To mark the 10-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina this August, a conservative member of the Chicago Tribune’s editorial board, Kristen McQueary, wrote that she wished that a similar “swirl of fury,” “a real storm,” would whip through Chicago and prompt a citywide “rebirth.” While 1,833 people died, and more than 400,000 others were displaced by Katrina—many permanently—McQueary found a silver lining in the catastrophe: slashed city budgets and mandatory unpaid furloughs; the demolition of old housing stock, labor contracts, and teachers’ unions; and the rise of “the nation's first free-market education system.”

“That’s what it took to hit the reset button in New Orleans,” McQueary wrote. “Chaos. Tragedy. Heartbreak.” Although McQueary was forced to walk back her language after commenters nationwide pilloried her callous “prayer,” she was merely repeating a powerful narrative that’s been created over the past decade. Just weeks after the hurricane made landfall, The New York Times’ longtime conservative columnist David Brooks wrote:

The first rule of the rebuilding effort should be: Nothing Like Before. Most of the ambitious and organized people abandoned the inner-city areas of New Orleans long ago, leaving neighborhoods where roughly three-quarters of the people were poor…. If we just put up new buildings and allow the same people to move back into their old neighborhoods, then urban New Orleans will become just as rundown and dysfunctional as before.²

Dreams of a blank slate on which to carry out a market-driven recovery weren’t confined to op-eds. Government officials began speculating about how the storm and the area’s subsequent evacuation would change New Orleans’ demographics. Alphonso Jackson, HUD Secretary to President George W. Bush, urged against rebuilding the Lower Ninth Ward and told the Houston Chronicle, “Whether we like it or not, New Orleans is not going to be 500,000 people for a long time. New Orleans is not going to be as black as it was for a long time, if ever again.”³ Rep. Richard H. Baker, a Republican congressman from Baton Rouge, was quoted as telling lobbyists in September 2005, “We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did.”⁴

Democrats got on board with the blank slate narrative as well. The efforts to get rid of large swaths of the city’s public housing units couldn’t have been successful without the unanimous support of New Orleans’ largely Democratic City Council. Arne Duncan, the Obama administration's secretary of education, expressed a kind of gratitude for the devastation, telling an interviewer, “I think the best thing that happened to the education system in New Orleans was Hurricane Katrina. That education system was

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**Policies That Make People Disappear**

Activist Shana griffin on Housing in Post-Katrina New Orleans

Thousands of working-class, African American families were displaced by the Housing Authority of New Orleans in favor of corporate development after Hurricane Katrina.

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In the years since the storm, four of the city’s 10 public housing developments have been demolished. Those 5,000 units were replaced by just more than 600 units. The number of housing vouchers, which are often promoted as a way to de-concentrate poverty, tripled from 2000 to 2010. How are changes to federal and local housing policy related to changes in the city’s demographics?

We had Rep. [Richard] Baker (R-La.) making the comment that, “We could not clean up public housing, but God did.” The idea that those who occupy public housing were dirty, a social ill that the state, in its paternalistic role, could not deal with, but God did. And seeing Hurricane Katrina as a metaphor, something that cleaned up this problem where the government had struggled to.

I grew up in public housing here in New Orleans called Iberville. I resided in public housing almost 23 years, almost half of my life. I grew up always feeling extreme shame about where I lived. I cringed when people would ask me where I lived. It caused an extreme level of anxiety to say I live in the projects. Just to say “public housing” was basically saying that you’re dirty, you’re bad, you’re dumb, you’re lazy, you’re a problem. I have these memories of extreme shame. As I got older, I realized that shame wasn’t based on my family or me or people who live in public housing being bad, dirty, dumb, lazy, or ugly people; it was based on the fear of being blamed for something that we didn’t cause.

I think that’s what we see now when I think about the demolition of public housing in New Orleans. It’s like these people are people that you can blame. It’s like if we have social problems, it has to be the people that are utilizing public assistance; it has to be people living in public housing; it has to be kids going to public schools. There’s something that’s almost inherently bad about anything public. It’s like these people are problems, so if you get rid of them, “the problem” goes away.

These are policies that make people disappear. You don’t see the remnants of what once was public housing. When the buildings are gone, the assumption is the people are gone.
You’ve written about the specific impact of such policies on women and girls. Did the displacement in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina have a disparate impact on low-income women?

Housing is not a gender neutral issue. Public and subsidized housing programs are disproportionately utilized by women of color and poor women. Black women represent a vast majority of leaseholders within public housing, and the same is true for voucher holders. So you see the ways in which gender and racial inequality came together to deny black women in the city a right to return home.

If you see an advertisement for housing that says, “Blacks not welcome,” that’s an obvious violation. If you see, “Children are not welcome,” that’s a clear violation as well. But whenever you see “No Section 8”—and you see that all the time—that is not a violation. Those who are likely to be poor and who are receiving Section 8 housing vouchers are women, and in the context of New Orleans, Black women.

Women’s perceived fertility rates are often used as an underpinning for affordable housing opposition. It’s this typical, unfortunate thing when there are articles around public housing or affordable housing in the local newspaper, and it’s seen also nationally, when you read the comments section, there are always comments about, “These women are having too many kids. They’re breeding criminals.”

In 2008, John LaBruzzo, Louisiana state representative, Republican, made statements about exploring legislation to pay poor women, those who are on welfare and in public housing, $1,000 to be sterilized because they’re having so many kids they can’t afford to take care of. He made the statement in the context of people evacuating because of Hurricane Gustav, but also during the same week that the House of Representatives overwhelmingly denied support of President Bush’s $700 billion dollar stimulus plan.

How have homeowners fared in the wake of Katrina?

Under the [federal] Road Home program [which provided funds that could be used to rebuild homes], Black homeowners’ properties were devalued compared to White homeowners and many White homeowners received more Road Home funding. The formula that was used [to determine who got grants] was based on homes’ pre Katrina value, not on the destruction that the homes suffered through Hurricane Katrina. The disparities were obvious and resulted in several lawsuits [which led to a $62 million settlement].

In general, the policies that were enacted did not show any investment or commitment to supporting people’s right to return home, and also sent a clear message in terms of who was wanted, who can come back, who can’t come back.

The lack of affordable housing in New Orleans seems to be caused by a number of factors, including soaring rents, stereotypes about low-income residents, and policies such as the federal Road Home program that left out both renters and Black homeowners. What solutions are you working on?

JPNSI creates the opportunity, rather than waiting for something to occur. We’re not just advocating for this, we’re also developing affordable housing in our communities.

When I think about the housing crisis in the city, I see the community land trust model as being one of many avenues to address the problem. At JPNSI we put a particular focus on permanent affordability as well as advocacy to improve equitable forms of development and resident-controlled development.

But a community land trust is not a silver bullet. You can create permanent affordability in an area like New Orleans and still be able to put somebody out of a unit. Affordability loses its strength in markets where you have poor tenant rights laws. Inclusionary zoning, a rental registry [to address blight through code enforcement], and tenant rights unions all need to play a role in broader strategy.

This spring, your organization broke ground on a four-unit development that you’ve said will be the first permanently affordable apartment building owned by a community land trust in New Orleans. In Mid-City, the neighborhood where this project is located, 79 percent of residents rent and rents have increased 44 percent since 2000. The need is so great and yet you’ve decided to smart small.

The scale of the project may seem small, but it’s characteristic in terms of New Orleans neighborhoods. It’s these small neighborhood projects that have seen the least of the funding and attention. Our effort to explore different possibilities to turn the tide is really important.

These small-scale projects are important and have a big impact on people. They feel like, “I can see a change.”

Dani McClain reports and writes on race, gender, policy, and politics. She is a contributing writer at The Nation and a fellow with the Nation Institute.
2. David Brooks, “Katrina’s Silver Lining,” The New York Times, September 8, 2005 h t t p : / / w w w . n y t i m e s . com/2005/09/08/opinion/katrinassilver-lining.html? r=0.