When It Rains, It Floods:  
An Ethnography of Infrastructure and Citizenship in New Orleans  

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Executive Summary

This document summarizes anthropological (ethnographic) research undertaken in the aftermath of the August 5th, 2017 flood in New Orleans. Through four weeks of informal conversations, formal interviews, observations in contexts related to flood recovery, and participation in community life, the researcher discovered that the August 5th flood had a substantial impact on the lives of New Orleanians—an impact that was not fully acknowledged by city leaders. Four key observations are highlighted in this document:

1) The flood had a profound emotional impact on New Orleans residents.
2) The flood substantially affected the livelihoods of many New Orleans residents.
3) The government’s response to citizens’ recovery needs was limited.
4) Few non-profits assisted with flood recovery in meaningful ways.

The costs of flood recovery were shifted from the government, which was largely responsible for the flood, onto the citizens of New Orleans. Since similar floods are likely to occur in the future, it is imperative that the City of New Orleans and the non-profit community develop an effective system for responding to citizens’ needs in the wake of small-scale floods that do not qualify for federal disaster assistance.
Introduction

On August 5th, 2017, heavy rain fell on much of New Orleans. The severity of the rainstorm, combined with the failure of the New Orleans Sewerage and Water Board’s pumping and drainage infrastructure, resulted in flooding in much of Mid-City, Tremé, Lakeview, and the Seventh Ward. My undergraduate senior thesis, written for the department of anthropology at Princeton University, examines the aftermath of the August 5th flood. I asked, “How did residents respond to the flood?”, “Who or what did residents believe was responsible?”, “Who helped those affected by the flood and how?”, and ultimately, “What does the August 5th flood tell us about the relationship between citizens and government?” Through four weeks of research in New Orleans between August 8th and September 6th, 2017, as well as a deep dive into newspaper articles and the scholarly literature, I concluded that Mayor Mitch Landrieu’s administration responded swiftly to public anger with repairs to infrastructure and took small steps to help those affected by the flood, but that the assistance from both government and non-profits was ultimately insufficient for meeting citizens’ needs.

Even with a functioning pumping and drainage system, floods such as the August 5th flood are likely to occur again. Climate change is increasing the frequency of severe rainfalls, which have occurred periodically throughout New Orleans history, and the city’s water management infrastructures continue to age. Looking to this future, it is imperative that the City of New Orleans possess an effective system for responding to citizens’ needs in the wake of small-scale floods that may not qualify for federal disaster assistance. This document explains my research methods, key observations, and the implications of this project for policy-making. Given that New Orleans has no shortage of experts on water management and that the August 5th flood has already been well analyzed from an infrastructural perspective, this document focuses on how people actually experienced the flood and its aftermath—essential information for formulating disaster response policies.
**Research Methods**

This research was conducted using the anthropological methodology called ethnography. Often described as “participant observation,” ethnography involves becoming embedded in a community for a prolonged period of time, taking field notes, conducting interviews, and generally participating in the social life of a particular place. Based on the premise that qualitative, experiential research is an invaluable supplement to quantitative information, ethnography aims not only to understand the facts, but also people’s emotional and interior experiences, to the extent that these are discoverable. Like journalism, ethnography can fill crucial gaps in our knowledge by telling people’s stories.

The observations presented in this document are the result of informal conversations with family and friends in New Orleans (my parents are from the city and I grew up visiting frequently), six formal interviews, and countless interactions with residents in various contexts related to flood recovery. This research involved asking businesses how they had been affected by the August 5th flood; speaking with flood victims and non-profit representatives at a temporary flood resource center; attending a town hall meeting held by a local politician to discuss water management; visiting damaged homes with the Cajun Army; and helping to gut houses that had been damaged in the flood. The people with whom I spoke in these contexts ranged in age from young adults to very elderly people and included African American and white residents. In addition to these interactions, I systematically reviewed the *Times-Picayune* and *New Orleans Advocate’s* coverage of the August 5th flood, explored online sources such as Facebook posts and videos of City Council meetings, and consulted scholarly works on New Orleans. In accordance with anthropological practice, the names in this document are pseudonyms, with the exceptions of public figures and Cajun Army leader Windy Boudreaux, who requested I use her real name. I have not disguised the names of non-profit or governmental organizations.
Key Observations

Observation #1: The flood had a profound emotional impact on New Orleans residents.

My conversations with New Orleans residents revealed an overwhelming sense of anger at the Sewerage and Water Board, Mayor Landrieu, and the local government generally. “We thought that we had had these conversations or that we had responsible people in charge,” Mid-City resident Tracy said. “How do we not have a pumping system that is functioning in the middle of hurricane season?” Several times I heard, word-for-word, the phrase “people are pretty pissed.” Some residents were frustrated that no one was being held accountable for the flood. Edward, for example, who was dealing with contractor fraud as he tried to repair his washing machine, exclaimed “Someone ought to be liable! No one is liable! If I did that to your house, I’d have to pay!” This frustration was similar across people who had not received flood damage, such as Tracy, and those who had, such as Edward. Many residents also tied their anger to the trauma they had experienced after Hurricane Katrina. Brenda, who lived in the Seventh Ward, said she was having “Katrina flashbacks” as she simultaneously gutted her home and watched the coverage of Hurricane Harvey. Clearly, the August 5th flood elicited frustration with city leaders and rekindled past traumas. It is important to pay attention to these emotions because emotion impacts how people behave in the aftermath of disaster.

Observation #2: The flood substantially affected the livelihoods of many New Orleans residents.

My conversations with flood victims at a Flood Recovery Resource Center organized by the city revealed how people had been affected by the flood. Damages ranged from flooded garages to leaky roofs to severe mold. Some had flood insurance, but many did not. Some citizens needed assistance paying utilities, since they had had to pay for home repairs. Others simply could not afford home repairs: one Tremé apartment I visited was in ruins two weeks after the flood, with black and green mold already visible two feet up the wall. However, flooded vehicles were by far the most common form of damage mentioned at the resource center. For
residents that could not afford repairs, a damaged vehicle could lead to a lost job or missed appointments. As a Catholic Charities representative exclaimed, “If they could afford new cars, they would already one!” There was no aid for car repairs available at the Flood Recovery Resource Center. While people were affected by the flood in a variety of ways, it is evident that a) a significant number of New Orleans residents needed help recovering from the flood and b) the damages were far more severe than reported in the local papers.

Observation #3: The government’s response to citizens’ recovery needs was limited.

Mayor Mitch Landrieu responded to public outcry about the Sewerage and Water Board with changes in leadership and immediate infrastructural repairs, but his administration took far fewer actions to help citizens recover. A flood damage survey was conducted, but comprehensive results from this survey have never been made widely available, minimizing its usefulness for citizens. The city also established the four-day Flood Recovery Resource Center, where flood victims could make connections with city agencies and non-profits. Both these actions occurred at least a week after the flood, however, after the time when people most need assistance with obtaining transportation, finding shelter, and gutting homes. It is very likely that many people who were unable to afford substantial repairs went unnoticed. They may have merely bleached their walls and tossed some of their furniture, neither of which address the underlying and potentially deadly problem of mold. The city health department attempted to educate citizens that bleach was insufficient to kill mold within walls, but without material assistance, these were empty recommendations.

Since the August 5th flood was not declared a federal disaster, the federal government’s ability to assist flood victims was limited; FEMA could not become involved. The only money allocated from the federal government came in the form of Small Business Administration (SBA) loans for real estate damage or personal property. These loans were in high demand; according to an SBA representative, 200 people had visited their temporary offices in the Mid-City Library.
between August 23rd and August 31st alone. However, while these loans may have helped some people recover, they were not useful to those most in need: low-income residents who would not qualify for a loan. When I asked an SBA representative what happened to individuals who did not qualify for a loan, he showed me some literature that they would provide them. These materials were exactly the same as those distributed at the Flood Recovery Resource Center. It provided information about mold, but no references to monetary resources for actually undergoing repairs. Low-income New Orleanians who were searching for assistance, but did not qualify for loans, must have found themselves in a loop of referrals to the same nonexistent resources. Moreover, the fact that the government provided loans rather than grants in the aftermath of a disaster for which they had acknowledged responsibility felt like a cruel joke. The cost of flood recovery was shifted from the government onto the citizens of New Orleans.

Observation #4: Few non-profits assisted with flood recovery in meaningful ways.

My research demonstrated that few non-profits assisted with recovery from the August 5th flood in meaningful ways. A variety of non-profits and government organizations were present at the Flood Recovery Resource Center: Catholic Charities, the Louisiana Civil Justice Center, the National Flood Insurance Program/FEMA, the Saint Bernard Project, the Cajun Army, I See Change, Stay Local, the Urban Conservancy, the New Orleans Health Department, and NOLA Ready. To my knowledge, only Catholic Charities and the Cajun Army assisted flood victims in material ways. Catholic Charities entered people into their intake system so they could receive services ranging from clothing to support with utilities, while Cajun Army helped to gut people’s homes and businesses.

The other organizations were primarily present to provide information about their initiatives. For example, I See Change, an organization that tracks the on-the-ground impacts of climate change, encouraged residents to download and contribute to their app so that better data could be collected about flooding. Meanwhile, a representative from the Louisiana Civil
Justice Center (LCJC) handed out business cards to all the residents who stopped by his table. He told me that the role of the LCJC would come later, after flood victims experienced contractor fraud or their flood insurance claims were rejected. One of the few organizations present that directly assists victims of disasters with rebuilding was the Saint Bernard Project (SBP). SBP handed out valuable information about the steps involved in disaster recovery and how to prevent contractor fraud, but they did not undertake any projects to help flood victims.

All these non-profits provide important services to New Orleans residents. However, very few material resources such as money and manpower were available at the Flood Recovery Resource Center. My sense that few of New Orleans’s many disaster response programs had been triggered by the August 5th flood was corroborated by comments from non-profit leaders. An employee of Evacueer, which assists the city with hurricane evacuations, wrote in an email that “we have had a few things going on, and I wish any of them were getting boots on the ground for flood assistance…Windy Boudreaux with the local arm of the Cajun Army is the only person who has reached out to me directly about opportunities for mucking/gutting here in New Orleans.” Another non-profit leader described the response to the flood as less than expected: “As far as this recent flood, it seems to be the disaster that never happened, so we’re just now hearing from people who were expecting a larger effort to clean up that never came.” For a flood which impacted between 600 and 800 people, the response by New Orleans’s local large non-profit community was very small.

Why did the August 5th flood fail to garner significant attention from the non-profit sector? Some reasons may include its small scale compared to a named storm, the lack of information regarding who was affected, people’s attempts to make do on their own, and Hurricane Harvey, which drew volunteers to Texas. Moreover, because the floodwaters came and went in a matter of hours, the impression may have developed that the August 5th flood was a mere moment, rather than a real disaster demanding long-term recovery. Several New Orleans residents with whom I spoke proposed the possibility that there actually was minimal damage. While this is a
possibility worth considering, my experiences talking to people at the Flood Recovery Resource Center and visiting flooded homes convinced me that this was not the case. I believe that there were at least a couple hundred New Orleanians who never received substantial flood recovery assistance. *Without adequate support from either government or non-profits, there were certainly people who slipped through the cracks.*

**Implications**

My research demonstrates that there must be a system in place for supporting people after small-scale floods which do not trigger federal disaster assistance. This system might involve a faster way of gathering information about flood damages, a centralized means for harnessing the resources and manpower of non-profits, and the establishment of a fund for no-strings-attached grant money for home and vehicle repairs. There must also be a recourse for renters who are evicted so that owners can undertake repairs. The Cajun Army, led by Windy Boudreaux, initiated some gutting and home repairs through in-kind donations and volunteer labor. The City of New Orleans should continue to support the work of the Cajun Army by providing construction permits easily and spreading the word about volunteer opportunities. The Cajun Army model of crowd-sourcing relief might also provide an inexpensive means for disaster assistance after future floods, as long as it is one component of a larger system that ensures citizens of New Orleans no longer slip through the cracks.
Selected Bibliography


