

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

Should We Abandon Louisiana?

In some ways, we already have.

Source: Zack Kopplin, Slate.com, August 20, 2016

In Louisiana, we've got chips on our shoulders against the rest of America. The recent flooding in Baton Rouge is just the latest reminder why it's warranted.

In the past week, at least 13 people have died and tens of thousands have been evacuated from around Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Somewhere around 40,000 homes have been destroyed. People were stranded on highways, waded through chest-deep water filled with venomous snakes, and escaped their flooded houses by floating on mattresses. Nearly a third of the state has been declared a disaster area.

The Louisiana floods were America's worst natural disaster since Hurricane Sandy according to the Red Cross, but for Sandy the media hyped the storm endlessly before it hit. The *New York Times* created a digital landing page, with hundreds of posts about lines for gas, available local services, and graphics showing the damage.

For Louisiana, there was nothing. People woke up with water in their homes.

At the beginning, on Friday and Saturday, Aug. 12 and 13, if you didn't live in Louisiana, you probably hadn't heard about the flood. The disaster didn't make it onto cable news and wasn't front-page material. As someone who grew up in Baton Rouge, I wasn't shocked.

"In Louisiana, there's a gnawing sense that the national media seems wholly uninterested in *this* disaster," Sean Illing, a Louisianian, wrote in *Salon*. "Media coverage scales with location," Illing told me, pointing out that human suffering in Louisiana doesn't fit any natural narrative. It's just suffering, and apparently pointless suffering isn't sexy when it's outside of the tri-state area.

After Illing's piece, there were national media recriminations. "Many readers have expressed disappointment in the coverage," wrote Liz Spayd, the *New York Times* public editor, criticizing the *Times*' lack of staff-written stories. "The *Times*'s performance seems particularly weak."

Starting a few days later, outlets did start covering it. Unfortunately, the coverage has been dominated by disaster porn (pictures of coffins floating down the street) or stories capitalizing on decrying a lack of coverage. The tragedy wasn't enough of a selling point—it's the media conspiracy that gets people to care.

Because we're Louisiana, people just assume we're going to flood. One football field of land disappears from Louisiana's coast every hour. Why rebuild again when the entire state is sinking?

If we must blame something for this flood, we should direct our blame at climate change. According to the National Weather Service, there was only a 0.1 percent chance of this flood according to historical models. This storm shouldn't have happened. Many of the homes that were destroyed weren't in a flood zone. (Unlike in New York and New Jersey after Hurricane Sandy, where the flooding was well-predicted.)

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But this won't be the last unexpected extreme weather event Louisiana will face as the Earth warms. Critics will use this as one more reason to give up on the state. And they'll use the inevitable next disaster too.

After Hurricane Katrina, many non-Louisianians advocated against rebuilding New Orleans. Dennis Hastert, the U.S. speaker of the House at the time, said New Orleans should be "bulldozed." Jack Shafer, a former *Slate* editor, wrote that Hastert's statement was one of "candor and wisdom."

But abandoning Louisiana wasn't Dennis Hastert's decision to make. It doesn't matter how bad the flooding may seem to outsiders—for residents, this was a freak disaster and not something that will convince us to abandon our homes willingly. (That sentiment was summed up in a blog post after Katrina that went viral but has a title that is not fit for print.)

What that decade-old commentary about bulldozing New Orleans missed is that we weren't looking for opinions, we were looking for help. But Louisiana is viewed as a backwater, so instead we just got paternalistic think pieces about why we didn't deserve help. We're too poor, we're too corrupt, and our schools were failing. "New Orleans puts the 'D' into dysfunctional," Shafer wrote, suggesting residents stay in Texas.

But because we, as a country, have collectively endangered our future by overusing fossil fuels, that doesn't mean Louisiana has sacrificed its right to exist and its people should leave. Climate change could sink all of our major coastal cities, but Louisiana is being held to a different standard, because we've already been hit with so many disasters. We've suffered so much that people are tired of hearing about us. In fact, we've suffered so much that people outside of Louisiana assume that we want to leave.

But the thing is that we don't. The people who do leave Louisiana after this flood probably won't have left because they've decided it's time to give up on their home. They'll leave because they can't afford to come back. Since many homes weren't in a flood zone, most people did not have flood insurance. The *Baton Rouge Advocate* calculated that the average Federal Emergency Management Agency check would only come out to about \$10,000. The FEMA money is "only to keep disaster victims safe, sanitary and secure," the *Advocate* wrote. It's not for repairs.

When you're hit by a natural disaster, you can sandbag, you can stock up on candles and water, you can evacuate. The government and nonprofits can provide aid. What you can't do is uproot your house or your community. Those things don't move.

At least not without extraordinary measures. The U.S. is currently debating whether and how to relocate several small towns in Alaska that are existentially threatened by climate change, but we have no idea how we're going to foot the bill. To move all of Louisiana would be an insanely expensive undertaking.

This would be an incredibly painful experience for an incredibly hardy group of residents. And it would not be well-received if it is dictated to us by people who don't understand that losing your home is a tragedy that none of our residents deserve.

We can rebuild and we will rebuild, and eventually we may relocate. But adding insult to injury doesn't help Louisiana. So for now, we'll just take a little compassion.

Possible Response Questions:

- What are your thoughts regarding climate change?
- Should we rebuild Louisiana? Explain.
- Pick a passage from the article and respond to it.