COLLECTIVE WOMEN’S STUDIES ESSAY

Losing Ground but Finding the High Road: Teaching Women’s Studies in Post-Katrina New Orleans

VICKI MAYER, BETH WILLINGER, PAMELA JENKINS, SUSAN TUCKER, SUSANNE DIETZEL, PAMELA WALDRON MOORE, BETSY JONES HEMENWAY, CRYSTAL KILE, VIOLET HARRINGTON BRYAN, AND JULIA REINEMAN

This essay combines the experiences and participation of women’s studies members from four campuses in New Orleans, Louisiana. It reflects both on the damage suffered by women in the academy and the strides that have been made in the post-Katrina environment.

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“Did you lose anything in the storm?” Three years after the worst disaster to hit an American city in public memory, this is a question we are still asked when we leave New Orleans. It seems like an awkward, if not unanswerable, question in a city that was immersed under water and then left high and dry by most state apparatuses, such that nearly half of the former population has still not returned. Each story of loss reflects a variety of factors. The losses range from the material (property, heirlooms, employment, transport), to the personal (family, friends, and colleagues), to the abstract (the loss of choices or hope). Yet we are also pressing on. The president of Xavier University, Norman Francis, who also became head of the Governor’s Louisiana Recovery Authority, has repeated often, “We’ve come too far to go back now,” which was, in many ways, a very effective Civil Rights slogan. This essay simply attempts to chart this path: where we came from and where we are going. Each loss has transformed us, in many cases opening up the possibilities for gains in areas we would not have expected. In the process, women’s studies have become redefined in ways that may mark the future of the discipline elsewhere.

Every woman who has been in New Orleans in the “pre-K” and “post-K” eras has a deeply personal and unique narrative of her own traumas and challenges, yet we also shared bonds as members of a gendered social group, as women whose entire city was affected. We are experiencing a collective mourning that is not yet finished. Despite our feelings of solidarity in writing this essay, it is not the place here to try to universalize our voices or to forget our differences. Rather, we wanted to contribute
something from our collective experiences. We have witnessed gender
taking a back seat to race and class issues in the description of the crisis,
while at the same time, we are frequently the ones held to be most respon-
sible in the rebuilding of the city. Supposedly gifted as “multitaskers,” we
have had little time to reflect, much less research, the past two and a half
years that began, for many of us, with packing a suitcase to take a simple
weekend “hurrication.”

Visible and Invisible Losses

Our collective suffering has been commodified in television series and
infotainment and by our own institutions that appropriate our trauma as
an opportunity to promote volunteerism, charity, even “study abroad”
experiences. These efforts have been largely pragmatic, if not necessary,
for a city that must compete with all others for public resources and
private investment in a neoliberal political economy. That, however,
does not make it any less disquieting to see personal suffering reduced to
those horrific photos taken at the Superdome or to the uplifting story of
the grateful individual recipient of a donated house or branded product.
Unlike these subjects, many of us are middle-class employees of institu-
tions of higher learning who have positions here of both privilege and
oppression. We are authorized to speak for others and yet voiceless in the
public sphere regarding our own personal losses and victories because they
do not fit the above binaries of the victims or the redeemed. Our affective
responses to the crisis, particularly when expressed as unfeminine anger,
have been pushed to the margins as less important relative to either the
real heroes or victims.

So yes, in answer to the question that begins this essay, we did lose
something in the storm. “Katrina has hastened us all—into leaving, into
dying, into divorcing or marrying or having babies, into changing, into
doing something else with our lives,” said Barbara Ewell of Loyola Univer-
sity, in a discussion with Susanne Dietzel in February 2008. Further, some
of the losses have been unequally gendered. According to the Institute
for Women’s Policy Research, at the time of the storm, Louisiana ranked
in the bottom ten among all states in the nation on many indicators of
women’s economic status (Williams et al. 2006). In a state that already
showed some of the worst statistics nationally for poverty, infant mortal-
ity, teen pregnancy, dropout rates, and violent crime, the ongoing crises
in health care, housing, education, and public safety services ensure that
women, particularly those who are poor and black, will face tougher chal-
lenges when considering their options for economic security or personal
safety (Hartmann et al. 2006). Nonprofits that serve low-income women,
such as the Louisiana Women’s Health Access Project and Dress for Success, have suffered heavy losses in staffing and funding. Meanwhile, all of us have faced higher rents and costs of living, making it harder than ever for many women to return.²

These quantitative measures, though, do not capture the scope of the crisis. For many of us who were comfortably never counted in poverty statistics, our changes began with where we were situated in the flood zones. Women’s studies practitioners across the city were uprooted, either temporarily through evacuation or permanently, when they returned to a damaged or destroyed shell of a house or apartment. Some of us became literally homeless, moving into hotels, renting spare rooms at overinflated prices, or depending on the hospitality of others for months. In New Orleans, faculty tend to live in or close to their respective campuses. Although many homes suffered minor to extensive structural damage in the storm winds and flood, faculty and staff of Loyola and Tulane Universities Uptown suffered fewer devastating losses than those of our colleagues at Xavier, University of New Orleans, Dillard, and Southern Universities whose faculty clustered in Mid-City, Lakeview, Gentilly, and through the devastated Ninth Ward out to New Orleans East, the areas most badly hit in the levee breaks.

Meanwhile, we waited (and in some cases waded) to see what would happen to our jobs and livelihoods. The director of Tulane’s Newcomb Center for Research on Women (NCROW) navigated pirogues³ to visit the soaked Seltzer-Gerard reading room of the Vorhoff Library and Newcomb Archives.⁴ Some faculty simply navigated the job market anew. Interdisciplinary programs are vulnerable by nature during times of financial exigency. The city’s universities stopped classes for a semester, the first time in their collective histories. The University of New Orleans (UNO) completed many classes from the 2005 fall semester as a mostly virtual university. During that time, the school lost nearly one-third of the interdisciplinary women studies faculty, including the Women’s Center director. Two faculty members were furloughed when their home departments or programs were eliminated, while others either retired or left on their own. Loyola University lost a disproportionate number of women faculty. Three senior women faculty, all members of NCROW, left Tulane University where male full professors outnumber females more than five to one. Comparatively fewer numbers left Tulane, but perhaps the bigger loss for some was the demise of Newcomb College, the oldest and longest-surviving women’s college in the South.⁵ In a moment of merging and downsizing, Tulane lost many of the administrative personnel who managed the college.
Gendering the Rebuild

The faculty and staff who have stayed through the past two years have struggled through a period of abnormality that continues to boggle the minds of outsiders. NCROW would have celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2005. Nadine Vorhoff Library staff members were reunited with their collections only in Fall 2006. Many of us lost our research and creative work. Our computers, notes, books, and personal archives molded in the humid conditions. Laboratories shuttered. Our human subject populations scattered as we did, many of them never to return. “The hardest thing for me is to see someone I care about who seems okay just suddenly disintegrate, just dissolve,” said Newcomb alumna Allison Raynor to a Tulane researcher. “These are people for whom this is what they know. This is solidly home” (Raynor 2006).

If the above quotation seems despondent, its emphasis on home should signal the very positive ways we have decided to rebuild, rejuvenate, and, in some cases, fight back. Women have historically led many of New Orleans’ cultural institutions, and since Katrina, women have begun to lead political institutions as well. For the first time in the city’s history, women outnumber men in the city council. The organization Women of the Storm, a nonpartisan alliance of women from the city, has kept recovery on the national agenda, from giving our national representatives “tours” of the devastated areas, to arranging to host a 2008 presidential debate. The Katrina Krewe, Citizens for a Greater New Orleans, Levees.org, Hike for KaTREEna, the Alliance for Affordable Energy, and Incite! New Orleans, similarly, are all led by women.

In our capacities as educators and university workers, we contributed to these efforts in our own ways. We have collected papers produced by each of these activist groups and housed them in our renovated libraries. We are conducting interviews with women: leaders, alumnae, those who have returned, and those who have not. UNO Women’s Studies faculty members are involved in the national study “Documenting the Displaced,” sponsored by the Social Science Research Council Hurricane Katrina Task Force, to collect stories of local families still far from home. Another tapestry of voices dubbed “Stories of the Storm” will be accessible through the Sophie portal of the Newcomb Web site, which is hosted through a nonlocal server (in case we flood again). The site http://newcomb.tulane.edu, produced by Tulane’s women’s studies and communication students through the Collat Media Project, has numerous interactive places for sharing images and insights and posts news on recovery efforts as they affect women and girls in the city (Hernandez et al. 2006). These projects have resulted in new courses tied to service learning in the city: “Feminist Documentation and New Media” and “Sophie the Riveter,” a seminar that
trains women in the art of building sustainable housing one nail at time. One very important curricular development has also occurred: Xavier University faculty members have formulated a proposal for a women’s studies minor.9

The common denominator among these innovative projects is the involvement of new local networks that have formed for women inside and outside of the academy. Called “Katrina Warriors,” women leaders of grassroots organizations and postsecondary institutions have banded together to collaborate, share information, and work together in rebuilding projects that affect women and girls in the city. Public events of this kind have led Eve Ensler, creator of The Vagina Monologues, to connect Warrior activities with those of women in conflict zones globally.10 Long-term projects now aim to provide community resources across the city from battered women’s shelters to cultural arts centers. Community has sometimes had insular connotations in this city, where multiple generations of families have dominated the economic, political, and cultural lives of neighborhoods, white, black, and creole, for more than two hundred years. The word “community,” is now up for grabs, claimed by everyone who lived in the city pre-K, and also those coming in “post” with the energy, idealism, and determination to rebuild. The New Orleans Women’s Studies Consortium, the host organization for the 2003 NWSA Conference, finally met again in October 2007, the first time since Katrina. Ten of our twenty members are new, a result of new hires in our respective institutions. They will also weigh in on these transformed definitions of community.

What this might mean for women’s studies in New Orleans’ institutions of higher learning is yet to be seen but should point to three lessons for those located in universities elsewhere. First, disasters affect everyone in a city, though gender still seems to be invisible when considering Katrina’s effects. The demise of Newcomb College, the dismissal or departure of women’s studies faculty, and the displacement of other female scholars cannot be read outside of the context of destroyed social and economic infrastructures. That said, it should also be noted that there is a healthy, ongoing debate on the future of women’s studies in this time of diminished resources.11 The second lesson for women’s studies supporters would be to listen to voices on all sides of these debates. Maintaining traditions or simply reinventing programs that do not include all women runs the risk of perpetuating the same generational splits that divide second, third, or potentially another wave of feminists coming together after a crisis. Finally, we still cannot take the meaning of feminism for granted. It is being reshaped along with the new coalitions that have emerged to fight for everything from public safety to the need for affordable energy sources in the city.
One result of our renewed, although perhaps not always affordable, energy is this short essay. Representing a truly collective effort, the authors above are only a partial listing of people who have supported us and contributed to our knowledge as we write about what we are living through. So yes, we all did lose something in Katrina. But we have also gained a lot as well.

All of the authors of this essay were affiliated with women's studies programs in New Orleans at the time that Hurricane Katrina made landfall. Vicki Mayer helped coordinate this collective authorship through the Faculty Study Group on Hurricane Katrina sponsored by the Newcomb College Center for Research on Women. Send correspondence to vmayer@tulane.edu.

Notes

1. Just a couple of these examples include the recently canceled K-Ville on Fox, along with the numerous reality programs and The Oprah Winfrey Show specials set in New Orleans. Many of these former programs partner with Habitat for Humanity, which also partners with local universities to do service learning and a “semester in New Orleans.”

2. Although not directly related, one indicator that women may be staying away is the number of children enrolled in the public school district. October 2007 figures show 32,149 students enrolled, down from 66,000 prior to the storm. See Greater New Orleans Nonprofit Knowledge Works, “Public School Enrollment, 2000–2007,” http://www.gnocdc.org/school_enrollment.html.

3. A pirogue is a small, flat-bottomed boat associated particularly with the Cajuns of the Louisiana marsh. These boats are light and small enough to move through very shallow water.

4. A foot of water resting for a month caused more than one quarter million dollars of damage to the building, although most collections were unharmed. Renovation is now being completed, meaning that Center staff have acted as contractors for now almost three years.

5. Established in 1886, Newcomb College was the first U.S. college for women founded within an existing university for men (Tulane University). The college was an early leader in the education of southern women. Beginning in the early 1970s, men and women students took all classes together; in 1987, the women’s college faculty merged with that of the men’s college, but the storm ended the gender-split administrative and student-governing bodies. As part of the renewal plan, funds for the college were shifted to the H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College Institute, an academic center designed to draw
women students and all educators from across the university to enhance women’s education and to carry the legacy and spirit of Newcomb College. The University’s recommendations for this change can be found at http://renewal.tulane.edu/traditions_031606_board.shtml. Some alumnae, organized as The Future of Newcomb College, Inc., have begun legal proceedings to revert their decision. Their efforts are documented on the Save Newcomb College Web site: http://www.newcomblives.com.

6. The Center received an outpouring of support and with grants from the M.B and Edna Zale Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Society of Southwest Archivists, the Society of American Archivists Emergency Disaster Assistance Grant Fund, and SOLINET.

7. The Commission on Presidential Debates thwarted this latter effort.


9. The Xavier University Academic Council approved the Women’s Study minor in the spring of 2008 and the program is now a part of the university’s curriculum.


11. See, for example, the lively letters to the editors of *New Orleans Magazine* [Case 2008; Edmunds 2008; Jones 2008; Kelly 2008] about Dawn Ruth’s column “Newcomb Musings” in the January 2008 issue.

References


