Hartnell, Anna. *After Katrina: Race Neoliberalism, and the End of the American Century*

Weston Twardowski

---

1. Hartnell, Anna. *After Katrina: Race Neoliberalism, and the End of the American Century*
3. Weston Twardowski
4. Anna Hartnell’s new book serves not merely as a fine examination of the tremendous economic, cultural and racial problems systemic within post-Katrina New Orleans, but deftly demonstrates how the city serves as a microcosm of the greater battles ravaging American society as a consequence of American imperialism, capitalism run amok, and the neglect populations which sit on the periphery of the nation’s consciousness. Joining with other Katrina scholars, Hartnell makes a powerful argument demonstrating how the federal government’s woeful response to the storm, and the turbulent history of the city following Katrina, serve as the true point of collapse of not only “the American Century,” but also the American dream. Viewed through the prism of post-Katrina New Orleans, Hartnell unravels the precarious nature of contemporary American culture, delving into topics a varied and complex as income inequality, gentrification, education, and changing ecologies. Although Hartnell primary field is English and comparative literature, she utilizes a wide range of sources within her study (ethnography, film, TV, and literature, demographic and economic data, as well as archival research) allow her to approach a wide range of themes and components of post-Katrina life within New Orleans. This diversity of subject matter is a fundamental strength of the her study, as the breadth of topics make this a relevant read for those not only interested in New Orleans and Katrina studies, but American and African American studies, urban studies, as well as film and literary studies.
5. Hartnell’s major intervention with the work is to move away from traditional structures of trauma surrounding the disaster—note that she does not minimize the real traumatic
effects on the city’s denizens, but merely does not structure her study around a trauma based approach—and instead examines the events through three separate modes of temporal study: “American time,” “Katrina time,” and “New Orleans time.” The term “Katrina time,” referred to those who were imprisoned or detained, often for minor offenses, prior to the storm and, because of missing paperwork and bureaucratic inattention due to Katrina, served months or years of prison time—often without trial. It is from this idea that Hartnell builds her examination: what was it to be in a state of constantly being overlooked, forgotten, imprisoned by the state and with a national audience to accept it? Hartnell broadens the original idea of “Katrina time” to present us with an altered state of being, of thinking, by which to examine the lives of New Orleanians post-Katrina. She adds to this with, “American time,” a hyper-modern, capitalist driven idea of futurity which dominates most discourse surrounding ideas of “Americaness.” Finally, she notes the importance of, “New Orleans time,” which serves as an antithesis to “American time.” “New Orleans time” exists in its own space, its own temporality which is defiantly, and diametrically opposed, to the constant machination of American capitalism and imperialism, and is instead the time of a forgotten, but ultimately resistive, existence with imperial domination.

Each temporality is comprised of two chapters. The first, “American time,” looks to the history of American imperialism within the Caribbean and abroad to examine how New Orleans came to exist within America, and how it always remained outside of American definitions of itself. Chapter two looks to how America has, over its control of the city, consistently tried to “Americanize” the city, and how the city has perpetually resisted these advances of enterprising Americans and outsiders who seek to transform the city into a more modern, more exclusively business interested place. The next section of the book deals specifically with “Katrina time.” Starting with an examination of documentaries following Katrina which deal with disaster, Hartnell unveils how this form of media became the most prominent as it aimed to engage directly against the often, radically hyperbolic, coverage of the press in the wake of the storm. The fourth chapter takes a decidedly different tack to examine the elimination of public housing and education in the city, doing an excellent job of mapping out the market driven aims of neoliberal leaders who further attacked the black poor and middle classes within the city, while fundamentally changing the demographic makeup of New Orleans. In the final section dealing with “New Orleans time,” the author looks first to the ecology of the city by tracking its relationship to water as both a giver of economic strength, but also a living threat to the security of the population of the city. The final chapter turns to the HBO show Treme to explore the contemporary realities of life and culture within the city as Hartnell argues that New Orleans offers a way of viewing not only what a city forgotten by the state looks like, but demonstrates how we may look to New Orleans as the future of the failed neoliberal American state where the priorities of the government and wealthy increasingly relegate the poor and middle-class to subjugation and neglect. Indeed, Hartnell’s vision of the coming America, with its total collapse of the American dream (and with it American identity) is a bleak “reading of the future.”

Clearly the scope of Hartnell’s book is impressive. Engaging with academics, studies of New Orleans demographics, education, politics, housing, literary and filmic interpretations of the city (both non-fiction and fictitious), the sheer volume of evidence and methods by which the study is crafted deserves commendation. Hartnell’s willingness to engage with and criticize scholarly narratives is commendable, as she critiques
Hartnell, Anna. After Katrina: Race Neoliberalism, and the End of the America... European journal of American studies, Reviews 2017-3

scholars on aspects of the war on drugs, trauma theory, and histories of American exceptionalism. Naturally though, given the breadth of the work, there are certain elements which the author leaves underdeveloped. While she repeatedly mentions the significance of jazz, jazz funerals, and Mardi Gras within the city, she doesn't engage with the rituals of the city in a productive way, and it is a noticeable absence from the work (especially in her too brief mentioning of the role of African influence on the city, a point which warrants more time than the author grants the subject in chapter two). More discussion of how these African influenced customs have helped give New Orleans, and especially black New Orleanians, an ability to separate themselves from Americanness would have helped strengthen her claims regarding the otherness of New Orleans within American society, as well as allowing her to dig more deeply into the cultural changes which have been wrought by the storm.

Hartnell lays out new ways not only of investigating New Orleans after Katrina, but, as she amply succeeds in her goals for the book, new ways of thinking about the American Century and modern American identity. After Katrina not only enters the growing field of Katrina studies in conversation with a number of works (and adds richly to their perspective) but successfully marries a variety of topics meriting serious scholastic inquiry in an effective and intelligent work. Further, Hartnell’s argument’s present new theoretical means of approaching both Katrina and American studies in ways which bear close though and examination, and is well worth the reading for scholars of both disciplines.