

Historically Speaking

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--"[Historians in the Midst of Catastrophe: Reflections of the University of New Orleans's Department of History after Katrina](#)" **[full text]**

Historically Speaking: The Bulletin of the Historical Society

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Historians in the Midst of Catastrophe: Reflections of the University of New Orleans's Department of History after Hurricane Katrina

The fall semester was only two weeks old at the University of New Orleans when Katrina bore down on the Gulf Coast. As the UNO history faculty evacuated, most took a few books and lecture notes along, believing they would be back in the classroom in a few days. In fact, it would be weeks before they would be allowed into the devastated city and months before they would be able to access their offices. Scattered across the country in hotels and shelters, or housed with family, friends, or strangers, faculty members were torn from their colleagues and the university. The technology of the modern age—cell phones, servers, e-mail addresses—had collapsed along with their campus. Research materials were endangered. Homes were destroyed or inaccessible. The campus became temporary shelter for perhaps 2,000 storm victims and sustained over \$100 million in damage.

Yet only six weeks after Katrina, the University of New Orleans reopened for its fall semester, the first and only university in New Orleans to do so. Over 7,000 UNO students attended lecture courses at satellite campuses in New Orleans suburbs or participated in online courses from locations across America and overseas. In December and January, many faculty members taught intensive intersession courses. On January 20, 2006, the University of New Orleans, against all odds, held its fall graduation.

The much reduced history faculty returned to the reopened but still damaged main campus for the spring semester. Two senior members who had planned to retire in May 2006 opted to leave in December. A job search was suspended. FEMA trailers intended to house homeless faculty and staff did not become available until April, and UNO is currently in a state of financial exigency that will mean termination of faculty and programs throughout the university. Although the campus remained dry for the most part, it is surrounded by some of New Orleans's most devastated neighborhoods. Huge cranes and pile drivers work unceasingly along the London Avenue canal that runs alongside campus. There's barely a

functioning business for miles, and reminders of the devastation of the storm and flood are everywhere. On a positive note, in January distinguished military historian Allan Millett, recently retired from Ohio State University, joined the faculty as Director of the Eisenhower Center, founded by our late colleague, Stephen Ambrose. It was he who first suggested that the history department should tell its story.

Below are thoughts and reflections of members of the University of New Orleans history department.

Ida Altman, research professor and department chair, fall 2005, had accepted a position at University of Florida in spring 2005 but stayed to serve her year as chair. After losing her home to Katrina, she drove over 300 miles twice weekly to teach her classes.

Recalling everything that has happened since the storm and flood is like summoning up a dream: some episodes stand out clearly while others are barely retrievable. Early on I had a conversation with a cousin who suggested (insistently, it seemed) that having lost my home and all belongings, I now “knew what was really important.” It irritated me at the time—I didn’t know exactly how I felt but certainly didn’t want someone else telling me how I should. In retrospect it seems even more off the mark. Of course I was thankful my husband and I had escaped harm, as had our friends; of course I was grateful for the love and support of family. But in fact it’s all important—chatting with my neighbors, early morning walks with my dog, seeing friends and colleagues at the gym, dinner at a favorite restaurant, zydeco music at Mid City Lanes; they all made life rich and familiar. Losses are not confined to what one can list on insurance claims.

In a larger sense, and especially in historical terms, it all does count. Since the storm I’ve lived in Mobile, which suffered relatively little damage; my husband soon resumed teaching at the University of South Alabama. Bereft and dazed, I offered to lecture to his class on the conquest of western Mexico. The lecture had peculiar resonance; the pivotal episode of that conquest was an immense storm and flood that engulfed the sprawling encampment of Spaniards and their Indian troops and auxiliaries along the banks of a river in September 1530.

The leader of the campaign, Nuño de Guzmán, was perhaps the most notorious of the Spanish conquerors of Mexico. Shrewd, ambitious, and callous, for a decade he exercised considerable power in New Spain. Yet, in the greatest test of his leadership abilities, following the flood he failed utterly, making decisions that compounded the misery and mortality suffered by his native allies. Just as some friends and I one evening speculated almost tearfully about how things might have unfolded had Edwin Edwards been governor at the time of Katrina, I wonder what the adroit Cortés might have done in the same circumstances. Yet Guzmán’s failure of leadership was only one of several factors that resulted in catastrophe.

When UNO resumed classes in October I taught four graduate students in my introductory course. We agreed that the history of Katrina and its aftermath must take into account politics and political leadership, or lack of such; weather, hydrology, geography; engineering; demographics; and the distinctive society and culture that shaped and reflected New Orleans’s neighborhoods and people. Over the years I’ve sometimes questioned the social value of what we do as historians. More than ever I feel that my students want to understand the “why” of history—not just of what happened to them but what has occurred in other times and places as well. Our job is to help them make sense of the past’s sad mysteries.

Günter Bischof, diplomatic historian, department chair 2006 and director of Center Austria, first came to UNO from Austria as an exchange student. After receiving his Ph.D. from Harvard, he returned to make Louisiana his home.

I evacuated for the first time from an approaching hurricane. Being married to a fearless Cajun who considers herself a seasoned storm-survivalist, we had never evacuated before. This time our frightened 14-year-old daughter quasi-forced us to leave. We went to Hot Springs, Arkansas (the first place we could find a hotel room), and took to the waters of this historic spa while the storm raged on the Gulf Coast. With hindsight it strikes me as bizarre irony that I was sitting in a pool of hot water in Hot Springs at the time when the canal walls broke and began filling the bowl that is New Orleans. We returned to our house in Larose on Bayou Lafourche (fifty miles southwest of New Orleans) the day after the storm. Our house was okay. We had lots of wind damage in the yard, but no water damage. We were without electricity for almost a week. The only source of news was the radio.

In the days after the storm I gave many interviews to Austrian newspapers and started to get in touch with people, including my chair, Dr. Altman. I also helped get some forty Austrian students, who had begun a year of studies at UNO the week before Katrina hit, into new host institutions all around the country (only four returned to their native Austria after the storm). American universities from San Diego State to Miami were magnificently generous in “adopting” these foreign students for a semester with tuition waivers. All of them are completing the year at their new institutions, as the housing shortage in New Orleans did not allow them to return to UNO. American civil society rose to the occasion, while the government in Washington dawdled. At the same time our partner university in Innsbruck, Austria, and other European universities granted refuge and were accepting UNO and New Orleans area students free of charge for a semester of study. Mutual transatlantic solidarity and higher education networking shone bright at a time of political tensions with the war in Iraq.

Since I still had a roof over my head and was back home, I began commuting and teaching two classes at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge ten days after Katrina hit. My U.S. History Survey II was a “refugee” section with student evacuees from all the New Orleans institutions (UNO, Tulane, Loyola, Dillard, Xavier, Delgado, and Holy Cross). Students missed classes as they tried to deal with lost property, insurance adjusters, and FEMA. Perceptibly dejected, they nonetheless were intent on continuing their education in hopes of restoring some structure to their shattered lives.

Teaching and writing did the same for me. Applying myself to what I like to do best provided relief and prevented depression, especially once I saw storm-ravaged New Orleans in early October. I sent regular reports to Austrian newspapers and penned ruminations on what I saw in the city for friends around the country and abroad—some of which were published on HNN (kudos to Dr. Rick Shenkman!). Writing was a form of therapy. On October 10, on my commute to Baton Rouge, I heard a report on NPR that UNO had reopened in a satellite campus in Jefferson Parish. It made me cry. Not only would I be able to hang on to my tenured faculty position (for the time being?), but I would also be involved in rebuilding our university, which has served many poor and underprivileged students from the greater New Orleans area for two generations. Continuing their education would provide them a means of returning and contributing to the Crescent City.

When I entered the UNO main campus for the first time in early October I was not sure whether my books and lecture notes had survived the flooding on the south side of the lakefront campus. I was lucky again—they were still there. The office smelled a little musty but otherwise looked untouched. While some colleagues sadly had lost their houses and

their books, my personal and professional life was still intact. Go figure. Now I inch toward better comprehension of why survivors of major catastrophes wrangle with a bad conscience.

Assistant professor James Mokhiber teaches African and world history, and was the first to return to the city after the flood.

Behind the wheel of a spattered minivan, I struggled to make my way to campus in mid-September. My usual route followed the bayou up to the lake, through a parade of the city's famous live oaks. I'd turn at the Greek church, pass the brick homes of the university district, and cross a small bridge over an unmarked canal. I suppose it could have been a pleasant ten-minute commute, but as an assistant professor with new courses to teach I usually had to make it in seven or eight.

It was slower going in the van after the storm. As I wound my way through the downed trees and power lines, I found myself dwelling on the scenes I had seen and imagined during our two-week evacuation. In my mind I saw the department's halls striped with the breached canal's muck; inside my office, I could imagine my bookshelves floating for a moment, before tipping my stashed crates of research into the floodwaters.

These images did not really begin to fade until I pulled up beside our building. While the low brick buildings across the street were ruined, the waters had just lapped at the glass doors of our breezeway. The department's halls were maybe a little dank. I opened the door to my office and shined my flashlight on my stowed research. I still may have an academic career, I thought selfishly. A friend helped fill the back of the filthy van with my folders. Let's hurry, he quipped, we don't want to be the first people in the city to be shot for looting academic research. That afternoon, I shared the campus news with my colleagues in the emerging diaspora. The message went out amid reports of missing colleagues and more. Already my elation had faded. My priceless folders ended up in the corner of a garage.

Over the next several weeks I traveled the city, shelters and outlying parishes with a British television crew, and grew more dismayed about the extent of the damage. At the same time, the university administration mounted ambitious plans to restart the semester online, and I found myself almost openly rebellious. The idea of teaching a course on African history, in the midst of everything, seemed preposterous. Later experience has shown that, from a practical point of view, this was a wiser course of action than I had let myself understand at the moment. As our enrollment numbers decline, and the first waves of firings and retirements begin, it is clear that we—and the city—have not yet heard the last of Katrina's effects.

I think about this a lot when I drive home after class now. From the small bridge over the canal, I can see the workers reinforcing the broken levees. I watch the debris piles come and go outside the empty homes, and wonder how many people will attend the summer festival at the quiet Greek church. I slow down when I turn onto the shady tree-lined boulevard by the bayou. I try to forget about the arborist I heard recently on the radio, saying that many of these leafy great oaks are in peril, and may even be dead. They just don't know it yet, he said.

Andrew Goss, assistant professor of history, is the department specialist in the history of Asia and Indonesia and has been with the department for two years.

Five weeks after we evacuated, my wife and I returned to our house in uptown New Orleans. We found it largely as we left it, with minor wind damage and no flooding. After pulling down the hurricane boards, we opened the windows and peeked into the

refrigerator. It had been emptied of all the meat prior to the evacuation, and we were able to salvage it with bleach and baking soda. We had been very fortunate and were full of hope. As members of the first round of regular residents back in the city, we felt like pioneers in a frontier town, capable of exerting our will on its future. After a month of inactivity in exile, glued to the TV and the Internet, we were euphoric at the prospects for action. With a safe haven to return to every night, the city looked more like opportunity than ruin.

The University of New Orleans reopened a week later, and in addition to reviving the first part of the Asian history survey I had started five weeks earlier, I began teaching a new history of science survey course online. This might have been a daunting task, with no books or lecture notes at home, and without electricity or a phone line. But in fact the experience freed me from the usual pressures facing a new faculty member. Professionally I was on my own, without anyone watching over my shoulder. In those early weeks there were still few rules, and we all shared a collegial sense of a shared mission. I gained access to my office before the campus was closed down for mold remediation, and the manager of the streetcar barn across the street offered us an energized extension cord during the first critical week of classes. The rewards were immediate. My students, both online and at the satellite location, were grateful for the return to class, and were eager to turn their minds towards Aristotle and the Ramayana. All four of my Asian history students had perfect attendance, arriving twice-a-week—at 7:45 am!—for nine weeks straight. It was the kind of course I had always dreamt of teaching.

Reflecting back now on the past six months, I see how Katrina led to the maturation of my historical consciousness. Questions about the political and social causes of the man-made part of the disaster caused me to shed the narrow intellectual worldview I had inhabited in graduate school for an outlook in which historians answer questions important to their community. Even before returning home, I had begun working with my colleague Connie Atkinson on a grant proposal examining the historical parallels between floodworks technology in the Netherlands and Louisiana. Even with no access to research materials, it was some of the most natural writing I had ever done. It was so obvious that in the effort to rebuild south Louisiana, historians would play a critical role, and that I, too, could do my part.

Much of the euphoria has worn off today. Classes have resumed on campus, and so have the usual challenges of grading, worrying about publications, and dealing with plagiarism. And the reality of considerable cutbacks at the university, caused by lower student enrollments and diminished state funding, has finally set in. But for me, Katrina has opened up my work, granting a kind of freedom to pursue less narrowly defined intellectual agendas.

Joe Louis Caldwell, associate professor of history and former department chair, is a native of north Louisiana and specialist in post-Civil War U.S. history.

On Saturday night, August 27, and again on Sunday morning, August 28, 2005, I listened to Mayor Ray Nagin and other city and state officials as they pontificated about the likely path of Hurricane Katrina. By early Sunday morning my wife, my daughter, and I had decided to evacuate our homes and our uptown neighborhood. As I left, I was stopped by a neighbor who asked me to try to persuade her husband to leave New Orleans. I did so and was rebuffed. The 85-year-old Reverend Montgomery informed me that he believed emphatically that the Lord would take care of him. At that point, I excused myself; he promised to pray for me, and I promised to do the same for him. My family and I left for Opelousas, Louisiana, the home of one of my wife's brothers. In the evacuation traffic, it took us nine

hours to make the normally two-hour trip. After staying with my brother-in-law for a month, we rented a trailer and remained in Opelousas for another five months. I came back to New Orleans briefly in September, when persons living in our zip code were allowed to come in to the city to examine their homes. We returned permanently in February 2006. Now we live in a FEMA trailer situated in the driveway of our damaged home.

I'm haunted by the images of that September visit. I arrived in the early morning hours. There were no streetlights. A misty pall hung over the city. As I drove down Claiborne Avenue, I saw a black Cadillac hearse upended on the neutral ground, leaning against a palm tree, reminiscent of something from a movie set. Arriving at my house I found the usually lush green neighborhood a dusty brown; there were no dogs, cats, pigeons, or "hoot" owls. The silence was deafening.

The dispersal of my uptown neighborhood reflects the larger picture of storm-ravaged New Orleans. My recalcitrant elderly neighbor, mentioned earlier, who chose to remain and ride out the storm, did survive but water rose over ten feet inside his two-story home. He retreated to the second floor where he was forced to spend a terrifying night sleeping atop a dresser. Rev. Montgomery, a veteran of World War II, had finally left his home when the National Guard came to his door—he said he could not refuse men in the uniform of the United States Army with whom he had served in the Pacific Theater. His stepson, Byron J. Stewart, who lives around the corner, evacuated his family to Alexandria, Louisiana. Joseph Victor, a retired truck driver, who lived a block away, evacuated with his family to Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Chalmous Smith, another neighbor, evacuated to Jackson, Mississippi. Charles Wilson, a neighbor employed at a local hotel, fled to the Convention Center and after two days there made his way to the Superdome and from there was evacuated to San Antonio, Texas. Most people in my neighborhood with the wherewithal to leave did so. Like our neighbors, when my family and I left before the storm, we packed for a weekend away from home. It was a very long weekend.

Arnold R. Hirsch, research professor, Ethel and Herman Midlo Chair in New Orleans Studies, and director of the Midlo Center for New Orleans Studies, is president-elect of The Urban History Association.

We were reluctant to leave our home, which was situated on a piece of (relatively) high ground in the Carrollton-University area uptown. We had listened to the dire warnings that attended the coming of Hurricane Ivan the year before, and evacuated for the first time during the quarter century we had lived in New Orleans. It was an absolute fiasco. Poorly planned and executed, our trip, undertaken with all the help and assistance the state could muster, got us to Lafayette in twelve hours—an excursion that normally took two or three. Saved by a late change in the hurricane's course, we returned home, vowing never to be stampeded out of our home again. My wife proved particularly adamant on that point, as a chronic illness and prescription drugs precluded my providing any relief for her as a driver. Our bravado disappeared the next year with Katrina's approach. We packed quickly and lightly—we were sure we would be home in a few days—and left our larger suitcases out for the next weekend's planned flight to Chicago where my nephew would be getting married. Aside from some T-shirts and jeans, I grabbed only my laptop on the off chance I would get to do some work over the next few days. The tuxedo would have to wait. We left in the predawn hours on Saturday, heading for our closest complementary accommodations: a cousin's home in Dallas. From there, I monitored Katrina's approach, staying up through the night as it made landfall, listening to the same reports over and over again as it moved inland. I slept a couple of hours once it appeared the worst had passed.

I awoke to begin planning our return only to learn of the collapse of the Industrial Canal and 17th Street levees. Exhausting the selections made possible by cable television, I went to the Internet for more information and then back to cable again. My wife and I watched in horror as our city disappeared beneath Lake Pontchartrain's unrelenting waves. Knowing only that we could not return home, we spent the rest of the week in Dallas and made ready for what seemed our inevitable trek to Chicago. We had family and a place to stay there. That trip proved uneventfully sad, though it was punctuated by the unfailing kindness of strangers who after learning we were in flight from New Orleans offered food and refreshment, words of solace and encouragement, and even clothing. Curiously, the only tension that I can recall resulting from our presence came not from the inherent awkwardness of receiving such aid, but from the testiness of soon-to-be relations who seemed gravely put out that we did not stop at a tuxedo rental on the way to the wedding.

Once in Chicago we quickly fell into a routine, albeit an unusual one. First came the constant monitoring of events and conditions in New Orleans. The scenes in the Superdome and Convention Center shook us badly, as did many reports in the national media. A large fire on Carrollton about a mile from our home went uncontrolled far too long and gave us some concern. We quickly found both local and extraterrestrial sources (satellite pictures) on the Internet and mined those to supplement the more conventional reports.

The passage of each day brought us into closer contact with those who returned almost immediately and a few who had never left at all. We were most appreciative for the bits of news gleaned this way (particularly eyewitness accounts that eventually informed us that our house sustained only minor damage and had not been flooded). We remained apprehensive, however, about the safety of friends who remained in harm's way. Soon, my wife took charge of the process that would enable us to return home, contacting (and contracting) electricians, plumbers, roofers, painters, landscapers, appliance repair services, and inspectors of various sorts. Daunting tasks when taken individually, collectively these chores drew on reserves of patience and persistence that I could not have previously imagined.

For my part, I fell in among old friends and institutions in Chicago that provided a seemingly endless array of activities and opportunities. Professionally, I had more than I could handle. What struck me most was how easily I fell into a network left behind nearly three decades before. I picked up with friends from undergraduate days who made it seem as though I had been away for no more than an extended summer break. Graduate school friends made me a T.A. once more, and later, local professional contacts kept me engaged in my current work. It was heady stuff and all, it seemed, too good to be true. Moreover, enough of my family remained intact to provide the delicate balance of joy and angst (tsuris for purists) that let loose another flood—this one of memories. And then there was the city itself. Birthplace, but no longer home, its allure, I understood, could be found in the very unreality of my situation. By mid-November we anxiously, but eagerly, headed south to reclaim both house and home.

Catherine Candy, assistant professor of history, the department's specialist in the British Empire and the history of Ireland and modern India, has lived in New Orleans for two years.

What I will remember about the UNO history department in the wake of Katrina is the startling alacrity with which, with the university servers down and e-mail addresses gone, colleagues created a Yahoo department listserv within three days and had it up and running from a hotel room in Houston, although it took many weeks of detective work to trace

everybody. I will also remember the incredible kindness of colleagues on my return to the city.

When it became clear that we would not be going back to New Orleans for a while, I evacuated to family in Ireland and was persuaded to talk about the hurricane in my old primary (grade) school where I was interrogated so tenaciously by the children about the fate of the children of Katrina that I wondered if anyone had studied transnational children's solidarity. On taking refuge at my alma mater, Irish historians at once remarked on the comparisons between the discourse on the famine in Ireland and that of Katrina. As the UNO faculty cobbled together courses for our widely scattered students in October, from Ireland I created a hastily pulled together online course that attempted a comparison of the two catastrophes in terms of roles of the state, class, race, gender, empire, evacuation/emigration, death and the "horror." Then, by early October, the news came of the tragedy in Pakistan and India, so that tracing the common global history of the shaping of all three catastrophes and aftermaths looms as the next teaching challenge.

Michael Mizell-Nelson, assistant professor of history and specialist in U.S. labor and race relations, is a long-time resident of New Orleans.

From the air as I approached New Orleans, I saw the great number of blue tarps covering rooftops throughout the city, so I wondered just how many of our things might have survived on the second floor. We lived across the street from the 17th Street canal levee breach, so I already knew that the first floor was a complete loss.

The muck that earlier covered our neighborhood had dried into dust laden with heavy metals and kicked around by the wind. Markings on the kitchen door revealed that our house had been searched on September 25 (almost four weeks following the disaster). Another mark near an upstairs window indicated that someone in a boat had checked our house for survivors before the ten feet of water had drained.

We were lucky in that there were no broken windows and no roof damage; also, no neighbors seeking higher ground had used our place as refuge. Everything in the upstairs rooms remained dry but smelled of sewerage and mold. The mold had sprouted along the walls, but stopped one step beneath the second floor landing. The second floor looked just as we had left it. Our daughter Keely's Brownie vest lay on the floor in the middle of her bedroom—exactly where she had left it. Except for the muddy footprints of the search-and-rescue people, the top floor had survived—and so had my research materials. Since we rented, I needed only to salvage our possessions and leave our former neighbors behind.

We were most fortunate in having a second floor; many of our neighbors lived in single-story homes, where little could be saved. The sight of one neighbor's collection of family photographs—three decades of family history—strewn about the lawn in an attempt to salvage some of the images broke our hearts.

Parents can't help but view Katrina through the eyes of children—their own and others. The kids' artwork that filled our walls was destroyed. I can accept losing all of the art, except for one piece our daughter made as a five-year-old. It's a self-portrait that included an Escher-like touch: her hands drawing her portrait. I found no trace of that portrait. I have some regrets about losing the hundreds of record albums and books, but I would do anything to reclaim her picture.

Despite our children's losses, they are also relatively fortunate. At least one child in our daughter's class is experiencing a post-Katrina divorce. Several classmates face temporarily

disrupted homes as parents live apart in order to preserve jobs that moved away from the city. Our family endured no such emotional or economic traumas. If ever I begin to consider our family as unfortunate, I need only glance at the three plastic tubs of our photos and videotapes, intact and safe, and think of our neighbors and their family photographs, water-soaked and mildewed, scattered like debris across their lawn.

Raphael Cassimere, Jr., Seraphia D. Leyda Professor of History and specialist in African-American and U.S. Constitutional history, is a native New Orleanian and alumni of UNO.

Like so many, my wife and I evacuated New Orleans. As we returned to the area along the I-10 through Jefferson Parish, west of the city, the damage seemed moderate, but as we entered the city the specter of death, decay, and desolation was everywhere. The shock of seeing our Bywater neighborhood was tempered by the welcomed sight of a few neighbors, but we learned that an elderly neighbor had died inside his home. Before going inside our house, we said a brief prayer. Although the damage was worse than we hoped, we still felt blessed, especially later as we drove to the university. En route the scenery was indescribable. Destruction was everywhere. If Katrina was an "act of God," then as St. Peter observed long ago, "God is no respecter of persons." Katrina was an indiscriminate destroyer. My thoughts turned to the awesome task of rebuilding.

James Russell Lowell wrote, "Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide." I believe New Orleans has been given a rare second chance to get it right. After the devastation caused by the Civil War, New Orleans lost an opportunity to build an inclusive society that treated all as equals before the law, without regard to race, color, or ethnicity. Bigotry and bitterness aborted the dream, and it failed. Now, we can start over again. But where do we begin? Economic and social reform, an updated building code, 21st-century levee protection, moral reform? While these are important, the foundation on which all else is built must be an excellent public school system, second to none, regional or national.

We should not clone the old system. At best, it would replicate mediocrity. The best and the brightest should be recruited who must represent the racial and ethnic entirety of our community and be held to the highest standards. Expectations should be very high and monitored continually. Those we entrust to manage our public schools must be persons of ability and integrity. We can no longer allow greedy self-interest groups to select policy makers and administrators solely on the basis of patronage. We must not tolerate cronyism or nepotism. Our children must learn to live harmoniously within an ethnically, racially, and socially diverse community.

We have a chance, perhaps our last, to create a school system that can be a model for the state, indeed, the nation. Instead of just catching up, we can lead the way. We must not retreat to our divisive past. Rather, we must be bold as we venture into the uncertain future.

Connie Zeanah Atkinson, assistant professor of history, associate director of the Midlo Center for New Orleans Studies and a specialist on New Orleans music and U.S cultural history, was a music journalist in New Orleans for many years.

Again and again, we are asked by friends, family, and generous strangers, "What do you need?" What we don't need is stuff. And where, in our FEMA trailers, would we put stuff anyway? On the other hand, we need so much. Our students need textbooks, and a place to live. Our department needs research money, money to hire new people, money for graduate assistantships. Our neighborhoods need everything.

What do I need? Well, I need to get over the shame of needing. I have learned that it is more difficult to receive than to give. I need to know what is going to happen with my university, my neighborhood, my city. I need to know how to shape the experiences that I have had and use them in teaching. I need to understand what role a historian of the city can play as events are happening all around us. And I need to figure out what to do about the anger—anger for the harm done our beautiful city, anger when she (yes, New Orleans is always a “she”) is mistreated, disrespected, and misused. The anger flashes when I hear discussions of not rebuilding her; of the plans created by policy makers without consideration of her special architecture, neighborhoods, and culture; of the nation’s money being poured into corporate contracts that never make it to the city’s people. My anger flared up again when the Southern Historical Association moved their 2006 annual meeting away from New Orleans to Birmingham, Alabama. This very public rebuff was especially irksome. If New Orleans is of no interest to historians of the South after the worst natural disaster in the nation’s history, when will she be of interest? In their letter announcing the move, officers of the Southern sent us their “prayers and best wishes”—and yes, we need those. Their conference we needed even more.

Mary Niall Mitchell, assistant professor of history and specialist in 19th-century southern and U.S. cultural history, was the recipient of the 2004-2005 Oscar Handlin fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies.

I am not doing a Katrina project. This is not to say that Katrina projects, carefully planned and considered, are not worthwhile, particularly those that involve engineering for our unreliable levees and psychological counseling for our devastated population. It is to say that I am not at all certain of what the historian’s role should be in the aftermath of such a disaster. While still sitting at my mother’s desk in Florida in September (or was it October?) I received e-mails from university officials encouraging me to develop a project, write a grant, teach a class related to Katrina. One such missive even suggested that a collection of narratives from Katrina survivors would make a great book. The water had only just receded, I thought. My house, untouched by flooding, did not have electricity. My answering machine would not pick up. I was still looking for my neighborhood, the Irish Channel, on satellite maps. Mice and coffin flies were having a house party in my kitchen. Everyone I knew from New Orleans was in a state of shock. Nobody knew what would become of the city, much less the university, which was surrounded by floodwater. Nothing in my experience up to that point suggested a “project” for me, a historian.

Since then, eloquent, meaningful, and necessary work by journalists, songwriters, and artists has appeared. It is all in the interest of healing, and if ever a population needed a deep dose of catharsis, it is the people of New Orleans after Katrina. Some of my colleagues at UNO and other schools are gamely instructing students in the methods of oral history so that they can collect the experiences of survivors. This, too, is important work. But I worry that in emphasizing the importance of “Katrina projects” in the immediate fallout of this disaster, we are missing the opportunity to deliver insight more profound than the idea that catastrophes make compelling reading. Having lived through such a disaster, and being daily disoriented, disheartened, and surprised by it, we have gained a perspective on history that most people never fully acquire. We are acutely aware that we do not know what is going to happen next. We are in the middle of the history that will someday be written, not because it will sell books but because, with perspective, reflection, and research, we will learn from it. It is this inability to predict the future, not the desire to seize on the recent past, which should shape our thinking. As students of history, we should take from Katrina a renewed appreciation for what those in the past endured, and for the difficult, often wrongheaded choices they made despite and because of the uncertainty they faced.