

## Missing a "Most Peculiar City"

### A Review of Craig Colten's *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature*

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*I am writing this review on August, 29 2006. It is exactly one year after I sat quietly in front of my grandmother's TV in Ruston, LA (my family's preferred hurricane evacuation destination) and watched as Hurricane Katrina pulled coastal Mississippi up by the roots and pushed Lake Pontchartrain into my adopted city of New Orleans. Over the last few weeks, I have been urged repeatedly by newscasters of every ilk to remember those lost and displaced by Hurricane Katrina. Most of my friends and colleagues from the impacted region have told me that they would very much like to do exactly the opposite. Most of us would like to forget the shock we felt as the storm came onshore, the fear we felt as we all scrambled to relocate each other, the frustration we felt with the storm's human toll, and the disappointment we felt while politicians from all levels of government fumbled to make news when they should have been making haste. I would like to become one of those coastal residents who swear that the last "big one" was no big deal. That it really wasn't that bad after all. But it was that bad, and it continues to be so today. Overall, the City of New Orleans is just now mustering enough money, citizenry, and visceral fortitude to digest one of the largest gentrification processes ever imposed on an urban landscape. Mississippi is just now starting to gingerly announce that its recovery efforts are having a tangible affect on its devastated coastal zone. And politicians are just now finding the best spins to leverage some political inertia out of the disaster or to distance themselves from its impacts. I would like to forget all of that. But I can't, because I can't seem to transcend my training. I know that to learn nothing from the past is to know nothing about the future. I know that there will be another storm, and another, and another after that. I know that today's recovery zone is tomorrow's disaster site. I have been taught, and I teach, that environmental management is not a chronology, but rather a continuum punctuated by successes and failures. New Orleans and the coastal towns of Mississippi will recover, they will rebuild, and they will remain. I am certain that, for reasons both noble and not, we will force these outcomes. The one thing I can't seem to make myself certain about is that we will learn from the process or that the loss that we are all being asked to remember will render any beneficial knowledge for future residents of the region. But, then again, maybe I will feel better about it all next year. In the mean time, I wish someone had written a book that might help us to divine the most likely futures New Orleans will face...*

Craig Colten's *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature* was not written to explain why Hurricane Katrina ended up being one of this nation's worst disasters rather than just another hurricane. But as timing would have it, it has served as that and more to students, pundits, and disaster devotees alike. By Colten's own description the text is meant to stand as a counter-point to the traditional economic explanations for the city by encouraging readers to "look at the city as an ecological system" (8) in which people live and "constantly rework [the] landscape...into the visible record of human transactions with the environment" (11). In recent years, Colten has written or edited a number of publications describing various historical environmental challenges faced by the people of southeast Louisiana and the City of New Orleans. His *in situ* vantage from Louisiana State University's Department of Geography and Anthropology in Baton Rouge, his personal attachment to this beautiful and challenged place, and his unique perspective on the value and importance of the historical within the geographic has rendered a growing body of work that, taken in whole, offers one of the more enlightened contemporary descriptions of our human environment.

New Orleans is, as Colten states in his dedication, a "most peculiar city." At face value, it defies logic. It is a city of nearly one million people situated at or below sea-level, slowly sinking into an unraveling wetland, bounded by fragile flood prevention structures, protected from drowning in the slightest rainstorm by water pumps based on a design principle borrowed from Mesopotamia circa 600 BC, squeezed between 1,600 square kilometers of Lake Pontchartrain and 470,000 daily cubic feet per second of the Mississippi River, and dangling precariously off the edge of the coastal plain of the Gulf of Mexico as if it were a flame and hurricanes were moths. Despite this myriad of compelling reasons for the city not to exist, it does. And, with a few glaring social and economic exceptions, it does so with grace, charm, and no small amount of joyous celebration of itself. If it persists, there must be a reason and six blocks of Bourbon Street in the French Quarter, no matter how intoxicating, can't be the city's sole explanation. In fact, the explanation for its present condition and impertinent coexistence with one of North America's most dynamic physical landscapes can be found in its nearly 300-year history of environmental management. A history that is deftly deconstructed by Colten in *An Unnatural Metropolis*. By enumerating the city's many environmental challenges and by tracing the sequent management approaches prompted by each historical and repetitive hazard, Colten renders the peculiar and the illogical familiar and reasoned. Therein lays one of the books most important and portable lessons for present-day urban managers: within the apparent heroics of today's mitigation, lays the seeds of tomorrow's disasters. Environmental disasters and our managerial responses are not discreet events. They are continuous social exercises and they are themselves part and parcel of normal.

To understand New Orleans today, Colten argues, you must understand the city at its European inception. Previous works have pointed out that the American Indian tribes in the area were both capable and prolific in their own efforts to direct and deter the waters of the Mississippi River, but the cultural addiction to structural fixes of pyramid-like proportions was a European import. New Orleans was settled in the early 1700s by the French, who arrived with an engineering history replete in water management successes in Europe and Africa. The city's purpose was to serve as an outlet through which French explorers and colonial capitalists would tap the vast natural resource base of the Mississippi River valley. To this end, the city was located to convenience commerce over both comfort and common sense. In his first two chapters, Colten describes the early piecemeal efforts to levee the river's waters, the devastating impacts of water-borne diseases (particularly Yellow Fever) on the imported European and African populations, and the various water engineering projects that first began draining the swamp of its real and perceived water-based hazards. If a few small pumps made people feel better, then many larger ones must be the answer to all that ailed them. Or so the logic went as New Orleans funded project after project meant to repel flood waters and jettison rainfall from the bowl-like landscape it occupied. By the beginning of the 1900s, the bulk of the city was intermittently ringed by private and municipal levees, drained by numerous large urban pumping stations, and rendered functional to shipping and commerce via its improved wharf structures and numerous canals connecting the Mississippi River to Lake Pontchartrain and beyond. The products flowed and, for the most part, water went where it was directed. Having apparently conquered both river and rainfall, city environmental managers turned their attention toward the more mundane, in the form of various municipal waste management regulations, and the aesthetic, in the form of park development and cemetery design. The city prospered, grew, and became complacent in its concern for inundation mitigation. A series of storms, both biblical and pedestrian, during the following decades (particularly Hurricane Betsy in 1965) would be harsh reminders of the degree to which structural mitigation in the city was based too often on hindsight and too seldom on the obvious implications of a rapidly developing urban landscape.

Issues of race are inherent in any discussion of New Orleans. It was one of North America's preeminent ports supporting the African slave trade prior to the Civil War. At the same time that it was giving birth to jazz it was adopting some of the most obvious and destructive Jim Crow policies in the country. The age of the automobile and the interstate prompted New Orleans to sacrifice numerous African-American neighborhoods in the name of progress. And through greed, apathy, and ignorance the city has hosted some of this country's most audacious institutionalized urban poverty. For all of its strengths, this is its greatest weakness. Colten tries to weave this social phenomenon into his discussions of the city's urban environmental management. Colten relies primarily on tangible outcomes of management-sewage

disposal, flood control structures, municipal water supply/delivery, and industrial waste disposal – to describe the influence of race on the urban environment. He concludes that although there were some real differences in the quality and timing of delivery of environmental management infrastructure, overall, the benefits of conquering these issues for whites and the economically affluent were ultimately realized by all residents. What's missing in this discussion is an evaluation of the degree to which the city's African-American populations were excluded from the decision-making in the first place. To what degree do the environmental outcomes Colten describes represent the needs, desires, and character of all of its citizens? Pumping stations and drainage canals may be color-blind, but the political machinations that lead to their development, or prioritization over other urban projects, are often quite susceptible to the vagaries of racial inequality. Colten doesn't skirt this issue, but it is not as well developed as are most of his other arguments relating to the social implications of the city's environmental management history. His description of the people, events, and government actions relating to the Agriculture Street landfill and its selection as a Superfund site during the late 1980s are an exception to this critique. This episode in the city's environmental history is well documented and aptly described by the author. It is also no less disturbing of an environmental disaster for the reader to discover than those related to water management in the proceeding pages of the text.

Colten devotes the final portion of *An Unnatural Metropolis* to a discussion of the more contemporary efforts by the city and its environmental managers to embrace that which they have fought so long to defend themselves against, namely water. By both chance and choice, the city has learned to embrace and institutionalize its wetland surroundings. What was once *hazard* is now *resource*. Though initially slated for drainage prior to the establishment of the various environmental laws of the 1960s and 1970s which made wetland development impossible if not economically untenable, Bayou Sauvage National Wildlife Refuge, the Audubon Nature Center, and Barataria Preserve now offer the citizens of New Orleans and its visitors a civilized peak at a wilderness landscape that is melting away from the city in all directions and taking with it hurricane storm-surge protection far greater than any levee yet conceived. Whether or not the wetland will be rehabilitated fast enough to reverse the tides of future hurricanes is yet to be seen, but Colten provides his readers with a detailed discussion of how the city has slowly learned not just to navigate and control its wetland setting, but also to turn it into one of its premier marketing features. What remains to be seen is whether this new and improved relationship with its natural surroundings is too little too late.

Craig Colten was awarded the John Brinckerhoff Jackson Prize last year at the Association of American Geographers meeting in Chicago, Illinois. This award is given each year to an American geographer who writes a book about the United States which conveys the insights of professional geography in language

that is interesting and attractive to a lay audience. In the two years preceding Colten's award, the prize was given to Donald Meinig and Peirce Lewis. This is fitting as Colten's work is heavily influenced by both scholars. In *An Unnatural Metropolis*, one can see the influence of Meinig's unique and comprehensive perspective on the machinations of history, culture, and geography. And Colten's text, by the author's own admission, stands squarely on the scholarly shoulders of Peirce Lewis' *New Orleans: the Making of an American Metropolis*. *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature* is a prodigy of both of these scholars' prior efforts and Colten is very much deserving of his inclusion in this prestigious company.

In this reviewer's opinion, Colten's text is a salient reminder to geographers who study the human environment that our subject is best described in motion, not as discreet, quick-response snapshots in time. Hazards geographers, in particular, are quick to argue that context is everything when it comes to understanding hazard and disaster, yet we too seldom employ the techniques of historical geography to help us leverage our descriptions of those contexts. I also believe that *An Unnatural Metropolis* can be seen as a collegial shot across the bow of Environmental History, a discipline which has made superb contributions to our understanding of the evolutions of the human environment. Colten's text reminds us that, though there may be room for all of us in the future, geography has long occupied that intellectual space.

When I moved to New Orleans five years ago, I was told that I had to read two books: Lewis' *The Making of an American Metropolis* and John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*. If you have had the pleasure of reading either, you will understand why these are seen as the neophytes guide to New Orleans. Though I no longer live in New Orleans, I miss it, terribly. I find myself zealously encouraging everyone I meet to visit the city and fall prey to its charms. Meet the people, see the city, imbibe on the culture, and hear the music. Oh yes, and read three books before you go: the two that were recommended to me above, and *An Unnatural Metropolis*, by Craig Colten of LSU's Department of Geography and Anthropology.

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*An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature*. Craig E. Colten. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press. January 2005. (ISBN: 0807129771).