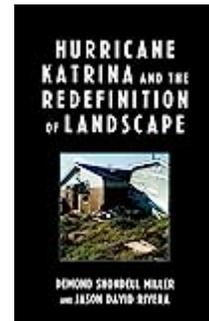




DeMond Shondell Miller, Jason David Rivera. *Hurricane Katrina and the Redefinition of Landscape*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008. Illustrations. xvii + 171 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-2146-7.



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The Importance of Knowing a Place

When asked to review DeMond Shondell Miller and Jason David Rivera's *Hurricane Katrina and the Redefinition of Landscape*, I relented because the beguiling title caught my attention, and, since I was in the midst of working on a project considering landscape redefinition, it seemed like a book I should read. From the opening sentence, however, I found the authors' lack of familiarity and understanding of New Orleans a serious liability to their scholarship. They suggest that "all, or nearly all of New Orleans suffered complete destruction" (p. 1). This is a shocking statement to anyone familiar with New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. While small sections of the city did endure complete destruction, much of the 80 percent of the city covered by water was undeveloped wetland and a full 20 percent did not even suffer inundation. Furthermore, the authors neglect to convey that much of the flooded area experienced only a few inches to a foot of water, and thus many of the traditional raised homes stood above the flood. Granted, there was extensive wind damage throughout the city and untold suffering, but the inaccurate opening passage

raised my skepticism to the *âredâ* level. Serious misunderstandings about conditions on the ground in New Orleans run throughout the book, and as a consequence, cause me to question the larger conceptual presentation.

Simple errors/typos further erode the authors' credibility. Their assertion that Katrina was "over 10,000 miles wide" is an example (p. 3). My quick Google Earth query shows that the distance from Brownsville, Texas, to Tampa, Florida, is just under 1,000 miles, and from Miami to Lisbon the distance is just over 4,000 miles. Katrina was a huge storm, but not twice the width of the Atlantic Ocean. To their credit, the authors offer a more credible, but still excessive, size of 1,300 miles on the following page.

Their unfamiliarity with the city and the impacts of Hurricane Katrina continue in subsequent chapters. In the chapter on the physical landscape, for example, they claim that "nearly every inch of soil between the French Quarter and St. Bernard Parish was under water" (p. 35). The swath of land that the French Quarter occupies

is astride the river's natural levee. It did not flood and most of the natural levee extending downstream into St. Bernard Parish did not flood. This fundamental fact has been a key component in the redefinition of New Orleans's landscape. Referred to after the storm as "the sliver by the river," the high ground experienced almost immediate reoccupation and rapid rent escalation as it returned to the "new normal" quicker than other sections of the city. The great contrasts between the poor and the wealthy, between black and white, took on a more vivid expression on this terrain. The authors seem unfamiliar with this critical landscape element.

One final example is necessary, but does not exhaust the lapses in local understanding. In their discussion of "Civic Trust," the authors assert that "during the 1927 Mississippi [River] flood, Blacks and the land they lived on in New Orleans was sacrificed to save the rest of the city" (p. 113). When the Corps of Engineers intentionally breached the levee downstream from New Orleans, it did not flood the city. It flooded largely rural St. Bernard Parish—which had few African American residents. The citizens who were hastily evacuated and whose livelihoods were sacrificed were known locally as *Islenos*—a group of Spanish-speaking trappers and fishermen who lived on the margins of society and the margins of terra firma. They were a minority who suffered due to the decision to blow up the levee. This fact has been incorporated into a series of urban myths about the corps intentionally destroying levees during Hurricane Betsy and Hurricane Katrina. The authors could have used this exam-

ple to support their argument about historic distrust, but unfortunately squandered the reader's trust due to their unfamiliarity with the local situation.

This volume joins a host of post-Katrina scholarship with an apparent desire to help expose many of the travesties that unfolded in the fall of 2005 and to frame the failure of government in a scholarly context. They draw on an impressive array of scholarship, and indeed, they rely so heavily on other authorities, it is sometimes hard to find their own contribution. I kept waiting for their own interpretation to appear. Despite their heavy reliance on the concepts of others, their use of geographical scholarship on landscape seriously was lacking—although not missing entirely. Consequently, their use of the term "landscape" often was unfamiliar to those steeped in the scholarly roots of landscape studies. Strangely, after a series of chapters that emphasize physical, cultural, economic, and political landscapes, the authors largely drop this core concept, although they do return to it in the conclusion. Yet, even in their conclusions, while attempting to finalize their case, they heavily cite other authorities rather than express their own opinions.

The authors do cite a rich body of literature that they drew on to situate their study. In addition, their graphic depictions of the changing nature of landscapes are valuable aids. However, the factual lapses frustrated my effort to seek and appreciate the more fundamental contribution of this work and would prevent me from using it as a text or reading supplement.

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