

Vignettes From a Carpetbagger: Four Parables of the Katrina Era

by Easha Anand

I didn't want to be a carpetbagger; I wanted to love New Orleans. I made sure that the first time I drank this far below the Mason-Dixon line, it was to brass band music and not in a lousy piano lounge at Pat O'Brian's. I read up on Eddie Jordan before coming to the city. I shared a crush on Trombone Shorty with the entire female population of Orleans Parish, I knew that the West Bank was East of the rest of New Orleans and I kept sweetness in my blood by eating Camellia Grill's pecan pie every week—all the tokens I needed for entrance to insiderdom.

But in Katrina Era New Orleans, insurance claims agents change so fast that sometimes you've got to squelch your pride and work up a sob story two and three times a month, and kids play on the roofs of FEMA trailers, because there's no playgrounds and, in some places, no school, and sometimes all you can do is pray and love, and that is what it means to love New Orleans.

So I cannot claim to I love the city. Because in the Katrina Era, love is something to be purchased with sweat equity, with a down payment of heartbreak and the kind of interest rate that nobody dares to calculate.

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In the Bible, after the flood washed everything away, then came the parables, to tell us how to build a new world. After the flood—after the 1,836 deaths and the \$81.2 billion in damages and the 175 mph winds—come the morality tales, and while I didn't live in New Orleans long enough or rightly enough to say I love it, I did live there long enough to know a

Katrina Era parable when I see one

I am a D.A.R.E baby, raised on the gospel of “friends don’t let friends.” But when I took car keys away from my perpetually soused friends in New Orleans, I got jeers all around for my trouble. New Orleans has drive-through daiquiri stands; tipsy parallel parking is apparently something its citizens imbibe in the womb, because whether they can walk straight or talk straight, they still slide their moldy stick shifts into spaces smaller than the length of the car. Hard to believe, I know, but sometimes this is a city of miracles. Rise up and bear witness.

### **The Parable of Man's Inhumanity to Man**

What used to be Congregation Beth Israel’s synagogue is now the primary pilgrimage site for Jewish volunteer groups visiting New Orleans. They come to get a sense of the devastation: Ten feet of water can mean losing everything—seven Torah scrolls, 10,000 prayer books. Located in the well-to-do suburb of Lakeview, Beth Israel is something of an untold story: Middle-class, white properties were destroyed, too.

But these days, the devastation that the former synagogue is supposed to evoke gives way to sacrilege.

The building is always locked, but every time someone comes to check on it, there’s something else destroyed: Windows are broken, a door is ajar, and one time, a skate ramp had been erected in the middle of the house of prayer, facing the pulpit.

“Skateboarders went into this sanctuary and set up a ramp in a gutted place of worship,” says Rabbi Uri Topolosky, furious. “It blows your mind, the irreverence.”

And then, one day this summer, the most heartbreaking crime of all.

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Copper is now a precious metal in New Orleans. A representative from Poland Scrap

Metal, Inc., says it sells at \$2.50 per pound, and so raiding a synagogue like Beth Israel—which a group of criminals did this past July—probably yielded upwards of \$500 in loot.

Poland Scrap Metal is complying with nascent city legislation to demand identification before copper is purchased, a deterrent to those who acquire the metal illegally. But they are competing with itinerant, unlicensed scrap metal companies, and builders don't seem to care about the difference.

Public Information Officer Sabrina Richardson of the New Orleans Police Department says that the swaths of uninhabited homes are prime real estate for copper thieves; the increase in copper theft has gotten so bad that it is the single biggest reason for additional patrols.

“Of course you don't want to encourage anything that will interrupt the rebuilding process,” the Poland Scrap representative says. “But it also interrupts the rebuilding process if you can't put a gutter in on a new house because you have no copper. We have to have the building materials on hand.

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The copper thieves came to Lakeview mere weeks after the entire Beth Israel congregation worked to clean out the whole building, to make it presentable enough to show a real estate agent.

The thieves smashed in the windows. They destroyed the yartzheit—the 10-by-8-foot memorial plaques with names and dates of the congregation's losses, and a little light that goes on during anniversary days, when everyone should remember—for the copper wiring.

And they slashed the walls looking for copper piping, tore it out of the air-conditioning unit and managed to re-flood the place four feet deep in the process.

You rebuild and pick up and move on and gut and scrub, and then there's something else

happens, and you to start all over again.

“That’s the worst part of these crimes,” Officer Richardson agrees. “They’re specifically targeting people who are putting their blood, sweat and tears into rebuilding.”

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I remember, in June, snagging a ride with three National Guardsmen, and they gave me a tour of the districts—three and seven—that they still patrol. They got out to check every air-conditioning unit. Even in the quasi-police state that borders the Industrial Canal, some thieves are brazen enough to hack at air-conditioning ducts.

One of my tour guides told me that he saw a fellow back home in Arkansas trying to sell off copper wiring that he boasted of bringing up from New Orleans. The National Guardsman punched him.

### **The Parable of Human Ingenuity**

The Espresso Book Machine is Rube Goldberg sui generis. It looks like a set piece from a Spielberg film, the automaton bastard child of an orgy of office appliances. The EBM can print a book in the time it takes you to down a venti Starbucks, which is to say about five minutes, and the book will be library quality, with a four-color cover, perfect binding and a production cost of a penny per page.

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After the flood, there was only “White Oleander” left. Not quite—“White Oleander” is the only title Chalmette High School librarian Peggy Schwarz remembers of the eight books saved from the school’s 25,000-strong collection—but it is still a decidedly lackluster ark.

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EBM is the brainchild of Dane Neller and Jason Epstein of OnDemand Books, says

Whitney Dorin, the company's director of business development. The very first working machine was demonstrated at the World Bank Info Shop, and then refurbished and donated to the New Orleans Public Library system. It will arrive in January, ready to print and bind any of the 200,000 public domain books to which it has access, titles like "Alice in Wonderland" and all the Dickens novels.

"It's not an end," Whitney says. "But it's a huge beginning."

The EBM works like this: While one laser printer spits out and aligns the pages, another prints the cover. Then the whole pile is passed over a heat-activated glue pot (the heat-activated glue is the piece Neller is most proud of) and pressed into shape.

Pressed into shape and then pressed into service: Ron Biava, Executive Director of the New Orleans Public Library Foundation, says the EBM will be used not only to replace some of the books the NOPL lost due to Katrina flooding—eight of 13 libraries were completely ruined—but also to let people inexpensively replace books from their personal collections, to keep in print some of the library's most frequently used self-published volumes ("A Guide to Genealogical Research" comes to Biava's mind), and to resurrect the libraries of six partner public schools.

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The first time Peggy returned to Chalmette High School, she took shrimp boots and a flashlight. It was mid-September, and it was horrifying.

Chalmette High School, in St. Bernard Parish, was one of those sites you saw on the news, with first a few hundred, then a few thousand, stragglers camped out inside of the only building which still had four walls.

By the time Peggy showed up, every book from the bottom four shelves had floated out

of the bookcase; Peggy had to wade through them to get to the walls. Though the water line didn't go that high, the fifth shelf was covered in furry mold, and the top shelf's books looked okay, but were destroyed on the inside.

"Maybe the water rose and then receded really fast," Peggy says. "I don't know. It doesn't matter."

The only books that were saved were the eight books that had been at Peggy's house and at the home of a Cajun Spanish teacher. But Peggy was not leaving.

"I'm a Chalmatian," she says. "Chalmatians stick around."

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When you return to a place where you know 1,500 people verged on starvation while they waited to be rescued, cell phones dead, what do you do next?

Rely on the generosity of strangers, it turns out. Michigan State University donated thousands of volumes, as did every person in the school district, Peggy says. Barbara Bush asked Time-Life to replace the library's bound volumes, and the company threw in so many framed photos and posters that nobody's sure what to do with them.

Peggy has teams of volunteers just going through the boxes in the library space; since the school reopened, she's guessing they've got about 16,000 usable volumes already. And now, with a wishlist culled from the online Gutenberg Project, Peggy is looking forward to completing the collection with help from the EBM.

Like Chalmette High School, the New Orleans Public Library system hopes to use EBM to appreciably upgrade, rather than just resurrecting the status quo. The EBM is just one component of a \$60 million set of repairs and upgrades: Safer storage space for archives; cleanup for the libraries still moldy with floodwater; and, thanks to OnDemand's new technology, more

books.

“A return to normal is not good enough,” Biava says. “Normal wasn’t that good anyway.”

### **The Parable of Aversion to Change**

Fidel Palma’s customers used to come out of the rubble. They would emerge from shells of buildings, from behind wheelbarrows filled with caulking guns and bricks. They were glazed with sweat and sprinkled with mold, iced with sheetrock dust and trying to hide the muddiest of their clothes. “No salsa, lots of beans, *por favor*,” they say, and pockmarked, white-haired Fidel stoops to replenish his supply of tortillas from the body of his taco truck, cursing as his knees crack.

Fidel’s was the only eating establishment within a mile of this neighborhood-turned-war-zone-cum-construction-site, and, thanks to 30-minute lunch breaks, he has a monopoly. But that has apparently changed since I left the New Orleans area. In July, Louis Congemi, a Jefferson Parish Councilman, authored legislation effectively banning taco trucks. The bill targeted mobile kitchens without restrooms, operating in areas without special landscape and buffer space exceptions.

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The bill therefore specifically—and, argues Darlene Kattan, president of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Louisiana, deliberately—targets taco trucks and, by extension, the Hispanic, largely undocumented workforce they serve. The fear that these relative newcomers, imported in large measure after Katrina to help with manual labor, will take over the city, says Darlene, is the “elephant in the room.”

Just how large the elephant is, however, remains unknown in the chaotic aftermath that

still is New Orleans today.

“Nobody knows,” says Darlene. “If anyone tells you that they have a hard number, get in your car and drive away as fast as you can.”

In Houston, taco trucks have become veritable white-tortilla establishments. They even sell advertising space along their sides. In Dallas, they mount cameras for the police, so that when they are wheeled into the desolate, abandoned parts of town, they can be the cops’ eyes and ears. Darlene says New Orleans lost a great opportunity to build bridges because of its fear of change.

“Nobody who actually went to the taco trucks was complaining,” Darlene says. “Americans line up and beg them to come. They say, ‘Oh my GOD, this is so fresh and inexpensive!’ There are no complaints.”

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The taco truck owners, by contrast, do have some complaints. At least Fidel—who came down to New Orleans from Jersey—does: Five Hispanic men he knows have been killed since the summer, mostly jumped for the week’s wages, which they have no choice but to carry around in cash. His wife miscarried, gruesomely, because the hospital wouldn’t take her—they decided that she didn’t know enough English to sign an informed consent form and represented a liability issue.

There are some things changing, Darlene says. The Hispanic Chamber of Commerce is instituting free professional development courses for local business owners. AFI Credit has opened a “safe account”—pointedly not a “savings account”; there will be no interest earned—wherein workers can deposit their checks and access their money through a debit card, rather than carry wads of cash around with them.

And Darlene, furious at how New Orleans is treating the group most directly responsible for its resurrection, is putting together a pool of bilingual volunteers. They will help out the police, teaching them to say, "Put your hands up!" in Spanish.

### **The Parable of Strength in Numbers**

It is the mystery of Magazine St.: How the province of the "uptown ladies"—women who dress like soccer moms and guzzle bellinis with lunch; who are self-professed "die-hard liberals," but who will cross the street if they see a boy on a skateboard—fell prey to a tatted invasion.

Crescent City Tattoos, which sits catty-corner to Slim Goodies, the first diner to open after the storm; Pigment Tattoos, whose sign has a rather apropos palette with daubs of paint on it; Eye Candy Tattoos, in front of which three guys with Miller High Life camouflage hats always seem to be sleeping; and four other tattoo parlors exist within a six block stretch.

Part of this evokes a national trend, according to Jacci Gresham, owner and chief tattooist at Aart Accent Tat-2, the first tattoo parlor to open after the storm. Jacci points out that even Walmart is advertising tattoos these days. And part of it evokes the way New Orleans has always been, which is to say a little more biker chic than most metropolitan areas.

But Jacci says she's done more fleurs de lis, that anomalous stamp of New Orleans, in the past two years than she had done in the previous 30 combined. Fleurs de lis in a state of Louisiana, fleurs de lis behind someone's name, fleurs de lis next to an "RIP."

I don't have a clue what the exact numbers are, but all seven of the tattoo parlor owners that I spoke with agreed that the market for tattoos is still feverish, and that they're doing eyes of the storm and "504"'s (the New Orleans area code) at a rate that's never been matched before.

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A week after Katrina hit, Jacci found a way across Lake Pontchartrain, evading National

Guardsmen to get back to her tattoo parlor. She hooked up a generator. She painted ads for her parlor on the refrigerators that flanked every Garden District street, taped shut and set out because nobody could cope with the smell. The ones with "Aart" written on them seemed to get picked up faster by the non-existent city services, Jacci said, but not fast enough that people didn't have time to find out she was back, to come find her.

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Thanksgiving was crazy this year, Jacci says, because everyone who had time off and booked it to New Orleans for a weekend came to get their tattoo. Two years and some change after Katrina, Jacci was thankful, still, for a landlord who let her pay only nominal rent to stay downtown when her house in the 9th Ward was demolished, and for three decades of tattooing, and sometimes two and three generations of canvases within the same family.

The grandparents come to her because they remember when Jacci was the first black woman in the entire country to own a tattoo parlor (that was 32 years ago, and of course it opened in New Orleans). Jacci was so unhappy with the way women were treated in tattoo parlors—"they'd come in asking for a wrist tattoo and they'd have to take off their blouse to get it," she says—that she quit her job at GM and started her own place. The old-timers bring their grandkids there because Jacci can do girly stuff—two-toned butterflies and lettering that looks better than average and tiny, intricate pieces, but not so detailed that it all blurs together when the skin isn't quite so taut, and because Jacci is a good listener.

They know that it will take more than stories to make sure their grandkids remember the storm, but they tell them to Jacci anyway. I ask Jacci what the best story she's heard while tattooing is. She thinks I'm crazy. She doesn't need to tell me that there is no such thing as a bad storyteller from New Orleans, and if you think you know one, well, they probably grew up in

Mandeville.

There are no best Katrina stories, either. You can't compare the girl who got out before the storm hit but whose fiancée shot himself the day they were denied their insurance claim with the boy who swam four miles to get help, only to come back and find his parents drowned. It's like apples and oranges. Kind of.

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The only official Katrina memorial sits in the Lower 9th Ward. It sits blocks from the hand-written street signs and front porch stairs leading nowhere that are the storm's real memorial. And it consists of one American flag, a dozen turquoise bars representing water heights and some bright red chairs. If that's all the government is going to do, Jacci's customers will have to do better. They choose to bear witness in a way that only ink soldered into flesh can.

That fleur de lis, which seems to be on every bicep under the age of 30, has become accepted in Katrina Era parlance as the city's Purple Heart: It says, "We know what it means to miss New Orleans."

### **Revelations**

Here is the story that matters most of all. When I showed up at the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, battered spiral in hand, Darlene talks to me about Iberville, about the sheetrockers from El Salvador and the time it takes to drive to Houston in traffic. But when Peggy sees the 240 area code from which I now call, ensconced in New England, she feels obliged to tell me that the storm hit on August 29, 2005, that Chalmette is in a parish near Orleans that flooded. Post-Katrina New Orleans is maybe still the city that care forgot, but it's also the city that America forgot, and that the locals have no choice but to love as hard as they can.

## End Notes

### Personal Interviews in Summer, 2007.

Darlene Kattan, head of Hispanic Chamber of Commerce  
Rabbi Uri Topolosky of Congregation Beth Israel  
Fidel Palma, taco truck owner in Metairie off of Veterans Blvd  
Poland Scrap Metal representative  
Annette Larue of Electric Ladyland  
Travis Linde of Pigment Tattoo  
Randy Jones of Eyecandy Tattoo  
Michael Schroeder of Crescent City Tattoo

### Personal Interviews in November, 2007.

Louis Congemi, Jefferson Parish Council Member  
Peggy Schwarz, Chalmette High School Librarian  
Whitney Dorin, Business Director of OnDemand Books  
Jacci Gresham, owner of Aart Tat-2  
Ron Biava, New Orleans Public Library Foundation  
Walt Clark of NOLA Tattooing  
Nathan Rothstein, founder, NOLA YURP  
Gil Benedek, AmeriCorps Coordinator

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