

Book Review

THE CONTINUING STORM: LEARNING FROM KATRINA. By Kai Erikson and Lori Peek. University of Texas Press, 2022.

The Continuing Storm is part of the series *The Katrina Bookshelf* edited by Kai Erikson and published by the University of Texas. This series is arguably the most comprehensive set of scholarly books on a single natural disaster ever published, and Erikson and Peek are two of the most experienced researchers of disasters. It is reasonable to ask, after multiple highly regarded volumes in the series, if there is much left to learn about the Katrina disaster. This latest volume underscores the vital point that Erikson made decades ago with his landmark study of a flooded town: that natural disasters become ongoing, long term human disasters over time.¹ *The Continuing Storm* shows that when we pull back and look more broadly across space and time at the unfolding of a disaster like Katrina, much of what we did not see initially becomes clearer, and importantly for scholars in American Studies and a range of fields, the connections between Hurricane Katrina and race, class, gender, the media, politics, economics, and institutions in American society are deeply interwoven.

The book is organized into three sections, each approaching the topics from what could be described as different standpoint epistemologies. The first section provides an overview of the human, physical, and political ecology which Katrina devastated, and provides some insight into some of the worst excesses of the disaster. Vivaly, Erikson, and Peek continually emphasize how such disasters are not just a product of nature, but also the engineered landscape and human decisions. We are reminded that while bodies were floating in rank water, and others took refuge on rooftops, this was also a *human* disaster. Over 100,000 citizens in America were in desperate need of help and lives were at risk, yet little was done, leading so many critics to state that this was the worst response to a natural disaster in human history. Of particular note, the responses by FEMA and

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the media are placed under scrutiny, and scholars of public policy and journalism will benefit from the hard, critical analysis.

The second section locates Katrina in time and space. Their analysis reminds us that disasters unfold over days and years and in different dimensions: mental illness, ongoing problems with the built environment, fundamental needs like housing, all remain challenges and sometimes get worse in the aftermath, making the disaster an ongoing, chronic condition long after the floodwaters have withdrawn. Spatially, we also see how Katrina became a site for displacement, both natural and human-caused. Thousands of public workers, notably school teachers and officials, were forced out or re-located; the city of New Orleans and surrounding areas became sites for neoliberal privatization pushes. Tragedy was turned into an opportunity for capital accumulation, while displacing poor, particularly poor people of color, from already fragile ecological and economic conditions. This is documentation of conditions and decisions which are vital to our understanding of not just Katrina, but the politics of race, class, and gender which clearly shaped the response and aftermath.

Finally, Erikson and Peek discuss the human experience of Katrina: an ethnographically and historically informed view of the lives and actions and experiences of people suffering some of the worst aspects of this multi-dimensional tragedy. One of the most significant findings is the importance of path-dependency, seeing how the past shapes the impact of Katrina which continues to this day. Concentrated poverty and racial discrimination, combined with historically discriminatory housing policies and changes to the built environment, resulted in differential impacts of Katrina on the poorest black communities. Overall, this work is incredibly valuable, particularly when taken as part of the whole series on Katrina, in providing detailed, often heavily data-driven, insight into the effects of not just a tragic natural disaster, but of the historically accumulation of decisions, policies, and institutions shaping inequality in the United States. This book will be of particular interest to scholars in American Studies, among other fields, especially for providing new ways of connecting public policy, history, and politics with our understanding of inequality, ecologies, and public policy in the United States.

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Notes

1. Kai Erikson, *Everything in Its Path*. Simon and Schuster, 1976.