158]). Dead bodies became dirt: visible, smelly, waterlogged. Colten ([2005] 2006: xix) argues that "human actions ... make an extreme event into a disaster ... The extreme event that became a disaster was not just the result of Katrina but the product of three centuries of urbanization in a precarious site." Yet Katrina was not only the product of three centuries of urbanization of New Orleans' precarious and precious watershed, but also the product of three centuries of American urbanization of the precarious and precious airshed through pollution with greenhouse gases.

The watery geographical location of New Orleans, its history of drainage and levee-building, the fossil-fuel dependence of modern industrial capitalist economies, poor relief efforts, and the storm combined to produce the “perfect” disaster of Katrina. Land, water, and air were mixed in an artificial quaking zone of elements not in their normal places, a feral quaking zone of the elements of air, earth, and water that had been in the native quaking zone of swamps now ran amok in a watery wasteland (see Giblett, 2009: especially chapter 1). Water was on the land and in the air. In the beginning as recounted in the biblical book of Genesis (1:1–2) when God created the heavens and the earth darkness and chaos moved over the face of the waters and the earth was without form and void in the geographical location and catastrophe of a native quaking zone. In the end when humans are re-creating the heavens and the earth darkness and chaos move over the face of the waters and the earth is without form and void in the geographical location and catastrophe of a feral quaking zone. Humans were thrown into this maelstrom where they quaked in fear and survived or died. Humans are now re-creating the city of New Orleans in the aftermath of “Katrina.” In the beginning of the history of the city humans created the city; from the disastrous destruction of some cities, humans are re-creating the city.

It is difficult to make sense of “Katrina.” Smith (2012: 303; see also Flint, 2006: 230) relates that, “as well as killing some 1500 people, the bill for the devastation wrought by hurricane Katrina on New Orleans ... was US\$200 billion, making it the most costly disaster in American history,” more than “9/11.” Around the name “Katrina” a whole series of events and images congregate, including those of photographer Robert Polidori (2006) in his book of photographs, *After the Flood*, with its overtones of divine punishment for human sin as with the biblical flood and as related in the book of Genesis (6–7). The flood returns the earth to the beginning when God created heaven and earth, when “the earth was without form and darkness moved ... upon the face of the waters” (Gen. 1:2), God’s first, and arguably best, work (Giblett, 1996: 142–143; 2014, “Preface”). The single catastrophe of history and geography begins here and now in the act of creation on the first day and in dividing land from water as God also did on the second day (Gen. 1:7), God’s second, and arguably second best, work. New Orleans began in the chaos of land and water. This chaos recurs in later disasters, such as “Katrina,” which

merely repeat the creation and catastrophe of the beginning in the eternal recurrence of the same. New Orleans developed by dividing land from water and is periodically flooded by the breaching of the division. The city is returned to its, and the, beginning, but this time inflected as a human-made “swamp,” a feral quaking zone. Catastrophe and creativity are locked together from the beginning. The creation of the world as wetland and the separation of land and water was a catastrophic action on God’s part. Its repetition in the draining or filling of wetlands is a catastrophic event for the heavens and earth, and humans, as is the unseparation of land and water in floods.

What Muecke (2007: 259 and 263) calls the rhetoric of “natural disaster” looms large in accounts of “Katrina.” In an ascending and escalating scale of hyperbole, “Katrina” for Brinkley (2006: 5, 60, 77), for instance, was a “natural disaster,” “the worst natural disaster in modern U.S. history” (62), “the biggest natural disaster in recent American history” (273), and “the worst natural disaster in modern American history” (331). Yet a hurricane in and by itself is not necessarily a disaster. It is a natural event. Perhaps all that could simply be said is that “Katrina was one of the most powerful storms ever recorded in U.S. history” (73). Yet to be recorded in US history “Katrina” had to be more than just a storm. It had also to be more than merely what Muecke (2007: 259) calls an “oceanic disaster” out to sea. It had to have made landfall and it had to have had human impact. It was not merely an event in the history of weather patterns in the United States. For Brinkley (2006: 249) “the hurricane disaster was followed by the flood disaster, which was followed by human disasters.” These three disasters for Brinkley add up to “the overall disaster, the sinking of New Orleans, [which] was a man-made disaster, resulting from poorly designed and managed levees and floodwalls” (426). The result was that for Brinkley “the man-made misery was worse than the storm” (597). The flood and the misery amounts to what Brinkley calls “the Great Deluge [which] was a disaster that the country brought on itself” (619).

The storm could also be seen as a disaster that the country brought on itself through the use of fossil fuels. The overall disaster comprising the hurricane, the flood disaster, and the “man-made” disaster of the sinking city and its drowning or displaced inhabitants was preceded by the disasters of dredging wetlands and of global warming. Brinkley (2006: 74) cites the work of Kerry Emanuel and concludes that “global warming makes bad hurricanes worse.”

Global warming is the result of the use of fossil fuels. Draining wetlands also makes bad hurricanes worse as “miles of coastal wetlands could reduce hurricane storm surges by over three or four feet” (10). Miles of coastal wetlands, however, had been destroyed. Brinkley relates that “nearly one million acres of buffering wetlands in southern Louisiana disappeared between 1990 and 2005” (9). They “disappeared” as the result, not of some sort of mega-conjuring trick, nor of erosion from sea-intrusion (though that contributed), but of deliberate human action and practices of filling wetlands. Brinkley relates how “too many Americans saw these swamps and coastal wetlands as wastelands” (9). Wastelands needed to be redeemed into enclave estates of condos and strip developments. In a historical and geographical irony that is not lost on students of wetlands and their geography and history, destroying wetlands can create the wasteland of flooded cities and a single catastrophe of history and geography, such as New Orleans in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina.

In searching for a trope to explain these events Brinkley (2006) turns to the tried and true figure of the monster, usually feminized, and “Katrina” is no exception given its feminine name to begin with (though, of course, hurricanes (and cyclones) are also given masculine names). For him, “hurricane Katrina had been a palpable monster, an alien beast” (xiv), “a monstrous hurricane” (72), “a monster hurricane” (115), and “the monster storm” (453; and Flint, 2006: 230). A monster, according to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Allen, 1990: 768), is: “a) an imaginary creature, usually large and frightening, composed of incongruous elements; or b) a large or ugly or misshapen animal or thing.” Katrina was not imaginary, though it, or she, was, and has been, imagined in a number of ways, including as a monster. “She” was certainly large and frightening. “She” was composed of the elements of air and water, and earth (and other solid matter). These may be incongruous elements in the normal course of events but not for a hurricane. “She” certainly caused ugliness and misshapenness to those caught in her wake of havoc, but aerial photographs show her to be a perfectly shaped hurricane, albeit with a deep and destructive throat imaginable as an orally sadistic monster.

Katrina for Brinkley (2006) was not just any monster in general but also an orally sadistic monster in particular. For him “Katrina was gargantuan in sheer size, 460 miles in diameter” (132). Drawing on chapters 7 and 44 of

Rabelais's *Gargantua*, Mikhail Bakhtin ([1965] 1984b: 459–460) traced how the word “gargantua” “in Spanish . . . means the throat. The Provencal tongue has the word ‘gargantuan’ meaning a glutton.” He goes on to argue that “gargantua” “symbolize[s] the gullet, not as a neutral anatomical term but as an abusive-laudatory image: gluttony, swallowing, devouring, banqueting. This is the gaping mouth, the grave-womb, swallowing and generating.” Katrina for Brinkley is thus an orally sadistic monster who destroys, who takes life, rather than the monstrous-maternal that both gives and takes life like a wetland.

For others Katrina was more like Thor. For Dara Adano “Katrina obliterated the landscape. Roads were torn up like they were sheets of paper and buildings looked like a huge hammer had pounded them into rubble. It was a wasteland” (cited by Brinkley, 2006: 163). Buffering wetlands that were regarded as wastelands were filled only to have a hurricane turn the landscape into a wet wasteland by an acute irony of history and reversal of fortunes. Not only the landscape but also the cityscape was turned into an artificial swamp. The Superdome for Marty Bahamode “cascaded into a cesspool of human waste and filth” (cited by Brinkley, 2006: 239). “The most hellish image in New Orleans” for Solnit (2005b: online “Postscript”) was “the forgotten thousands crammed into the fetid depths of the Superdome.” The human-made swamp, the feral quaking zone inside the Superdome, had worse conditions of air, water, and sanitation than any swamp outside not made with human hands, any native quaking zone, had ever had.

Whereas Adano turned to Norse mythology and Brinkley to Rabelais, Christian fundamentalist bloggers turned to the Bible and quoted Hosea (8:7): “For they have sown the wind and they shall reap the whirlwind” (cited by Brinkley, 2006: 204), already pressed into service in relation to the fire-bombing of cities as we saw in Chapter 7. In more recent terms, “they” (the engineers in the case of New Orleans) have dredged the wetland, and they (some of the residents of New Orleans) shall drown in the wet wasteland. Or in even more recent terms, they (the citizens of modern industrial countries) have seeded the clouds with greenhouse gases, and they shall reap the whirlwind and storm surge of Katrina and other extreme weather events.

New Orleans, as Kelman ([2003] 2006: xii) writes in his post-Katrina preface, “has a horrible disaster history” in the sense that it has a history of

horrible disasters. It also has a horrible history of the single disaster of its swampy location. Rather than “a chain of events that appears before us,” “the Angel of History” for Benjamin ([1940] 2003: 392) “sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage.” Rather than a series of disasters of the founding, drainage, disease, death, floods, hurricanes, and so on that mark the history of New Orleans, the Angel of History sees a single, catastrophic history, not just of New Orleans but preceding and postdating it. This catastrophic history and geography began in the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, darkness and chaos moved over the face of the waters, the earth was without form and void, and when God divided the land from the water, and is ending in industrial capitalism and its technologies, weather, climate, cities, floods, rivers and wetlands intertwining and interrelating together as entities and agents. Rather than a series of acts and sites of creativity and destruction that appear before us, the Angel of Geography sees one single process and place that keeps (re)creating order out of chaos and chaos out of order. This geography and history began at the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, and the wetland, and divided land from water, and continues when and as humans drain(ed) wetlands, create(d) cities, destroy(ed) cities, rebuilt/d cities, and rehabilitate(d) wetlands. “Katrina” is a salutary instance of the cultural and natural operating together in the one single catastrophe and creativity of divine and human history and geography.