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Review of Markets of Sorrow, Labors of Faith: New Orleans in the Wake of Katrina by Vincanne Adams

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VINCANNE ADAMS (2013) *MARKETS OF SORROW, LABORS OF FAITH: NEW ORLEANS IN THE WAKE OF KATRINA*. DURHAM & LONDON: DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS. ISBN: 9780822379195.

Helen Morgan Parmett

I recently took a group of students to New Orleans over our spring break for an interdisciplinary class on the relationships between space, culture, and media industries in cities. It was a trip that promised to be both wonderful and terrifying—wonderful in the sense of students living an embodied education of not only the history, politics, and culture of the city, but also of the sights, sounds, smells, and physical encounters that make up those histories, politics, and cultures; yet terrifying in the sense that the students might miss the significance of how these same sounds, sights, smells, and physical encounters speak to histories of inequity, injustice, and struggle that manifest themselves in renewed struggles over privatization, insecurity, and loss in the post-Katrina aftermath. Carrying Vincanne Adams' book in my bag throughout the trip (as I was toting it around as a reminder of the need to complete this review) felt like more than the weight of the physical pages on my shoulder. The book weighed on me as a responsibility to ensure students understood the significance of what they were witnessing—that the seeds of 'recovery' we were seeing in New Orleans were part of what Adams refers to as a 'second order disaster,' one that 'had its own logic and rationales that were nearly as deadly as those that produced the floods in the first place' (Adams, 2013: 4). So as the students stumbled home from Bourbon or Frenchman Streets in the wee hours of morning, toting daiquiri cups and other signs that they were living the motto of *les bon temps rouler*, I took up their days trying to drive home the viciousness of neoliberal economics.

Markets of Sorrow makes a significant contribution to studies on post-Katrina New Orleans, specifically, and to disaster studies in the neoliberal era more generally. The book focuses not on the Hurricane Katrina event nor on its immediate aftermath but,

instead, on the many and painfully long years that have followed, as individuals, communities, and neighborhoods struggle to rebuild their lives, homes, and city. Organized into eight thematic chapters, the book ties ethnographic accounts of recovery experiences to structural social analyses of political economic shifts (largely the results of neoliberal policies and rationalities) and the social inequalities produced in and through these shifts. The first six chapters of the book forefront the voices, experiences, and emotions of residents struggling to recover (taken from Adams' ethnographic research), focusing on the lack of immediate relief, how recovery capitalism cuts across categories of race and class, navigating bureaucratic failures in Road Home and other recovery programs, the effects of delayed recovery on mental health, and experiences with non-profits and faith-based recovery efforts. These earlier chapters build up to two concluding chapters that tie these experiences into the institutional forms that recovery takes in the conditions of market-driven governance currently taking shape in U.S. disaster economy. Especially, the concluding chapters foreground the significance of how the experiences detailed in earlier chapters speak to the formations of an affectively driven recovery economy. There are two overarching threads that run throughout these interweaving analyses of the social, personal, and inequitable structures of recovery. The first, which is likely Adams' most significant contribution, is that the post-Katrina recovery period drew on and produced an *affect economy* that depends on an unpaid, emotionally and morally driven labour force to do the work of disaster recovery. Secondly, Adams argues that these trends are not unique to New Orleans or Katrina but, rather, are indicative of what the future holds for us all. Indeed, Adams suggests that Katrina makes manifest a form of *shared vulnerability* under neoliberal capital.

Katrina's Affect Economy

It became clear soon after Katrina that city, federal, and state governments had failed on just about every level possible. They failed to adequately prepare the city and its citizens for disaster, to build levees that would hold, to provide routes of exit for the most vulnerable, and to meet even the most basic needs of survivors. It also became clear that these failures were tied to a long history of injustice and inequity in the city, as the most disenfranchised were produced as vulnerable through decades of government and corporate programs, policies, as well as neglect. Adams drives home,

however, that this is a kind of ‘privately organized, publicly funded bureaucratic failure’ that is less about government bureaucracy and failure alone and more about ‘the inefficiencies of profit’ (7). In other words, the post-Katrina recovery period has demonstrated that it is not so much that government failed its people. Rather, it is the privatization of government services and the subjection of those services to market principles that have failed.

Nevertheless, amongst this failure, it was individuals, communities, neighborhood organizations, social aid and pleasure clubs, non-profits, and faith-based charity groups that rose up to ultimately do much of the hard work of rebuilding and recovery. On the one hand, there is much to be lauded in these efforts, as they appear to demonstrate the persistence of the human and social body and even, perhaps, the constituent power of the multitude in the face of the constituted power of capital (Hardt & Negri, 2000). On the other hand, however, the free labour provided by these individuals and groups also works as a kind of alibi for the continuation of the privatization of public services. That is, turning over the work of rebuilding to community and nonprofit groups takes for granted that the government should not be responsible for rebuilding and recovery after disasters. But even more so—and this is what *Markets of Sorrow* really adds to the discussion of the neoliberalization of post-Katrina recovery and disaster studies— depending on the good will of citizens to do the work of government in disaster recovery provides the structure for a new form of an affective economy that depends not on citizens’ rights to recovery, but on the morality and emotional choices of individuals through which various private, for-profit entities can garner profit.

To a degree, the line of argument in *Markets of Sorrow* seems to further Naomi Klein’s (2007) thesis on the role of disaster capitalism in post-Katrina recovery. As Adams notes, the post-Katrina recovery period produced techniques and mechanisms for turning need into profit such that aid institutions were set up and designed not necessarily to help but, rather, to create new business opportunities. The book is flush with examples from the Road Home program to Small Business Administration loans that ‘blurred the lines between disaster recovery and disaster profiteering,’ where these programs took advantage of those in need and did more to help produce profits for government subcontractors than they did to help actual victims (66).

One area that *Markets of Sorrow* highlights particularly well along these lines is with regards to the role of non-profit organizations and charities in carrying out the work of disaster relief and the ways in which they help to produce disaster capitalism and philanthrocapitalism. Although there have been sharp cuts to government funding for charity, the money available for disaster relief remains relatively high (129). As a result, a number of federal subcontractors see opportunities in providing disaster relief, and organizations like the Red Cross and the Salvation Army find themselves having to compete with for-profit companies as well as other non-profits and charities for these funds. Adams notes that although federal money still generally goes to non-profits and charities for disaster relief, it is now ‘organized through a new type of market assemblage—the intermediary public-private corporation [which] uses federal and private-sector fund to in some sense “manage” the charity sector alongside and sometimes in competition with for-profit companies that are subcontracted for specific relief projects’ (129). These intermediary corporations operate with federal dollars but without federal oversight in accountability or regulation. Nevertheless, charities and non-profits are increasingly managed along profit-based measures of accountability and effectiveness (130), using the language of ‘investment portfolios’ and ‘return risk rewards’ (162-163). Though Adams does not use the phrase herself, it is arguable that the Katrina recovery efforts have contributed significantly to what scholars and activists have termed the ‘non-profit industrial complex’ (INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, 2007), where non-profits increasingly work along neoliberal logics to transform social service and welfare practices into profitable enterprise.

As a result of these pressures for producing effectiveness and accountability along for-profit measures, charitable and non-profit organizations working on Katrina recovery found themselves having to think in business model terms, where they were required to show donors they were a good investment and could develop self-sustaining fiscal practices (160-161). Adams’ uses a poignant example of a woman who began a non-profit rebuilding organization for her neighborhood that later partnered with a larger non-profit organization (HandsOn). The leader of the organization, Caroline, suggested that once the organization fell under this larger umbrella, what it meant to help and the practices of helping were significantly altered. The organization was required to demonstrate accountability in helping that would meet for-profit standards, which meant that you were more successful in helping if you helped

more people. However, this often meant that they ultimately did less work for each individual even though they were helping more people. These for-profit measures therefore helped to contribute to the lack of recovery resources available to meet the needs of victims.

But Adams is clear that these examples are more than disaster capitalism—they also point to the significance of the circulation of affect and its subsumption into the logics of neoliberal capital. As she notes, ‘it is no longer working conditions that generate an affective surplus, in the Marxist sense, but the conditions of *inclusion* in the market and the very circumstances of need that are generated by it that create a surfeit of affect that fuels a new kind of economy’ (123). It is this exposure to vulnerability under neoliberalism that Adams suggests contemporary registers of affect work and, ultimately, are turned into new mechanisms for profit:

How does a surfeit of emotion generated by the inefficiencies of profit in recovery capitalism become itself drawn back into the economy as a new resource for profit—from being surfeit in the emotional sense to being surplus in the fiscal sense?...It is a condition that produces a kind of chronic trauma but also responds to it. It calls people to action, to try to help one another, and to fill up the gaps left open by a structure that fails to take care of them. (124)

Affect is thus produced in multiple forms in recovery capitalism: through the production of need and the ‘needy subject’; through the production of feelings of ‘betrayal, anger, depression, and a frenetic madness’ (123); as well as through the production of a desire to help, feelings of empathy, and concern. Each of these, in turn, is taken as a site of exploitation for profit.

In terms of the production of need and the ‘needy subject,’ Adams argues that since disaster recovery ultimately depends on the production of need, there is little incentive to actually meet that need. So long as there is a need to be filled, companies charged with providing recovery support will profit either way. Adams suggests,

[w]hat we see today is that market-driven governance turns the persistence of need into an engine of disaster capitalism. (9)

These arrangements organize markets of sorrow in which the production of profits like the production of indebtedness among the already poor, are integral to the survival of the market itself. (72)

As a result, bureaucratic failure is built into the very logics of recovery capitalism in ways that very much depend on a neoliberal rationality. Discussing the Road Home program and its subcontractor, ICF International, Adams argues the company, ‘made use of neoliberal logics to “help” disaster victims by way of the for-profit sector...by shortchanging the returning residents of the funds they needed to rebuild’ (83). That is, ‘giving out minimal funding affirmed [ICF’s] ethical commitment to *help people help themselves*, and to avoid the problem of moral hazard and the appearance of creating dependency on welfare, but it also enabled the company to retain large amounts of the funding for itself in ways that remain unaccounted for’ (87).

These stories of the profiteering off disaster will be familiar to most readers who have been following the story of New Orleans’ post-Katrina recovery. Although Adams’ discussion of various programs and companies that profited from this surplus of affect is astute and well documented, it does not fully flesh out how affect works within these particular transactions beyond the production of need and the ethical commitments to help. In what ways does the production of need provoke affective responses from the for-profit sector—how, specifically, is the ethical commitment to help formed within these companies, its executives, and its workers? What are the contours of those commitments, and how are these affective responses managed to maximize profit? Although *Markets of Sorrow* details how for-profit recovery services are motivated by neoliberal, market-based rationalities that harness discourses of corporate social responsibility and philanthrocapitalism, future research might demonstrate more clearly how these are derived from and translated into affects.

Where the book excels, however, is in the chapters where Adams describes the work of charity, and, especially, faith-based recovery efforts in New Orleans. In these parts of the book, the specific mechanisms through which affect is produced as surplus and, ultimately, subsumed into profit, are thrown into sharp focus. Although Adams acknowledges that it was ultimately faith-based charities that did much of the work of recovery, she argues that these

efforts mark a dangerous turn in the formation of new assemblages in disaster recovery. Specifically, she suggests faith-based charities

[f]ueled another set of assumptions about who is ultimately responsible for taking care of people after disaster. The large shift toward allowing charity groups to do the work of recovery only reinforces political assumptions that taking care of postdisaster victims is a moral choice orchestrated by faith-based commitments and is not a civic duty that falls in large part to the infrastructural obligations of a publicly funded safety net. When safety-net relief for victims becomes a matter of mobilizing the right combination of volunteer spirit and private donations rather than a matter of governmental protections of universal civil rights, then the idea that relief and recovery should be shielded from the competing demand of profitability becomes moot. The private sector is left to figure out how to make the project of relief and recovery profitable in order to pay for itself. (148)

These affective sentiments and mechanisms for recovery therefore shift disaster recovery from a civic duty and a civil right to a moral choice, suggesting that the obligation to help victims of disaster is a matter of one's commitment to faith and feelings of sentiment rather than an obligation of government to its citizens (150). This shift is made possible by the circulation of affect, such that 'the affective surplus aroused by disaster commands a sense of purpose and ethical goodness among those who volunteer and a sense of not only gratitude but also restored faith in society on the part of those who receive help' (149). This is a dangerous shift, as it carries with it no guarantees and leaves the work of disaster open to moral calculation—i.e. who is worthy and unworthy of being saved. But this shift is dangerous in another way as well: it helps fuel the affect economy by supplying free labour.

The assemblages produced out of charity and faith-based recovery efforts after Katrina depended on the affects of empathy and a desire to help by encouraging volunteers to donate their labour. This labour is a kind of affective surplus that enables corporations to profit from the good will and sentiment of volunteers, while at the same time fostering a precarious labour force while simultaneously

placating unemployed and unpaid subjects by promoting feelings of productivity. Moreover, much of the Katrina recovery orchestrated through non-profits and other charitable organizations required individual homeowners to supply 'sweat equity,' where they were required to provide their own labour for free as a condition of receiving funds. This reconfigures 'the needy as the new work force' (167), producing neoliberal and entrepreneurial subjectivities where individuals learn to 'help themselves' rather than demanding government support for disaster relief. Ultimately, as Adams argues,

[t]he government...becomes a partisan bystander...to a set of institutions that functions with federal support but by a logic that is governed almost entirely by private-sector business and corporate principles, where competition for resources and market accountability reign and where hoards of unpaid or poorly paid laborers are now asked to do the work of providing a safety net essentially for 'free' or at rates far below minimum wage. (168)

Although much of Adams' critique of the affect economy and its production of markets of sorrow targets non-profits and faith-based charity organizations, she also directs her critique to grassroots social movements as well, arguing that they too legitimize neoliberalism and the privatizing of social services:

The celebration of grass-roots social movements should not be overlooked or underestimated, but it is important to remember that such movements often adopt the same views as those who may be responsible for creating problems of disenfranchisement to begin with...The belief that the private sector will do what government has failed to do is accompanied by an unfortunate new set of dependencies on not just the for-profit market but also a growing intermediary infrastructure that is profiting from the partnership between government and grass-roots groups...this growing intermediary sector has also nurtured dependency on corporate donations, philanthrocapitalism, and venture philanthropy as mechanisms for capitalization. (158-159)

Adams acknowledges that grassroots, social movement organizations are tied to a long history of social justice activism in the city, including the history of African American Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs that have served poor African Americans by providing services that have all too often been denied by government to these communities (long before neoliberalism). She also recognizes that many of these organizations are committed to socially just rebuilding and focused not just on Katrina recovery, but also on the ways in which present injustices are linked to past injustice as well and have made social justice activism more visible in the post-Katrina era. Despite these acknowledgements, however, Adams concludes that these organizations focus their blame incorrectly on the government and thereby foster markets of sorrow and an affect economy by turning to private, for-profit and non-profit, entities.

Although I am sympathetic to an extent with Adams' claims regarding grassroots, social movement organizations, her arguments here are less compelling than those she makes with regards to non-profits and faith-based charity. This is by far one of the shortest parts of the book, and she provides neither evidence on specific social movement organizations nor insights from her ethnographic research on those working within these organizations. While social justice organizations like Common Ground (that partnered with Brad Pitt's Make it Right Foundation to build houses in the Lower Ninth Ward) clearly come to mind in her admonishments of the kinds of neoliberal logics and partnerships some social justice movement organizations working after Katrina have become subject to, it is doubtful that this is the case regarding all social movement organizations. The danger here too is a reduction of the work of Common Ground, and other similar organizations, which denies the agency of organizations and those working within them to strategically negotiate partnerships in ways that might not entirely result in their subsumption into neoliberal logics. In other words, she seems to deny the possibility of these organizations cultivating what she refers to earlier in the book as 'Katrina savvy,' or, as her informant Gerald stated, 'knowing all the tricks and how to see through their bullshit' (81).

As a result of Adams' dismissal of the relevance of grassroots, social movements in a more socially just recovery, Adams leaves the reader with few hopeful alternatives to the affect economy produced in and out of markets of sorrow. Her alternative appears to be a call upon

the reader to reinvest in the state and the public sector. However, might social movement organizations be the logical vehicle for demanding a more socially just public sector? And, indeed, this is the work that many social justice organizations in New Orleans and elsewhere are doing. Perhaps more pertinent to the central focus of the book, Adams left me wanting to understand more about how the affective surplus produced through Katrina's recovery might be put to use toward projects other than the production of new markets of sorrow? To what extent might the affective surplus produce a kind of excess or constitutive power that could be put to work in producing alternative logics of recovery that rest neither on the moral choices of neoliberal individuals nor on the reinvention of a welfare state? These questions should not be interpreted as a wholesale critique of Adams' points about the importance of making demands on government to fulfill its obligations to citizens or on the significance of reshaping institutions. We should do all of those things. But we should also be provoking ourselves to think through the rhetorics, logics, and technologies through which citizens might make these demands if they are to go beyond the neoliberal present and the problematics of the history of the social welfare state.

Shared Vulnerability

A significant argumentative thread in *Markets of Sorrow* is that Katrina is our future—it speaks not just of an individual event or the vulnerabilities of any particular individual, neighborhood, or city. Rather, it is a disaster that foretells of things to come for us all:

Katrina was not just 'another' disaster. It was an indictment of the restructuring of America's political economy as well as a visible window into the effects of this restructuring over the long haul. It was also a foreshadowing of a future that could belong to anyone, a catastrophic revelation of vulnerability not just of a few Americans but of an American way of life. (Adams, 2013: 181)

Under the tenets of neoliberal capital and its reliance on disaster and disaster recovery, Adams suggests we are all, equally, potentially vulnerable to the traumas of a Katrina-like catastrophe. The book's subjects are of all walks of life—from renters to homeowners to business owners, of varying races, genders, and classes. Adams dwells on the idea that the traumas experienced as a result of the

recovery process did not discriminate. This is a similar refrain to some of the discourse that circulated after Katrina that water does not discriminate (e.g. upscale neighborhoods like Lakeview and lower-income neighborhoods like Gentilly were both effected by the floods), yet Adams' emphasis is on the political economic structures of neoliberal disaster recovery rather than on the physical effects of water on the city. Discussing a relatively well-off stable owner, Helen, Adams suggests that in the Katrina recovery process, everyone was vulnerable and no one was immune:

Helen's story reveals much about the vulnerability of even privileged citizens when it comes to recovering from disasters in the absence of a strong social safety net that can distribute recovery resources in a manner that is efficient, equitable, and timely...what all of their experiences have in common is a shared vulnerability that was aroused not so much by the storm and floods but by the infrastructures of recovery that were mobilized in the aftermath.
(66)

Adams' emphasis on shared vulnerability is a potentially valuable rhetorical strategy but one that also risks obfuscating the ways in which race and class, as well as other forms of identity, also play significant roles in structuring the contours of neoliberalism (including in its affective registers). On the one hand, her argument surrounding shared vulnerability does much to gain the attention of privileged readers and the ways in which they too are implicated in neoliberal restructurings of the political economy. Helen's story is likely to resonate with those who have gained a relative degree of success and who might think they will remain immune from the violence and exclusion of the withering social safety net. It might catalyze these readers toward greater politicization and support for the obligations of government to its citizens as well as garner skepticism of the privatization of social services.

On the other hand, however, the effects of neoliberalism *are* unequal, just as the effects of water and the effects of recovery capitalism have been unequal as well. Adams does, in fact, attend to these inequities when she notes:

the degree to which the hurricane and floods led to dispossession and impoverishment in the years

afterward was racially uneven and exacerbated by the way that recovery was organized; specifically, the poor were disproportionately hurt more than those with financial resources. Others have shown that racism explains a good deal of the delay in rescue-and-relief operations as well as the criminalization of victims of the disaster and the violence against them. What has been explored less is how racial disparities are seen in the recovery years as the disparities that already existed along lines of race and class were made more visible and more extreme in and through differential access to and use of recovery resources. Market-oriented strategies for recovery that sought to use fiscal resources where they were most likely to bring profits, rather than using them where the need was greatest, fueled a situation in which African Americans would be offered less than others. Existing inequalities in socioeconomic starting points helped fuel a racialization of recovery that meant African American communities would be the least likely to return and the last to recover. (37)

She suggests as well that the emphasis on discourses of ‘worthiness above other measures, such as humanitarianism or human rights based on need’ meant that many poor and black residents were ‘denied adequate funding because of race-based assumptions about their fiscal worthiness’ (39). As a result, existing racial inequalities were exacerbated by the neoliberalization of recovery and its reliance on an affective economy of markets of sorrow.

Yet, this recognition of the inequalities, exclusions, and disparities in recovery capitalism and in the affect economy is given short shrift in *Markets of Sorrow*, relegated to a few pages rather than integrated into the overarching analysis of the specific ways in which the affect economy generates surplus value and exploits it for profit. Further, the emphasis on shared vulnerability risks misleading the reader into thinking that neoliberalism is colorblind and thereby reproducing a kind of post-racial sensibility. It obscures how some populations are still more vulnerable than others and the ways in which race, class, and other identities are reconfigured within these restructurings of neoliberal vulnerabilities. That is, while some populations are hailed as entrepreneurial subjects under neoliberal capital (e.g. to provide

sweat equity and to demonstrate their potential for self-responsible homeownership)—in itself a certain kind of vulnerability and precarity—others remain subject to more violent and punitive interventions (Giroux, 2006; Goldberg, 2009; Nadesan, 2008). As Henry Giroux argues, these distinctions in the treatment of populations speak to the formation of a ‘biopolitics of disposability,’

[i]n which entire populations are now considered disposable, an unnecessary burden on state coffers, and consigned to fend for themselves. The deeply existential and material questions regarding who is going to die and who is going to live in this society are now centrally determined by race and class. (2006: 10)

He goes on to suggest that

[i]t is important to grasp how the confluence of race and poverty has become part of a new and more insidious set of forces based on a revised set of biopolitical commitments, which have largely given up on the sanctity of human life for those populations rendered ‘at risk’ by global neoliberal economies and, instead, have embraced an emergent security state founded on cultural homogeneity. (2006: 11)

I would argue, then, that the more important lesson of Katrina and recovery capitalism is not a matter of shared vulnerability, but, rather, the ways in which vulnerability remains raced and classed through new techniques for producing and capitalizing on that vulnerability. Adams offers a useful starting point from which scholars might begin to map these techniques and the ways in which vulnerabilities of race, class, and other identities are bound up with the production, extraction, and exploitation of affect.

Katrina is our Future

Despite some of the critiques and gaps I’ve noted here, *Markets of Sorrow* is undoubtedly an important contribution to studies of Katrina and the reconfiguration of disaster recovery through affective registers within neoliberalism. Its most notable contribution is in the ways in which it highlights how Katrina

recovery has produced and refined new assemblages for disaster recovery that tie non-profits, faith-based organizations, and social movements to private, for-profit, and governmental institutions. Adams does much to further our understanding of how these assemblages work to produce a new economy that is 'based on the circulation of an affective surplus—the emotional responsiveness and ethical inducement to action generated by a recognition of ongoing need among Americans and the unpaid labor force it mobilizes' (2). Though I would disagree with Adams that Katrina reveals a shared vulnerability, I wholeheartedly concur that it reveals something about what our future holds—in other words, that Katrina is our future. Katrina and the disaster of recovery speaks to the formation of a new political and economic assemblage that is not unique to New Orleans nor to a specific disaster. In this way, *Markets of Sorrow* differs greatly from much of the existing discourses surrounding both New Orleans and Katrina that highlight the city's and the disaster's exceptionalism. Instead, Adams reminds us 'how much like other cities in America New Orleans is or could be under the conditions of recovery capitalism we have witnessed here. "We're Americans," Caroline [an informant and survivor of Katrina] said in her congressional testimony...And that is my point' (187).

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