On August 29, 2005, a series of events were put into motion that would change my life forever. The week before, I had been watching the news, observing a massive hurricane named Katrina move toward the Gulf of Mexico. This was an annual ritual, however. New Orleans and many other communities along the Gulf Coast deal with hurricane season every year. My main concern was for my family; they needed to leave. So I called my mother and father and urged them both to leave, which they did by August 27. Up to this point things were pretty much protocol; this was not the first time they had fled their homes as a precautionary measure. I thought I knew
the drill—they would leave for a few days, there would be some minor flooding and roof damage, and the power would probably be out several days. On August 29 this annual routine turned into a nightmare. When the initial reports came in, it appeared that New Orleans had dodged a bullet. Small flooding and power outages constituted the preliminary reports. At approximately 1:00 a.m. on August 30, I logged onto a radio feed from a local CBS affiliate. Mayor Nagin was reporting that 80 percent of the city was experiencing major flooding, with up to ten feet in some areas. This couldn’t be happening. I called my father right away, and told him the news. I was afraid to call my mother, I was afraid to tell her what had probably happened to her house. By daybreak all news agencies were beginning to report the depths of the disaster. This was not the usual drill, and people would not be returning in a few days. Three major levees had been breached—the 17th Street canal, the London Avenue canal, and the Industrial canal. The place where I was born and raised was under water.

As a native of the city, I found it very interesting to observe news analysts, scholars, and politicians making various assessments of the outcomes associated with Katrina. Some writers wish to highlight the impact of racism, while others focus on class-based discrimination. Although these dynamics are important parts of the story, many accounts fail to capture some of the deeper challenges that confront the city. New Orleans has been a dying city for the past fifteen to twenty years. To grasp the uphill battle that we face, it is essential to understand the political and economic context in the city before Katrina and how these factors will affect future rebuilding plans.

Before beginning this analysis, however, I must first admit to bending a number of (traditional) social science rules. The usual stance of objectivity is one that I cannot claim. My vantage point is far from clear, clouded by reflections of my home. No matter where you lay your head, home is home—that place where your formulative experiences reside. Thus, because this event has affected my family and me, I must acknowledge that I am far from a distant observer. The role I occupy in this analysis is more like that of a participant observer selectively referencing “hidden transcripts.” In light of this position, I occasionally employ narrative and cultural devices in the analysis in an effort to tie the personal to the general electoral and political-economic dynamics this chapter explores. In addition to experiences and observations drawn from family and friends, I draw on traditional political-economic sources that include public opinion data, socio-economic statistics, and local periodicals.

This is a study of New Orleans before and after Katrina. It begins with an examination of the electoral and attitudinal patterns in the city over the past couple of decades. This section concentrates on the mayoral office and African American occupancy of City Hall since the administration of Ernest “Dutch” Morial, with particular attention on Mayor Nagin’s first electoral campaign. The next section continues this theme by examining the transformation and shift Nagin made in his bid for reelection following the hurricane. Following an analysis of mayoral politics, the second section explores the city’s political-economic policies and performance since the 1980s. New Orleans was a struggling city prior to Katrina, and this section details some of the root causes of the city’s political and economic woes. In the final section, I offer some conclusions regarding the city’s future.