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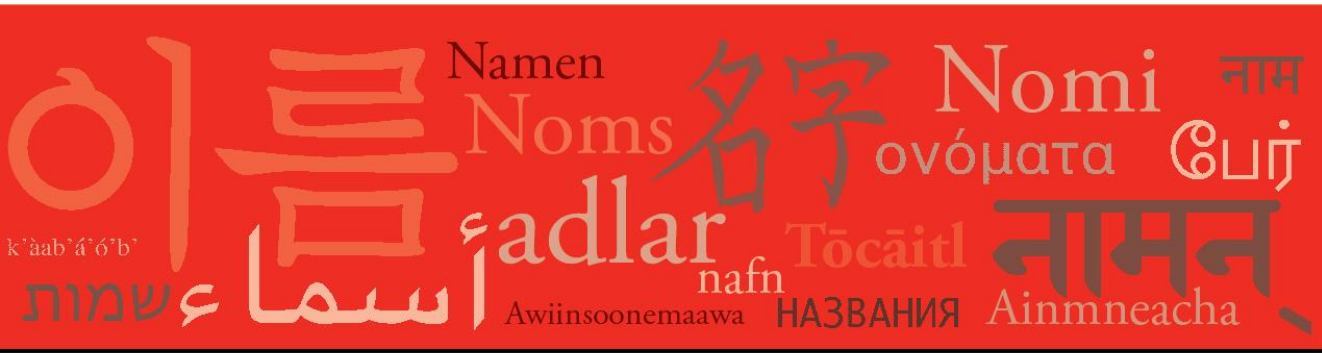

Book Review

Tempest: Hurricane Naming and American Culture.

BY LIZ SKILTON. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press. 2023. Pp. 320 (Paperback). $40.00. ISBN 13: 978-0-8071-7996-3.

In 1951, Lerner and Loewe's hit musical *Paint Your Wagon* opened on Broadway. One of its more popular tunes, "They Call the Wind Marīa", became an instant success. Its plaintive lyrics echoed the loneliness of California Gold Rush–era prospectors: "Way out west, they've got a name for rain and wind and fire [. . .] The rain is Tess, the fire's Joe, and they call the wind Marīa" (1969). Inspired by the 1941 best-selling novel *Storm* by George R. Stewart, a founding member of the American Name Society, the lyrics popularized the use of personalizing weather events with first names and predated the decision of the National Weather Service (NWS) to identify Atlantic Ocean storms with a female given name. The introduction of female names for hurricanes replaced the use of the phonetic alphabet names beginning with *Able, Baker,* and *Charlie* used during World War II.

In 1953, the NWS introduced an alphabetical list based on popular mid-century names of girls. The first storm of that hurricane season bore the name *Alice* after *Alice in Wonderland*. Although the choice of names for hurricanes has undergone significant change, the protocol of naming storms persists to this day. Two powerful storms of the 2024 hurricane season come to mind: Helene caused catastrophic flooding in North and South Carolina, and Milton brought 15 inches of rain and 46 related tornadoes in Florida. As the author of *Tempest: Hurricane Naming and American Culture* points out, these storms and other major hurricanes—such as Camille (1969), Andrew (1992), Katrina (2005), and Sandy (2012)—remain not only in the collective consciousness of those who lived through them but also in the archives of the Weather Bureau and in the public perception of the national emergency response teams.

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Liz Skilton is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Louisiana-Lafayette and the Associate Director of Research at the Kathleen Babineaux Blanco Public Policy Center. She is co-editor of the book *Rethinking American Disasters* (2023). A multidisciplinary master, Skilton infuses the *Tempest* narrative with regional and institutional history, gender issues, politics, and social influences. She deftly interprets the rhetoric of the popular press and social media, with a solid understanding of naming protocols and change over time. *Tempest* is a satisfying read that weaves popular history, public policy, and environmental issues into a narrative that is both retrospective and predictive, especially in the face of current climate challenges.

The book consists of an introduction, six chapters, seventy pages of notes, a bibliography, and an index. The narrative focus is clearly laid out in each chapter's title, exemplified by a defining hurricane of each era and contextual influences that shaped the period. Chapter two, for example, ties Camile (1954) to both the Cold War and sexual politics, while chapter four explores how Andrew (1992) became an exemplar of the ways that media outlets began to compete with one another for viewers as twenty-four-hour cable television was widely adopted. Local weather events became part of the national news particularly after The Weather Channel began broadcasting weather forecasts, news, and analysis in 1982 and, later, expanded content with documentaries, natural phenomena, and entertainment. Weather was good business, and, as the author astutely concludes, Katrina (2005) became the first major internet storm with real-time coverage, images of the physical devastation, human consequences, and, in the aftermath, commodification of post-hurricane New Orleans (172–173).

Skilton's sources are wide ranging: archival materials, government reports, qualitative and quantitative research, scientific data, news reports, and interviews. In the popular press, editorial cartoons emphasize and heighten her argument that descriptions of storms became increasingly and negatively gendered. A 1956 cartoon titled "Meteorological Optometrist" features an Air Force pilot saying "'Sorry, Lady, I have to look you in the eye'" (54), simultaneously directing the reader to scientific advances, the feminization of storms, and acceptable social norms between men and women. In reaction to a 1978 National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) decision, one headline read, "'Meet the *Himicane* [sic]: Liberated Wind That Still Does No Good'," accompanied by a cartoon with an obstetrician announcing to a blustery cloud, "'You had a son!'" (114–115). This and other uses of print and non-print sources are just a few of the ways in which *Tempest* appeals to both a popular and an academic audience.

Thus, the reader encounters the history of the weather service dating from the US Weather Bureau in the 1840s, the post–Civil War Congressional resolution for a nationwide weather network under the US Army Signal Corps, the National Weather Service in 1890, and the current National Weather Service Agency within the Department of Commerce. As an example of her gender analysis, Skilton tracks the influence of the women's movement in the persona of Roxcy Bolton, a Florida ERA advocate. Appearing before the largely male membership of the 1971 Interdepartmental Hurricane Warning Conference, she denounced the female naming system as "'humiliating and degrading'" (98). In an argument that *Names* readers will appreciate, Skilton contends that there is a distinct tie between the public impression of the severity, economic impact, and destructiveness of hurricanes and their given names.

As a direct result of the work of activists, NOAA revised its policy from an all-female list of hurricane names and introduced male names in 1978. The list of hurricane names for any given year alternates a female with a male name. Subsequent name choices have become more inclusive with the addition of ethnic names such as *Fiona*, *Ivan*, *Klaus*, and *Paloma*. The US National Weather Service uses six alphabetical lists of twenty-one names each and Greek letters if more than twenty-one named storms erupt in a given year. Currently, there is a six-year rotating list of pre-selected names. If a hurricane is particularly deadly or fierce, NOAA permanently deletes the name both to avoid confusion with later storms and to prevent lingering traumatic responses among those affected by the storm.

Today, regional committees identify powerful storms under the auspices of the World Meteorological Organization. Cultural norms prevail, and naming conventions vary by international region. Japan identifies typhoons using a number-based convention; Australia alternates a female storm list with a male list. Southeast Asia began naming storms in the Pacific basin in 2000, and in the Indian Ocean in 2004. Currently, each participating Asian country proposes a list of culturally specific names, and the lists are rotated in alphabetical order by country (NOAA 2025).

As Skilton persuasively argues, the process of naming hurricanes and the meanings attached to those names carry significant cultural, scientific, financial, and social importance. More recently, the use of phrases like "climate change" and "global warming" (228–229) is also fraught with a myriad of meanings, even as new terms in the weather lexicon like "snowicane", "snowmaggedon", and "polar vortex" heighten awareness of weather events. Interestingly, the name *Maria* has yet to appear on the list of hurricanes.

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