

**“We Know This Place”: Resistance and Remembrance in New  
Orleans’ Lower Ninth Ward**

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## **ABSTRACT**

After the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, The Lower Ninth Ward emerged as a site of great tension in New Orleans. It became a contested area, wherein a battle would be fought over the rebuilding of both the physical space and the cultural place; its future only considered negotiable by non-community outsiders. A high percentage of the residents of the Lower Ninth Ward lost everything in the floods, and after undergoing such trauma and being displaced to far-flung U.S. cities, they were forced to witness the media portrayal of their community as transient, violent, and unredeemable. Some 3000 Lower Ninth Ward residents determined to reclaim their land, their homes and—perhaps most importantly—their culture and community. They did this not just for themselves, but to make it possible for many others to return in the future and to preserve a culture and community that had sustained them for generations.

This paper seeks to examine some of the processes, through which, residents of the Lower Ninth Ward have been able to negotiate the survival of their neighbourhood, including resistance to detrimental urban planning decisions, maintaining ties to the community while displaced, and finally through community memory and organizations.

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\*"We Know This Place" by Sunni Patterson

## INTRODUCTION: KATRINA'S WORLD

The devastation of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina was not the result of a 'natural disaster.' The levee failures, the deaths of over 1100 people,<sup>1</sup> and the abandonment of an estimated 20 000 people for days at the Louisiana Superdome and Ernest M. Morial Convention Center were distinctly man-made,<sup>2</sup> and exposed the many failures of the United States government to protect and assist the most vulnerable citizens of one of its most culturally important cities. The flooding and destruction of portions of New Orleans were the result of the failings of the very institutions that should have protected the city, particularly the federal government and the Army Corps of Engineers. The hurricane did not directly hit the city, however, the resultant storm surge was more than enough to inundate some eighty percent of New Orleans with flood water and cause more damage than any disaster — natural or unnatural — in the history of the United States.

Among those left behind on August 29 2005 were the poorest, and mostly black, citizens of New Orleans — those least likely to have any other option but to wait out the storm and hope for the best. This abandonment was a “manifestation of the deep, lingering historical race-class-gender inequities and disparities”<sup>3</sup> that characterized the often unseen reality of New Orleans. That reality reflected the fact

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<sup>1</sup> Jed Horne. *Breach of Faith: Hurricane Katrina and the Near Death of a Great American City* (New York: Random House Publishing, 2008), 43.

<sup>2</sup> John R. Logan, “Unnatural Disaster,” in *Race, Place and Environmental Justice After Hurricane Katrina: Struggles to Reclaim, Rebuild, and Revitalize New Orleans and the Gulf Coast*, eds. Robert D. Bullard and Beverley Wright (Boulder: Westview Press, 2009), 249.

<sup>3</sup> Mtangulizi Sanyika, “Katrina and the Condition of Black New Orleans: The Struggle for Justice, Equity and Democracy,” in *Race, Place and Environmental Justice*, 87.

that New Orleans had traditionally housed its black population in environmentally questionable areas — “disaster zones”<sup>4</sup> — that were out of the public eye and far from popular tourist destinations such as the French Quarter and the Garden District that presented an idealized history of the City that ‘sentimentalizes’ slavery with narratives of New Orleans ‘exotic’ past<sup>5</sup> while ignoring the social and economic realities of the people. Nevertheless, many black New Orleanians do participate in the tourist culture on multiple levels — whether as service workers in the tourist industry or as the producers of some of the culture that drives the very industry that employs them. However, these people had always been rendered largely invisible, that is until Katrina brought them — and the Lower Ninth Ward the neighbourhood hardest hit by Katrina into the public consciousness.<sup>6</sup>

Since its creation, the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans has remained a place of economic, social and environmental vulnerability. Originally part of the Ninth Ward voting district of New Orleans, which included the Holy Cross and Bywater neighbourhoods, the ward was divided into upper and lower sections through the construction of a canal connecting Lake Pontchartrain to the Mississippi River.<sup>7</sup> Developed as a residential neighbourhood 150 years after New Orleans was founded, the entire area was built on reclaimed swampland that had once been a

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<sup>4</sup> Lynnell L. Thomas, “Roots Run Deep Here’: The Construction of Black New Orleans in Post-Katrina Tourism Narratives,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 61, Number 3, Sept., 2009, 755

<sup>5</sup> Thomas, “Roots Run Deep Here,” 749.

<sup>6</sup> Billy Sothorn, *Down In New Orleans: Reflections From a Drowned City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 276.

<sup>7</sup> Joyce Marie Jackson, “Declaration of Taking Twice: Fazendeville Community of the Lower Ninth Ward”, *American Anthropologist* 108, no. 4: 774.

part of large plantations that stretched from higher ground, down to the banks of the Mississippi River.<sup>8</sup> Today, the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> is bounded on three sides by water, connected by land with only St. Bernard Parish to the east.

The completion of the Industrial Canal in 1923 further marginalized this area, effectively cutting it off from the rest of the city. In 2005, the population of the Lower Ninth Ward was ninety-eight percent African-American but it had once been home to poor European immigrant labourers from Ireland, Germany and Italy.<sup>9</sup> Because of the racial composition of the neighbourhood and the lower- and working-class social designations of its residents, the growth of infrastructure in the Lower Ninth Ward was delayed and often lagged behind the rest of the city. Water, it seems, has always been a problem for this neighbourhood — whether related to inadequate drainage, poor sewer systems, fear of flooding or even acquiring good drinking water. However, the rural neighbourhood atmosphere of the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> attracted working-class families, both black and white, due to its proximity to the shipping industry and its greater industrial development after 1950. The interracial aspect of the Lower Ninth Ward began to change in 1960, after Ruby Bridges came to local and national attention as the first African-American child to attend an all-white school in New Orleans.<sup>10</sup> The bitterness that followed the desegregation of the New Orleans school system highlighted racial tensions in the neighbourhood and

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2006), 10-11.

<sup>9</sup> Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water*, 10-11.

<sup>10</sup> Jackson, "Fazandeville Community", 774.

white families began an exodus from the area that would mirror a demographic trend in many of the urban, working-class spaces of America.<sup>11</sup>

Inasmuch as the Lower Ninth Ward lagged behind other New Orleans neighbourhoods, it was also at the forefront of neighbourhood organizing. This tendency was sparked, ironically enough, by another hurricane — Hurricane Betsy in 1965. Foregrounding the devastation that would occur 40 years later, Betsy resulted in a proliferation of community organizations that grew out of federal programs designed to assist “blighted neighbourhoods.”<sup>12</sup> These included Lower Ninth Ward Neighborhood Council, the Lower Ninth Ward Housing Development Corporation and the Lower Ninth Ward Health Clinic. Each of these organizations provided institutional support for the neighbourhood and legitimized its standing as a ‘community’ rather than merely being a collection of the city’s poor and unwanted citizens.

When New Orleans flooded on August 29, 2005, residents of the Lower Ninth Ward had the most unlikely chance of escape. They were the residents that had the least access to transportation and the least access to the financial resources necessary to escape.<sup>13</sup> The residents of the Lower Ninth Ward became the face of Katrina — nameless citizens from a hitherto unknown area of the city — and the

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<sup>11</sup> Mindy Fullilove, *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Random House Publishing, 2004), 239.

<sup>12</sup> Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water*, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Robert D. Bullard, Glenn S. Johnson and Angel O. Torres, “Transportation Matters: Stranded On the Side of the Road Before and After Disasters Strike,” in *Race, Place and Environmental Justice*, 66-67.

Lower Ninth Ward became “a world-famous war zone.”<sup>14</sup> They were photographed and filmed clinging to rooftops, wading through the floodwaters and huddled by the thousands in the Louisiana Superdome and the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center. It was the Lower Ninth Ward itself that was accused of being a community of looters and thieves, rapists and murderers in the confusion and media frenzy that followed the storm, and the media soon conflated all African-American storm refugees with Lower Ninth Ward residents. The neighbourhood and its residents became symbolic of poverty and urban decay in America, leading Fox News commentator Shepard Smith to wonder if America would be “forever scarred by Third World horrors unthinkable in this nation until now.”<sup>15</sup> Unsubstantiated and damning reports were carelessly conveyed to the world in the days following the storm, the most notable of which was the report of an unnamed National Guardsman, who claimed to have seen the body of a seven-year-old rape victim with her throat slit. The story was reported in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* on September 6, 2005 and was soon picked up by major national and international new outlets.<sup>16</sup> Despite the fact that the *Times-Picayune* corrected the story two weeks later, the story had entered into the Katrina narrative and memory.

One of key questions that emerged in September of 2005 was : should (if possible) the Lower Ninth Ward be rebuilt? It was a question that would soon be the subject of debate in New Orleans and the object of the city’s first major recovery

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<sup>14</sup> Sothorn, *Down in New Orleans*, 276.

<sup>15</sup> Dan Baum, “The Lost Year: Behind the Failure to Rebuild,” *The New Yorker*. August 21, 2006.

[http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/08/21/060821fa\\_fact2](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/08/21/060821fa_fact2)

<sup>16</sup> Newseum Katrina Exhibit, Washington D.C. March 18 2011.



commission. The answer to this question varied, depending on who was asked. For many of the homeowners and residents of the Lower Ninth Ward, the question was ridiculous on its face — of course their homes and community should be rebuilt. The neighbourhood itself was solidly working-class and had the highest rate of home ownership in the city, at more than sixty percent,<sup>17</sup> with many of the homes having been passed down for generations.<sup>18</sup> A number of local residents were also landlords who rented out one or more homes in the community.<sup>19</sup> Despite negative (and overblown) impressions of the Lower Ninth Ward in the media frenzy after the storm, they viewed themselves and their neighbourhood as an integral part of the city and as important, economically and culturally as more well-known neighbourhoods such as the French Quarter, Central Business District and the Garden District. With the attention of the nation now focused on the Lower Ninth Ward, residents who were determined to return and rebuild. The now (in)famous statement made by former First Lady, Barbara Bush at the Houston Astrodome, , that “what I'm hearing which is sort of scary is that they all want to stay in Texas. ...so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway so this – this is working very well for them,”<sup>20</sup> belied the fact that the refugees in the Superdome and Convention Center as well as those later evacuated to the Houston Astrodome came from a *place* — one with a rich cultural history and the memories

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<sup>17</sup> GNOCDC, “Lower Ninth Ward Neighbourhood.”

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Jordan Flaherty, *Floodlines: Community and Resistance from Katrina to the Jena Six* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010), 47.

of generations of their families. A neighbourhood that remained important to their sense of themselves, in which their identities had been formed.

The Lower Ninth Ward is more than a metaphor for urban poverty, vulnerability and race problems in America. The whole of the Katrina experience is closely tied to remembering and forgetting. New Orleans is a city that survives on the past. Tourism and the promoted image of the city as an historically important place urges visitors to remember — the French Quarter, Jazz, Mississippi river culture, Cajun cuisine and music. But both the city of New Orleans — and the tourist industry that drives it — also wants America to forget deep racial injustice, slavery and the era of Jim Crow. In the post-Katrina debate, decisions about preservation were limited to heritage sites and perceptions of what was important to preserve in New Orleans — the French Quarter, the Garden District took precedence over neighbourhoods such as the Lower Ninth Ward, with many of the city's public housing projects not being considered at all. It was an opportunity to “whiten” the city and the sacrifice of the Lower Ninth Ward was seen as a way to revitalize the city and make New Orleans a “safe” and desirable tourist destination.<sup>21</sup>

The appearance of the Lower Ninth Ward on American television forced the city to confront what it chose to remember and what it chose to forget. The residents of the Lower Ninth Ward would, in the aftermath of the flood, refused to be forgotten again and would steadfastly resist the destruction of their community. In the five and a half years since Hurricane Katrina, the vastly depopulated Lower

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<sup>21</sup> George Lipsitz, “Learning From New Orleans: The Social Warrant of Hostile Privatism and Competitive Consumer Citizenship,” *Cultural Anthropology* 21, no. 2 (2006): 453.

Ninth Ward is slowly rebuilding using dual strategies of resistance and remembrance. The 3000 residents who have returned and rebuilt have been active participants in resisting not only the characterization of their community as crime filled, rundown, and transient but also as one that is not part of the vision of a renewed and whiter New Orleans.<sup>22</sup> However, the rebuilding process is also inward and is contingent upon remembering, maintaining and celebrating the traditions and lived culture of the community. The story of the post-Katrina Lower Ninth Ward touches on obstacles to rebuilding and the potential destruction of the neighbourhood. It also intersects with narratives of dispersal and of community memory. Finally, it speaks to the resilience of the people as they engage with the process of reconstructing not only the physical space of the Lower Ninth Ward but also the culture that had sustained it.

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<sup>22</sup> Sanyika, "Katrina and the Condition of Black New Orleans," 105.

## CHAPTER I: RESISTING RELOCATION THROUGH COMMUNITY MEMORY

The first Mardi Gras after Hurricane Katrina, in February 2006, was seen as evidence of the city's — and of the people's — resilience. However, it was little more than symbolic. The revelry and the celebratory mood masked growing frustration over bureaucratic delays and ineptitude, lack of concern and aid for displaced citizens, and seemingly insurmountable obstacles to rebuilding. During the months since Hurricane Katrina had destroyed, or rendered uninhabitable some 200 000 of the 430 000 homes in the greater New Orleans metropolitan area<sup>23</sup>, city residents — particularly the poorest citizens — had seen promises broken, monies delayed and survivors demonized. As a result, many New Orleanians were left wondering if anyone cared at all about what had happened to them. There seemed to be no shortage of task forces created to examine the various difficulties facing both the City of New Orleans and the State of Louisiana in the daunting process of rebuilding and restructuring the region. Many of the problems that plagued New Orleans after Katrina have still not been resolved and the Lower Ninth Ward is not the only neighbourhood that continues to be affected by the lack of a cohesive recovery plan — whether from national, state or local governing bodies. In 2011, the process is still ongoing and remains fraught with difficulty.

However, early municipal and state government responses, which included preliminary plans for rebuilding and recovery, exposed disparate views of what kind of city should be rebuilt and what that city should look like. Local government and

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<sup>23</sup> David Hammer, "Road Home Legal Challenge May Be on the Brink of a Settlement.", *Times-Picayune*, April 9, 2011, NOLA.com, [www.nola.com](http://www.nola.com)

the business community shared a vision of what a revitalized New Orleans could be, while residents — particularly those hardest hit by the disaster — feared that their neighbourhoods would be demolished, plowed under and forgotten. This disparity revealed a telling truth about the city’s plans — that what would be preserved largely depended upon which side of the racial and class line the neighbourhood was located. Racial and social injustice, as well as concrete obstacles to rebuilding would emerge as critical questions in the initial debate over which neighbourhoods were deemed worthy of saving and which would be sacrificed for the ‘greater good’ of the city — with particular emphasis being placed on revitalizing the tourist industry. The French Quarter and the Garden District, while suffering comparatively little in the way of damages were among the first areas of the city to have electricity, water and other services restored, while other communities, more severely damaged, waited for those same services.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, new visions for a rebuilt New Orleans began to be articulated almost immediately. New Orleans’ business elite, meeting in Dallas shortly after Katrina, determined that it would be in the best interests of the city to “reduce its footprint by converting the Lower Ninth Ward and New Orleans East to flood protection zones”<sup>25</sup> that would provide a buffer for the rest of the city in the event of future flooding.

Against this backdrop, which John R. Logan describes as “neighbourhood triage,”<sup>26</sup> — an unofficial policy of diverting the city’s resources to the preservation of historically and economically important districts — residents of the Lower Ninth

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<sup>24</sup> Horne, *Breach of Faith*, 207.

<sup>25</sup> Sanyika, “Katrina and the Condition of Black New Orleans”, 94.

<sup>26</sup> Logan, “Unnatural Disaster”, 256.

Ward faced what appeared to be an uphill battle to recover suitable housing and infrastructure. However, almost as important as rebuilding the physical space of the neighbourhood was the importance of first recovering a sense of *place* and remembering that which, as a community, had truly mattered to the residents. As a result, establishing that the cultural identity of the Lower Ninth was as important to those who had lived there as that of the French Quarter, for example, was to the historic identity of New Orleans, became a primary mode of resistance to the symbolic, as well as the real destruction of the neighbourhood. Former residents not only objected to any initial recovery plans that did not include the Lower Ninth Ward, but are also continuing, over five years later, to sustain pressure on programs (particularly the Road Home Program) to provide the financial means to rebuild their homes and allow them to return to their community. For the Lower Ninth Ward was clearly a community. The people were there and their stories were there, like that of New Orleans musician, Kermit Ruffins who describes his childhood growing up in the Lower Ninth Ward, “I grew up in the Lower Ninth Ward. Me, my little sister, and my little brother, we would go crawfishing and crabbin’ in that Industrial Canal — kind of close to where the levee actually broke — almost every weekend. And we always was into a lot of fun stuff, being kids growing up in the Lower Ninth Ward right on Jourdan Avenue, at the 1400 block.”<sup>27</sup> Now, decisions about the future of their neighbourhood were being made without any input from them; this was unacceptable to the residents of the Lower Ninth Ward, they were

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<sup>27</sup> Kermit Ruffins, *Voices From the Storm*, eds. Lola Vollen and Chris Ying, (San Francisco: McSweeney’s Books, 2006), 30.

angry and they would refuse to be forgotten. There arose an organic resistance to relocation that seemed to come from a sense of familiarity, becoming a natural process of revitalized community commitment and a renewed desire to preserve neighbourhood culture. This sense of commitment to community provided the basis for what would become a battle between Lower Ninth Ward residents and the city of New Orleans.

Underpinning the desire to rebuild the Lower Ninth, are both specific and abstract social memories that contribute to a shared sense of local identity. Ninth Ward resident, Chandra McCormick, remembers the neighbourhood as “ a place where families grew up, they lived there because they chose to be there, it was a place where values...family values... prevailed.”<sup>28</sup> Like many other residents, McCormick’s memories of growing up in the Lower Ninth informed her desire to try to rebuild and recreate the neighbourhood as it was before Katrina. Life in the Ninth Ward had had a certain rhythm and pattern to it that the storm had destroyed, and it was this familiarity that was in danger of being lost if the city did not consider the community worth saving. In describing his experience of being in the Lower Ninth after Katrina, it is evident that even the most mundane of memories had taken on special significance for John W. Taylor, Jr. Taylor recalled that “You walked around the corner to the drugstore, you walked to the neighbourhood store, the neighbourhood wino aksed [sic] you for a quarter like he does everyday, you don’t

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<sup>28</sup> PBS, “The Way We Were,” *Frontline*.  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/katrina/view/special.html>

think those sort of things are important until they're not there."<sup>29</sup> The potential loss of the place in which these specific memories were located inspired a groundswell of public outrage in New Orleans' black community.

Specific memories of place, such as those of McCormick and Taylor, contribute to the larger, collective memory of the Lower Ninth Ward and it is a memory of a local history that has been articulated by many residents in the fight to preserve the neighbourhood. French historian, Pierre Nora, argues that while history is memory that was once exclusive to aristocratic families, the church and the state, modern 'materialization of memory' — particularly oral history projects — have democratized the process, allowing a myriad of individuals to participate in the recording of history. In this way, those previously excluded from history are now included, in a "process of interior decolonization...affecting ethnic minorities, families and groups that until now have possessed reserves of memory but little or no historical capital."<sup>30</sup> It is Nora's notion of interior decolonization that has enabled Lower Ninth Ward residents to offer organized resistance to the characterization of their neighbourhood as 'blighted' and use the collective memory of the community to mount a defense against a city that would prefer to forget them. Divya Tolia-Kelly suggests that the type of memory that has led, and continues to lead, Lower Ninth residents to protest so strongly against the destruction of their community operates as "a significant connective force [that is] ... a resource for the sustenance of a sense

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<sup>29</sup> John W. Taylor Jr.  
<http://storycorps.org/listen/stories/category/hurricane-katrina/>

<sup>30</sup> Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux De Mémoire*," *Representations*, Spring 1989, 7.



of self that temporally connects to social heritage, genealogy, and acts as a resource for identification with place.”<sup>31</sup> When Lower Ninth Ward resident Herbert Gettridge was interviewed for PBS’ *Frontline* while rebuilding his flood damaged home, he said of the neighbourhood “I ain’t going no place, man. I’m going to stay right here. This is it. This is my home, and this is where I’ll be.”<sup>32</sup> The home, to which Gettridge refers, has a long history of activism that began with emancipation and continued through the Civil Rights Movement and desegregation. Over 225 African American societies — including mutual aid and benevolent associations — were registered or publicly mentioned in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>33</sup> Due to Lower Ninth Ward activism, New Orleans was the first deep-South school district to desegregate, an event which occurred at the now named Louis D. Armstrong Elementary School, just outside the Lower Ninth Ward.<sup>34</sup> This community history of activism and civic involvement is a critical process of identification that would assist Lower Ninth Ward residents in resisting the city of New Orleans and the State of Louisiana’s neglect of the neighbourhood in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

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<sup>31</sup> Divya Tolia-Kelly, “Locating Processes of Identification: Studying the Precipitates of Re-Memory through Artefacts in the British Asian Home”, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Sept. 2004, 316.

<sup>32</sup> PBS *Frontline*. The Old Man and the Storm.

<sup>33</sup> Jackson, “Fazendeville Community,” 774.,

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*.

## WHITENING THE CITY

In the months following the storm, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco created both the Louisiana Recovery Authority and the Task Force on Work-Force Competitiveness, but neither did anything to assuage the fears of the displaced and homeless citizens that looked to them for solutions. As a result of the debate about whether or not it was feasible or even desirable to attempt to rebuild the Lower Ninth Ward, many of the residents felt that wealthier — and whiter — New Orleanians would attempt to use the destruction of property in the neighbourhood as a “land grab” and as a means of “whitening” the city by discouraging the blackest and the poorest in the city to relocate, or to make permanent whatever living arrangements they had made during the evacuation of the city both during and after the storm. This was a perception that was particularly pervasive in the Lower Ninth Ward. Lower Ninth resident, Robert Rock, interviewed while clearing debris from his property, remarked that “the perception in the black community is, that they’re not turning the water on in certain neighborhoods because they don’t want you back. They don’t want black people back. Whether that’s true or not, you know, you don’t know.”<sup>35</sup>

These suspicions were not misplaced as prominent local citizens echoed these sentiments in carefully coded language. Architect Ray Manning was quoted in the *Times-Picayune* as saying that New Orleanians had a “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reengage and recalibrate this city in a way that, politically, you might never have

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<sup>35</sup> *When the Levees Broke*, directed by Spike Lee (2006; New York: Home Box Office), DVD.

been able to get to.”<sup>36</sup> There seemed to be some popular and institutional support for the idea of rebuilding a “whiter” and less poor New Orleans while ignoring the sense of community and shared culture in black neighbourhoods. Also excluded from the city planners’ ‘recalibrating’ of New Orleans were several of the city’s public housing developments, a fact proudly announced by Republican Congressman Richard Baker, who declared, “We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did.”<sup>37</sup> In 2006, it was announced that the downtown Florida, St. Bernard and Lafitte housing projects — little damaged by Katrina — would not be opened for reoccupation by the approximately 5000 residents who had lived there before the storm.<sup>38</sup> New Orleans street performer and public housing resident, “Mr. New Jangles,” believes that he knows the reason why, proclaiming, “Why keep us from going into a place where we be living our whole life? Reason why? To be honest with you, they don't want the black folk back in the area. That's all it boils down to. They wanna try and wipe the place out and put up some middle-income housing and you know we can't afford it!”<sup>39</sup> This suspicion was confirmed by City Council President, Oliver Thomas, who publicly stated that public housing residents should not be allowed to return to the city, declaring “we don’t need soap opera watchers right now.”<sup>40</sup> Further evidence of the policy of discouraging African-Americans from returning to New Orleans can be

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<sup>36</sup> Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water*, 146.

<sup>37</sup> Sanyika, “Katrina and the Condition of Black New Orleans”, 95.

<sup>38</sup> Robert D. Bullard and Beverley Wright in *Race, Place, and Environmental Justice*, 28.

<sup>39</sup> “Mr. New Jangles” George “Mr. New Jangles” Street Performer, *Alive In Truth Oral History Project*, June, 2006. <http://www.aliveintruth.org/>

<sup>40</sup> Jordan Flaherty, *Floodlines*, 186.

found in the disparity in the amount of assistance provided to black entrepreneurs and homeowners from the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) disaster home loans and business loans. Residents of the affluent — and white — Lakeview neighbourhood have received 47 percent of their loan approvals, while poverty-stricken, black neighbourhoods have received only 7 percent. This discrepancy is not limited to poor neighbourhoods, and in terms of overall numbers, fewer blacks of any income level have received fewer loans.<sup>41</sup>

### **BRING NEW ORLEANS BACK COMMISSION**

New Orleans Mayor, Ray Nagin, already facing intense criticism for his lack of direct action regarding the storm and the evacuation of New Orleans<sup>42</sup>, attempted to recoup some political goodwill by creating the Bring New Orleans Back Commission (BNOBC) in the fall of 2005. The purpose of the Commission was to determine and articulate a plan for the future of New Orleans. The Commission's stated 'vision':

New Orleans will be a sustainable, environmentally safe, socially equitable community with a vibrant economy. Its neighborhoods will be planned with its citizens and connect to jobs and the region. Each will preserve and celebrate its heritage of culture, landscape, and architecture.<sup>43</sup>

Almost immediately, Nagin's commission came under attack for its policy (or lack thereof) of determining potential rebuilding resources and funds, but more

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<sup>41</sup> Robert D. Bullard and Beverley Wright in *Race, Place, and Environmental Justice*, 7.

<sup>42</sup> Breach of Faith, Come Hell or High Water, Deadly Indifference.

<sup>43</sup> Vision Statement of the Bring New Orleans Back Commission. BNOBC Urban Planning Final Report, 12.

importantly for the fact that it was suspected of implicitly excluding neighbourhoods in which the populations were predominantly poor and black. Additionally, corporate and business interests were disproportionately represented in the makeup of the board.<sup>44</sup> In January 2006, it was announced that a four-month moratorium on building permits in some of the hardest hit neighbourhoods would take effect. Neighbourhoods included Gentilly, Mid-City and the Lower Ninth Ward. It was subsequently announced that, during this four month period, the neighbourhoods under restriction would have to demonstrate “critical mass” — or provide proof that a certain percentage of former residents planned to return and rebuild. This is further articulated by the BNOBC Urban Planning reports’ statement that “neighborhoods require sufficient population to support the equitable and efficient provision of public facilities and services.”<sup>45</sup> If this critical mass was not met (some suggestions as to what that number might be were anywhere from 40-50 percent of former residents) those neighbourhoods would be plowed under and property owners offered a buyout through the Crescent City Recovery Corporation, or alternately have their property seized through eminent domain. However, the BNOBC Urban Planning Committee final report acknowledges that “lack of housing will be the biggest constraint to return.”<sup>46</sup> Marc Morial, former mayor of New Orleans, was critical of this element of the BNOBC philosophy, saying “the plan, as I saw was basically a red-lining plan that would red-line all of these neighbourhoods. Say to people in those neighbourhoods, ‘You’ve got to prove to us, the government,

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<sup>44</sup> Sanyika, “Katrina and the Condition of Black New Orleans”, 95

<sup>45</sup> BNOBC Urban Planning Final Report, 35.

<sup>46</sup> BNOBC Urban Planning Final report, 10.

that your neighbourhood is viable, and until you prove it, we're not gonna let you fix up your home. And if WE don't think it's viable, we're gonna come in and buy up your land, and demolish your house. In America?"

Not for the first time, this proposal placed Nagin, as well as the commission at odds with New Orleans city council, and the commission backpedalled on the critical mass requirement. When confronted with public resistance and condemnation from African-American community leaders,<sup>47</sup> Nagin was forced to publicly state his unqualified 'support' for the Lower Ninth Ward. Subsequently, and with the assistance of the three-year-old African-American Leadership Project of New Orleans (AALP), residents in affected communities developed an eleven point Citizens Bill of Rights, point four of which claimed that: "All displaced persons should have the right to participate in the rebuilding of the city as owners, producers, providers, planners, developers, workers, and direct beneficiaries. Participation must especially include African-Americans and the poor, and those previously excluded from the development process."<sup>48</sup>

Another central recommendation of the BNOBC was the Neighborhood Center Model. The model submitted that the neighbourhood's populations should be sufficient to support basic infrastructure, public schools, cultural and community facilities, as well as health care facilities.<sup>49</sup> However, like many of the committee's recommendations, many of the requirements read more like a 'wish list' as there is

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<sup>47</sup> Flaherty, *Floodlines*, 196.

<sup>48</sup> Citizen Bill of Rights, AARP letter to the National Congressional Black Caucus.

<sup>49</sup> BNOBC Report, 35

no public school in the Lower Ninth Ward as of 2011,<sup>50</sup> and the current population of the Lower Ninth would not qualify as ‘sufficient’ under the proposal’s initial rubric.

One of the key proposals included in the committee’s final report was the establishment of neighborhood planning teams to commence feasibility studies for rebuilding in individual neighborhoods. The planning teams were expected to complete their studies by May 20, 2006. This was, of course, prejudicial to the hardest hit Lower Ninth Ward, as the majority of the homes there had been rendered unlivable and most of its residents were scattered across the country in the spring of 2006. According to the BNOBC plan, the Lower Ninth Ward was identified as an “Infill Development Area” that had sustained such a degree of damage as to render the area ‘blighted’ and was deemed to have a surplus of “adjudicated properties, and underutilized sites on high ground, or those requiring demolition and clearance, that can be developed with houses, commercial, and institutional uses.”<sup>51</sup> It was noted by residents, who immediately protested this designation, that in its report, the BNOBC encouraged outside developers to participate in the rebuilding of Infill Areas rather than individual landowners. Additionally, many local residents, who saw themselves as key stakeholders in this process, feared that the vision of developers and architects would neglect to replace high-density housing and low-income rental properties that had been lost, opting

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<sup>50</sup> There is a charter school that draws ‘qualified’ students from throughout the city. Most children in the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> are bused out of the district.

<sup>51</sup> BNOBC Report, 46.

instead to rebuild with a “sentimental and historicist vision of how cities work”<sup>52</sup> that privileged individual homes and businesses.

Ultimately, New Orleans City Council voted not to accept the report as it was presented. However, the report inspired many residents from all over the city to work together, and many neighbourhood associations emerged as important voices in the city’s recovery. Furthermore, city council meetings regarding the future of devastated neighbourhoods provided an opportunity for residents to express their refusal to be marginalized in any future vision of the city. Increased community awareness and activism, as well as the refusal to be forgotten in the future plans of New Orleans was the unintended result of the misguided attempts of the BNOBC’s proposals. At a raucous public meeting on March 20 2006, held to answer questions from the public about the Committee’s findings, Cynthia Lewis, New Orleans District Councilperson for District E, representing the Lower Ninth Ward, rose to address the BNOBC Committee Members. Lewis spoke on behalf of her constituents when she told the Committee, “the people have responded (to the BNOBC report) ... and we demand equity. Equity now, for all of our neighbourhoods.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> John S. Petterson, Laura D. Stanley, Edward Glazier and James Philipp, “A Preliminary Assessment of Social and Economic Impact Associated With Hurricane Katrina,” *American Anthropologist*, Dec., 2006, 659.

<sup>53</sup> “Future of New Orleans Final Public Meeting, March 20, 2006,” *C-Span Video Library*, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/FinalPu>



## LOOK AND LEAVE

Disparity and injustice were immediately evident in the treatment of Lower Ninth Ward residents with respect to their ability to return to their homes after the flood, particularly when compared to other flooded neighbourhoods. Residents of primarily white Lakeview were allowed to return to salvage property and belongings and even to stay in their homes while access to the Lower Ninth Ward was shut off and controlled by National Guardsman. In the weeks following Katrina, restricted bus tours — called “Look and Leaves” were the only means available to Lower Ninth Ward residents to visit their damaged or destroyed properties. They were expected to both assess damages and to retrieve any personal belongings that they might find whilst on these short tours. In early October 2005 it was announced that “residents in portions of the Lower Ninth Ward will be able to return to the city to visit their homes. Residents may return to see the extent of damage to their property and to gather personal valuables.”<sup>54</sup> No residents were allowed to remain after dark. Additionally, any evacuees who wished to participate in the Look and Leave Program were required to return to New Orleans from whatever location they had been relocated to at their own expense. Many lacked the resources to do this and were not able to take advantage of the program. This resulted in the permanent loss of family archives, photographs and other material memories of personal and community history. However, some residents were lucky enough to find and preserve some of the remnants of their past.

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<sup>54</sup> The Times-Picayune. NOLA.com Katrina Archive. Published October 11, 2005.

In her book *Look and Leave: Photographs and Stories from New Orleans's Lower Ninth Ward*, author and photographer Jane Fulton Alt describes the joy of seventy-five year "Miss Victoria" at the recovery of her wedding ring and her deceased husband's drivers' license by a National guardsman during a Look and Leave in November, 2005. Unfortunately, many other mementoes and artefacts important to the cultural history of the Lower Ninth Ward were destroyed or lost forever to the flood. Ronald Lewis, curator of the House of Dance and Feathers Mardi Gras Indian Museum packed as many costumes and artefacts as he could fit into suitcases, however he lost a significant portion of his collection in the flood.<sup>55</sup> Irreplaceable printed material, elaborate costumes and Mardi Gras souvenirs were unsalvageable after the storm. Music legend Antoine "Fats" Domino, a lifelong resident of the Lower Ninth Ward, chose not to evacuate and while he was rescued by the Coast Guard on September 2, he suffered the loss of many invaluable items of memorabilia housed in his Lower Ninth Ward home and studio, including pianos and gold and platinum records. In the first few weeks after Katrina, individual homeowners were not the only citizens who risked the loss of material artefacts, but tenants as well risked the further devastation of being evicted in absentia and their belongings "tossed out in the street"<sup>56</sup>

Nevertheless, many residents felt that the loss of personal belongings was incidental in comparison to the loss of their homes and communities — their sense of place and identity. The loss of so many shared and individual possessions can

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<sup>55</sup> Ronald Lewis, personal conversation, Mar. 2011.

<sup>56</sup> Flaherty, *Floodlines*, 71.

constitute a tangible threat to the social memory of the community as they are “precipitates of narrated histories, and artefacts of heritage and tradition”<sup>57</sup> that often signify a narration of a shared past that has not, or cannot be experienced by all members of the community. However, artefacts alone do not constitute memory, and the loss of personal mementos was not enough to convince Lower Ninth Ward resident Mae Hagan not to return, and on one Look and Leave tour, she remained defiant saying ““It's even worse in there than I thought it would be, and I can't find any pictures or memories. But I'm still going to rebuild. I was born and raised here. I ain't leavin'.”<sup>58</sup> Although they faced many roadblocks in their journey home, many residents were determined to rebuild, and most hoped for the assistance of both the city and the federal government. However, this assistance would not come without a protracted and heated fight. Discrimination and inequities in city policy were the first of many barriers that residents met in their initial attempts to return to the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> and begin the rebuilding process.

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<sup>57</sup> Tolia-Kelly, “Locating Processes of Identification,” 317.

<sup>58</sup> Tim Padgett, “The View From Flood Street,” *Time.com*, October 12 2005. <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1116961,00.html>

## CHAPTER II: RECONNECTING AND REMEMBERING IN THE KATRINA DIASPORA

On August 31, 2010 a Grand Marshall from New Orleans 3<sup>rd</sup> Ward named Shorty, accompanied by a group of brass musicians called “The Hustlers” led a group of singing, dancing, New Orleans Saints-jersey-wearing revelers in a second-line parade to mark the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. In true New Orleans style, entire families turned out to take part in the celebration — through the streets of Houston, Texas.<sup>59</sup> It was the first second-line parade to take place in outside of New Orleans and for about 1500 of the estimated 50 000 evacuees who have remained in Houston it was a reminder of the life they left behind. Former Seventh Ward resident and parade organizer, Harvey Yancy has been making connections with other displaced New Orleanians during the five years he has lived in Houston and plans to make the parade an annual event for “as long as he is there.”<sup>60</sup> Yancy’s words echo the sentiments of many of Houston’s transplanted New Orleanians. While many plan to make Houston their permanent home, many others situate their lives in Houston within the discursive framework of ephemerality. They discuss their lives in temporary terms, saying, “I’m living in Houston for now” or “When I go back to New Orleans.” The act of transplanting New Orleans culture is, on the one hand, a strategy for sustaining cultural traditions and community within the framework of displacement and marginalization, however, through the creation of new cultural institutions, refugees (or evacuees, displaced citizens) risk creating a

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<sup>59</sup> Sheila Stroup, “New Orleanians Bring Joyous Second-Line to Houston on Katrina Anniversary”, *Times-Picayune*. Sept., 05, 2010. NOLA.com

<sup>60</sup> Stroup, *Times-Picayune*, NOLA.com

lived tension of being in one location while remembering another. This can, for some, result in a state of perpetual impermanence, in which individuals engage in the process of constant negotiation of the past, present and future.

Hurricane Katrina displaced an estimated 1.5 million people from the Gulf Coast region, including Mississippi, Alabama and Louisiana, and of this number approximately 455 000 were from the Greater New Orleans area.<sup>61</sup> Approximately 120 000 New Orleanians, who had remained in the city constituted a ‘second wave’<sup>62</sup> of evacuees, and were likely to be black, elderly, poor or without access to transportation — or all of these in combination. This group of evacuees was more likely to have lived in neighbourhoods such as the Lower Ninth Ward and were also more dependent on institutional evacuation,<sup>63</sup> which resulted in their settlement farther away than those who left the city of their own accord. Major cities such as Atlanta, Tulsa, Austin and Houston, as well as Baton Rouge received large numbers of evacuees, however Houston received by far the largest number of displaced people, at approximately 240 000,<sup>64</sup> and FEMA reported that just over 100 000 households were receiving assistance more than a year later.<sup>65</sup> With no homes or jobs to return to, many evacuees made the decision \_ almost immediately — that

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<sup>61</sup> Vincanne Adams, Taslim Van Hattum and Diana English, “Chronic Disaster Syndrome: Displacement, Disaster Capitalism, and the Eviction of the Poor from New Orleans,” *American Ethnologist*, Vol., 36, No. 4, 2009, 615.

<sup>62</sup> Joanne M. Nigg, John Barnshaw and Manuel R. Torres, “Hurricane Katrina and the Flooding of New Orleans: Emergent Issues in Sheltering and Temporary Housing,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, March, 2006, 113.

<sup>63</sup> Petterson et al, “Social Impact of Katrina,” 654.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 650.

<sup>65</sup> FEMA, News and Media, By the Numbers – One Year Later – Hurricane Katrina. <http://www.fema.gov/news/newsrelease.fema?id=29359>

they would not return to New Orleans. A poll conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health just two weeks after the storm, two-thirds of respondents living in emergency shelters planned to relocate permanently to Houston.<sup>66</sup> Evacuee Patricia Thompson held a different opinion of Hurricane Katrina than did many of her fellow New Orleanians. Unable to 'get ahead' in New Orleans, and frustrated by the racial injustice she claimed was all too common in the city, Thompson claimed that "Katrina was a blessing 'cause Katrina turned my life around. I've been wanting to leave New Orleans. You're not treated right in New Orleans, you're not treated fair."<sup>67</sup> By the spring of 2006, Thompson had found employment in Houston as a childcare provider and had joined a new church, and like so many others, she has no plans to return to New Orleans. For others, such as evacuee Renee Martin who, as a child, had survived Hurricane Betsy, it was an opportunity to forget the grinding poverty that had characterized her life in New Orleans. Grateful for the chance to start over, Martin says, "Everything is new to me and I like it. There's nothing that reminds me too much of my past."<sup>68</sup>

However, many of the evacuees were anxious to return to New Orleans. Lynette Toca, a young New Orleans homemaker, interviewed just weeks after the hurricane states, "Every morning I wake up and pray for them to say we can go back

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<sup>66</sup> Harvard School of Public Health, "Survey of Katrina Evacuees in Houston Finds Half of Those Trapped in Homes Waited Three Days of More For Rescue: Many Had Chronic Health Problems and No Health Insurance." *Press Releases*, September 16, 2005. <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/press-releases/archives/2005-releases/press09162005.html>

<sup>67</sup> Patricia Thompson, *Voices From the Storm*, 214.

<sup>68</sup> Renee Martin, *Voices From the Storm*, 209.

to New Orleans.”<sup>69</sup> Houston, and other evacuation locations represented unfamiliar territory, to which many displaced New Orleanians had difficulty adjusting, and in which they often felt uncomfortable. Paul Brodwin suggests that such diasporic subjectivity “grows out of the experience of marginalization and unstable relations of difference in the dominant society where they currently, if temporarily live”<sup>70</sup> In the case of Houston, relations quickly became unstable as local residents that had initially welcomed the evacuees, became concerned with media reports that evacuees were responsible for public housing shortages and a rise in the local crime rate.<sup>71</sup>

Unfortunately, for many evacuees the wait to return turned into months and then years and for those who had found employment in Houston and other evacuee destinations, or for those with children now in local schools, what had begun as a temporary stay seemed in danger of becoming a permanent move. Patrice Briant, writing from Houston in February 2006, acknowledged that like many evacuees, she and her family might not be able to return due to financial constraints and limited housing options. Briant was well aware that New Orleans had had problems before Katrina, saying that “I was bitter over the crime rate and corruption”<sup>72</sup> but nevertheless, she wanted to go back to the city if at all possible. “I miss corner

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<sup>69</sup> Richard Morin and Lisa Rein, “Some of the Uprooted Won’t Go Home Again”, *The Washington Post*, September 16, 2005.  
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2005/09/15/AR2005091502010.html>

<sup>70</sup> Paul Brodwin, “Marginality and Subjectivity in the Haitian Diaspora.” *Anthropological Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (2003): 383.

<sup>71</sup> Jed Horne, *Breach of Faith*, 182-183

<sup>72</sup> Patrice Briant. “You Never Miss a Good Thing Until It’s Gone,” *Bourbon Street Journal*. NOLA.com. February 19 2006.  
[http://blog.nola.com/bourbon/2006/02/you\\_never\\_miss\\_a\\_good\\_thing\\_un.html](http://blog.nola.com/bourbon/2006/02/you_never_miss_a_good_thing_un.html)

stores, and sitting on the front porch. I miss the sounds of Bourbon Street. Most of all I miss the people,” Briant remembers, “I love my city and I miss it dearly.”<sup>73</sup>

## **DISPERSAL AND CULTURAL FLOW**

The term *diaspora* has often been deployed within the discourse of Katrina’s aftermath. Sometimes referred to as “The Katrina Diaspora,”<sup>74</sup> the term implies a forced relocation of individuals from their homes, while at the same time suggesting the possibility of multiple belongings. This is particularly important in that it also implies a spreading outward of New Orleans culture in new and positive ways. Paul Brodwin says that “diasporas are defined by the cultural connections and flows that knit together a single geographically dispersed group.”<sup>75</sup> Like Grand Marshall Shorty’s Houston Second Line, many Katrina evacuees are bringing little pieces of New Orleans culture to wherever they have found themselves, in an effort not only to remember their roots, but also to create new memories. New Orleans musician, Jackie Harris, who evacuated to New York City two days before Katrina struck, welcomed the opportunity to participate in the Higher Ground Hurricane Relief Benefit Concert on September 17 2005. For Harris, it was a chance to share New Orleans music with New York musicians and particularly Julliard students, many of whom had never played New Orleans jazz, and she believes that as a result of Katrina, “New Orleans music is bubbling all over the world”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Briant, “You Never Miss a Good Thing.”

<sup>74</sup> Lisa K. Bates and Rebekah A. Green, “Housing Recovery in the Ninth Ward,” *Race, Place, and Environmental Justice*, 243.

<sup>75</sup> Brodwin, “Marginality and Subjectivity in the Haitian Diaspora,” 384.

<sup>76</sup> Jackie Harris, *Voices From the Storm*, 222.



New Orleans culture has not only been relocated outside the city by local artists, it has also been taken up, reproduced and reinvented by artists with no ties to the city. Although popular culture that originated and developed in New Orleans has been shaped by local geography, economics and racialized experiences, the potential to connect those experiences with a wider audience has been explored subsequent to Katrina. The events surrounding Hurricane Katrina have influenced African American artists who were not from New Orleans and who did not experience Katrina but who have, through music, used the themes of racial injustice, oppression and disillusionment that characterized the events of the storm and the evacuation as a general indictment of race relations in America. Internationally known Hip-Hop artists, such as Chuck D., Jay-Z, Kanye West, and Lil Wayne have all used Katrina and the abandonment of the city's black citizens to engage listeners and to "historicize the economic and racial marginalization of Katrina victims as a national problem."<sup>77</sup> Media Studies professor and popular culture critic, Henry Jenkins believes that the Katrina Diaspora has begun to transform American culture and that a "process of cultural appropriation has begun."<sup>78</sup> Using the example of Houston hip-hop group, The Legendary K.O., Jenkins describes group members using their interaction with evacuees at the Houston Astrodome and Convention Centre to write the popular song "George Bush Doesn't Care About Black People." The song is written from the perspective of a black man in New Orleans, immediately following Katrina — an

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<sup>77</sup> Zenia Kish, "My FEMA People": Hip-Hop as Disaster Recovery in the Katrina Diaspora," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 3, Sept. 2009, 689.

<sup>78</sup> Henry Jenkins, "People From That Part of the World": The Politics of Dislocation," *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 21, Issue 3, 480.

event not directly experienced by any of the group members. In this way, the cultural knowledge of New Orleans, mediated by Hurricane Katrina becomes part of a larger discursive framework of African American experience.

### **SYMBOLIC RETURN – HBO’S *TREME***

In addition to music, television has provided a unique perspective and framework for keeping the storm as well as the Lower Ninth Ward neighbourhood in the public consciousness, Home Box Office (HBO) in particular has participated in this process with the presentation of two Spike Lee documentaries — *When the Levees Broke: A requiem in Four Acts* (2006) and *If God is Willing and Da Creek Don’t Rise* (2010) — as well as the dramatic series *Treme*, which premiered on April 11 2010. As a dramatic representation of post-Katrina New Orleans, *Treme* functions in a dual capacity. It contributes to a wider understanding of the aftermath of Katrina and its effects on the city — safely filtered and mediated by actors and scriptwriters — and it is a cultural conduit that enables displaced citizens to maintain virtual ties to New Orleans. The producers have taken care to attempt to be as authentic as possible and to respect the memory of the storm and the cultural history of the city. In addition to bringing economic benefits to the city through location filming, the show uses many local performers as well as non-industry related local citizens in many of its episodes. While the show is based on the actual events surrounding Hurricane Katrina and features several key New Orleanians in non-fictional roles, the series is a dramatization. This format allows events to be viewed from a distance — no matter how closely viewers may relate to the storyline — and the show

provides a safe context for remembering the disaster. Treme producer David Simon, acknowledges this, saying in an “Open Letter to New Orleans” that, “Our television drama is taking liberties with a profound, unforgettable period in this city's history. It depicts day-to-day life in New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina, referencing certain real events, real people and places, real cultural reference points known to many, if not most of those who call this city home.”<sup>79</sup> That these cultural reference points are an effective instrument for dramatically communicating shared memories is evidenced by a blog post from Charlotte Voelke following the series premiere.

Voelke writes:

There was a point in the show that really hit home for me. They showed one character walking into his house for the first time since the storm. Everything was completely destroyed and it looked like a war zone. I can remember seeing my home, and other family and friend's homes after the storm and seeing exactly what this character saw in the show. All I could think about was how many other people watching the show were feeling such real emotions, remembering when they saw their destroyed homes for the first time after the storm.<sup>80</sup>

Storylines that function as cultural reference points for evacuees include that of the character Ladonna Batiste-Williams (Khandi Alexander) who evacuated to Baton Rouge, but cannot settle as her desire to be back in New Orleans leads her to spend more time in the city and away from her family, and that of Janette Desautel (Kim Dickens), who loses her restaurant after Katrina and must relocate to New York to find work. The character of Mardi Gras Indian Chief, Albert Lambreaux

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<sup>79</sup> *The Times-Picayune*. HBO's “Treme” Creator David Simon Explains It All For You. April 11 2010.

[http://www.nola.com/treme-hbo/index.ssf/2010/04/hbos\\_treme\\_creator\\_david\\_simon.html](http://www.nola.com/treme-hbo/index.ssf/2010/04/hbos_treme_creator_david_simon.html)

<sup>80</sup> Charlotte Voelke, “Treme,” Charlotte's Web. April 12 2010.  
<http://www.blogger.com/frame.php?url=http://charlottesawesomeweb.blogspot.com/2010/04/treme.html>

(Clarke Peters) is symbolic of Lower Ninth Ward residents' difficulties in returning and rebuilding amid the bureaucratic 'red tape' that must surely resonate with Lower Ninth Ward viewers. Similarly, the character portrayed by New Orleans native Wendell Pierce, street musician Antoine Batiste, is representative of the problems of trying to work in New Orleans while residing outside of the city as an evacuee. Simon explains the importance of these storylines saying, "By referencing what is real, or historical, a fictional narrative can speak in a powerful, full-throated way to the problems and issues of our time." New Orleanian Holley Bendtsen agrees with Simon, but also notes that "If they showed it as tough as it really was to live through that year, no one would watch it. It would be completely depressing. People still in 2006-2007 were coming in from Houston, going to the flooded house and finding grandma's body still in the house so I don't think they show it as horrible as it was."<sup>81</sup> The opening credits of the show portray a mix of historic photographs and video, intercut with images of Katrina and its aftermath. The creator of the opening credits, Karen Thorson, says that "They are not traditional main title sequences. Ours are more abstract and raw presentations. We don't use any images from the show. It's all created outside from other sources."<sup>82</sup> The purpose of this, according to Thorson, is to urge viewers to remember that the fictional series takes place amid

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<sup>81</sup> Jeremy Ford. "Deconstructing Treme: What Is New Orleans?" Buffa's Bar and Restaurant. June 21 2011. <http://www.buffaslounge.com/blog/files/84711ec432e573c4d91a6a3a5706d2e6-7.html>

<sup>82</sup> Lolis Eric Elie. "Deconstructing the Treme Opening Credits." HBO. *Inside Treme*. May 6 2011. <http://www.inside-treme-blog.com/home/?currentPage=8>

very real events and to “give viewers a sense of what has been lost in New Orleans culturally as a result of the passage of time.”<sup>83</sup>

While *Treme* viewing parties have quickly become a part of New Orleans culture, with venues such as Buffa’s Restaurant and Lounge offering weekly screenings and food and drink specials,<sup>84</sup> viewing *Treme* from afar has also become a means of reconnecting with fellow dispersed New Orleanians in a group setting that enables discussion and remembrance. Bars and lounges in both New York City and Seattle advertise *Treme* viewing nights and parties. Readers of Karen Dalton-Beninato’s *Huffington Post* blog recently responded to her post about the Buffa’s Restaurant and Lounge season two finale party with comments on their own viewing. Dalton-Beninato responded to one readers comment about flying in for the finale, saying, “Flying in for the finale says a lot about the community that forms around New Orleans traditions. Even the new ones.”<sup>85</sup> At such events, the collective memory of the storm can be shared and former identities can be reclaimed, even though the participants are widely dispersed. Sociologist Ron Eyerman explains:

Collective memory unifies a group through time and over space by providing a narrative frame, a collective story, which locates the individual and his and her biography within it, and which, because it can be represented as narrative and as text, attains mobility. The narrative can travel, as individuals travel, and it can be embodied, written down, painted, represented, communicated and received in

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<sup>83</sup> Elie, “Inside *Treme*.”

<sup>84</sup> Gambit. BestofNewOrleans.com. “Where To Watch *Treme*.” April 22 2011. <http://www.bestofneworleans.com/blogofneworleans/archives/2011/04/22/where-to-watch-treme>

<sup>85</sup> Karen Dalton-Beninato. “Independence Day: *Treme* Season Finale,” *The Huffington Post*, July 4 2011. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/karen-daltonbeninato/independence-day-itremei\\_b\\_889604.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/karen-daltonbeninato/independence-day-itremei_b_889604.html)

distant places by isolated individuals, who can then, through them, be remembered and reunited with the collective.<sup>86</sup>

When considering the possibility of remaining connected to the larger narrative frame of Katrina through a fictional representation of the experience, dispersed members of the community can, therefore, negotiate new ways of framing the disaster and incorporate the experiences of others into their own understanding and memory of the event.

### **STAYING CONNECTED**

While new generations might define themselves *against* older generations, their sense of the past is often communicated to them *from* their elders. This can also be called “collaborative remembering” and it occurs when groups of individuals — both young and old — work together to recall information or events from the past or of a traumatic event such as Katrina and the subsequent diaspora. Lower Ninth Ward resident Mack McClendon, is trying to overcome the knowledge gap that has resulted from the dispersal of so many Lower Ninth Ward residents through his project, The Lower Ninth Ward Village, and is in the process of creating a program that would connect older Ninth Ward residents with young people so that neighbourhood knowledge can be transmitted to a new generation. Through the center, McClendon hopes to “bring the community back, make it whole,”<sup>87</sup> and with his “Where’s Your Neighbour” program he hopes to collaborate with Lower Ninth

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<sup>86</sup> Ron Eyerman, “The Past in the Present: Culture and the Transmission of Memory,” *Acta Sociologica* 47, no. 2 (2004): 161.

<sup>87</sup> Mack McClendon. Lower Ninth ward Village. [lowerninthwardvillage.org](http://lowerninthwardvillage.org)

Ward residents to assemble a comprehensive database of displaced neighbors. The database will detail each resident's plan for return and any obstacles that are standing in his or her way. Displaced residents also have the opportunity to communicate with one another through the organization's website. Similarly, The Find Our Folk organization decided, in 2006 to launch a nationwide tour. It was the aim of the "The Finding Our Folk Tour" to connect displaced evacuees with organizations that could enable them to share their experiences, meet other evacuees and inform them of resources that might help them to eventually return home. The tour partnered with New Orleans musicians, artists and poets, as well as community elders and the leaders of local grassroots organizations. Some of the notable tour participants included actor Danny Glover, members of The Hot 8 Brass Band and civil rights activist, Bob Moses.<sup>88</sup> Throughout January and February of 2006 the tour used local schools to convene sharing circles, develop learning strategies for displaced children and compile detailed documentation on the status of evacuees.

While both the Lower Ninth Village and the Finding Our Folk Tour use, or have used their websites as places for connectedness and remembrance, many other websites have emerged that are more specifically dedicated to the sharing of Katrina and post-Katrina memories. The *Experience Project*<sup>89</sup> is a social networking site that offers a collection of blogs and groups to registered users, including a sharing site for Katrina survivors. NOLA.com, the online version of the New Orleans *Times-*

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<sup>88</sup> Finding Our Folk Tour. Finding Our Folk YouTube Channel.  
<http://www.youtube.com/user/findingourfolk#p/u/5/T4IAKVCaxvQ>

<sup>89</sup> The Experience Project. "I Survived Hurricane Katrina,"  
[http://www.experienceproject.com/group\\_stories.php?g=248642](http://www.experienceproject.com/group_stories.php?g=248642)

*Picayune*, has a Katrina page that is comprised of archived Katrina articles, current news items and blogs, as well as being the home of a thriving Katrina forum. The forum provides a platform for both current and former New Orleanians to share their stories and frustrations as well as offering a means for displaced residents to remain in touch with friends and families back home. Websites of this nature are in integral part of connectedness for Katrina evacuees, in some ways shrinking the distance between their current location and their former home. They also play an important role in maintaining the cultural traditions of the Lower Ninth Ward, possibly more so than those who have witnessed changes from positions within the community. Henry Jenkins argues that “some research suggests that those who remain behind may embrace change, whereas those who left seem to adopt a more conservative perspective — wanting to be able to return home whenever they want to a world that looks just like it when they left.”<sup>90</sup> This observation seems supported by several of the online communities and forums that are available to Katrina survivors. In particular, the website “Do You Know What It Means?” Help Remember New Orleans<sup>91</sup> invites users to share their stories, photographs and videos. However, many of the users opt to show pictures of New Orleans and Lower Ninth Ward as it was, with very few uploading images of the way the city and neighbourhood look now. Jenkins further argues that for many, the actual experience of ‘local’ communities is now being challenged and mediated through

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<sup>90</sup> Jenkins, “Politics of Dislocation.”

<sup>91</sup> “Do You Know What It Means?” Help Remember New Orleans.  
<http://www.doyouknowwhatitmeans.org/>



technology<sup>92</sup>, bringing connectedness though the digital world more into the realm of normality. Internet connectivity can, in fact, challenge the very assumptions of what community can be. George Lipsitz suggests that “The new spatial and social relations of our time have important consequences for knowledge. New social relations create new social subjects who inevitably create new epistemologies and new ontologies, new ways of knowing and new ways of being. New social subjects produce new archives and new imaginings”<sup>93</sup> Lipsitz’s ‘New Imaginings’ may mean that Katrina’s displaced citizens can, figuratively at least, go home again.

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<sup>92</sup> Jenkins, “Politics of Dislocation.”

<sup>93</sup> George Lipsitz, *American Studies In a Moment of Danger* (Critical American Studies), (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 7.

### CHAPTER III: THE OLD AND THE NEW IN THE LOWER NINTH WARD

When the Mardi Gras Indian Chiefs emerged from their clubhouses and homes to parade through the streets on Mardi Gras, 2006 and the Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs held their first second-line parades it was a signal to the Lower Ninth Ward that the community and its memories were still a vital part of ‘their’ city of New Orleans and despite the fact that the neighbourhood had been physically destroyed, the lived culture that made it a community was still alive. The Chiefs and the Clubs represented a manifestation of the viability of the culture of the Lower Ninth Ward and were a testament to the resiliency of the people who had returned and were engaged in the rebuilding process. The celebrations were not restricted to those living in the New Orleans and the Lower Ninth Ward — they also included those for whom Mardi Gras 2006 marked the first time they had returned to New Orleans. Witnessing and participating in place-based cultural traditions and rituals that are part of what Joyce Marie Jackson calls “vernacular networks,” can, she argues, “assist in recovery and continue to shape how displaced New Orleanians reconstruct their lives.”<sup>94</sup>

The emergence of several grassroots organizations aimed at recovery in the Lower Ninth Ward can also be considered vernacular networks. The addition of many new grassroots organizations offered residents a chance to both engage with the community and to assist in the creation of what many hoped would be new cultural traditions in the Lower Ninth Ward. Frederick Weil, of Louisiana State

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<sup>94</sup> Jackson, “Fazendeville Community”, 775.

University credits Katrina with inspiring a renewed level of civic involvement that crossed social and racial barriers in New Orleans, stating that after the hurricane “citizens had an incentive to cooperate and provide each other with mutual assistance; communities had an incentive to partner with one another and elites had an incentive to accept leadership initiatives from outside their traditional ranks.”<sup>95</sup> Together, with traditions that have deep cultural roots in the community, new grassroots organizations are contributing to the regrowth and reinvigoration of the Lower Ninth Ward.

### **MARDI GRAS INDIANS AND SECOND-LINES AS VEHICLES OF MEMORY**

New Orleans’ street culture, especially African-American street culture, has always been political and has often served as a means of empowering black citizens, if only in the context of Mardi Gras. Mardi Gras helped to create an opening for black New Orleanians to call into question the racial stereotypes and racialized treatment of blacks that had existed since antebellum times. In what was a very racially and socially ordered society, Mardi Gras, or Carnival was an opportunity for *disorder*.

Like many counter-narratives, or the stories of excluded groups, the history of the Mardi Gras Indian tradition is contested and vague. However, the late 1800s seems to be the accepted date of the beginning of the Mardi Gras Indian tradition. Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward poet and author Kalamu ya Salaam believes the emergence of the tradition at this time was due to New Orleans undergoing a “significant period of

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<sup>95</sup> Frederick Weil, “The Rise of Community Engagement After Katrina,” *New Orleans Index at Five*, Washington: Brookings Institute and Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, 2006, 1.

racist repression and outright terror” that changed the way whites and blacks interacted, resulting in a more strictly segregated city. Salaam also believes that the tradition remained obscure for many years because “the structures of Jim Crow ensured that the Indians would be a phenomenon that existed cocooned within predominantly Black and/or mixed Black/immigrant residential neighborhoods.”<sup>96</sup>

What has been recorded, however, is that the first instance of a Black Indian presence at Mardi Gras was the appearance, in the late 1880s, of the Creole Wild West tribe, under Chief Becate, who claimed a mixed heritage of both American Indian and African descent. There has been speculation that the appearance of the Creole Wild West coincided with a visit of the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show in New Orleans at the time of the 1885 Mardi Gras. It is believed that black New Orleanians and American Indians developed a sympathetic connection based on shared oppression by white Americans. There is also speculation that cooperation between Native Americans and escaped slaves accounted for the connection between the two groups. However, Michael P. Smith, who is credited with identifying Mardi Gras Indians with the Buffalo Bill show, also contends that the ritual performance of dance and drumming is a fluid continuance of early African-American slave traditions that had existed in New Orleans since colonial times.<sup>97</sup> Nevertheless, the first account of an actual Mardi Gras Indian parade during Carnival season comes

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<sup>96</sup> Kalamu ya Salaam, “New Orleans Mardi Gras Indians and Tootie Montana,” *Louisiana Living Traditions*. [www.louisianafolklife.org](http://www.louisianafolklife.org)

<sup>97</sup> Michael P. Smith, *Mardi Gras Indians* (Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican Publishing Company, 1994), 145

from 1899, where the phenomenon of “forty to fifty bewigged and painted Indians paraded, jabbering and waving their tomahawks behind their chief.”<sup>98</sup>

Regardless of their origins, Mardi Gras Indians traditions became structures for participatory, politicized public action. Initially at least, this public action was enacted solely within the space of black communities, as an expression of black social and economic concerns. In limiting their activity to their own communities, Mardi Gras Indians were not necessarily considered aggressive in thought or action towards whites — they fought for supremacy amongst themselves. Tribes would engage in competition, not only for recognition of the most elaborate or ‘pretty’ costuming, but also of having the most power and the highest respect in the community. While early tribes would sometimes establish this supremacy with physical violence, the competition became, by the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, a battle for aesthetic dominance. Historian Reid Mitchell suggests that the lure of masking Indian was easy to understand — “it provided black men drawn from New Orleans’ poorest communities with an opportunity for self-expression.”<sup>99</sup> As the performative meaning of Mardi Gras Indian parades transformed from acts of violent assertion to celebrations of black heritage they came to represent both the culture and the performance of that culture. However, in the staged “reiteration of stories,”<sup>100</sup> the importance of the story itself has been subjugated by the

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<sup>98</sup> Reid Mitchell, *All On a Mardi Gras Day: Episodes in the History of New Orleans Carnival* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 114.

<sup>99</sup> Mitchell, *All On a Mardi Gras Day*, 116.

<sup>100</sup> Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Routledge, 2010), 139.

performance element — that is to say, the act of resistance itself has become more important than the historical origin and meaning.

Contemporary Mardi Gras Indian culture is a vital component of the larger cultural community of black New Orleans, and the rituals and traditions have become a part of the collective memory of that community. In the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward, Mardi Gras Indians are an important part of the process of telling the community narrative — the ritual communicates both a real and a representational past. This narrative is shared by many members of the community, whose personal and family history is similar to that of other members, although specific, individual memories can be very different. It is in this perceived “shared past” that the community memory is formed. Because the Lower Ninth Ward had a relatively small population before Katrina there was a strong intergenerational element to shared memory in the neighbourhood. Several generations of several large families contributed to a shared sense of kinship and functioned as signifiers in the construction of community memory. Families such as the Montana’s and the Gettridge’s have participated for generations in the Mardi Gras Indian tradition, with family patriarchs serving as Big Chiefs and other family members sewing and acting as Spyboys and Flagboys.<sup>101</sup> Therefore, members of the tribes were well known by name and by family as well as by their function in the ritual.

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<sup>101</sup> According to Michael P. Smith, the Big Chief is the leader of the tribe. The Spyboy’s main function, at least originally, was to look out for other Chiefs and report any other tribe activity in the neighbourhood. The Flagboy carried the tribe’s banner and immediately preceded the Chief.

Ritual, performance, dance, as well as other forms of embodied culture are as integral to understanding the history of a social group as the written archive of recorded events. According to performance studies scholar, Diana Taylor, ritual and performance are part of a repertoire of embodied memory that offers alternative perspectives to those derived from the written archive.<sup>102</sup> The usefulness of this ritualized collective memory to the study of both the history and the future of the Lower Ninth Ward is, in part, relational to the sites of memory (in this case the street or the parade). These sites are “understood as places where groups of people engage in public activity through which they express a collective shared knowledge... of the past, on which a group’s sense of unity and individuality is based.”<sup>103</sup> Within these performances, the political meaning is essential, although it is sometimes subsumed by the process and performance of the ritual. The Mardi Gras Indians are in the milieu of an oral tradition that, unlike written tradition, depends primarily on memory for its survival; they simultaneously become an apparatus for claiming space for those who, in the past, possessed no recognized status in the larger community, or like now, may have lost their homes and community.

The Mardi Gras Indian parades of 2006 provided a cultural continuity that transcended the flood and gave a sense of hope to residents of the Lower Ninth that their community and traditions would endure, despite the dispersal of so many members. Lower Ninth Ward resident and co-creator of the Lower Ninth Ward

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<sup>102</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 20.

<sup>103</sup> Winter, in *Memory in Mind and Culture*, edited by Pascal Boyer and James V. Wertsch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 252.

Choctaw Hunters tribe, Ronald Lewis, says that Indian practice is one place you can count on to reconnect with your friends — “it’s a party they give on Sundays at local bars. These little neighbourhood spots become synonymous with the community; they are a part of history and where the teaching happens.”<sup>104</sup>

However, as much as the Mardi Gras Indian tradition is based on the past, it is not immutable. Rather, it is a tradition that is always evolving and adapting and will continue to do so as the Lower Ninth rebuilds. In recent years, traditional music has incorporated elements of hip-hop culture, and the community second lines that were once exclusively black are now becoming populated with increasing numbers of white parade enthusiasts and supporters.<sup>105</sup> Most important though is the knowledge that the Mardi Gras Indian parades continue to be political as much as they are social in that they are a process of claimsmaking in the city. Also, as Ronald Lewis explains “ they are powerful ways of expressing grief and faith in collective perseverance and triumph over adversity — becoming important spaces for coming together and reflecting on life and community.”<sup>106</sup> The Mardi Gras Indian tradition of walking the neighbourhoods also provides an opportunity to include those who might not otherwise be able to participate – the elderly, the infirm, children who can view the parades from their porches.

Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs, like the Mardi Gras Indians not only claim space for public rituals but are also organized community structures that provide support

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<sup>104</sup> Ronald W. Lewis, *House of Dance and Feathers: A Museum* (New Orleans: Neighbourhood Story Project, 2009), 96.

<sup>105</sup> Flaherty, *Floodlines*, 138.

<sup>106</sup> Lewis, *House of Dance and Feathers*, 130.



and play an important role in cultural remembering and resistance. Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs in New Orleans are based on organizations of mutual aid or benevolent societies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These organizations provided dues-paying members with assistance in health care costs, funeral expenses and financial aid in times of injury, illness or other crises and otherwise served as ‘social welfare’ in the United States until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Significantly, they also served as labour organizations. Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs, like the Mardi Gras Indians, were developed during a period of organizing in black communities and conceptualized as ‘self-defense’ “in literal terms of withstanding segregationist terror and figuratively in terms of associations of mutual aid.”<sup>107</sup>

New Orleans Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs have a rich history and have contributed significantly to the culture of black New Orleans, and although they no longer serve all of the functions for which they were originally created, they continue to provide both a space for community participation and a vehicle for expressing black traditions of parading and jazz music. The New Orleans second-line tradition began with the emergence of the Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs, which, as parade permit holders, are the first line. The second line is comprised of those who follow the parade, but who are also considered participants — thus bringing as many community members into the experience as possible. In addition to being embodied cultural practices and modes of transmitting community knowledge, parades become “sites of memory...places where local politics happens. The men and women who come to such places arrive with a mixture of motives and

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<sup>107</sup> Salaam, *Tootie Montana*.

hopes.”<sup>108</sup> Anthropologist Helen Regis says that “contemporary parades in the streets of New Orleans have their own distinctive genealogies, traced to a collective memory of defiance and freedom.”<sup>109</sup> The contemporary parades to which she refers originated as alternate parades on 4<sup>th</sup> of July and Labour Day that provided an acceptable outlet for African-American self-expression and a place in which they could protest and resist social injustices. The 1850 Fugitive Slave and the 1890 Separate Car Act each prompted processions to display the solidarity and strength of New Orleans’ African-American communities. In the Lower Ninth, the Big Nine Social Aid and Pleasure Club, the CTC (Cross the Canal) Social Club and the Nine Times Social and Pleasure Club parade each year through second line season which runs almost every Sunday from August of one year to early May of the next.

After Katrina, and the images of the Lower Ninth Ward that portrayed the residents as lawless and violent, the emergence of the first social clubs in the 2006 parade season held special meaning. As Fred Johnson, co-founder of the Black Men of Labor Social Aid and Pleasure club explains “we wanted to represent a different imagery of Black men than is often put out on the street. We are not pimps and gang bangers. We are working men who make a contribution to our communities. After Katrina our community was being written off and we stood up as an organization and said “We’re not gonna accept people saying that we can’t function as a people in the Lower Ninth Ward anymore.”<sup>110</sup> In the post-Katrina Lower Ninth Ward, Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs played a critical role in the rebuilding process, working

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<sup>108</sup> Winter, in *Memory Mind and Culture*, 256.

<sup>109</sup> Helen Regis “Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs” in *House of Dance and Feathers*, 128.

<sup>110</sup> Lewis, *House of Dance and Feathers*, 134.

tirelessly to locate and repatriate their members back to the community.<sup>111</sup>

However, the city of New Orleans was not as committed to maintaining the cultural traditions of black New Orleans. In a bid to control the public disorder sometimes associated with second-line traditions, parade permits issued during the first season post-Katrina were set at so high a price as to make permits unaffordable for many clubs. In 2007, the Original Pigeontown Steppers Social Aid and Pleasure Club were shocked to receive a \$ 7560.00 parade permit fee from the city of New Orleans — a dramatic increase from the 2005 fee of \$1200. The New Orleans Police Department cited an “increased threat of violence”<sup>112</sup> The Pigeontown Steppers, as well as 18 other local clubs, subsequently joined the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in an earlier lawsuit citing violations to the First Amendment right to free expression. In November 2006, the ACLU had charged that the city of New Orleans was assessing parade permit rates with a racial bias. Rates for two separate funerals — African-American Dinerral Shavers and white filmmaker Helen Hill — differed by over \$2000 (with the higher rate assessed to the Shavers funeral).<sup>113</sup> Ultimately, the NOPD agreed to reduce the security fees it charged Second Line Clubs, thus ending the ACLU lawsuit.<sup>114</sup> The lawsuit exposed continued racism within the institutions of the city of New Orleans that persisted post-Katrina, thus illustrating that many things had not been washed away by the storm.

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<sup>111</sup> Flaherty, *Floodlines*, 263.

<sup>112</sup> Gary Scheets, “Permit Fees Raining on Second-Line Parades,” *Times-Picayune*, March 29, 2007, NOLA.com.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> David Meeks, “NOPD Halves Fees For Second-Line Parades,” *Times-Picayune*, April 25, 2007, NOLA.com

## **NEW GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS AND COMMUNITY OBJECTIVES IN THE LOWER NINTH WARD**

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is the single agency of any level of government most closely associated with Hurricane Katrina and the city of New Orleans — largely due to its failure to respond in a timely and effective manner in aiding the citizens of New Orleans who were trapped in the city as well as the perception of its continued institutional failures in almost every aspect of its involvement. In fact, it has become synonymous with the racial and economic divisions in New Orleans and even in the nation as a whole. The failure of FEMA during and immediately after the storm aside, the agency became known as yet another roadblock and yet another instrument of marginalization for New Orleans' most vulnerable citizens in their struggle to reclaim their homes. Louisiana's Road Home Program, described as the "largest single housing recovery program in US history"<sup>115</sup> promised that eligible homeowners affected by Hurricane Katrina (as well as Hurricane Rita which struck only weeks after Katrina) could receive 'up to' \$150,000 in compensation for their homes. The initial grants, though, were limited to the pre-Katrina value of the home. In the Lower Ninth the average home value, pre-Katrina, was \$70 000. However, the cost to rebuild could be up to triple that amount due to new FEMA and local building codes. In fact, on April 8, 2011, two fair-housing organizations in New Orleans, along with five African-American

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<sup>115</sup> "The Road Home Overview," *The Louisiana Road Home Program*, <http://www.road2la.org/>

homeowners, had their discrimination lawsuit against the Road Home Hurricane Katrina relief program sent back to district court from the State Court of Appeals for further review.<sup>116</sup> They had claimed that the Road Home program used a grant formula that violated the anti-discrimination provisions of the Fair Housing Act. The lawsuit argued that it was unfair for the program to base grant amounts on pre-Katrina market value, as opposed to actual rebuilding costs. As a result of these difficulties a number of locally conceived grassroots organizations were created to address these, and other obstacles and became sites of resistance in the struggle to reclaim socially and economically marginalized neighbourhoods, particularly the Lower Ninth Ward. Organizations vary in terms of purpose and vision but each is operated by and participated in by members of the communities they serve. Some are neighborhood based, while others can be categorized by special interest—whether that be historic preservation, education or the arts. What these organizations represent is agency and an outlet for previously silenced groups to control their own future and assert claims as community stakeholders. Local residents, excluded from the official planning process have turned to these grassroots organizations as a way of replacing or influencing local government in determining what should happen in their neighbourhoods.

A New Orleans residents survey, conducted by Tulane University after the Bring New Orleans Back Commission announced its neighbourhood planning directive, yielded some interesting results that reflected the concerns of

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<sup>116</sup> David Hammer, “Road Home Legal Challenge May Be On the Brink of A Settlement,” *Times-Picayune*, April 9, 2011. NOLA.com.

neighbourhoods with varying racial and economic compositions. Lakeview, which was one of the most severely damaged neighbourhoods after Hurricane Katrina<sup>117</sup>, is an upscale, affluent community that is often cited in counterpoint to the Lower Ninth Ward. While the population of the Lower Ninth Ward was 98 percent black pre-Katrina, Lakeview's population was 94 percent white. The average annual household income in Lakeview was \$64 000 pre-Katrina, compared to just \$27 000 in the Lower Ninth Ward.<sup>118</sup> As of the 2010 Greater New Orleans census, Lakeview has recovered 70 percent of its population since Katrina, while the Lower Ninth Ward has only recovered 20 percent.<sup>119</sup> The Tulane University survey revealed community discrepancies that go beyond demographic and economic differences. The two neighbourhoods share very different visions and concerns. Lakeview residents list their top five concerns as (in order of most importance): Low crime rate, no litter, good street lighting, trees and other greenery, and good schools. The same survey question in the Lower Ninth Ward shows different priorities: Affordable housing, good street lighting, good schools, not much noise, and park or playground. Low crime rate appears in the seventh spot in the Lower Ninth Ward survey, followed by health clinics at number eight — which did not appear at all in the Lakeview top twelve concerns.<sup>120</sup>

The neighbourhood associations that formed as a result of the BNOBC directive attempted to meet some of stated concerns of residents. Common Ground

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<sup>117</sup> GNODC, Lakeview Statistics 2000

<sup>118</sup> GNODC, Lakeview and Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Statistics 2000

<sup>119</sup> GNODC, Lakeview and Lower 9<sup>th</sup>, 2010

<sup>120</sup> Tulane Neighbourhood Survey, 2006.

Relief was created by former Black Panther, Malik Rahim in the days following Katrina to respond to the immediate, short-term needs of storm victims. It has since expanded to provide long-term support and establish a permanent community presence through the founding of institutions that offer assistance to residents, such as a free legal clinic and a health clinic. Upon the organization's inception, Rahim, explained the purpose and function of Common Ground, stating "This is a determining time for residents of the Ninth Ward. It is critical that the residents return home. It will not be comfortable at first, but needs will be met. We will survive this by working together."<sup>121</sup> To date, Common Ground has brought over 25 000 volunteers to the area and has gutted over 3000 homes. Most importantly, it provides assistance to residents navigating the application process for aid in rebuilding. The Lower Ninth Ward Neighborhood Empowerment Network Association (NENA) is one of the largest and most comprehensive neighbourhood organizations operating in the Lower Ninth Ward. In partnership with Loyola and Tulane Universities, Crescent City Alliance Recovery Effort (CARE) and charitable organizations such as the United Way, Mercy Corps and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Foundation, NENA offers home-buying and home-building advice as well as providing gap financing that allows homeowners to begin the rebuilding process., Patricia Jones, NENA founder and Lower Ninth Ward resident believes that NENA's monthly community meetings not only take up the business of rebuilding, but also

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<sup>121</sup> Sothern, *Down In New Orleans*, 278.

provide a space where “people can engage in conversing with each other on topics that are useful for the community.”<sup>122</sup>

When Rick Prose founded [lowernine.org](http://lowernine.org) in 2005, he realized that in addition to housing, the Lower Ninth Ward lacked sustainable resources as well as basic services. With the closest grocery store to the Lower Ninth Ward being three miles away, one of the easiest and most affordable solutions was the creation of a system of community gardens that could provide year-round fresh produce to residents. With the help of local residents who rented vacant lots to the organization at the rate of \$1 a year, [lowernine.org](http://lowernine.org) started Villere Farm in 2008, followed by Lamanche Farm in 2010. The Farms are co-operative gardens, supplying local residents with traditional Southern produce including eggplant, collard and mustard greens, okra and beans through garden shares and sales at local farmer’s markets.<sup>123</sup> The gardens have been a huge success and sales are brisk. Richard McCarthy, executive director of the Crescent City Farmers Market wishes there were more community garden initiatives, and says “We live in one of those rare urban communities where there is rural encroachment. We had long hoped that these rugged urban farmers would suddenly appear and become rock stars at our farmers markets.”<sup>124</sup>

The proliferation of grassroots organization belies the media representation of the residents of the Lower Ninth Ward as a ghettoized population with no stake in their community. Many of the returned residents are vocally involved in community

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<sup>122</sup> Patricia Jones, Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward Neighborhood Empowerment Network Association NENA. <http://www.9thwardnena.org/>

<sup>123</sup> [lowernine.org](http://lowernine.org)

<sup>124</sup> Judy Walker, “Urban Agriculture: The Fruits (and Veggies) of Our Labor,” *Times-Picayune*, August 30, 2007, [NOLA.com](http://NOLA.com).



resistance to the idea that the neighbourhood would be better off plowed under and redeveloped as condominiums or industrial parks. However, like many other neighborhood organizations, the groups that I have mentioned are involved in ongoing processes of rebuilding and are still struggling to make their community visions a reality. Despite the will to do so, rebuilding and community recovery are hampered by lack of financial resources and temporary housing and after five and half years many of their ideas are, unfortunately, still in the planning stages.

## **CONCLUSION: THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF THE LOWER NINTH WARD**

The impressive body of literature that has been produced in the almost six years since Hurricane Katrina made landfall, clearly demonstrates the deep emotional scars the storm and its aftermath left on New Orleans and the United States. The events of the storm and beyond that played out in the media—and in the living rooms of the nation—forced Americans to confront a reality that took them by surprise. In their nation, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, there existed an underclass of poor, black citizens without the means to escape certain disaster. It also shocked the nation to discover that the U.S. government lacked the ability—or the will—to help. However, the storm also revealed that New Orleans residents, particularly working-class African Americans possessed inner resources, a sense of community and cultural traditions that they considered worth preserving. The aftermath of Katrina further revealed that in the face of a national crisis, the citizens of cities such as Houston, Atlanta, Baton Rouge and dozens of other communities were willing to open their homes to help their fellow Americans. Common Ground Relief estimates that over 35 000 people have given their time to volunteer in the rebuilding process in the Lower Ninth Ward<sup>125</sup>, and the organization is but one of many that has brought volunteers to the neighbourhood to gut houses, clean up debris and hang drywall. In many ways the disaster of Hurricane Katrina brought out the best in the American people. Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately—it also highlighted some of the problems faced by Americans in times of disaster. Many of Katrina's victims have been frustrated in their efforts to receive adequate funding to rebuild and racial tensions have continued to play a critical role in the decision making

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<sup>125</sup> Common Ground Relief. <http://www.commongroundrelief.org/about>

processes of reconstruction. Nevertheless, New Orleans is slowly healing and its communities, including the devastated Lower Ninth Ward, are recovering a sense of “cultural confidence’ — the idea that “a place’s insiders remain confident or comfortable that cultural forms represent their ways of life, even as these forms sometimes change.”<sup>126</sup>

Change is indeed one word that describes the post-Katrina Lower Ninth Ward. Walking the streets of the neighborhood, located in the heart of industrial New Orleans, is jarring. On some of streets there is a quiet, rural feeling to the place, with long stretches of unbroken landscape punctuated by houses that appear randomly placed. However, in one location in particular, there are signs of life and activity. Close to the Industrial Canal, actor Brad Pitt’s “Make It Right” organization is nearing the completion of its fiftieth home in the Lower Ninth Ward. “Make It Right” plans to build a total of 150 architecturally innovative and environmentally sustainable homes that will be available for purchase to former Lower Ninth Ward residents and their families.<sup>127</sup> “Make It Right” homeowners include Diedra M. Taylor, a single mother who had lived in her Lower Ninth Ward home for only 14 months prior to Katrina. After evacuating to Houston, Taylor found herself missing her community and her neighbours, recalling that “I had Ms. Stella on one side and

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<sup>126</sup> Eugenie L. Birch and Susan M. Wachter, *Rebuilding Urban Places After Disaster: Lessons From Hurricane Katrina*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press: 2006), 268.

<sup>127</sup> “Rebuilding A Community,” *Make It Right: Helping to Rebuild New Orleans’ Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward*, [http://www.makeitrightnola.org/index.php/work\\_progress/rebuilding](http://www.makeitrightnola.org/index.php/work_progress/rebuilding)

Debra on the other.”<sup>128</sup> Taylor credits “Make It Right” with instilling a feeling hope for the Lower Ninth Ward, and with making her return to New Orleans possible. Journalist and author Jordan Flaherty, supports Pitt’s efforts, saying “Pitt may be directly responsible for more rebuilding in the Lower Ninth Ward than any government aid, organizational support, or individual act of charity. This reflects well on him, but more pertinently, it reflects very poorly on our government.”<sup>129</sup> Unfortunately, Flaherty is correct. The pace of rebuilding in the Lower Ninth Ward has been slowed by both insurance disputes and the tangled bureaucracy of state and federal aid programs. There are many abandoned homes and vacant lots that are situated within a crumbling infrastructure in the Lower Ninth Ward that serve as a testament to institutional failure. Since Katrina, only a small percentage of home owners have received grant and loan monies sufficient to rebuild. Yet the dollar amount spent by local, state and federal programs is staggering. The Louisiana “Road Home” Program has distributed more than \$8 billion in federal rebuilding grants to underinsured homeowners in New Orleans metropolitan area and FEMA had distributed nearly \$4 billion in debris removal and infrastructure repair grants throughout the metropolitan area. Additionally, the Army Corps of Engineers has spent approximately \$15 billion to improve the region’s flood control system.<sup>130</sup> Despite the influx of cash, rebuilding the Lower Ninth Ward cannot be a top-down process. Rebuilding must be framed in terms of community and identity —

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<sup>128</sup> Diedra M. Taylor, “Homeowner Stories,” *Make It Right: Helping to Rebuild New Orleans’ Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward*, [http://www.makeitrightnola.org/index.php/work\\_progress/story/diedra\\_m.\\_taylor](http://www.makeitrightnola.org/index.php/work_progress/story/diedra_m._taylor)

<sup>129</sup> Flaherty, *Floodlines*, 185.

<sup>130</sup> GNODC Economic Info.

determining what remains and what is important, both to individuals and the community. Any debate must come down to what the residents themselves see as the future of their community.

Despite the continuing difficulties in rebuilding the physical space of the Lower Ninth Ward, residents are optimistic about recovering their sense of place. Cherice Harrison-Nelson, daughter of the late Big Chief of the Guardians of the Flame, Donald Harrison Sr., credits the cornerstones of the Lower Ninth Ward's 'cultural infrastructure' such as the Mardi Gras Indian tribes and Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs with keeping community memory alive. Harrison-Nelson believes that the Mardi Gras Indians are particularly important as they have always served as a "galvanizing factor in African-American communities."<sup>131</sup> However, the tradition has struggled in the Lower Ninth Ward since Katrina. The survival of some of the Indian tribes is threatened because many of their members have not returned. The high cost of creating a new 'suit of pretty' each year is borne by fewer members and some of the tribes are considering amalgamation in order to ensure their ability to continue to parade each year.<sup>132</sup> Still, the Mardi Gras Indian tribes remain a cultural touchstone in the Lower Ninth and, thanks to international exposure on HBO's *Treme*, have achieved a cultural prominence that promises that the tribes continue to be a source of community participation and remembrance.

A number of different strategies and community projects are ongoing in the Lower Ninth Ward, and seek to function as modes of reclaiming and strengthening

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<sup>131</sup> Clyde Woods, "Upholding Community Traditions: An Interview with Cherice Harrison-Nelson, March 1, 2009," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 61, Number 3, Sept. 2009, 642.

<sup>132</sup> Lewis, House of Dance and Feathers, 69.

the neighbourhood and its culture. Whether or not the Lower Ninth Ward can be reclaimed or whether it will develop into something unrecognizable depends largely on the will of residents to maintain the cultural character of the community. Former Lower Ninth Ward Resident, Kalamu ya Salaam, frames this question as one of “double displacement,” saying that “people were displaced by the hurricane, moved out of the city. They wanted to come back. So, this double displacement works in this way: when you get back, you find out where you are and who you are is not where you were and who you were.”<sup>133</sup> Nevertheless, rather than simply being a community caught in a cycle of urban decay and abandonment, the Lower Ninth Ward was and continues to be a community struggling to maintain its identity even as doubt remains that it can be revitalized.

At this juncture, it seems likely that the Lower Ninth Ward will remain a residential neighbourhood, with the long-term, pre-Katrina residents being charged with upholding the history and memories of the community. Without this commitment, the cultural continuity of the Lower Ninth Ward is at risk of being lost, or so transformed that it loses its meaning, a sentiment best expressed by New Orleans musician and performance artist, Eric William Pierson, who says “Everything left will just be a small fragment left behind, or a recreation from someone who may or may not have experienced it. New Orleans will be staler, it will be a living memory, an antique piece of furniture.”<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Kalamu ya Salaam, *Voices From the Storm*, 221.

<sup>134</sup> Eric William Pierson, “Ninth Ward Katrina Stories,” *New York Night Train*, <http://www.newyorknighttrain.com/zine/issues/3/orleans.html>

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