FOREWORD

Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Her winds and waters stirred up the history of this fabled city. Disasters generally have a way of making the past present, and this one was no exception. It did not take long to see that Katrina and the flooding of the city threw New Orleans' ugly race history into sharp relief.

During antebellum times being "sold down the river," namely, the Mississippi River, was a source of profound worry for blacks. New Orleans, the end point down the river, was imagined to be a city of sorrows. It was an abyss, a den of wickedness; it was thought to be the worst place a person could be sent. The horror of being sold down the river is a theme sounded in literature and oral tradition. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the eponymous character meets his death at the run-down plantation of Simon Legree, down the river in rural Louisiana.

It is worth recalling that by 1840 New Orleans was the center of the slave trade in the United States. In his autobiography, *Twelve Years a Slave*, Solomon Northup recounts a slave auction in the Vieux Carré. In vivid prose he describes this dehumanizing moment—the slave pens, the wrenching apart of families, the horror of it all. Summoning words from somewhere within, Northup concludes his account with this telling afterthought: "It was a mournful scene indeed."¹

"It was a mournful scene indeed" is a string of words that spans the wretched misery of the nineteenth-century slave auction and that catastrophic moment more than 160 years later when tens of thousands of black families lost everything, some even life itself. White people living in New Orleans also suffered, of course. But they could weather their misery in the absence of that ornery consciousness described by W.E.B. Du Bois as the double: "one ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls . . . two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals."²

As Katrina made its way to New Orleans, Mayor Ray Nagin issued the first mandatory order to evacuate in the history of the city. It is worth setting the demographic and temporal context for the mayor's order. When Katrina slammed into the eastern edge of the Paris of the South, more than half of the population of New Orleans was black. Moreover, New Orleans ranked eighth among American cities with the poorest populations. Twenty-eight percent lived below the poverty line. Fourteen percent of city residents lived

in households with incomes below 50 percent of the poverty line. Upward of 40 percent of the population was functionally illiterate. By 2005, in short, the legacy of slavery and racism combined with the deindustrialization of the American economy had left an indelible mark on the material circumstances of most blacks living in New Orleans.³

Now, consider the date that the mayor issued his evacuation order: August 28, the end of the month. For folks living below, at, or just above the poverty line, money was in short supply in the last few days of August. Who could afford to evacuate became a question rooted in the history of the city. The best many people could do was seek refuge on their roofs. Many stayed there for days. Some didn't make it, perishing from the punishing heat and lack of food and water. In many ways Hurricane Katrina was a perfect storm throwing into stark relief the consequences of long years of racial oppression, a mutating economy, and, as this book documents, a failed federal relief effort.

Left to Chance steps boldly into this fray. The authors look closely and over a long period at the experiences of residents in two historic New Orleans neighborhoods, both African American: Hollygrove and Pontchartrain Park. The first is a working-class enclave reclaimed from swamp sometime in the 1920s. Subject to the whims of city planners, major thoroughfares slice through this neighborhood, giving it a haphazard look and feel, as if what is there is simply what is left after others make decisions about how best to travel by car.

The second neighborhood is what we would call middle class. Pontchartrain Park is a testament to Homer Adolph Plessy, a former New Orleanian whose arrest for violating a race segregation law in Louisiana led to the famed Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Developed in the 1950s to accommodate a small but rising middle-income class of blacks, Pontchartrain Park was designed to comply with the "separate but equal" clause of the 1896 decision. In short, both neighborhoods are shaped by the shifting fortunes of race tied to class in this iconic American city.

The authors open a wide space for the voices of those who lived with and through the flooding of the city. Behind their stories is the inescapable shadow of race and its partner, class, there for any reader to see. From the first moments when evacuating or staying put is a decision that must be made, to the pitiful state and federal relief efforts, to years later when life once again begins to take on the appearance of the normal, we are brought face to face with the chaotic world of disaster. It is a world—as the voices in this book make unmistakably clear—in which chance is in charge.

Following the lives of men and women in these two neighborhoods for several years after that fateful day in August 2005, Kroll-Smith, Baxter, and Jenkins weave a compelling account of people working against the odds to make sense of and manage the protracted and bewildering mess that was, and in many ways still is, Hurricane Katrina.

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LEFT TO CHANCE