

Exceptionally Black New Orleans:  
Public Policy, Memory, and Ritual in “The City that Care Forgot”

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## Introduction

### Do you know what it means to love New Orleans? Notes of a Native Daughter on the Problematic South

“Do you know what it means to miss New Orleans when that’s where you left your heart? Do you know something more? I miss the one I care for, more than I miss New Orleans.”

- Song written by Eddie DeLange and Louis Alter, sung by Billie Holiday and Louise Armstrong in the movie *New Orleans*

“Do you know what it means to miss New Orleans and miss it each night and day?” the now famous, and extensively recorded, jazz melody begins. It’s the question running through the entirety of a song that initially attempts to contextualize this longing with a smattering of New Orleans centric imagery and cultural references such as oleanders in June, moss covered vines, the lazy Mississippi, Creole tunes, and Mardi Gras memories. However, with the song’s final lines (see epilogue) the place in question becomes supplemented entirely for the people or persons left behind, a noticeable shift which implies that the human element, much more so than the idea/construction of the place in question (i.e. its aesthetics, its physical location, and its cultural specificity), is what truly makes New Orleans a place worth missing or being. At various moments in my own life, which has been underscored, thus far, by two opposing relational perspectives to the city itself, I’d have responded quite differently to the query posed by Louis Armstrong and Billie Holiday, recycled and replayed over time.

Throughout my teens and early adulthood, missing a place I’d never left and, therefore, could no longer see or appreciate beyond the deeply engrained customs and routines contributing to a consistent monotony was outside the realm of possibility. My then desire for “exotic” life experiences were so substantial and growing, that all I could think of was leaving the city behind. As I remember it, New Orleans represented a narrow life trajectory; one I couldn’t see myself

being content to follow through to its conclusion. Presently, after a ten-year absence (accentuated by the unexpected shock and trauma of Hurricane Katrina's devastation/aftermath in 2005) my relationship to New Orleans has shifted and given the ceaseless pull I feel back to the place I grew up, my questions—much like the questions posed by the song—have evolved and taken on new life.

More recently, I've wrestled with the decision to return to live and, thus, commit to a place that continues to feel too small, too dangerous, and too deplete of opportunity for me to truly take the plunge. Lyrically, "Do you know what it means..." parallels my own longing, which is and isn't defined by several distinctive features of living in the Crescent city, such as its regularly festive atmosphere, unlimited access to some of the country's best food and music, and its defiantly un-American spirit which has produced an eclectic character unlike any other North American city I've yet to experience. And yet, it's the producers of said culture and spirit that typically get overlooked in narratives of praise and devotion showered on this exceptional place. And for me, it comes down to the people, as it should, within ongoing conversations and examinations of the cultural contributions and significance of the city. Therefore, if my input to the ongoing discourse on New Orleans accomplishes anything, I hope it works to re-center the residents/cultural producers of New Orleans as the rightful recipients of whatever love or admiration we choose to extend to this place, as well as a critical consideration of what "love" in action looks like because, truthfully, it's the people who have captured our hearts and imaginations. And it's to the people of this city that this work is dedicated.

Not to be misunderstood, my dissertation titled *Exceptionally Black New Orleans: Public Policy, Memory, and Ritual in "The City that Care Forgot,"* should not be read as my "unconditional" love letter to New Orleans or as a shameless attempt to promote or "rep" my

city. New Orleans can be a difficult place to live and an even harder place to love. The love I'm interested in discussing and practicing throughout my dissertation requires the very demanding work of "truth telling" via social and institutional criticism, literary and cultural analysis, and self-critique/reflexivity in order to sustain itself or be of use to anyone. I've learned too often that Love without intention, risk, or requirements from self or others results in a hollow devotion to something we are incapable of truly understanding. In his introductory pages to *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) James Baldwin famously writes, "I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually."<sup>1</sup> This became a widely known stance that Baldwin espoused from the critical distance of an expatriate, electing to eventually return and engage in the Civil Rights struggle unfolding in the United States towards the end of the 50s, while continuing to spend significant portions of his life abroad. I reference Baldwin here because, like him, I am prepared to insist on my right to criticize a place I claim to love, all the while anticipating that my brand of love will not be appreciated by those who'd prefer for certain critiques to remain unspoken. However, many forms of critical citizenship involve shunning notions of patriotism or nativism that over rely on narratives of exceptionalism, superiority, benevolence, or loyalty for the sake of loyalty. Additionally, my Black feminist roots have taught me that writing should be the precursor to action, and in the case of New Orleans much can be said about this city, for better or worse, without ever investing time and energy in improving its shortcomings.

In the way of Baldwin, Audre Lorde, and many of my teachers before me, I write in an effort to understand the complexities of the world around me and to chart a purposeful course through it. As an author and a public intellectual Baldwin wrestled with the question of when and

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<sup>1</sup> James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, Beacon Press: Boston, 1955

how to participate in the most significant anti-racist moment of his time and to effect real change in the place he'd once fled as a means of self-preservation. In the words of scholar Lloyd Kramer, "Baldwin strongly believed...that intellectuals must participate in the public culture of their own era. No honest writer could shun this task, even when the effort to tell historical or cultural truths was painful..."<sup>2</sup> Without question, New Orleans is that place for me as well; a place I felt I needed to leave to nurture and embrace other parts of myself, but that has always deeply defined who I am. Therefore, considering the extremely personal nature of my work, as a black woman and a New Orleanian, there are many things about participating in the conversation on New Orleans that can be painful to re-live or confront, particularly on the subject of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. Nevertheless, I strive for meaning and understanding so that there can, in turn, be action, change, and eventual progress.

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One of the essential threads of my dissertation is that the national narrative(s) taking place about New Orleans and the tangible efforts to rebuild and reconfigure the city after Hurricane Katrina have been racially coded conversations, complicated by the often-suppressed history of anti-black sentiments and policies that have extensively and intentionally disenfranchised residents of color in The Crescent City. Although African Americans remain the city's racial majority, nearly 100,000 black residents were unable or unwilling to return after the hurricane. By comparison, white residents in New Orleans have diminished by approximately

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<sup>2</sup> Lloyd Kramer, "James Baldwin in Paris: Exile, Multiculturalism and the Public Intellectual," *Historical Reflections/Reflexions Historiques*, Vol. 27, No. (Spring 2001), pp. 27-47. Kramer argues that Baldwin "...returned from his European exile with new claims for the writer's crucial public role in the evolving national history of politics and culture. Writers performed the all-important public work of interpreting the 'intangible dreams of people' and connect the long, multicultural history of the past to those who will live in the future. In other words, writing helped to change or recreate the world whenever it described the world with honesty and clarity and moral responsibility." pg. 46

11,500 inhabitants as of August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015, with Asian and Hispanic populations on the rise.<sup>3</sup> As a result of what some consider to be dramatic shifts in racial demographics, questions and concerns have been voiced by longstanding citizens and interested scholars alike regarding the material, economic, and socio-cultural consequences of such new realities. Understandably, these are questions I cannot attempt to answer conclusively with any one investigation into the adverse outcomes of the storm for black residents in New Orleans. Thankfully, the interdisciplinary research needed to measure the long-term impact of Hurricane Katrina upon New Orleans specifically and the Gulf South more generally is well underway. As such, I will be drawing upon and contributing to what numerous scholars have already identified as a significant conversation, both locally and nationally.

Post Katrina, given the disparate outcomes and dispersal rates for African Americans, residents of the city have questioned to what extent New Orleans is being intentionally reconfigured as a smaller, wealthier, and whiter place. In one highly publicized example, former mayor Ray Nagin sparked controversy and mock criticism by referring to New Orleans as a “Chocolate city” in comments directed at citizens’ concerns in 2006. In his brief speech on Martin Luther King Jr Day, Nagin is best remembered for his assertion that, “[New Orleans] will be chocolate at the end of the day...[it] will be a majority African-American city.” At the time, Mayor Nagin made this statement in response to questions regarding the sizeable number of African American residents who were unable to return to the city following the storm. Within an article on NOLA.com, Times-Picayune author Andy Grimm recounts

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<sup>3</sup> Kelsey Nowakowski, “Charts Show How Hurricane Katrina Changed New Orleans,” *National Geographic*, August 29, 2015. <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/08/150828-data-points-how-hurricane-katrina-changed-new-orleans/> The populations measured were compared to the cities racial makeup in 2000.



Nagin's comments and the backlash that followed, framing the mayor's remarks as an unsuccessful attempt to quiet some of these fears:

Nagin's most controversial remark was meant to calm the growing concern that plans for rebuilding New Orleans after Katrina seemed not to consider restoring parts of the city that once had been inhabited by poor, black residents that had been displaced by the storm. Nagin said he had used the line before, and that he was riffing on a song of the same title by the funk band Parliament. But his "Chocolate City" speech...launched a spirited debate--and numerous styles of T-shirts parodying the mayor.<sup>4</sup>

Nagin, who is now infamous for his headline producing arrest, trial, and indictment for corruption, is well known for making public statements that were later deemed controversial or inappropriate; however, his comments and the public's response remain a fitting example of the discomfort associated with New Orleans' contested status as a "black city".

And yet, in terms of both census numbers and cultural impact, New Orleans has traditionally been a town with a predominant African American influence. The subject of New Orleans' "blackness" has, however, been the frequent, and at times uncomfortable, topic of discussion, in part, because of the popular and prevailing racial/cultural associations with the city, which have always been diverse and/or blended, with overarching Eurocentric influences.<sup>5</sup> These cultural constructions are well documented in Violet Harrington Bryan's *The Myth of New Orleans in Literature*, in which she catalogues an extensive fascination on the part of American

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<sup>4</sup> Andy Grimm, "Ray Nagin in his own words: The soul of New Orleans, Chocolate city, and the biggest g---n crisis in the history of this country," NOLA.com and The Times-Picayune. September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2014. [http://www.nola.com/crime/index.ssf/2014/09/ray\\_nagin\\_in\\_his\\_own\\_words\\_the.html](http://www.nola.com/crime/index.ssf/2014/09/ray_nagin_in_his_own_words_the.html)

<sup>5</sup> In an excerpt from Richard S. Kennedy's preface to *Literary New Orleans in the Modern World*, he describes what I've referred to as the "popular and prevailing" racial/cultural mixture attributed to New Orleans since its colonial origins. He writes, "This very aura is what one perceives and welcomes in certain European centers—in the hill towns of Italy like Siena, the French towns of Provence like Arles, or the cities of central Spain like Toledo. Here one finds the midday languor, the appreciation of the good things of life: food and drink are taken seriously, ease is valued, hustle is absent, the warm Mediterranean climate is absorbed, though the heat of the day is avoided in shade and siesta...in New Orleans the European heritage of settlement and migration has been predominantly the mix of French, Spanish, and later Italian, to which was added the dark-skinned people of other warm climes, Caribbean and African and, as time went on, other ethnic elements that soon adapted to the locale. One can expect here inhabitants who savor the possibilities of relaxation and pleasure and have created an ethos of warmth and tolerance. pg. xiv

writers who've been documenting the complex relationship between color distinction (read: racial classification) and its direct correlation to political and social hierarchies in the city since its founding. More to the point, Bryan's work argues that "the extent of 'Creolization,' or synthesis of various cultures and intermarriage of ethnic groups, that has taken place in New Orleans is unique in American history," to say the least.<sup>6</sup> However, she is unwavering in her assertion that black New Orleanians from various Diasporic origins have profoundly influenced the city's cultural heritage and distinctiveness. Bryan writes:

African, Afro-Caribbean, and African-American traditions and folklore have played a vital role in designing the New Orleans cultural landscape. In the 1840s Alexis de Tocqueville commented on the interesting situation of the races in Louisiana. He observed that Louisiana was one section of the United States where there was a 'third race,' and he predicted that racial mixture was the only solution to the problem of race relations after the abolition of slavery in America.<sup>7</sup>

As Bryan's references to Tocqueville's writing on Louisiana suggests, New Orleans (and the U.S. South by extension) has a long-documented history as a site of racial inquiry and study with broader implications for the nation at large. Theoretically grounded in the foundational work of Barthes and Bakhtin, Bryan's study analyzes popular mythologies that have been created, sustained, and adapted by writers over time, in order to trace the role that gender and race have played in iterations of New Orleans culture and identity from 1880 through the late twentieth century.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Violet Harrington Bryan, *The Myth of New Orleans in Literature: Dialogues of Race and Gender*. University of Tennessee Press, 1993. pg. 1. Bryan goes on to contextualize her statement with the following assessment of New Orleans' racial and cultural history, "As an international port city, it has from its earliest days attracted settlers of diverse nationalities and social and political traditions—Native American, French, African, Spanish—and the city has had waves of immigration from Canada (Quebec and Nova Scotia), Germany, Ireland, the Canary Islands, Italy, and Greece, as well as from Santo Domingo/Haiti, Cuba, and other Caribbean Countries."

<sup>7</sup> Violet Harrington Bryan, *Ibid*, pg. 3

<sup>8</sup> Much like Bryan, my project is deeply invested in the mutually constitutive relationship between culture and literature, with a particular focus on the significant role that black writers and black cultural have played in the production of New Orleans culture. However, I'm also interested in texts beyond literature that have contributed to

Published in 1993, *The Myth of New Orleans in Literature* differentiates itself from the numerous studies written on New Orleans and its authors, with its inclusion of little known African American writers (at the time of its publication) including Alice Dunbar Nelson, whose substantial body of work had only recently been re-discovered by English scholars in the late 80s. In keeping with many Eurocentric literary traditions, studies on New Orleans's literary history have been revised and expanded over the last several decades to be more inclusive in their acknowledgment of African American authorship as well as women of various ethnic backgrounds. Such an effort to "diversify" the city's literary history receives explicit mention in Richard S. Kennedy's preface to his edited collection of essays titled *Literary New Orleans in the Modern World*, when he writes, "the...way the book differs strongly from its predecessor is that it stresses the African American presence as an essential element in the culture of the city...."<sup>9</sup> The "predecessor" Kennedy references here is a volume titled *Literary New Orleans: Essays and Meditations*, also published by Louisiana State University Press in 1992, which focused more so on writers such as William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, and Walker Percy. Arguably, each one of these writers is a widely known, celebrated literary figure in both conventional iterations of a New Orleans canon with significant crossover appeal and status within a broader North American Literary tradition as well. Which is to suggest that the prevailing voices and cultural authorities on New Orleans have often been distinguished in print as white and male. When, in fact, any truly "representative" literary study of New Orleans should

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widely circulated and commonly held cultural assumptions associated with the city such as advertisements and cultural guidebooks promoting New Orleans, as well as the city's depictions on film, in music, and among visual artists.

<sup>9</sup> Richard S. Kennedy, *Literary New Orleans in the Modern World*. Louisiana State University Press: Baton Rouge, 1998. pg. xvi

be multi-lingual and it would challenge the ill-defined boundaries of race, nation, and gender that one has always encountered in this syncretic space.

Contemporarily, New Orleans's identities have taken shape along a global pipeline of cultural consumption and invention, resulting in an eclectic array of locally and globally inflected artistic expression in addition to one of its most universally influential exports, Afro-Louisianan culture. Within "New Orleans in the World and the World in New Orleans," George Lipsitz asserts that "New Orleans serves as both the southernmost port of the Mississippi River Valley and metaphorically as the north most port of the Caribbean Sea. The re-mapping of New Orleans within a literal and figurative cartography that establishes the city as a multifaceted port/point of entry for the United States is another theme that recurs throughout the dissertation as I engage with scholars invested in the potential linkages and interactions these reconfigurations produce. "Every day for centuries," Lipsitz goes on to say, "ships and sailors from Cuba, Haiti, Mexico, and Trinidad have entered and departed the local port. Migrants from Haiti, Martinique, and other Francophone Caribbean islands have brought a distinct inflection to local African American identity."<sup>10</sup> That said, when I speak of New Orleans and when I speak of black culture I am not referring to some monolithic idea of what blackness in America can, at times, narrowly imply. Thinkers such Michelle M. Wright have described blackness as a "unit of diversity" and within her work she, "...frame[s] Blackness as a concept that cannot be one) limited to a particular national, cultural, and linguistic border, or two) produced in isolation from gender and sexuality."<sup>11</sup> Much like Wright, I seek to critically extend the boundaries of

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<sup>10</sup> George Lipsitz, "New Orleans in the World and the World in New Orleans," *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Fall 2011) pg. 261

<sup>11</sup> Michelle M. Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora*. Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2004. pg 4-6, She writes "Reliance on the term black to signify homogeneous set of practices and/or experiences elides philosophical, cultural, and historical difference and, in insisting on either absolute difference or non, denies us a framework in which to understand blackness as a unit of diversity."

blackness, particularly in the case of African Americans whose diversity is often denied or cast aside in favor of promoting cultural or philosophical cohesion.

At the level of regional difference, I am also invested in the deep divisions among North American blacks that contribute to intra-racial conflicts with underlying anti-black sentiments such as those that emerge in the Creole versus black self-identity debate among native New Orleanians, a topic I will revisit in Chapter 2. In this endeavor, I turn to resources such as *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana* by Virginia R. Dominguez, *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana's Free People of Color* by Sybil Klein, and Riché Richardson's *Black Masculinity and the U.S. South*, for their important commentary and distinction of Southern blackness as a concept with far reaching consequences for how we conceptualize African American identity more broadly. According to Richardson, there have been “fewer critical efforts to recognize how the prevailing ideological views of the South as inferior have been internalized and manifested within the category of African American and how southern identity has functioned as a basis on which blacks are maligned and excluded.”<sup>12</sup> It is with many of these distinctions in mind that I deem New Orleans a black city; one whose history (past and present) has been white washed and revised time and again, in order to deemphasize the role that African Americans have played in its self-definition, expression, and rebellious spirit.

Somewhat deceptively, New Orleans is self-distinguished and internationally known for its prioritization of historical preservation with places like the French Quarter being a prime example of the city's distinctive flare and engagement with its past. However, as a native of the city, I can attest to the numerous ways in which our own knowledge of our history is plagued by

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<sup>12</sup> Riché Richardson, *Black Masculinity and the U.S. South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta*, The University of Georgia Press: Athens and London, 2007. pg. 8

inaccuracies and strategic omissions. Within *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, Joseph Roach asserts that “memory is a process that depends crucially on forgetting.” Taking New Orleans as one of two major cities/case studies in his book, Roach begins his preface with the following claim: “Cities of the dead are primarily for the living. They exist not only as artifacts, such as cemeteries and commemorative landmarks, but also as behaviors. They endure, in other words, as occasions for memory and invention.”<sup>13</sup> As such, the act or performance of memory, such as those enacted during carnivals or festivals, or documented in archives and museums, or landmarked in the form commemorative statues and street signs, is often marred by the unseen and unknown hand of erasure.

One very timely example being the city’s recent and controversial decision to remove several Confederate monuments, many of which have been standing for over a century, and the ensuing debates/protests that followed. In light of the significant media attention given to the removal of said monuments, New Orleans and its history has once again become the site of national attention, as well as the forerunner in what appears to be growing trend across the south to remove monuments that seem to celebrate rather than criticize our country’s long documented history with regimes of white supremacy. A statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee, formerly perched atop a pedestal overlooking Lee Circle near downtown New Orleans, was the last of four Confederate monuments removed by the city with state officials publicly condemning the anti-black, pro-slavery, and terroristic history these statues represented. In contrast, protestors against the removal of the monuments subscribe to a counter narrative in which the history of the Confederacy and the “Great War” are beacons of Southern pride and patriotism, separated from the issue of slavery entirely. Although many of the Confederate

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<sup>13</sup> Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. Columbia University Press: New York, 1996. Pg. xi and 2

sympathizers are white southerners themselves, unbothered by the racist and offensive ideals these icons represent, almost all the protestors against the removal of these monuments are convinced that they are defending and protecting an accurate and valued version of “History” from the threat of revision and/or erasure.

In what is fast becoming an iconic speech due to its copious circulation and distribution online, Mayor Mitch Landrieu responded to the onslaught of protests, anger, and threats of violence that occurred following the city’s decision to remove the Confederate monuments. Lauded by some as the speech that “should end the Confederate debate,” Mayor Landrieu attempted to “right” the historical record and clear the air, so to speak, by recounting the often overlooked and unspoken symbology of the monuments in question. The official transcript of his speech begins with the acknowledgement that the Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, and P.G.T. Beauregard statues were “not erected just to honor these men, but as part of the movement which became known as The Cult of the Lost Cause. This “cult” had one goal—through monuments and through other means—to rewrite history to hide the truth, which is that the Confederacy was on the wrong side of humanity.” He goes on to outline the intended revisions Confederate sympathizers hoped to accomplish through various public campaigns characterized by lies and intimidation:

First erected over 166 years after the founding of our city and 19 years after the end of the Civil War, the monuments that we took down were meant to rebrand the history of our city and the ideals of a defeated Confederacy. It is self-evident that these men did not fight for the United States of America. They fought against it. They may have been warriors, but in this cause they were not patriots. These statues are not just stone and metal. They are not just innocent remembrances of a benign history. These monuments purposefully celebrate a fictional, sanitized Confederacy, ignoring the death, ignoring the enslavement and the terror that it actually stood for.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Christopher Mathias, “Watch the Speech that Should end the Confederate Monuments Debate for Good,” Huff Post- Black Voices, 5/23/2017. In the official transcript of his speech, the mayor goes on to say: “After the Civil

On the subject of historical erasure and revision, Mayor Landrieu makes a convincing case for the falsities and racial terrorism these statues purposefully reinforced to maintain a status quo in which blacks were regarded as naturally inferior to the white race. And, in many ways, the sentiments of Landrieu's speech echo Roach's assertion that, "...forgetting...is an opportunistic tactic of whiteness;" both in its content and in the speech's implicit critic of the Mayor's own political legacy to the city of New Orleans, specifically, through the policies that have most affected the African American community during his terms in office.<sup>15</sup> There are those who believe that the Mayor's speech and his removal of the monuments were political ploys to further his personal agenda to one day run for higher office. Regardless of Landrieu's intentions, the removal of these symbols cannot be the only step or gesture on the part of the city to right the wrongs of the past or engage in a meaningful dialogue about race and the enduring traumas of slavery for contemporary black Americans.

Within Ned Sublette's historical memoir, *The Year Before the Flood: A Story of New Orleans*, he demonstrates the preferential and often destructive hand of history, memory, and commemoration as practiced by the city, and the disadvantaging results for black New Orleanians.

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War, these statues were a part of that terrorism as much as a burning cross on someone's lawn; they were erected purposefully to send a strong message to all who walked in their shadows about who was still in charge in this city. Should you have further doubt about the true goals of the Confederacy, in the very weeks before the war broke out, the Vice President of the Confederacy, Alexander Stephens, made it clear that the Confederate cause was about maintaining slavery and white supremacy. He said in his now famous "corner-stone speech" that the Confederacy's "cornerstone rests upon the great truth, that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery—subordination to the superior race—is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first in the history of the world based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth." [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/mitch-landrieu-speech-confederate-monuments\\_us\\_59243ebce4b03b485cb5122b](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/mitch-landrieu-speech-confederate-monuments_us_59243ebce4b03b485cb5122b)

<sup>15</sup> On New Orleans's political climate post Katrina, George Lipsitz argues that "the federal, state, and municipal governments and local elected officials (including blacks) from both major parties [conspire] with private developers and investors to make sure that displaced residents of housing projects and poor neighborhoods cannot return to the city or participate meaningfully in planning its future." Although Lipsitz's comments were most likely directed at the Nagin administration, Mayor Landrieu has done little to reverse these trends and, by extension, has contributed to the black exile syndrome New Orleans is still experiencing. *Ibid*, pg. 284



Sublette's tale begins when the legacy of the French Quarter was threatened with destruction on the part of the Federally funded Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways—an initiative begun in 1956, which built 42,500 miles of highways by 1973—antifreeway activists rallied against the proposed building of a Mississippi River expressway running alongside the French Quarter in 1946. In the words of Sublette, "...New Orleans became the single most contentious battleground of the Freeway Revolt," adding that these, "expressway opponents were helped in 1965 when Stewart Udall, secretary of the interior, designated the French Quarter as a historic district." This act combined with the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, resulted in the defeat of the proposed riverfront superhighway. The lesser known and costly loss of this battle was the adjacent neighborhood of the Tremé, which was left out of Udall's proposed historic territory, despite its status as the oldest African American residential district in the country. Consequently, writes Sublette "They tore up the part of Claiborne Avenue that was [the Treme's] main boulevard...a long-elevated stretch of interstate overpass was constructed directly overhead where it had been, taking out a major African American business district and reconfiguring the Tremé's most important parade route."<sup>16</sup> Since the highway's construction, the environmental and economic impacts of this decision have been overwhelmingly negative for the community it runs over and through. The individuals most affected by this transaction were neither consulted, nor considered when their homes and businesses were disrupted and destroyed. How has this kind of disregard for black urban spaces been tolerated in a city like New Orleans where there is such a significant African American presence, with so many stories and legacies worthy of the city's protection?

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<sup>16</sup> Ned Sublette, *The Year Before the Flood: A Story of New Orleans*, Lawrence Hill Books: Chicago, 2009. pg 24-5

Lipsitz makes the argument that despite the significant debt of cultural gratitude owed to generations of underserved communities, such as historically black neighborhoods like the Tremé, “the city of New Orleans has systematically destroyed the spaces most important to black people.”<sup>17</sup> Despite its internationally celebrated notoriety, the “City of Sin” or “The Big Easy,” has suffered for, as much as it has profited from, its distinct role as the alluring, yet dangerous pleasure center of the United States. By way of example, I reference an article published in September of 2005, just days after the city (so-loved) was flooded by the disastrous breach of the levees. At that time several sources in both the national and international press weighed the cultural and historical significance of the city against the substantial financial costs of rebuilding, citing the city’s supposed mismanagement as one of many reasons it should be allowed to disappear from the map.<sup>18</sup> The question on many people’s minds was, quite frankly, whether the city and its legacy were worth salvaging?

“Don’t Rebuild New Orleans” is Jack Shafer’s impassioned, yet callous plea for the nation and the citizens of New Orleans to recognize the city for what it was (from his perspective) and move on. And in spite of its bias, Shafer’s article and many editorials like it, focused on the exceptionalism(s) associated with representations of New Orleans on film and depicted by the mainstream media that deemed the city unworthy of saving. His article begins,

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<sup>17</sup> George Lipsitz, *Ibid*, pg. 273-4 In one such example Lipsitz writes “The decision by local authorities to rename Place Congo as Beaugard Square in honor of a Confederate general prefigured subsequent insults and incursions, including the destruction of the Treme Market in the 1930s. In the uptown area, Dryades Street served as a center of commerce and culture for African Americans until white merchants moved their shops to the suburbs or went out of business entirely rather than concede to demands of civil rights activists in the 1960s to employ African Americans as workers in their stores... The construction of Louis Armstrong Park, however, destroyed much of what was Congo Square and reconfigured the street front along Rampart.”

<sup>18</sup> These debates also focused on the illogic of rebuilding a city below sea level, that would always be vulnerable to the wrath of mother nature. Within *Sustaining New Orleans*, Barbara Eckstein describes what she terms the “geoeconomic irony of its place.” pg.8-9

“Nobody can deny New Orleans’s cultural primacy or its historical importance. But before we refloat the sunken city...let’s investigate what sort of place Katrina destroyed.” Shafer’s critique, which I quote at length, depicts the “sunken city” as irredeemable in more ways than one, which is a critique that continued to resurface as a prominent strand of the ongoing discourse regarding New Orleans’s future:

The city’s romance is not the reality for most who live there. It’s a poor place, with about 27% of the population of 484,000 living under the poverty line, and it’s a black place, where 67% are African-American. In 65% of families living in poverty, no husband is present. These are the people whom Katrina hit the hardest. New Orleans’s public schools, which are 93% black, have failed their citizens. The state of Louisiana rates 47% of New Orleans schools as "Academically Unacceptable" and another 26% are under "Academic Warning." About 25% of adults have no high-school diploma ...Little wonder the city’s homicide rate stands at 10 times the national average. New Orleans puts the "D" into dysfunctional. Only a sadist would insist on resurrecting this concentration of poverty, crime and deplorable schools. Yet that’s what New Orleans’s cheerleaders -- both natives and tourists -- are advocating.<sup>19</sup>

There are many things I could say about Shafer’s assessment of the city, but for now I’d like to focus my attention on his overt racialization (read: blackening) of New Orleans which he depicts as a poverty stricken urban wasteland, overrun by ignorance and criminal activity and, therefore, underserving of the public’s adoration or the government’s financial assistance. Not to be singled out, this article and its author outline the “hopeless” perceptions of the city (widely circulated) before and after Katrina in public discourses that portrayed New Orleans as always already ruined or destined for failure.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Jack Shafer. “Don’t Rebuild New Orleans” *National Post*, Sep 10, 2005. Also, found at [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/press\\_box/2005/09/dont\\_refloat.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/press_box/2005/09/dont_refloat.html)

<sup>20</sup> Here I read Shafer’s article through the lens of “Haiti’s Nightmare and the Lessons of History,” by Michel-Rolph Trouillot featured in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Beacon Press Books: Boston, 1995. Trouillot makes a similar observation about the exceptionalism thrust upon Haiti, a black space in the global imagination, articulating the potential implications for those attempting to “diagnose” the country’s political turmoil under such (mis)perceptions. Trouillot’s thoughts are as follows: “Haitian exceptionalism takes many forms. [However,] the most dangerous and resilient is the idea that the Haitian political quagmire is due to some congenital disease of the Haitian mind. Such a conclusion makes Haiti’s political dilemma immune to rational explanation and

Statistics like those quoted in Shafer's article are often emphasized to negatively reflect upon African Americans for the deplorable conditions they produce for themselves, rather than cited as the socially engineered outcomes of historical racism and ongoing systemic oppression. However, countless scholars make a convincing case for the ways in which the devastating revelations of Hurricane Katrina went above and beyond the seemingly unique problems of rebuilding a poorly situated city, subjected to the frequent battery of storms, with long standing infrastructural issues such as crime and poverty. Lipsitz observes:

The hurricane was a natural disaster, to be sure, but its disproportionate impact on the black working class stemmed from decidedly unnatural, deliberate, and socially constructed causes. For decades and even centuries, the unchecked power of the plantation bloc in the Mississippi Delta has led to policies deliberately designed to make white property more valuable than black humanity, to craft increase in institutional rents for the rich out of the suffering of the black working class. The organized abandonment of poor and working-class black people in the region preceded the hurricane and contributed significantly to its devastating impact.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, what became apparent, during and after the storm, were the disproportionate effects of catastrophe upon society's oppressed and disadvantaged: the poor, people of color, the disabled, and the elderly, to name of few. Many of whom were already struggling in their daily lives with issues like housing shortages, incarceration/criminalization, and limited options for economic or educational advancement. Furthermore, the State's inability to facilitate "mandatory" evacuations or assist with rebuilding efforts for all has since come under scrutiny

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therefore to solutions that could be both just and practical." In other words, the critical stances Trouillot describes are corrupted by pathologies of blackness and paternalistic colonial legacies such as the white man's burden, which assumes that race and/or gender are the primary determinants of who can and cannot effectively govern themselves. Noticeably analogous rhetoric appears in the diagnostic narratives of post Katrina New Orleans that discuss or insist upon outside intervention, because this overwhelmingly black city so desperately needs saving; primarily, from itself.

<sup>21</sup> George Lipsitz, *Ibid*, pg. 283-4

for the significant class bias these concepts expose and the challenge these options can pose to those without sufficient resources.

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Cultural tourism plays a substantial role in sustaining the local economy of this city and, to an even greater extent, the celebration and recognition of New Orleans culture has played a tremendous role in the city's efforts to heal post Katrina. In recognizing New Orleans as a black city (i.e. a place that has benefited tremendously from the cultural contributions of Black Americans) my hope is to redirect the attention of the city's cultural celebrants to the plight of present day Black New Orleanians, particularly, the black and the poor, who are counted among some of the most underemployed, undereducated, incarcerated and socially devalued citizens in the city. Lipsitz suggests that "people all over the world have been inspired, entertained, and sustained by the cultural creativity of the black working class in New Orleans...but the politics behind the masks need to be discerned, appreciated, and acted upon, as well."<sup>22</sup> The political messages behind the masks are many, but one of the consistent themes running throughout black art is that black lives (should) matter and that black culture, in its numerous and varied iterations, should not simply be consumed, appropriated, or commodified without recognition of the humanity from which it stems.

For my part, I recognize that "Culture" is not a stable concept and that black culture is as diverse and multifaceted as those producing said culture. It is not my intention to generalize or promote some limited or definitive construction of "black culture." Nor does my dissertation seek to participate in debates on "authenticity," as it applies to theories about African American

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<sup>22</sup> George Lipsitz, *Ibid*, pg 287

culture throughout history and/or cultural authenticity in the context of black New Orleans.<sup>23</sup> I am, however, interested in parallels between the performance of blackness versus the lived experience of blackness, as well as the moments when these experiences meet through the production of art, literature, and various cultural artifacts. E. Patrick Johnson's *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* argues that "blackness does not only reside in the theatrical fantasy of the white imaginary that is then projected onto black bodies, nor is it always consciously acted out; rather, it is also the inexpressible yet undeniable racial experience of black people—the ways in which the 'living of blackness' becomes a material way of knowing."<sup>24</sup> Like Johnson, this nexus between lived experience and the performance of blackness (conscious or otherwise) will provide much of the basis for my literary and cultural analysis. Additional studies guiding my discussion of culture and performance are the aforementioned *Cities of the Dead* by Joseph Roach as well as Hortense Spillers' *Black, White, and In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. Most notably, Spillers' assertion that "at any given moment, theories about African American culture and its manifold contents are partial and incomplete... In other words, the culture, because it locates a synthesis, as well as symptom of resistance, shows all the instabilities of definition and practice."<sup>25</sup> As such, my work

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<sup>23</sup> E. Patrick Johnson. *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*. Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2003. On black culture and the authenticity debate, E. Patrick Johnson writes, "in the context of black American history, one would find that, even in relation to nationalism, the notion of 'authentic' blackness has always been contested: the discourse of 'house niggers' vs. 'field niggers'; Sojourner Truth's insistence on a black female subjectivity in relation to the black polity; Booker T. Washington's call for vocational skill over W.E.B. Du Bois's 'talented tenth'; Richard Wright's critique of Zora Neale Hurston's focus on the 'folk' over the plight of the black man; Eldridge Cleaver's caustic attack on James Baldwin's homosexuality as 'anti-black' and 'anti-male'; urban northerners' condescending attitudes toward rural southerners and vice versa..." p. 3-4

<sup>24</sup> E. Patrick Johnson, *Ibid*, pg. 9. He writes, "...performance and blackness are distinct discourses with their own agendas, 'sidewinders' traveling in their own directions... I examine the site where these slippery signifiers both cross paths and diverge..."

<sup>25</sup> Hortense Spillers, *Black White and In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*, University Press of Chicago, 2003 pg. 3

can only hope to succeed in providing a partial picture/consideration of black culture and by extension, black southern culture, rather than a totalizing theory or discussion on these subjects.

That said, I intend to bring several discourses on Black culture, New Orleans culture, and Southern culture together to make a compelling argument regarding the political efficacy of black art in New Orleans's post Katrina cultural moment, while demonstrating how this moment or movement has greater sociopolitical ramifications both nationally and globally. Specifically, I'm arguing that while the storm and its extensive destruction produced long standing social, economic, and environmental upheaval for residents of the city, with disproportionate affects for African Americans living throughout the Gulf South, it has also resulted in a creative outpouring from black writers, artists, and activists utilizing their talents and their voices to shine a light on these imbalances and working to improve lackluster conditions for black Americans here and everywhere. In just one example of the calculated upheavals for city residents following Hurricane Katrina, Naomi Klein's *Shock Doctrine* opens with a critical look at the dissolution of New Orleans' public-school system and massive firing of teachers/union members, which was replaced by a system of private institutions run at a profit and subsidized by the state. Klein, "call[s] these orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities, 'disaster capitalism.'"<sup>26</sup> In short, disaster capitalism, exploits the temporary chaos of crisis in order to "...develop alternatives to existing policies to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable."<sup>27</sup> However, the Post Katrina political climate and it's perceived injustices has also resulted in an outpouring of criticism, art, and social movement

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<sup>26</sup> Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. Picador: New York, 2007. Pg. 6

<sup>27</sup> Naomi Klein, *Ibid*, pg. 7

across the Gulf South, on behalf of artists and activists alike, eager to intervene in these predatory initiatives.

What are some of the “official” qualifications required to identify or define a cultural movement? Sharon L. Jones once argued that the Harlem Renaissance, “represent[ed] an artificial movement constructed by intellectuals and activists such as W.E.B. Dub Bois, Alain Locke, and Jessie Fauset who viewed art as a means of promoting social, economic, and political change.”<sup>28</sup> Thereby suggesting that cultural movements are made, in part, by those attempting to document and understand their moment of historical significance. As such, the critical scholarship produced on the subject of the Harlem Renaissance since the 1920s and 30s contains numerous examples of how and why we might begin to assess our contemporary moment for similar qualifications. While there are numerous and significant differences between the post Katrina political moment and the sociopolitical climate that produced the Harlem Renaissance, I’m attempting to discuss contemporary art and contexts, about which, comparatively less has been written. Therefore, I plan to supplement my analysis of New Orleans cultural movement—a Southern Renaissance in its own right—with the generous archive produced by writers, art critics, and scholars on the Harlem Renaissance.

In “African American Art and Critical Discourse Between World Wars,” Mary Ann Calo suggests that “...the leaders of this so-called Negro or Harlem Renaissance believed in the capacity of artistic expression to alter deeply ingrained assumptions of black inferiority and eliminate prejudice, a phenomenon scholar David Levering Lewis has referred to subsequently

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<sup>28</sup> Sharon L. Jones, *Rereading The Harlem Renaissance: Race, Class, and Gender in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, and Dorothy West*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press. 2002.



as ‘civil rights by copyright.’”<sup>29</sup> Similar intentions motivate much of the artistic output currently taking the Post Katrina Gulf South as its primary subject, linking these two moments in the history of African American cultural production—a topic I’ll discuss at length in Chapter 2. My goals for labeling the art/activism across the Gulf South a “movement” are twofold: 1. Once published, my work becomes a part of the public discourse and informs (encourages) those already participating in this Post Katrina cultural moment of its sociopolitical value, historically positions me within this moment, while inspiring others to lend legitimacy to this theory with their own intellectual and artistic contributions. 2. As with the art, theory, and criticism on the Harlem Renaissance, I want to contribute to a theoretical discourse that will extend the life of this conversation on Post Katrina New Orleans/elevate its status within the context of Black Studies.

Although I’m writing about relatively recent events in U.S. history, Hurricane Katrina scholarship has already generated a substantial archive. Presently, more than a decade after the storm, there is a considerable amount of journalism, criticism, and literature to read and learn about just how culturally significant Katrina’s outcomes have been for New Orleans, documenting the anti-racist/social justice advocacy taking place across the Gulf South. Riché Richardson argues that the timing is right for such a Southern shift in Black Studies, because the “urban bias” present in this academic field is no longer reflective of the current demographics for African Americans living and working across the U.S. Richardson contends:

this ‘urban bias’ in criticism and theory has reflected the modernization and globalization processes of the twentieth century. It is necessary to recognize its manifestations in the African American context, and its complements in such academic fields as black studies, as a byproduct of a range of historical

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<sup>29</sup> Mary Ann Calo, “African American Art and Critical Discourse Between World Wars”. *American Quarterly*, Vol. 51.3: 580-621, Sep., 1999., pg. 581

phenomena, including the Great Migration to the urban North. (Current statistics show that the demography of the African American population has once again shifted back to the South, a phenomenon that is also helping produce more complex racial formations that defy the prevailing logic about race in the nation in and beyond the South.)<sup>30</sup>

So, while a Southern Renaissance may seem like a contradiction in terms, I believe the timing is ideal for such a consideration and to hopefully build upon the productive social justice momentum generated post storm, before the Post Katrina numbness and malaise eventually set in. Furthermore, Richardson claims that “...a line of reactionary policymaking...was inaugurated with the notorious ‘southern strategy’ after the Civil Rights era, which was designed in part to reverse the gains of the Civil Rights era that promised a more equitable society,” suggesting that we are well overdue for such a moment/movement.<sup>31</sup>

Chapter 1 of the dissertation discusses the development of New Orleans’s cultural tourism throughout the first half of the twentieth century, examining the popular mythologies that have taken shape in our national imagination between now and then. The 1920s, 30s, and 40s, as these were the decades when the city experienced its mass tourism boom, assisted in part by the mythologies, exceptionalisms, and stereotypes made popular in literature by authors such as Lyle Saxon and Robert Tallant. As such, I read *Fabulous New Orleans*, a cultural guidebook written by Saxon, as an extension of this largely white authored commentary on New Orleans, which claims that the city is a place best experienced or understood through its performance/display of cultural exceptionalism. These performances are often intended to demonstrate the city’s history of cultural distinction from the rest of the country as well as to promote ethno-tourism, while their underlying subtext reinforces white superiority and an

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<sup>30</sup> Riché Richardson, *Ibid*, pg. 16

<sup>31</sup> Riché Richardson, *Ibid*, pg. 18

apparent mastery of exotic cultures. Post Katrina, it's my understanding that if there is any hope of redirecting the "economic engine" of mass tourism for the city of New Orleans, it is essential for contemporary residents to ascertain its origins as well as its implicit maintenance and reproduction of various systems of oppression, such as white supremacy. Thus far, Post Katrina Tourism (i.e. Disaster Tourism and Ethno-tourism) has done little to address the mass dispersal of black New Orleanians facilitated by the storm or hold city leader's accountable for their neglect of poor black urban spaces.

Chapter 2 focuses on the significant cultural response to Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, highlighting the incisive social criticism and poignant advocacy on behalf of the vulnerable and voiceless that has emerged since the storm. It's my ambition to bridge two conversations: One that considers the insights and strategies art and literature can provide in the struggle for social justice. And another which describes the efforts already underway to rectify or improve the conditions of those most devastated by Katrina. Accordingly, my chapter considers the ways in which black writers and artists producing work on Hurricane Katrina and its devastating effects for lower income African Americans throughout the Gulf South, share parallels with the social justice movements occurring throughout the region. Not only are their similarities to be found, but I argue that these artists are effectively participating in a critical and intellectual discourse that takes the leaders and policy makers of the United States to task for the discrepancies between its democratic ideals and practice. Ultimately, I seek to explore the ways in which Katrina and its traumas, combined with lengthy and inequitable rates of recovery in effected areas, have been the catalyst for a black arts/social movement akin to the Harlem Renaissance of the South.

Chapter 3 documents my experience as the project manager for a program called Wisdom of the Elders in New Orleans Louisiana (WOE) In March of 2016. WOE in New Orleans's focus on tracing family lineages and conducting individual life history interviews. Participants and I produced a community cookbook/recipe share that was designed to give everyone involved an opportunity to share food memories from their childhood and to discuss the cultural significance of food in a city like New Orleans. Significantly, this generation of black New Orleanians (ages 65 and older) represent a diminished population from a now bygone era for the city. The cultural trauma of Hurricane Katrina presently defines many resident's relationship to the city, however, that trauma is most acutely experienced by the elderly population; many of whom were born and raised in New Orleans and who are seeing it change dramatically over a condensed period of time. Their memories of Pre and Post Katrina New Orleans will someday exist in written or tap-recorded form only, and if my work with this particular group of African American seniors is any indication, their generation has countless stories to tell and they are unwilling to let "history" leave their voices out of both contemporary and future conversations about "their city". In an effort to recover some of the documentation and family memorabilia that had been lost to the flooding of Hurricane Katrina, participants and I often grappled with what could and couldn't be recovered, both in terms of personal remembrance and cultural continuity/heritage for the city of New Orleans.

Emily Badger of the *Washington Post* writes a persuasive article on black urban spaces becoming increasingly visible and connected through crisis. Among the cities she names, Badger discusses the infrastructural issues that lead to the catastrophes of New Orleans and Flint, and she details the police violence, coupled with the deterioration of human relationships that

resulted in Ferguson and Baltimore. Borrowing Professor Henry Louis Taylor's terminology, Badger classifies these locations as throwaway cities:

Flint is what I call a throwaway city...It was left by the big industries. It was left on its own, by the state, by taxpayers, by the county. And then such places must strike terrible financial bargains -- ticketing residents in Ferguson to generate money, downgrading the water supply in Flint to cut costs. The same shortage of funding also affects schools. The quality of schools alters children's futures. Those children remain in poverty as adults. And their own families live with the environmental costs of decades-old decisions on where to put highways, factories and power plants. These kinds of places are frequently home to minorities. And they often exist, too, within larger regions that do have resources.<sup>32</sup>

As such, throwaway cities like Flint and New Orleans get little to no lingering concern or they are all together forgotten once the cameras move on and the news coverage ceases to make them relevant. I'm not conflating these territories and their individual narratives of systemic inequality, rather, I work to demonstrate the ways in which black spaces are constantly under siege across the nation and to criticize the level of complacency with which these injustices are met. In the case of New Orleans, the focus for those outside of this community (or communities hit hardest by the destruction of Hurricane Katrina and the financial burdens that followed) shifts back to trivialities, such as the city's status as vacation destination. However, Badger argues that crises like those that took place in Ferguson and Baltimore, "point to the endurance in America of structural racism, of minorities disproportionately left vulnerable to the economy or the environment, of communities abandoned by taxpayer dollars, public interest and government oversight." The normalization of social inequity is a symptom that accompanies the mythologies we subscribe to about ourselves and our status as Americans. That is, until the next crisis occurs,

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<sup>32</sup> Emily Badger, "How Flint, Ferguson, and Baltimore are all connected," *The Washington Post.Com*, Jan. 25<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/01/25/how-flint-ferguson-and-baltimore-are-all-connected/>

and we are forced to confront the uncomfortable realities of black and brown disposability on our screens.

Within an essay titled “Love is Asymmetrical: James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*” Grant Farred argues that “Foremost among the concepts Baldwin radicalizes is love; and what it means to love those who would do the black Self harm.”<sup>33</sup> In one such radical expression of love, Baldwin addresses a letter to his young nephew (also named James, in Baldwin’s honor) on the ills of growing up black in America and speaks to the prospective strategies he will need to combat the hate that threatens to consume him (i.e. self-hate and the hate generated by white supremacy in America) He writes, “I know how black it looks today, for you. It looked bad that day, too, yes, we were trembling. We have not stopped trembling yet, but if we had not *loved* each other none of us would have survived. And now you must survive because we *love* you, and for the sake of your children and your children’s children.”<sup>34</sup> [my emphasis] In other words, the love of which Baldwin speaks is both an act of survival as well as an act of political resistance. Black love is necessary, to ourselves, yes, and yet, it’s an act that benefits many and a debt that can never adequately be repaid. It sustains and is itself, self-sustaining, in the recognition of our need of one another and of the substantial difference we can make in each other’s lives.

What does it look like to truly love a city? Or to love black people for that matter? What’s required in both word and action? And how are these questions inextricably linked in the case of New Orleans? As I reflect on these questions myself, I see my dissertation as a vehicle to outline an aspirational relationship to the city and the citizens who’ve captured my heart. For me,

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<sup>33</sup> Grant Farred, “Love is Asymmetrical, James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*” *Critical Philosophy of Race*, Vol. 3, No. 2 Special Issue: James Baldwin and Philosophy (2015) pg 292

<sup>34</sup> James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985*, St. Martin’s Press: New York, 1985. pg. 335

these questions are essential to my life in New Orleans and to my ongoing project as a young scholar to utilize literary and cultural criticism as a mechanism of social justice advocacy and reform. My partial response, at least at this early stage in my inquiry, is that you cannot claim to love or value New Orleans (the place or cultural manifestations of the place) and refuse to care about the realities affecting the lives of black people who live there because these are essentially coterminous acts. And if you are boasting of a love for this city that does not require you to work to improve upon the conditions described throughout my dissertation, then you can keep that love to yourself. My aspirations are not, however, limited to the city of New Orleans. Instead, I strive to construct an aspirational model to neglected people and places throughout the globe, which has become increasingly necessary in an era of black cities taking center stage via crisis and catastrophe.

## Chapter 1

### The Rise of Cultural Tourism in NOLA: Lyle Saxon, Literary New Orleans, and the Ethnographic Gaze

In August 2005, Americans watched large sections of New Orleans disappear under the floodwaters unleashed by Hurricane Katrina. A levee breach turned back the clock to 1718. Some television networks and newspaper editors could barely see beyond the French Quarter, as if the city remained a colonial outpost precariously perched on the banks of the Mississippi River...Only after several days did the nation awaken to the extent of the crisis...Perhaps the delayed reaction was the cost of being too dependent on tourism. How could anything serious happen in New Orleans? How important, after all, is a tourist town?<sup>35</sup>

- Anthony J. Stanonis, *Creating the Big Easy: New Orleans and the Emergency of Modern Tourism, 1918-1945*

What's your New Orleans story? What comes to mind when you think of this festive and historic town? Prior to the Fall of 2005, upon leaving New Orleans, whenever my hometown became known, people often posed questions regarding life in the "Big Easy." Typically, their interest stemmed from popular depictions of the city on film or in literature that rendered New Orleans a non-stop party or a parade of tourist delights. My stories of home were expected to confirm the dirt and debauchery or double down on the corruption and crime that were so well known across the country. To be fair, the city's notorious reputation is a partial invention of self-promotion that has played a significant and lucrative role in establishing New Orleans as a destination city/adult playground, who's tourist industry yields multibillion dollar profits each year.<sup>36</sup> Post Katrina, the tone of the questions I receive about life in this city have noticeably

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<sup>35</sup> Anthony J. Stanonis, *Creating the Big Easy: New Orleans and the Emergence of Modern Tourism, 1918-1945*, University of Georgia Press: Athens, 2006, pg. 25

<sup>36</sup> According to a study completed by the University of New Orleans (UNO) Hospitality Research Center for the New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau (NOCVB) and New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation (NOTMC), "In 2016, visitors to New Orleans spent \$7.41 billion dollars, a 5.1 percent increase compared to the visitor spending record set in 2015, and the city hosted a record-breaking 10.45 million visitors, the highest since 2004 and a 6.9 percent increase compared to 2015." <https://www.fqba.org/new-orleans-breaks-tourism-records-for-visitation-and-visitor-spending-in-2016/>



shifted. New images, such as families stranded on rooftops submerged in murky water, now surface in the global imagination associated with New Orleans and for a brief moment in time, the city became a very “real” place, seen primarily in the context of what we’d lost.

One of the essential elements of New Orleans’s cultural distinction and appeal are its resistance to change and its preservation of the past, both in the form of its customs and folkways as well as its architectural structures. Before the waters receded, there was a great deal of speculation about the extent of the damage done to this living archive, much of it, physically unsalvageable, now singularly preserved in the hearts and memories of a generation of New Orleanians faced with the daunting challenge of rebuilding and recovering the past. And, in yet another devastating blow to New Orleans’s cultural landscape, a large percentage of the city’s African American residents were unable to return post evacuation.<sup>37</sup> In the years following Katrina, tourist centers such as the French Quarter were given top priority by State officials and bounced back swiftly, while many poor and predominantly black neighborhoods remain neglected more than a decade after the storm. As such, my chapter considers the following: How did cultural tourism come to be established as such a lucrative enterprise in New Orleans and how have literary constructions of the city contributed to its national appeal? How has local tourism consistently relied on the entertainment value of black culture, while maintaining African American’s social inferiority? And how has this narrative been impacted by the events of Hurricane Katrina? Keeping in mind, that thus far, the post Katrina Disaster Tourism industry

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<sup>37</sup> Here I’m referring here to the nearly 100,000 black residents who were unable or unwilling to return after the hurricane. Why I refer to them as “key cultural producers” will become clear as I expand on the role and significance of African Americans as the often unrecognized and uncredited cultural producers for the city of New Orleans throughout this chapter.

has done little to address the mass dispersal of black New Orleanians catalyzed by the storm, city leader's neglect of poor black urban spaces, or helped residents struggling to rebuild their lives.

Throughout her book, *Sustaining New Orleans: Literature, Local Memory, and the Fate of a City*, Barbara Eckstein provides her readers with numerous examples of the unique and, at times bizarre, manifestations historical preservation has taken in the city of New Orleans in the twentieth century.<sup>38</sup> Eckstein's accounts illustrate just how important such efforts have been treated in a place like New Orleans, where history plus culture amounts to significant revenue:

the cultivation of desire for textures built over generations has been taken very seriously, at least in the sense that tourists pay to see it. The inhabitants are not, however, federally subsidized to be simulacra of themselves and the display of sexual license and cultural diversity remains as central to the city's economic base and culture of desire as historic preservation. The living folkways of New Orleans inhabitants, even in the tourist-trammeled Quarter, foil the inclination of some to make the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century city a gated model of colonial community like Williamsburg or a purely fabricated settlement like Disneyland. Desire by definition cannot contain its object. And it is this excess as much as any desire for safe diversion that attracts so many tourists to New Orleans.<sup>39</sup>

Presently, this tension between tourists in search of entertainment and city residents still working to rebuild their lives Post Katrina remains at the heart of this economic exchange. The city's efforts to capitalize on the voyeuristic and morbid curiosity of outsiders through the pointedly exploitative practice of "Disaster Tourism" only serves to reinforce New Orleans's reputation as one of the most commodified U.S. cities in the country. Eckstein contends that, "a city's survival, in today's urban parlance, inevitably evokes the term sustainability;" a term that she ultimately reconfigures to include the tenants of environmental health, social justice, and

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<sup>38</sup> Including a proposal on the part of a Harvard social scientist, David Reisman, in the mid-1950s "that New Orleans and its residents be federally subsidized as were Yellowstone and its denizens so that they might serve as a living history and culture lesson for Americans." Eckstein goes on to say that Reisman was not being facetious by making such a proposal, but his ideas were taken by many, though not intended, as a joke, pg. xi

<sup>39</sup> Barbara Eckstein, *Sustaining New Orleans: Literature, Local Memory, and the Fate of a City*, Routledge: New York, 2006. pg. 8

economic viability. To this end, she argues that, "...in many places our human need is not for economic growth but a 'need to redirect or economic engine into paths that are restorative rather than exploitative.'"<sup>40</sup> Post Katrina, it's my understanding that if there is any hope of redirecting the "economic engine" of mass tourism for the city of New Orleans, it is essential for us to understand its origins as well as its implicit maintenance and reproduction of various systems of oppression, such as white supremacy.

Accordingly, my chapter discusses the development of New Orleans's cultural tourism throughout the first half of the twentieth century, examining the popular mythologies that have taken shape in our national imagination between now and then, which have transformed New Orleans into a destination city as well as a "non-place."<sup>41</sup> As much money as tourism generates for the city from year to year, the average citizen doesn't see or feel the benefits of this economic infusion and there are frequent debates among those who call New Orleans home about the drawbacks of this recurring flood of visitors to our streets. The average tourist to "the Big Easy" is hoping to escape their mundanity through diverse and exotic experiences, distinguished by indulgence, stimulation, and diversion from their everyday lives. The antagonism that ensues between locals and tourist occurs at the collision of myth and "reality," where New Orleans as both the literal place and the cultural construct or object of desire meet. But in this standoff, whose needs get prioritize and, in turn, receive greater attention from city leaders who have, historically, tended to value profit over people? It's been said that mass tourism in New Orleans is an industry constructed by whites and for whites and yet, it is an industry that also relies

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<sup>40</sup> Barbara Eckstein, *Ibid*, pg. 5

<sup>41</sup> See epilogue, for exposition on the particular phenomenon I'm interested in addressing in this chapter. New Orleans ceases to exist in the national imagination outside of its narrow designation as a tourist town; a quality it shares with some Caribbean locales, seen primarily as vacation destinations, but universally ignored as "real" places where people live and die.

heavily on the cultural representations of African Americans. Ultimately, my discussion of cultural tourism reinforces such claims, however, my work also argues that the city's insistence on public memory as a cultural cornerstone has resulted in an unwieldy social and public arena in which the black individuals it seeks to erase, destroy, or render undesirable continue to assert their worth and renegotiate the terms imposed upon them.

Within, *Creating the Big Easy: New Orleans and the Emergence of Modern Tourism, 1918-1945* Anthony J. Stanonis suggests that any study of tourism is "...an examination of the relationship between local boosters and travelers...[presumably because] the industry developed as city leaders responded to vacationers' interests."<sup>42</sup> Beginning as early as the 1890s, several external trends in our nation's development and industrialization contributed to the establishment of New Orleans's profitable tourist enterprise, including the expansion of roads and railways across the country, the growing prominence/manipulation of media such as radios and movies, as well as the invention and increased popularity of automotive travel. For my purposes, I will be focusing on the heyday of New Orleans tourism, the 1920s-40s, as these were the years when the city experienced its mass tourism boom, assisted in part by the mythologies, exceptionalisms, and stereotypes made popular in literary depictions of the city by authors and folklorists such as Lyle Saxon and Robert Tallant. According to Stanonis, "between the First and Second World Wars ...several writers from the period forged careers by writing books about New Orleans that have remained in print and [widely] read..." Authors, such as Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner, Grace King, Truman Capote, and Tennessee Williams produced "description(s) of New Orleans that both captivated readers and turned mundane built environments into alluring

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<sup>42</sup> Anthony J. Stanonis, *Ibid*, pg. 23

tourist attractions.”<sup>43</sup> In addition to these romantic and idyllic literary descriptions, advertisers piggybacked on such imagery promoting travel to New Orleans by juxtaposing its old and new world flare, while working to establish NOLA as a destination city in its own right. Popular airlines, such as Delta offered newly routed direct flights to New Orleans with such taglines as “Southern Charm in a skyscraper setting,” and The Southern Railway System worked to provide the shortest rail route to cities such as New Orleans and Atlanta.<sup>44</sup> Modern technology made the nation and the world by extension a smaller, more accessible place, but there remained a simultaneous desire for the “good ole days” and New Orleans was often marketed as these contradictory desires come to life.

Writing set in the city have served as unofficial advertisements, promoting the revelry and intrigue that await visitors to New Orleans. Stanonis argues that the “works of writers merged with the efforts of tourism boosters to enhance the images associated with New Orleans: the elegance of Creoles, the skill of jazzmen, the seductiveness of courtesans, the joy of Mardi Gras maskers, the romance and exoticism of the French Quarter.”<sup>45</sup> Specifically, he suggests that an outpouring of writing in the 20s “reshaped” and “popularized” America’s viewpoint of the

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<sup>43</sup> Anthony J. Stanonis, *Ibid*, pg. 2

<sup>44</sup> See original advertisement in appendix on pg. Small text at the bottom left of the Delta ad reads “A city of diversified charm in a land of contrast...that’s New Orleans, where the grillwork of early French homes frames a masterpiece of business-world architecture. Down South the ever-changing new stands in relief against the unchanging old. Today, Delta Air Lines helps speed the war-vital business of the South’s new steel mills, chemical plants, shipyards, petroleum plants, bomber factories and textile mills. In peacetime, Delta courtesy and efficiency will help you enjoy the hospitable, tradition-rich South—land of inspiring historic shrines, ante-bellum mansions, cypress-lined bayous, rich-scented gardens...”

<sup>45</sup> On the multivalent and evolving symbology of New Orleans in literature Stanonis writes, “A business-driven, dangerous city slowly became enticing, more accessible, and safer—at least in literary accounts. The creation of romanticized images had more to do with rescuing for posterity traces of a rapidly acculturating French population and selling stories at a time when local color reached the height of popularity than with attracting visitors to the Crescent City. Few Americans at the time could afford to walk through the streets of New Orleans in the footsteps of Cable and Hearn. But those who did often interpreted what they saw in terms of what they had read.” *Ibid*, pg. 18

“Big Easy,” focusing on a few of the most significant and enduring legacies that the city refuses to shake: 1) New Orleans is widely regarded as a dangerous city, overrun by crime and corruption 2) It’s also considered to be a decadent city where pleasure is the priority and vice of every kind runs amuck. 3) It’s a Foreign city, with a history of French and Spanish rule as well as an international port with a multifaceted immigrant narrative 4) It was the largest slave market in the U.S. South, therefore, it’s a city with a significant black population and Afro-Caribbean influences, still plagued by the long-term effects of institutional racism and social inequality 5) It’s a Carnival town, widely known for its festivals, food, and music. And yet, it’s also a city that has strategically capitalized upon the profound nostalgia of the North American South for decades as an essential component of its cultural appeal. Historically, its foreign-ness and its blackness have both been cited as sources of the danger and deviance visitors risk encountering in the city, thusly, narratives of white supremacy have proved essential to its public image to restore “order” and promote safety amid the seeming chaos.

Few texts present us with the opportunity to engage with each of these “New Orleansisms” quite as well as Lyle Saxon’s cultural guidebook entitled *Fabulous New Orleans*, which is where my study on the literary branch of cultural tourism begins. “The very name ‘New Orleans’” Saxon begins, “brings to mind a Mardi Gras pageant moving through the streets at night: crowds of masqueraders, rearing horses, great decorated floats glowing with color and glittering with gold-leaf. Aboard the swaying cars are centaurs, mermaids, satyrs, gods and men, illuminated by flaring torches carried by strutting negroes robed in red.”<sup>46</sup> Present day, Mardi Gras remains high on the list of popular imagery linked to the city, however, carnivals underlying commentary on race and the history of class divisions it showcases rarely get

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<sup>46</sup> Lyle Saxon, *Fabulous New Orleans*, Pelican Publishing Company, Inc: Gretna, Louisiana 1995, pg. xi Originally published by The Century Company in New York in 1928.

acknowledged by those taking part in this local tradition. In response to Saxon's visuals, Eckstein observes that this "...image climbs aboard a metonymy already set in motion during Reconstruction by boosters such as the Krewe of Rex," which cast New Orleans as, "...a place of enticing fables, but fables written and staged at the direction of carnival clubs or krewes, the oldest and most influential of which were and are white businessmen, bankers, and other moneyed professionals."<sup>47</sup> As such, I read *Fabulous New Orleans* as an extension of this largely white authored commentary on New Orleans, which frequently claims that the city is a place best experienced or understood through its performance/display of cultural difference. From the early 20<sup>th</sup> century up to the present, these performances are carried out to demonstrate the city's history of cultural exceptionalism, to promote ethno-tourism, and to reinforces white superiority through it's apparent mastery of exotic cultures. Thusly, I analyze portions of this popular cultural guidebook, focusing primarily on the spectacles of blackness described throughout and what I'm referring to as a continual feedback loop of cultural distortion practiced by mainstream tourism by and for white Americans. This distortion is characterized by an over reliance on notions of transparency when documenting/observing other cultures, filtered through the racial essentialism often associated with the ethnocentric gaze.

On February 13, 1929, the *Times-Picayune*, printed an article entitled "Congratulations Extended Author by Mayor O'Keefe...." after a publicity event where Saxon gifted a copy of *Fabulous New Orleans* to the city official. At said event, an advisor to the Mayor made the subsequent statement: "I do not believe anything else has served so well to advertise New Orleans as Mr. Saxon's book," which was followed by the announcement that New Orleans would be spending "450,000\$ on a national campaign advertising the city." As for Saxon, he

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<sup>47</sup> Barbara Eckstein, *Ibid*, pg. 13

was told that his book had been of “untold advertising value to the city.”<sup>48</sup> Undoubtedly, this display of civic endorsement was arranged following the positive reviews of Saxon’s text which were being circulated throughout the country, much like this review printed June 9, 1928 out of Detroit, Michigan. His reviewer writes:

New Orleans is well called the City of Mystery and this account of the dramatic events that took place during its life under French, Spanish, and American flags is as fascinating as fiction. Floods and plagues, the gay masque of Mardi Gras, duels that grew out of applause for singers at the French opera, strange voodoo rites—and the author attended one not so long ago—snake worship and other unusual characteristics of this city that mark it as different from any other in the United States are described and discussed. Mr. Saxon is a native of Louisiana and the author of ‘Father Mississippi,’ a volume which appeared last year, earning him the title of the ‘new chronicler of the south.’<sup>49</sup>

Quite the lofty title to bestow upon a “local color” writer, and yet Saxon would go on to receive increasing fame across the country for his many publications on Louisiana’s history and culture. Despite the mutually beneficial relationship between Saxon and city leaders, many critics of his literary career argue that Saxon’s success was built, primarily, on exploiting New Orleans’s negative national stereotypes.

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First published in 1928, *Fabulous New Orleans* is a work of creative non-fiction written by Saxon containing historical lore, cultural exposition, and popular mythologies; stories generated, in part, from the author’s own personal experience of the city, or so he would have his readers believe. Saxon (1891-1946) or “Mr. New Orleans” as he was sometimes called was a well-known writer and journalist for *The Times-Picayune*, who directed the Louisiana branch of

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<sup>48</sup> *Times-Picayune*, Feb. 13, 1929. Special Collections Division of Tulane University

<sup>49</sup> “Review of *Fabulous New Orleans*,” June 9, 1928, Detroit, Michigan, Special Collections Division of Tulane University



the Federal Writer's Project (A New Deal program overseen by the Works Progress Administration or WPA). Under Saxon's leadership, the Louisiana branch of the FWP produced two travel guides—the *WPA Guide to New Orleans* (1938) and *Louisiana: A Guide to the State* (1941) and a folklore collection—*Gumbo Ya Ya: A Collection of Louisiana Folk Tales* (1945). Serving primarily as travel guide for visitors to the city, *Fabulous New Orleans* exemplifies the kinds of popular cultural guidebooks being produced in the 20s, 30s, and 40s. Saxon's book tells the story of the city's founding and attempts to give the reader an impression of the distinctive character of New Orleans at various moments in time, while describing the evolving tension between old and new world mentalities (i.e. Catholic Creole New Orleans versus Protestant Anglo American New Orleans) preserved within this perpetually "foreign" locale. And, despite inviting readers into a unique and "exotic" setting, the stories in *Fabulous New Orleans* are set against the minimal, yet discernable backdrop of increasingly modern national contexts, concluding in Prohibition era America.<sup>50</sup>

However, before turning to the text, I'd like to take a closer look at the man who went to such great lengths to be an "unquestioned" authority on all things New Orleans. Purportedly born in Baton Rouge—a fact that has since been disproven by Saxon's biographers—Saxon's public persona as an "unofficial" city representative was the result of local/communal prestige he'd managed to cultivate amongst New Orleans natives and his success in the national literary

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<sup>50</sup> Anthony J. Stanonis, *Ibid*, pg. 37 According to Stanonis, Saxon had to strike a delicate balance in his writing, catering to audiences who both wanted to visit a more modern and "sanitized" version of New Orleans, while reveling in the deviance that had once been pursuable in dark corners of the city. He writes, "Prohibition and the 1917 closure of Storyville, the city's legal red-light district... dampened spirits as debauchery sought sanctuary behind closed doors. While the perception of a sensual New Orleans lingered, tourists with nineteenth-century expectations were destined for disappointment. By depicting a modern New Orleans largely cleansed of crude behavior, Saxon helped the city attract conservative tourists, who condemned the city's earlier moral excesses. But, by drawing attention to the city's lurid past and suggesting that an underground legacy persisted, Saxon's writings enticed tourists interested in vicariously indulging in carnality."

marketplace.<sup>51</sup> Evidence of Saxon's prolific career can be found in a 1938 review of the author's body of work entitled "Saxon Known Everywhere—Best Here," printed by the Baton-Rouge *State-Times*, which recounts some of Saxon's best sellers, including his first short story, "Cane River," which appeared in *The Dial Magazine* in 1926 and which was later included in the O'Brien and O. Henry collections. He also wrote *Father Mississippi*, a history of this turbulent and prominent river, which was published in 1927, followed by *Fabulous New Orleans* in 1928, *Old Louisiana*, a study of plantation life, published in 1929, and in 1930 he wrote *Lafitte, the Pirate*, which was later adapted for the major motion picture, *The Buccaneer*.<sup>52</sup> Clearly, a trusted authority on the city/state that made him famous, yet the question remains: what did Saxon's work *and* his public image hold that made him such a widely embraced candidate for the role of literary and cultural representative?

Saxon astutely presented himself as a descendant of "good stock" who derived from a family of white Southern planters which connected him to antebellum fantasies of a simpler time

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<sup>51</sup> Rosan Augusta Jordan and Frank De Caro, "In this Folk-Lore Land': Race, Class, Identity, and Folklore Studies in Louisiana." Within their article, these scholars make frequent reference to Saxon's falsified origins from Baton Rouge and his invention of the Plantation owning family of Saxons from Louisiana: They write that "from the beginning of his life Saxon was a non-Southerner—at least in literal terms of his birth outside Dixie--though he lived in the Deep South, with its strong feelings about regional identity and who did and did not belong within its social boundaries. He even let it be widely believed that he had been born in Baton Rouge, to the extent that this "fact" appears in much of the earlier biographical material about him." Several pages later they discuss the reality of Saxon's upbringing, noting that "The Saxons do not seem to have been planters. Indeed, Saxon's biographer Cathy Chance Harvey was able to find no family plantation in the days of Saxon's childhood or youth. Yet in his books he provides a number of supposedly autobiographical accounts that link him to one or more family plantations and that in general evoke a childhood world of the big house with its fields, levees, and Negro servants." pg. 49, 52

<sup>52</sup> "Saxon Known Everywhere—Best Here," *State-Times*, Baton Rouge. March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1938. The article also discusses Saxon's ongoing work with the WPA to produce additional guidebooks, stating that: "At present state director of the federal writers' project in Louisiana, [Saxon] is directing his workers in the compiling of three books concerning the state: the first of which 'The New Orleans City Guide,' has just been published and is receiving wide acclaim. Perhaps the most comprehensive work on New Orleans ever published, this book was done entirely by Workers Progress Administration writers and research workers. Magnificently illustrated, it was published by Houghton Mifflin company of Boston and is presently being issued to libraries over the state by the Louisiana Library commission. It contains chapters on history, folk-lore, cuisine, motor tours of the French Quarter, the Garden District, and so on.

when racial harmony was exemplified through white supremacy and happy black servitude. As Saxon had learned from his predecessors, collecting black folklore was one way to boost his social status by linking him to plantation society and white aristocracy. Within an article titled “‘In This Folk-Lore Land’: Race, Class, Identity and Folklore Studies in Louisiana,” Rosan Augusta Jordan and Frank De Caro discuss the ways in which African American folklore was routinely appropriated by white, upper crust, members of the New Orleans branch of the American Folklore Society in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>53</sup> As a precursor to the FWP, members of the American Folklore Society were tasked with documenting Louisiana culture, yet their work pulled heavily from black sources and exhibited the kinds of implicit bias white collectors frequently brought to African American folklore. Jordan and De Caro observe:

The very act of "collecting folklore" (indeed, their very literacy) set up the collectors as socially superior (a factor inherent in much folklore collecting, of course). But beyond that, the folk material itself could serve to reinforce identity by seeming to stress by its very nature the otherness of those who possessed it. The heavy dialect of the tales the members published stressed that, as did the sense that the possessors of this lore, unlike its collectors, were superstitious-believing in ghosts and jack-o-lanterns and witches who shed their skin to become cats-or religious in a child-like way-believing fanciful stories about how trees came by their characteristics.

Dialect stories or stories from the plantation (i.e. “Stories Mammy Told Me”) where in high demand as they perpetuated a rigid racial hierarchy that early folklorists were eager to reinforce.

As many scholars have speculated, Saxon’s bisexuality was a source of insecurity for the author

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<sup>53</sup> Rosan Augusta Jordan and Frank De Caro, “‘In this Folk-Lore Land’: Race, Class, Identity, and Folklore Studies in Louisiana.” *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 109, No. 431 (Winter, 1996), pp. 31-59 They write, “From 1892 to 1896 the association met monthly to discuss folklore and to encourage its collection and preservation. The membership was all white, but both the Creole and the American (that is, ‘Anglo-Saxon’) communities were represented. In addition, the members were mostly from ‘society’ (but not necessarily from families with money); many had connections with (white) plantation families; their names appeared often in the society columns of the local newspapers...the folklore collected and discussed by association members was heavily African American in its provenance. The minutes of the association during its first year and a half record numerous instances of members reading or reporting on ‘Negro stories’ and Louisiana stories ‘of African origin.’” Pg. 40

because he was aware that his sexuality would not be accepted by many of his friends and acquaintances.<sup>54</sup> As such, fictionalizing his origins was just one of many ways that Saxon attempted to re-establish himself as the heteronormative white male authority he was so eager to project to his readers.

The 1995 reprint of *Fabulous New Orleans* contains a second introduction written by Robert Tallant, Saxon's longtime friend and protégé, serving as an elegiac tribute to the author, who succumbed to cancer in 1946. Tallant's secondary introduction memorializes Saxon for the significant role he played in salvaging the Vieux Carré from certain demise with his renovation of "a sixteen-room house" on Royal Street as well as the popular artist salon which he later hosted from his home. According to Tallant, Saxon's intervention resulted in what's been referred to as the French Quarter Renaissance of the 1920s and 30s and he played a vital role in mentoring aspiring authors who visited the city, specifically in search of his guidance. However, despite overwhelmingly positive reviews of their work, Tallant and Saxon were not universally praised for their contributions to the study of American Folklore. Writer and anthropologist, Zora Neale Hurston was an outspoken critic of the "shoddy" work exhibited by writer Robert Tallant in his WPA sponsored research in *Voodoo in New Orleans* (1946), publishing a review of the text for the *Journal of American Folklore* in which she described the book as a "nuisance." Ultimately, Hurston found fault with much of the book including the fact that hoodoo is never defined, and the author's sources are poorly documented. The drunken spectacle of voodoo that Tallant and Saxon were famous for perpetuating also made no attempts to establish a relationship between voodoo in New Orleans and African religions or similar practices in Santo Domingo

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<sup>54</sup> Rosan Augusta Jordan and Frank De Caro, *Ibid*, pg. 49

(Haiti).”<sup>55</sup> For Hurston, many of these oversights could be attributed to the threatening nature of what Hoodoo represented for men like Tallant and Saxon: The opposition of white patriarchy. However, the desecration of these spiritual practices could not detract from the revelations of Hurston’s research and experiences in the field, which left her with the overwhelming sense of New Orleans as a place for empowerment “of and through women.”<sup>56</sup>

A contemporary of both Saxon and Tallant in the field of ethnography, Hurston’s body of work, including *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse* (1938), documented black cultural practices such as Voodoo in the U.S. and Jamaica, thereby situating the U.S. South within an essential route of African cultural transmissions in the New World. More to the point, Hurston’s ethnography allowed scholars to explore the complexities of cultural documentation both from the point of view of a presumed insider as well as a perceived outsider—as a black woman from the U.S., Hurston occupies both roles in her studies—particularly when requiring participants to speak truthfully about culturally transgressive practices, which are in many instances, regularly policed or restricted by the state. That difficulty is further compounded where interview subjects are weary of outsiders due to a plethora of racist inaccuracies previously circulated in print, tainting public opinion. When Hurston addresses the apparent distortion of black culture by its white documenters she sites such misrepresentation as both cause and effect of the misleading

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<sup>55</sup> Barbara Eckstein comments on the careers of Lyle Saxon and Robert Tallant, who often reduced the practice of voodoo to drunken Negroes in blackface: “Saxon’s *Fabulous New Orleans* assured the jazz age readers...that something called voodoo was still to be found in New Orleans, but it also assured the national readers that if voodoo ever had the power of sober gossip, religious belief, or rebellious slave culture under the leadership of Laveau in the antebellum city...it was now, in the Jim Crow South, nothing more than the drunken sex of uneducated Negroes and the entertainment of white fools like himself...Saxon’s protégé, Robert Tallant, perpetuated the identification of New Orleans with voodoo and with Marie Laveau specifically, while also producing a voodoo discourse such as Saxon’s that works to disempower the very preoccupation it feeds.” *Ibid*, pg. 23

<sup>56</sup> David C. Estes, “The Neo-African Vatican: Zora Neale Hurston’s New Orleans,” *Literary New Orleans in the Modern World*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998. pg.77

stories that their readers have been told time and again about black cultural practices such as voodoo. However, despite Hurston's posturing and the reiteration of her authority/mastery as a collector of folklore with years of experience, she encounters setbacks in the field and is denied easy access into exclusive communities it's presumed her blackness will permit.<sup>57</sup> Hurston's work, therefore, reveals that "mastering" a culture is a process fraught with tension between the competing desires of both the subjects of study and the ethnographer even when there is a perceived kinship between them.<sup>58</sup>

By comparison, the spectacles of blackness described throughout *Fabulous New Orleans* and what I'm referring to as a continual feedback loop of cultural distortion demonstrate Saxon's perpetuation of an Othering and exoticizing ethno-tourist gaze adopted by mainstream tourism in the city to this day. This distortion is characterized by an over reliance on notions of transparency when documenting/observing other cultures, filtered through the racial essentialism often associated with the ethnocentric gaze. Some of the most routinely analyzed portions of Saxon's lengthy cultural study are the chapters written as autobiographical episodes from the author's life. Specifically, the Mardi Gras day excursion that opens the text and some of the

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<sup>57</sup> According to Ifeoma Nwankwo, "Part of Hurston's attitude is certainly attributable to her white advisor's (Franz Boas) and her white patron's (Charlotte Osgood Mason) valuation of her as an insider who can tap into and write about blackness in a way that they cannot. For them, she is and must be authentically black and therefore able to automatically know and understand black communities everywhere. "Insider and Outsider, Black and American: Rethinking Zora Neale Hurston's Caribbean Ethnography," *Radical History Review*, Issue 87, Fall 2003, pg 57

<sup>58</sup> Nwankwo writes, "*Mules and Men* reveals her creation of a writerly voice out of her multiple positions as a woman, a member of the community she is studying, an anthropologist, and as a black anthropologist trying to change the view of her race. Her travels to the Caribbean, as well as the challenge of writing *Tell My Horse*, multiply her negotiations, adding in the factor of geographical/cultural/national distance, and requiring her to simultaneously balance all the voices she spoke through previously while also figuring out how to express her kinship with her black Caribbean subjects as a national and perspectival outsider. Not only is she a foreigner but she is also an anthropologist—a person whose approach her subjects can easily read as inherently othering and exoticizing." *Ibid*, pg 64

contemporary tales he tells in the concluding chapter(s), titled “Part IV: These Times”.<sup>59</sup> Over 300 pages in length, a comprehensive discussion of the text in question is not feasible here, but like a few of my predecessors, I’ve chosen to focus on both Saxon as author and Saxon as a character in his cultural guidebook, or what Jordan and De Caro refer to as his style of “anecdotal history.” My discussion of the book focuses primarily on Part I titled “Mardi Gras,” which contains many of the spectacles I’d like to discuss. Although, this particular portion of the book covers a twenty-four-hour period, followed by a brief scene that occurs on the following morning of Ash Wednesday, Saxon dedicates nearly 65 pages to its telling.

Initially, Saxon introduces his reader to two unnamed characters, a small boy and his grandfather, who have travelled by river steamboat for the boy’s first visit into the city. Their first stop of the day is the French Market for morning coffee and the scene is here described through the eyes of our young narrator, who observes everything he sees with curiosity and excitement. “This isn’t a bit like the plantation,” says the boy...His eyes are wide as he watches and listens. Around them the market men drink coffee and discuss the affairs of the day. The boy hears the rapid trilling of French, the soft slur of Italian, and the easy droning of negroes’ voices. It is all new and strange and delightful.”<sup>60</sup> Right away, Saxon depicts New Orleans as a multilingual/multicultural environment with an exotic array of voices that contribute to the city’s auditory and visual appeal for new comers. The only indication the reader is given regarding the boy’s origins are his references to the plantation and his additional mention of travelling from “up river” to their destination. Following a paragraph break and the noticeable inclusion of white

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<sup>59</sup> *Fabulous New Orleans* is 328 pages in length, not including its 2 introductions, notes, bibliography, and index. Illustrations appear throughout depicting pencil sketches of various locations of the city done by a Mr. Suydam, whom Saxon credits in his introduction.

<sup>60</sup> Lyle Saxon, *Ibid*, pg. 3,5

space, Saxon shifts his perspective to reveal that he is the young boy and that the initial chapters of the book are a retelling of his first encounter with New Orleans. “And this is my first impression of the fabulous city,” Saxon concludes, “when I went there with my grandfather for Mardi Gras, twenty-five years ago.”<sup>61</sup> From its first few pages, *Fabulous New Orleans* shirks easy generic classification as its author chooses to blend elements of fiction and memoir to foreground a text that also summarizes episodes from New Orleans’s colonial past, as well as the discovery of the Mississippi River (1541) and the founding of Louisiana, dating as far back as 1697. A decision that both signals the desire of the author to place himself within the larger historical context and narrative of the city, but one that also relieves him of the burden of wholly adhering to the standards of historical documentation. He’s done his research, as evidenced by his bibliography, but telling an entertaining and engaging story also takes priority for a writer such as Saxon, whose background in journalism dictates many of the creative choices he allows himself to make throughout.

After having their morning coffee, the second stop for Saxon and his grandfather is a lavish house off Royal Street, inhabited by a wealthy Creole gentleman who, its implied, is a past acquaintance of Saxon’s grandfather, as well as an array of “negro” servants who receive grotesque and exaggerated physical descriptions from our narrator. The black servants are as intriguing to the young Saxon as are the flowers, vines, statues, and fountain he observes upon first entering the old house on Orleans Street and they are just as essential to the façade of wealth and luxury here described.<sup>62</sup> Saxon writes:

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<sup>61</sup> Lyle Saxon, *Ibid*, pg. 6

<sup>62</sup> Saxon provides a vivid description of the house, from the entranceway to the courtyard. Such descriptions become embedded in the imaginations of his readers/visitors to New Orleans, eager to walk through such scenery and indulge in its old-world luxury. He writes, “The passage into which we had come was fully fifty feet long and perhaps fifteen feet wide. It was paved with blue-gray flagstones and the long unbroken walls were of mouldering plaster which had been tinted green at some past time, but which were now peeling off in places, showing purplish



The old woman who had let us in...was followed by a very black negro man who carried a smaller chair for me. He was the very ugliest negro that I had ever seen; his skin was so black that it seemed almost blue, and the whites of his half-closed eyes were yellowish. His arms hung nearly to his knees and he walked with a shuffling gait that was like the slinking of an animal, but when he spoke his voice was so meek and childlike that I nearly laughed aloud...I watched him, fascinated by his ugliness, and from time to time he would lift his head and regard me solemnly, a long, fixed stare full into my eyes, as though we two shared a secret all unknown to the others.<sup>63</sup>

Upon arrival, their host reveals that the children have already left for the day accompanied by their nurse so its decided that Robert, the male servant described above, will take the child out for the day, acting as both his chaperon and tour guide. The young Saxon's bizarre fixation on the butler's body (and black bodies more generally) as well as an implied connection sustained by a "shared secret" are significant themes maintained throughout the chapter as the two embark upon their own Mardi Gras Day adventure. With this literary homage to the dynamic of Huck and Jim in the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), Saxon establishes a fictional parallel for his twosome whose relationship is similarly complicated by the circumstances of race and social status, but whose "bond" seemingly overcomes these impediments. "...As the door closed behind us a great change came over Robert," writes Saxon, "*His meekness fell from him as though it were a cloak thrown aside.* [my emphasis] He began strutting down the street as though walking in time to silent music: 'Us is goin' tuh have us a *time!*' he said. Enraptured, I trotted after."<sup>64</sup> From this moment on, it's as if Saxon and his reader by proxy are treated to some insight into Robert's inner life and a veil is lifted upon all of black New Orleans as he treats the

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patches, and here and there a space where the red bricks could be seen. The ceiling was high above my head and was crossed at intervals by large beams. At the end of the passage, seen through an arch of masonry, was a large courtyard in which bamboo was growing and where tall palm-trees waved in the sunlight. The court was surrounded by the walls of the house, and a balcony extended around three sides of it at the second floor." Pg. 8-9

<sup>63</sup> Lyle Saxon, *Ibid*, pg 11

<sup>64</sup> Lyle Saxon, *Ibid*, pg. 13

young Saxon to an experience that is exceptional precisely because of its separateness and concealment from the conventional white world they leave behind.

Over the course of the day, the twosome navigates the discernably segregated city streets, slipping precariously between black and white spaces with the aid of festive disguises and Robert's occasional performance of "racial drag," including altering his voice when speaking to a police officer so he'd be perceived as white. During the first stop on their Mardi Gras tour of the city, young Saxon once again observes Robert code switching as they enter a costume shop to purchase their attire for the day. Saxon writes, "At last it came our turn to be served and again I saw black Robert respectful and servile as he had appeared at first."<sup>65</sup> Frequently described as "meek" by the narrator, servant Robert takes on the stoop shouldered cadence of an overgrown child, effectively combating the black male stereotypes that classify him as a threat to the white characters in the text (all, that is, except Saxon). Inconsistent in his assessment of Robert's calculated performance of race, Saxon's narration often slips between a retrospective childlike innocence, intercut with the more knowing translation of an adult who now realizes the significance of the things he witnessed. Saxon writes:

He told the woman in charge that I must be fitted with a red devil costume...But Robert had other fish to fry. He began explaining that a second costume was needed for his employer, 'dis chile's brother'—which surprised me, more or less, as I had no brother. But I remained silent and waited while Robert looked at this and that, and finally selected some red silk tights and a few other fittings for this mysterious stranger. At last he received a second bundle and we departed from the shop.<sup>66</sup>

Robert fabricates the child's family tree to acquire a costume of his own, one that will completely cover his skin and that will allow him to move more freely throughout the city than

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<sup>65</sup> Lyle Saxon, *Ibid*, pg. 16

<sup>66</sup> Lyle Saxon, *Ibid*, pg. 16

he normally does as an identifiably black man. And the young Saxon becomes his willing accomplice in the lie, because he too gets to enjoy the perks of anonymity and the performance of a selective racial drag. “Yassuh!” Saxon recalls, “Robert could show me things that no other man in New Orleans could show half so well. All that was necessary was that I forget it afterwards and carry no tales back to his master. In return for this trifling promise, I was to be *initiated* into experiences of unknown brilliance.”<sup>67</sup> Saxon’s choice of terminology and his invocation of black vernacular suggests that his access to a behind the scenes black experience is similarly compelling as is Robert’s desire to strategically occupy whiteness, both for his past self, eager to embark on his Mardi Gras day adventure, and for a contemporary audience living vicariously through his story.

One could argue that Robert’s skillful manipulation of the social mores that typically constrain his daily life is a progressive choice made on behalf of the author, demonstrating an awareness on Saxon’s part regarding the fiction of racial determinism, however, the text tends to undermine these moments by reinforcing racial stereotypes. These episodes occur most often in the text when the young Saxon indulges in an ethnographic gaze that accompanies lengthy descriptive passages detailing his unknown observance of the “inner lives” of black New Orleanians. In one such instance, Robert takes his ward back to his meager apartment so the two can change and its there that Saxon sees what he describes as the grotesque visual of Robert’s exposed black body:

He stripped. The bagging clothes which made him appear as other men were cast aside, and a strange creature emerged. His body was unbelievably black, and his arms were knotty with muscles. His legs were thick and bent slightly at the knees, and his hands hung down like the paws of some gigantic gorilla. But for all his

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<sup>67</sup> Lyle Saxon, *Ibid*, pg. 19

brutish appearance, Robert was an artist at heart. The care which he expended upon his toilet would have put Beau Brummel to shame.<sup>68</sup>

Robert's overt comparison to a gorilla and the gross distortion of his body is just one of several visual cues that expose Saxon's racial bias as well as his willingness to exploit popular stereotypes for the amusement of his audience. Cloaked in their disguises the young Saxon and Robert embark on their adventure and once again, the narrative delights in this servile black man's opportunity to cast aside his race for the day. Saxon writes "...now that none of his skin was visible, no one could tell whether he were a white man or a negro—or a Chinaman or anything else, for that matter...A few minutes later two red devils emerged from the courtyard into the street, Robert walking before carrying the umbrella and I walking behind supporting his spangled tail."<sup>69</sup> In the tradition of racial passing narratives, the audience is made aware of the "deception" at hand, unbeknownst

The balance Saxon attempts to achieve in describing a staged/annual performance and captivating his audience is the exceptionalism of his experience. Saxon writes, "Now there are a great many people who have been born in New Orleans and who have lived there all their lives, but who have never seen the arrival of the Zulu King: and I feel sorry for them....This custom has continued for many years—a sort of burlesque of the grander Mardi Gras of the white people, and it provides the note of humor which is lacking in the great parades."<sup>70</sup> "He represented a savage chieftain, but whether from modesty or from fear of cold, the Zulu King wore, instead of his own black skin, a suite of black knitted underwear. There were bunches of dried grass at

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<sup>68</sup> Lyle Saxon, *Ibid*, pg. 19

<sup>69</sup> Lyle Saxon, *Ibid*, pg. 20

<sup>70</sup> Lyle Saxon, *Ibid*, pg. 26

throat, ankles, and wrists, and a sort of grass skirt such a hula-hula dancers wear, and he wore a fuzzy black wig surmounted by a tin crown. In his hand he carried a scepter—a broomstick—upon which was mounted a stuffed white rooster.”<sup>71</sup> On the tradition that accompanies this display, Joseph Roach writes, “Since 1872...Rex has reigned annually over Mardi Gras as its perpetually smiling Lord of Misrule. Traditionally chose from the ranks of the city’s business elite centered around the exclusive Boston Club...Since 1909 members of the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club have likewise staged an annual float parade, featuring stereotypes of ‘Africans.’ In addition to ‘King Zulu,’ high officials in the organization take on such personas as ‘The Big Shot of Africa,’ ‘The Witch Doctor,’ ‘Governor,’ ‘Province Prince,’ and ‘Ambassador’...Originally known as the ‘The Tramps,’ the working-class African Americans who founded Zulu took their inspiration from a staged minstrel number, ‘There Never Was and Never Will Be a King Like Me’<sup>72</sup> Both parades roll on Mardi Gras morning, using the same route along St. Charles Avenue. Roach goes on to say, “This Africa is the dystopia of racist fantasy...King Zulu turns Rex not so much upside down as inside out. The white greasepaint under his black face discloses an acute reflexivity in the way that Zulu, laughing behind the mask of apparent self-deprecation, reproduces a kind of Africa by mocking absurd Eurocentric stereotypes of divine kingship...As whiteface minstrelsy, however, Zulu has layers within layers, and behind the visible mask of carnivalesque satire there is a practice of disruptive humor.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Lyle Saxon, *Ibid*, By comparison, when the young Saxon first sees the King of Rex, he recounts “It was like a gigantic frosted wedding cake and at the top on a golden throne was seated Rex, Kind of the Carnival. Such a perfect king he was, with his fat legs encased in white silk tights, a round fat stomach under shimmering satin, long golden hair and a magnificent curled yellow beard! His face was covered with a simpering wax mask, benign and jovial. On his head he wore the very grandest crown I had ever seen, all gold and jewels which sparkled in the sun; and he carried a diamond scepter in his hand which he waved good-naturedly at the cheering crowd.” pg. 26, 38

<sup>72</sup> Joseph Roach, *Ibid*, pg. 18-9

<sup>73</sup> Joseph Roach, *Ibid*, pg. 21

Roach argues that the key to understanding how performances work within a culture is, “to understand how circum-Atlantic societies, confronted with revolutionary circumstances for which few precedents existed, have invented themselves by performing their pasts in the presence of others.” He goes on to say, that “they could not perform themselves, however, unless they also performed what and who they thought they were not. By defining themselves in opposition to others, they produced mutual representations from encomiums to caricatures, sometimes in each another’s presence, at other times behind each other’s backs.”<sup>74</sup> In the case of Saxon’s text and throughout his career as a folklorist/ethnographer, the performance of culture he most astutely captures is not that of the “exotic” black and brown residents of the city, rather he performs and documents the ways a diminishing white southern aristocracy created itself in relation to cultural outsiders and racial Others.

Within Daphne A. Brooks’s *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* she introduces a concept described as “spectacular opacity” regarding the complicated legacies of black performance. She writes:

figures in this book experiment with ways of ‘doing’ their bodies differently in public spaces. We can think of their acts as opaque, as dark points of possibility that create figurative sites for the reconfiguration of black and female bodies on display. A kind of shrouding, this trope of darkness paradoxically allows for corporeal unveiling to yoke with the (re)covering and re-historicizing of the flesh...this cultural phenomenon emerges at varying times as a product of the performer’s will, at other times as a visual obstacle erupting as a result of the hostile spectator’s epistemological resistance to reading alternative racial and gender representations. From either standpoint, spectacular opacities contest the ‘dominative imposition of transparency’ systemically willed on the black figures.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Joseph Roach, *Ibid*, On page four of his text, Roach defines the Circum-Atlantic world as a concept that “insists on the centrality of the diasporic and genocidal histories of Africa and the Americas, North and South, in the creation of the culture of modernity.” pg. 5

<sup>75</sup> Daphne Brookes, pg. 8

the reader—in the context of literary New Orleans—is often assumed to be a cultural outsider who occupies the position of an acknowledged or unacknowledged observer. And it is the task of the reader to receive the cultural instruction of the text as one who needs to acquire new knowledge before they can understand and interpret a text with accuracy. “To decipher meaning,” suggests Heather Russell, “necessitates full writerly immersion...into what [she] would call a ‘literacy of African Atlantic resistance.’” Russell’s emphasis on proficiency derives from the work of scholars such as Vève Clark and her definition of “diaspora literacy,” which suggests that “the allusive quality of African diasporic texts is not primarily concerned with veiled references to history, or sign-posting the past; rather, allusion is ‘a pedagogical tool,’ which produces active writerly engagement.”<sup>76</sup> The question of who gets to speak with authority on the subject of culture and to whom it belongs have become increasingly contested topics in the public sphere post Katrina, with black residents at the forefront of the conversation.

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Lynnell L. Thomas “‘Roots Run Deep Here’: The Construction of Black New Orleans in Post-Katrina Tourism Narratives” Post-Katrina tourism has been unable to reconcile a pre-katrina tourist narrative that hinged on southern mythology and racial desire with the counternarrative of racial disaster. On the bus tours that quickly, Thomas observes how they oscillate “between the revitalized French Quarter and the ruins of the Ninth Ward, these tours ambivalently express both that the city has recovered from the storm intact, ready to do business as usual and that New Orleans and its residents, particularly its black population, continue to

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<sup>76</sup> Heather Russell, p. 21

languish from neglect and abandonment.”<sup>77</sup> However, he makes it clear that this separation has always deeply defined New Orleans tourism, due to what Thomas describes as the “two distinct but intersecting frames” of desire and disaster that inform representations of black culture in the city. He writes:

On the one hand, tourists were encouraged to think that they were experiencing and celebrating black culture by eating Creole cuisine, listening to jazz music, and sharing in anecdotes of quadroon balls and secret voodoo rites. On the other hand, tourists were directed to adopt the white supremacist memory of slavery and black culture that views the Old South with a sense of loss and nostalgia. In effect, the city’s promotion of black cultural consumption produced a ‘desire’ for ‘blackness’ at the same time that this ‘blackness’ was used to signify the ‘disaster’ of black emancipation and desegregation.<sup>78</sup>

“In each case, tourists were signaled to consume or gaze upon black culture, without the uncomfortable acknowledgment of the history of slavery or its persistent legacy of racial and class inequality.” “One way that the tourism narrative achieved this duality was by limiting its historical focus to the colonial and antebellum periods and by focusing exclusively on the purportedly exceptional race relations that distinguished New Orleans from the rest of the slaveholding south.”<sup>79</sup>

Anna Hartnell’s article titled, “Katrina Tourism and a Tale of Two Cities: Visualizing Race and Class in New Orleans” contends that despite the hypervisibility of poor African Americans in the national and international media during the storm, Post Katrina tourism has

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<sup>77</sup> Lynell L. Thomas. “‘Roots Run Deep Here’: The Construction of Black New Orleans in Post-Katrina Tourism Narratives,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No.3, In the Wake of Katrina: New Paradigms and Social Visions (Sep. 2009), pp. 749-768

<sup>78</sup> Lynell L. Thomas, *Ibid*, pg 750

<sup>79</sup> Lynell L. Thomas, *Ibid*, “The emphasis on selected features of these eras—such as European cultural influences, the relative freedom of New Orleans’s black population, the city’s laissez faire attitudes regarding race, the social sanctioning of interracial unions, and a large population of free blacks—lent itself to the construction of New Orleans as benefiting from the most liberal and refined elements of southern culture while abdicating its most brutal, inhuman, and inegalitarian features.” pg.751



become increasingly characterized by a focus on “natural environments” and an environmentalism which downplays narratives of social justice once so central to our understanding of Katrina’s devastating outcomes. Hartnell writes, “...after Katrina, tourists can experience ‘firsthand’ the storm-devastated neighborhoods while being almost entirely insulated from the human beings still suffering the ongoing economic and racial fallout from the hurricane’s aftermath.”<sup>80</sup> Insulating tourists from the “discomfort” of human suffering has been facilitated by buffer zones and cultivated tourist centers which shield them from harsh realities that are often just a few steps away:

For a long time, the French Quarter has acted as a site of translation where the musical, religious, and performance traditions—for which the city is so well known—are packaged for tourists. But now it also functions as a haven for Katrina tourism. Those on the Katrina bus are safely deposited back in the French Quarter following the detour into the still-stricken parts of the city...Stark economic and racial divides do of course characterize most American cities, but tourism has played a very particular role in constructing and highlighting these divisions in New Orleans. Not only does the city’s foremost industry have a history of offering up the experiences of the largely underprivileged for consumption by the privileged, but it does this in such a way that tourists can be thrilled by the contemporary nature of events while cushioned from its potential discomforts.<sup>81</sup>

Hartnell goes on to point out that the “irony” of the shock most people exhibited at the visibility of two-tiered system plagued by inequality was that “this ‘hidden city’ was not only one that visitors to New Orleans routinely brushed shoulders with, but it was also one that they actively dabbled in; for, as so many scholars contend, New Orleans’s predominantly black poor are the creators of the culture that draws hordes of visitors to the city each year.”<sup>82</sup> Pre Katrina efforts,

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<sup>80</sup> Anna Hartnell, “Katrina Tourism and a Tale of Two Cities: Visualizing Race and Class in New Orleans,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 3, *In the Wake of Katrina: New Paradigms and Social Visions* (Sep., 2009), pg. 723

<sup>81</sup> Anna Hartnell, *Ibid*, pg. 724

<sup>82</sup> Anna Hartnell, *Ibid*, pg. 733

initiated in the 70s, were under development to combat the white washing and commodification of black culture performed by mainstream tourism. Typically, African Americans who develop their own black heritage tours incorporating histories of slave uprisings, black entrepreneurship, civil rights milestones, and African-American educational, political, and cultural institutions have been unable to thrive due to the imbalance of resources, marketing, and industry support they encounter. These efforts are more necessary than ever as the current practice of Post Katrina tourism diverts focus from the uneven and incomplete rebuilding of the city and threatens to erase the persistent legacy of racial and class inequality the storm exposed.

Appendix

*Southern Charm IN A SKYSCRAPER SETTING*

TO CHICAGO  
DETROIT  
CLEVELAND  
INDIANAPOLIS  
LEXINGTON  
KNOXVILLE  
ATLANTA  
COLUMBIA  
BIRMINGHAM  
AUGUSTA  
CHARLESTON  
SAVANNAH  
NEW ORLEANS  
MEMPHIS  
JACKSON  
MOBILE  
BAYON  
ALEXANDRIA  
TULSA  
TYLER  
TO WEST COAST  
FT. WORTH  
DALLAS

▲ A city of diversified charm in a land of contrast . . . that's New Orleans, where the grillwork of early French homes frames a masterpiece of business-world architecture. Down South the ever-changing *new* stands in relief against the unchanging *old*. ▲ Today, Delta Air Lines helps speed the war-vital business of the South's new steel mills, chemical plants, shipyards, petroleum plants, bomber factories and textile mills.

▲ In peacetime, Delta courtesy and efficiency will help you enjoy the hospitable, tradition-rich South—land of inspiring historic shrines, ante-bellum mansions, cypress-lined bayous, rich-scented gardens . . .

**DELTA** *Air Lines*

THE AIRLINE OF THE SOUTH . . . GENERAL OFFICES, MUNICIPAL AIRPORT, ATLANTA, GA.

Figure 1. DELTA Air Lines Advertisement <sup>83</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Original print obtained from <http://www.vintageadbrowser.com>, "Delta Airlines" (1945)

*Des Moines Register*  
*8/8/45*



# New wings over the Southland

## Direct service to

# NEW ORLEANS

- SHREVEPORT
- TEXARKANA
- FORT SMITH

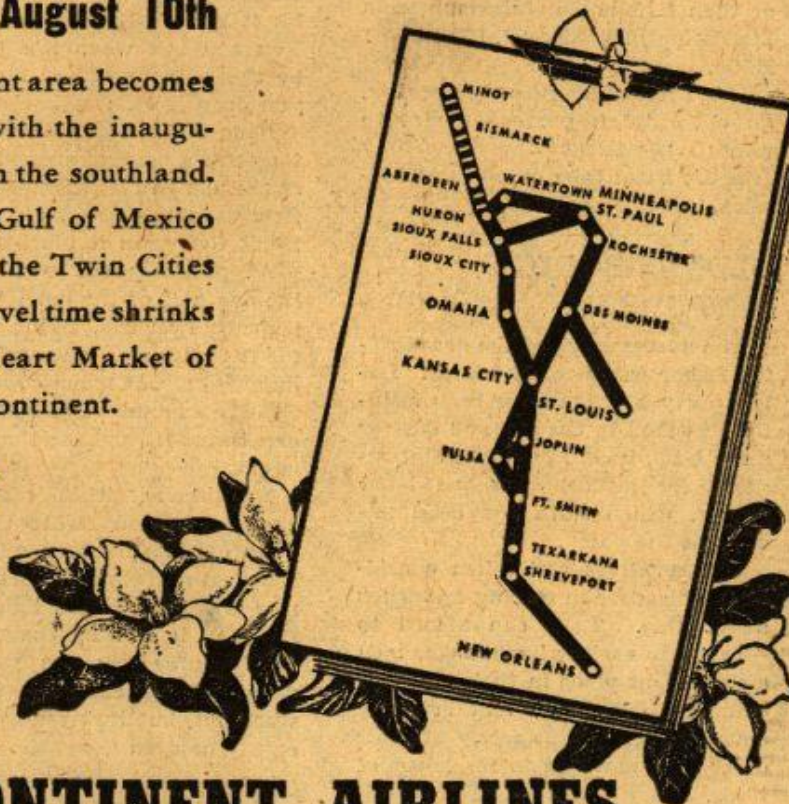
**Service Effective August 10th**

All of the Mid-Continent area becomes next door neighbors with the inauguration of new service in the southland. In terms of time the Gulf of Mexico has moved north and the Twin Cities have moved south. Travel time shrinks to hours across the Heart Market of the nation. Fly Mid-Continent.

**9 DEPARTURES DAILY**

*North and South*  
Call 2-0233

*for air reservations everywhere*  
*City ticket office—416 6th Ave.*



# MID-CONTINENT AIRLINES

*Serving the Heart of America*

Figure 2. Mid-Continent Airlines Advertisement <sup>84</sup>

<sup>84</sup> Original Print obtained from <http://www.vintageadbrowser.com>, "Mid-Continent Airline's New Orleans – New wings over the Southland, Direct service to New Orleans" (1945)

**6 TRAINS DAILY**

**THE SOUTHERNER**  
Leaves 4:35 PM  
Only all-coach reserved seat streamliner  
to ATLANTA, BIRMINGHAM  
and NEW ORLEANS

**THE CRESCENT**  
Leaves 1:50 PM  
for ATLANTA, MONTGOMERY,  
MOBILE and NEW ORLEANS  
Only all-Pullman train  
to ATLANTA

**PIEDMONT LIMITED**  
Leaves 9:50 PM  
for ATLANTA, MONTGOMERY,  
MOBILE and NEW ORLEANS

**BIRMINGHAM SPECIAL**  
Leaves 12:30 PM  
for KNOXVILLE, CHATTANOOGA,  
BIRMINGHAM and MEMPHIS

**THE PELICAN**  
Leaves 6:35 PM  
for CHATTANOOGA,  
BIRMINGHAM, SHREVEPORT  
and NEW ORLEANS

**TRAIN NO. 139-29**  
Leaves 6:35 PM  
for CHARLOTTE, N. C., GREEN-  
VILLE, S. C. and ATLANTA

**Also—Quickest rail service . . .** Later  
departures—earlier arrivals . . . Only  
double track line to Atlanta . . . Auto-  
matic train control . . . Diesel power  
. . . Coaches and sleeping cars (sections,  
bedrooms, compartments and drawing  
rooms) . . . Observation, club, lounge  
and tavern cars . . . Southern dining  
car service . . . Six trains daily

**GO SOUTH ON THE SOUTHERN**

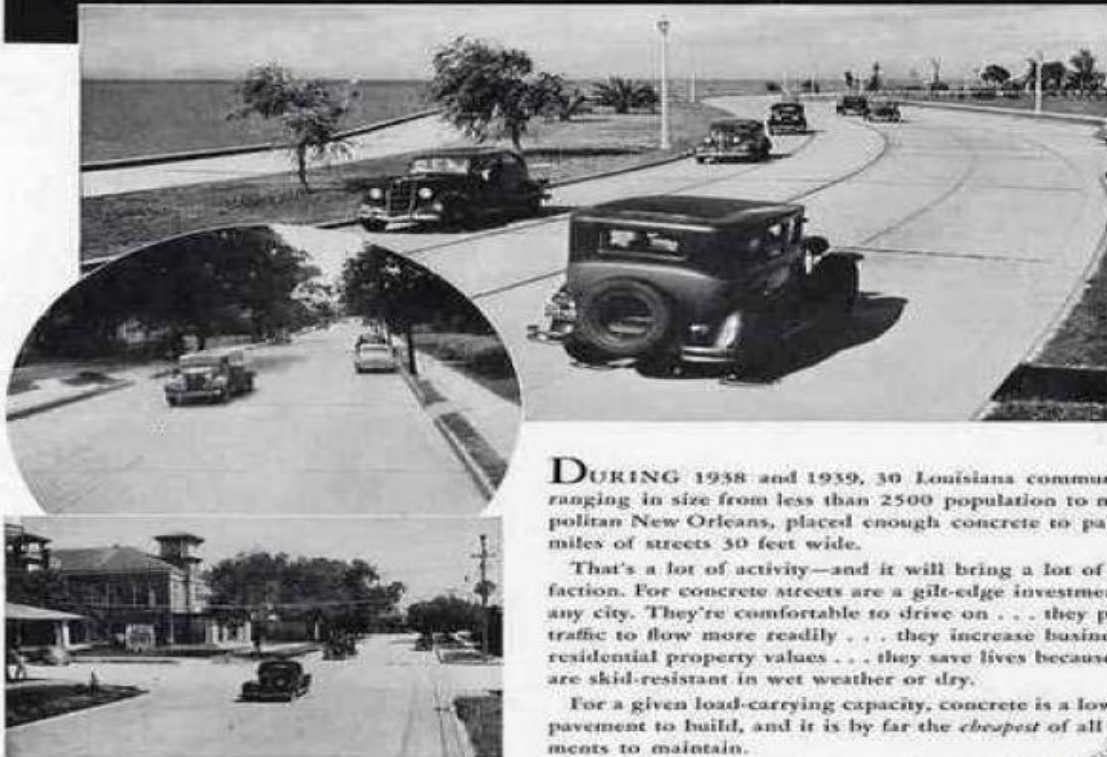
**Call:** D. H. BECK, *General Passenger Agent*  
500 Fifth Avenue, Telephone: Wisc. 7-9822

**SOUTHERN RAILWAY SYSTEM**

Figure 3. Southern Railway System Advertisement <sup>85</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Original print obtained from <http://www.vintageadbrowser.com>, titled “Southern Railway System – The Shortest Rail Route to Atlanta, Birmingham, New Orleans is via Southern Railway (1947) According to Anthony J. Stanonis, the advent of mass tourism can be attributed to a growing economic divide between those in urban centers with greater access to newly available and increasingly “affordable” options for travel. He writes, “In a brief study of New York City, Neil Harris has shown that the economic growth of American cities made the 1890s in particular ‘the take-off decade’ for urban tourism. Railroads lowered fares, and postcards emerged to spread images of cities nationwide. Urban environments opened to tourists as railroads, hotels, and local business boosters tapped the market in travelers. Considerable friction developed, however, between wealthy tourists spending freely on leisure and locals who labored out of need or out of a still-strong ethic that prized work over pleasure. Travel remained expensive for most of the American public. The upper class continued to dominate the tourist trade, limiting its economic and cultural impact on the urban scene.” *Creating the Big Easy: New Orleans and the Emergence of Modern Tourism, 1918-1945*, University of Georgia Press: Athens, 2006. pg. 19

*In just 2 years,*  
**30 Louisiana towns have placed  
 1,457,000 square yards of  
 CONCRETE STREETS**



**DURING** 1938 and 1939, 30 Louisiana communities, ranging in size from less than 2500 population to metropolitan New Orleans, placed enough concrete to pave 83 miles of streets 30 feet wide.

That's a lot of activity—and it will bring a lot of satisfaction. For concrete streets are a gilt-edge investment for any city. They're comfortable to drive on . . . they permit traffic to flow more readily . . . they increase business or residential property values . . . they save lives because they are skid-resistant in wet weather or dry.

For a given load-carrying capacity, concrete is a low cost pavement to build, and it is by far the *cheapest* of all pavements to maintain.

Get extra service and extra savings by designing your city's streets for concrete.

**PORTLAND CEMENT ASSOCIATION**  
 Dept. 2-4, 33 W. Grand Ave., Chicago, Ill.

*A national organization to improve and extend the uses of concrete . . . through scientific research and engineering field work.*

(Top) Lake Shore Drive in New Orleans. A total of 467,796 sq. yds. of concrete built in this city in the past two years.

(Center) Residential Lawrence Street, Lake Charles, La., paved with concrete in 1938. Total of 154,582 sq. yds. built in past two years.

(Lower) First Street in Morgan City, La., which built 40,950 sq. yds. of concrete in past two years.

**Figure 4. Portland Cement Association Advertisement** <sup>86</sup>

<sup>86</sup> Original photo printed in 1940, print acquired from <http://www.vintageadbrowser.com>. According to Anthony J. Stanonis, automotive travel to New Orleans saw a significant increase in the 30s, due in part to the road construction and expansion occurring across the state. He writes, "By the late 1930s, travelers could gain easy access to Louisiana. The roads constructed under New Deal programs opened interstate access to Louisiana. Moreover, the massive road construction projects undertaken by the Huey Long administration supplied motoring tourists with easily traversed state routes. Though *Louisiana: A Guide to the State* called Long a 'virtual dictator,' the tour book credited the prominent politician with launching 'the most comprehensive paving program ever undertaken in the Deep South.' From 1928 to 1936, the state government replaced many dirt roads with approximately 9,800 miles of improved highways." "Always in Costume and Mask": Lyle Saxon and New Orleans Tourism," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Winter, 2001) pg. 38

## Chapter 2

### The Color of Catastrophe and the Political Efficacy of Black Art Post Katrina

Hurricane Katrina exposed for the entire nation the legacy of a discriminatory system and its consequences. Yet, it also raised opportunities for civil rights, environmental, labor, and environmental justice organizations to advocate for processes of relief, recovery, and rebuilding that could address the socioeconomic and environmental inequalities that have plagued the region. Put simply, the aftermath of Katrina can become a time of important change for Americans - if we confront the contradictions between our democratic ideals and the injustices that Katrina laid bare.

- Manuel Pastor et. al., "Environment, Disaster, and Race After Katrina"<sup>87</sup>

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, there has been much discussion regarding the classification of the storm and its devastation as both a manmade disaster as well as a natural disaster, chronicling the cumulative impact of these two very different yet interconnected and destructive phenomena upon African American communities. Manuel Pastor is just one of several scholars to contribute their findings to the article referenced above, which describes the ways that pre-existing social inequality exacerbates the adverse outcomes experienced by poor minorities and those essentially ill equipped to prepare for and recover from natural disasters of this scale. "How consequential," he and his fellow contributors ask, "is racial inequality in environmental conditions?"<sup>88</sup> In many ways, their essay is a call to action and an empirical basis

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<sup>87</sup> Manuel Pastor, Robert Bullard, James K. Boyce, Alice Fothergill, Rachel Morello-Frosch and Beverly Wright, "Environment, Disaster, and Race After Katrina," *Race, Poverty & the Environment*, Vol. 13, No. 1, Getting Ready for Change: Green Economics and Climate Justice (Summer 2006), pg. 25

<sup>88</sup> Manuel Pastor, et al. *Ibid*, Pastor and his fellow researchers discuss how the conversation on environmental justice and socioeconomic inequality extends beyond as well as relates to the Hurricane Katrina narrative. They write, "The southern United States has a long history of coping with weather-related disasters and a legacy of institutionalized racism against African Americans. Hurricane Katrina hit the region in a particularly vulnerable place, pushing right up against an industrial corridor running from New Orleans to Baton Rouge, popularly known as 'Cancer Alley,' a place that is host to both numerous petrochemical complexes and many poor African American communities that have long complained of environmental disparities. It is no coincidence that the storm's most dramatic effects were felt in a city where black reliance on public transit was four times higher than that of whites, and where the public plans for evacuation were tragically deficient." pg. 21

for change, citing a direct correlation between socioeconomic and environmental inequalities as evidence that we as a nation can and should do more to protect our most vulnerable and “least valuable” citizens:

The social dynamics that underlie the disproportionate environmental hazards faced by low-income communities and minorities also play out in the arena of disaster prevention, mitigation, and recovery. In a sense, environmental justice is about slow-motion disasters—and disasters reveal environmental injustice in a fast-forward mode. Both revolve around the axes of disparities of wealth and power. Lack of wealth heightens the risks that individuals and communities face, for three reasons. First, it translates into a lack of purchasing power to secure private alternatives to public provisions of a clean and safe environment for all. Second, it translates into less ability to withstand shocks (such as health bills and property damage) that wealth would cushion. Third, it translates through the ‘shadow prices’ of cost-benefit analysis into public policies that place a lower priority on protecting ‘less valuable’ people and their assets.<sup>89</sup>

Factors such as little or no insurance, lower incomes, fewer savings, and unemployment, put these individuals at greater risk to the ravages of natural disasters and environmental hazards. However, as the study suggests, socioeconomic status is just one determining factor, stressing that “even middle-class African Americans, Latinos, and Asians face elevated environmental risks.”<sup>90</sup> And while these may seem like obvious conclusions to draw from the conditions these researchers have observed and the statistics they’ve assembled, Pastor and his fellow researchers are invested in far more than simply answering the question explicitly posed by their study. The underlying and resonating question put forth by “Environment, Disaster, and Race After Katrina”

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<sup>89</sup> Manuel Pastor et. al, *Ibid*, They go on to describe the ways in which race, more so than economic standing plays a significant factor in disaster outcomes, even for the African American middle class in New Orleans. They write, “New Orleans East was a community where most of the city’s black professionals, school teachers, and administrators, famous musicians (from hip-hop to jazz), businessmen, and politicians lived. It was an area primarily of homeowners with flood insurance. It represented nearly 40 percent of the city’s tax base, but the Urban Land Institute plan included a map showing most of New Orleans East being relegated to parks and green space, or subject to a building moratorium until neighborhoods proved viability. In the aftermath of Katrina, New Orleans East evacuees and their friends have learned that all of their education and money did not shield them from natural disasters, the neglect of the levee system, and coastal wetlands erosion, and the ways in which public policy decisions reinforce the legacy of race. Their community was literally wiped off the map with no regard for the social, economic, and financial impact this decision would have on those affected.” pg. 21

<sup>90</sup> Manuel Pastor et. al., *Ibid*, pg. 21



is whether we as a nation are willing to build a more equitable society from the ruins of what was clearly a lopsided and racially biased system to begin with? Moreover, their article was steadfast in its assertion, in the summer of 2006, that without egalitarian and unbiased government intervention, predatory businesses and developers would descend upon the city, followed by policies that neglected rather than assisted lower income communities.

Sadly, many of their grim warnings and stern pronouncements have come to pass. Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, details some of the land grabs and disaster opportunism following the storm, describing them as "carefully orchestrated raids" on the public sector, which she terms "disaster capitalism." Specifically, Klein recounts an op-ed written for *The Wall Street Journal* by Milton Friedman, just 3 months after the levees broke, in which he characterized the destruction wrought by the hurricane as an opportunity to "radically reform the educational system." Friedman proposed that rather than of spending billions to rebuild New Orleans' pre-existing public-school system, the government should provide families with vouchers for private institutions that would be run at a profit and subsidized by the state. According to Klein a "network of right-wing think tanks" took Friedman's ideas and ran with them. The Administration of George W Bush endorsed their proposals with, "...tens of millions of dollars to convert New Orleans schools into 'charter schools,' publicly funded institutions run by private entities according to their own rules," a decision that was met with a mixed public response, particularly in a place like New Orleans where, "...they are seen by many African-American parents as a way of reversing the gains of the civil rights movement, which guaranteed all children the same standard of education."<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, pg. 5-6

Even more troubling was the swiftness with which these changes occurred in a city's whose recovery efforts were otherwise frustratingly slow. Klein writes:

In sharp contrast to the glacial pace with which the levees were repaired and the electricity grid was brought back online, the auctioning off of New Orleans' school system took place with military speed and precision. Within nineteen months, with most of the city's poor residents still in exile, New Orleans' public school system had been almost completely replaced by privately run charter schools. Before Hurricane Katrina, the school board had run 123 public schools; now it ran just 4. Before the storm, there had been 7 charter schools in the city; now there were 31. New Orleans teachers used to be represented by a strong union; now the union's contract had been shredded, and its forty-seven hundred members had all been fired. Some of the younger teachers were rehired by the charters, at reduced salaries; most were not.<sup>92</sup>

Resultingly, a complete overhaul of the New Orleans public school system occurred without so much as a vote or the solicited input of the individuals it would affect the most, significantly altering the educational composition of the city for the indefinite future. This kind of radical refurbishment, is just one example of the exploitative practices Klein's work explores in a long line of corporate seizures/privatization, strategies developed and perfected over the last several decades by men like Friedman and his admirers who, "[wait] for a major crisis, then [sell] off pieces of the state to private players while citizens [are] still reeling from the shock...quickly making the 'reforms' permanent."<sup>93</sup> Essentially, the circumstances in New Orleans were looked upon as an occasion to perfect these strategies which would be enacted wherever and whenever the "opportunity" of a crisis presented itself.

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<sup>92</sup> Naomi Klein, *Ibid*, pg. 6

<sup>93</sup> Naomi Klein, *Ibid*, The shock doctrine, or the philosophy which gives Klein's book its title, was taken from Friedman's commentary on what he regards as the fundamentally strategic role of capitalism in the modern age: "only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable." pg. 7

And yet, we've also learned Post Katrina that disaster opportunism does not have to be synonymous with profiteering, but instead, can lend itself to resourcefulness and innovative thinking among social justice workers and community organizers as well as artists and writers, eager to assist and uplift those most impacted by unfortunate circumstances. As such, my chapter considers the ways in which black writers and artists producing work on Hurricane Katrina and its devastating effects for lower income African Americans throughout the Gulf South, share parallels with the social justice movements occurring throughout the region. Not only are their similarities to be found, but I argue that these artists are effectively participating in a critical and intellectual discourse that takes the leaders and policy makers of the United States to task for the discrepancies between its democratic ideals and practice. Increasingly, when I looked at the work of organizers and activists and compared that to the work of artists and authors producing with some of the same social interventions in mind, I began to see similarities emerge which suggest we are witnessing a significant cultural political moment in this region of the country.

Accordingly, I'd like to explore the ways in which Katrina and its traumas, combined with lengthy and inequitable rates of recovery in effected areas, have been the catalyst for a black arts/social movement akin to the Harlem Renaissance of the South. I utilize the Harlem Renaissance as a reference because, although these historical moments differ greatly, they share significant goals and approaches to art as a form of social protest which, by comparison, serves to reinforce the political salience of this contemporary moment.

Houston Baker Jr. describes the Harlem Renaissance as “an outpouring of Afro-American writing, music, and social criticism that includes some of the earliest attempts by Afro-American artists and intellectuals to define themselves in ‘modern’ terms.”<sup>94</sup> Obviously, the artists of the

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<sup>94</sup> Houston A. Baker, Jr. “Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 39.1: 84-97, Spring 1987. pg. 89

Harlem Renaissance were producing their work in a segregated, pre-civil rights society, largely reliant on white patronage to see their art reach a broad public platform.<sup>95</sup> Baker writes, “[a]rt seemed to offer the only means of advancement because it was the only area in America—from an Afro-American perspective—where the color line had not been rigidly drawn.” He goes on to say that black Americans were “[e]xcluded from politics and education, from profitable and challenging areas of the professions, and brutalized by all American economic arrangements, [therefore] Afro-Americans adopted the arts as a domain of hope and an area of possible progress.”<sup>96</sup> By way of this tradition, black art has continued to be both a creative outlet and a platform for the disenfranchised and the underrepresented in this country. Sadly, despite the social advancements we’ve experienced since then, black Americans remain at a considerable disadvantage and Baker’s assessment of the U.S.’s racial climate toward the close of the Harlem Renaissance sting with a familiar resonance. He writes, “In the end, all of Harlem’s sound and flair could not alter the indubitably American fact that black men and women, regardless of their educational or artistic accomplishments, would always be poorer, more brutally treated, and held in lower esteem than their white American counterparts.”<sup>97</sup> That said, we have made significant social and cultural gains, and the social justice movements taking place across the south are

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<sup>95</sup> Mary Ann Calo’s essay, “African American Art and Critical Discourse Between World Wars,” is another resource which demonstrates the significant role that print culture and art criticism played in shaping the intellectual discourse on race, nation, and culture in the early twentieth century. As Calo observes, “cultural critic and philosopher Alain Locke marshaled impressive evidence that America was on the threshold of a black artistic coming of age...[which] seemed an opportune moment to consider the possibility that a characteristically ‘Negro’ art had developed in America and to speculate on its contribution (past, present, and future) to the formation of the national culture.”<sup>95</sup> The artists I intend to discuss are not invested in the authenticating or defining black art against specific criteria, nor are their critics, but because these artists are choosing to highlight the communities they come from—communities that are still experiencing profound social disadvantages in the 21<sup>st</sup> century—they find themselves in a position to criticize and condemn the social engineered circumstances of racial inequality.

<sup>96</sup> Houston A. Baker, Jr. *Ibid.* pg. 90

<sup>97</sup> Houston A. Baker, Jr. *Ibid.*, pg. 91

reinforced by select black artists and writers who are utilizing their talents to make critical interventions.

“Beyond Disaster Exceptionalism: Social Movement Developments in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina,” is a crucial piece of scholarship written by Rachel E. Luft which outlines three distinct waves of social movements carried out by grassroots organizers, intent on developing new strategies for social resistance throughout the Gulf South. I make frequent reference to Luft’s study in the pages that follow because her article provides a detailed overview of the community organizing and advocacy carried out Post Katrina, a crucial component of the Southern Renaissance I’m working to establish. Furthermore, her article provides an interpretive framework which I utilize as a direct link between the social movements occurring across the Gulf South and the political efficacy of the art and literature later discussed in this chapter, including the work of local “street artist” artist Brandan “BMike” Odums, Patricia Smith’s poetry collection *Blood Dazzler*, and Natasha Tretheway’s *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast*. Just as there has been a tremendous outpouring of scholarship on the subject of Hurricane Katrina, there has also been a significant cultural response to the storm and its aftermath that is not without its incisive social criticism and poignant advocacy on behalf of the vulnerable and voiceless. Therefore, it’s my ambition to bridge these two conversations and to consider what new insights and strategies art and literature can provide in the struggle for social justice and racial equality.

The first wave of social movement discussed in “Beyond Disaster Exceptionalism” is characterized by crisis and plagued by the more immediate concerns affecting predominantly poor black residents of the city in the days following the storm. Given the widespread media coverage documenting the horrendous conditions those stranded or dispersed by the hurricane

experienced and the clear mismanagement of disaster protocols on behalf of the State there was a mass response from out of state volunteers and organizers, working to provide aide and assistance to those in need. Luft explains that “[i]mmediately after the hurricane, some movement leaders expected that Katrina would rekindle a mass movement in the United States.” Although such a movement never came to fruition, Luft maintains that “the amount of movement activity on the Gulf Coast has been remarkable, especially in light of the fact that much of the population remains displaced and poor people have notoriously low levels of movement participation.”<sup>98</sup>

As one might expect, early priorities like distributing supplies such as food and water, assisting with the gutting of flood damaged houses, and removing trash/hazardous materials topped the list of volunteer activities desperately needed across the city. However, pre-existing groups such as the national Association for Community Organizing or ACORN, founded in 1970 and headquartered in New Orleans, “began an early effort to defend Black land rights and prevent widespread demolition of damaged property,” work that was desperately needed as low income residents struggled against corporate and State driven recovery plans that failed to consider their rights.<sup>99</sup> According to Luft, the four most prominent organizations on the scene for

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<sup>98</sup> Rachel E Luft, “Beyond Disaster Exceptionalism: Social Movement Developments in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 3, In the Wake of Katrina: New Paradigms and Social Visions (Sep., 2009), Luft contends that while there was no national movement in response to Hurricane Katrina, locally there was a tremendous amount of activity that has yet to be documented by the scholarly research on disaster and social movements. She writes, “Hurricane Katrina reorganized the social movement terrain of New Orleans, washing away some groups and providing the conditions for the emergence of new ones. Directly after the disaster and for the next two years, the movement landscape was characterized by crisis organizing. I use the term crisis organizing literally here because, for many in the city, the period of disaster, disruption, and trauma has been extensive.” pg. 502

<sup>99</sup> Rachel E. Luft, *Ibid.*, On the significant efforts/activities of new and established community organizers Luft writes, “PHRF and POC led local and regional Survivor Councils composed of low-income Black displaced New Orleanians. As bottom-up structures of participation, self-determination, and accountability, Survivor Councils were designed for people excluded from many of the formal planning and recovery channels. ACORN created a similar structure, called the ACORN Katrina Survivors Association. Additionally, PHRF convened a work group to pursue tenants' rights, and launched a human rights campaign. POC focused on reconstruction activity in the lower Ninth

those first two years following Katrina were the national Association for Community Organizing and Reform Now (ACORN), The Common Ground Collective (CG), The People's Hurricane Relief Fund (PHRF), and the People's Organizing Committee (POC). She characterizes the activities of these organizations in the following way:

Each strove to establish a reconstruction agenda based on principles of participatory democracy, self-determination, and accountability. These four groups...sought, to varying degrees, to make resistance to State recovery policy central to the reconstruction. All were cofounded by baby boomer men and run by Black men who had the local and national movement capital to convene groups, garner a national progressive audience, and raise resources. In this way, the early post-Katrina configurations, built by New Orleanians out of enduring local and national ties, responded to the immediate aftermath of the disaster.<sup>100</sup>

Organizers with roots in local groups and networks as well as the national/local divisions of the Black Liberation movement, along with thousands of progressives, activists, and college students mobilized from around the country. Among those participating in this first wave of activity, the shared goal was to build a movement that would organize low income black New Orleanians, focusing primarily on the Ninth Ward, which had rapidly become “the symbol of post disaster land contestation.”

However, by 2006 a new leadership emerged both as a response to some of the oversights and exclusions of their predecessors as well as the needs of city residents who were at a considerable social disadvantage long before the storm and who now faced the additional burdens of life in post Katrina New Orleans. On this second wave of organizers, Luft observes that “most were younger (in their late twenties and early thirties), more than half were women,

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Ward with the intent to create construction work training programs and organized displaced residents in FEMA trailer parks in and around New Orleans and Baton Rouge. ACORN supported low income home owners with counseling on mortgage and foreclosure relief. The groups also organized protest activity directed at FEMA, HUD, the Louisiana Recovery Association, the Bring New Orleans Back Commission, and the Red Cross.”  
pg. 502-4

<sup>100</sup> Rachel E. Luft, *Ibid*, pg. 503

and they were more racially diverse, including Latinos and Asians as well as Blacks,” which was a stark departure from the more masculine driven leadership of first wave organizing in more ways than one:

The second generation of grassroots Katrina movement groups understands its work to be part of the Katrina recovery, but directed toward ongoing social problems. Social justice movement activity has become more decentralized, moving away from overarching reconstruction work and agenda setting by large coalition organizations. The second-generation groups locate their mission in the broader context of racial, gender, economic, immigrant, and environmental justice. They tie service provision to community organizing and perceive New Orleans's hurricane experience to be a concentrated, accelerated version of trends around the country, including a shrinking welfare state and infrastructure, privatization, and militarism.<sup>101</sup>

As the title of her article suggests, it became increasingly important for organizers in the city to move away from the “exceptional” circumstances produced by disasters and to re-focus on the interaction between disaster outcomes/recovery and the ongoing results of institutional racism, sexism, and class discrimination. Two of the second-generation groups Luft chooses to highlight are the New Orleans Women's Health Clinic (NOWHC) and the New Orleans Women's Health and Justice Initiative (NOWHJI). Both were, “[f]ounded by women who were active members of the local chapter of INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence before Katrina, they had also been important contributors to PHRF in the early post-Katrina months, but left because of concerns about gender issues and sexism within the organization.”<sup>102</sup> The clinic, located in the Tremé, provided reproductive and sexual health care to low income women of color and the women involved in its founding/administration approach reproductive freedom in the context of

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<sup>101</sup> Rachel E. Luft, *Ibid*, pg. 505

<sup>102</sup> Rachel E Luft, *Ibid*, pg. 504



broader struggles for social justice and equality.<sup>103</sup> As 2007 came to a close, PHRF and POC dissolved, CG shrunk significantly in size, and ACORN returned to its national focus on home foreclosures. In their place, the independent and decentralized groups of the second generation came together to work on certain issues as an assorted “social justice network” throughout the Gulf south.

Not long after Katrina made landfall, social scientists began circulating analyses of the disaster from social constructionist and social vulnerability perspectives, concluding that “years of human and infrastructural neglect—the racialized poverty that had 27 percent of New Orleans's inhabitants living below the poverty line; the poorly designed and maintained levees; and the federal government's inadequately managed and funded emergency management operations agency...” were chiefly to blame for the devastating outcomes of the storm.<sup>104</sup> These were the same conclusions being drawn by grassroots movement leaders who were actively trying to provide aid and assistance on the ground, while working toward their ultimate goals to bring about state reform and to advocate for the structural redistribution of power and resources.

Moving forward, organizers began to contextualize Katrina's outcomes in the “long history of

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<sup>103</sup> Rachel E Luft, *Ibid*, pg 508-9. On the clinic's role in the community and the vision for its purpose in the post Katrina “resistance”, Luft writes, “In the wake of the impending health-care disaster due more to post-Katrina policy than to the hurricane itself, the women of INCITE! founded the clinic to meet women's reproductive and sexual health needs. After observing the interlocking effects of the State's response to Katrina on low-income women of color, cofounder and interim director Shana Griffin began to understand the way in which disaster was being used as a vehicle for limiting reproductive freedom in a larger program of population control. From this perspective, the attending conditions of natural disaster, such as evacuation and reentry, are decentered; they are then reinterpreted as *opportunities*, either for social control *or* for resistance, where in this case resistance means reproductive justice.”

<sup>104</sup> Rachel E. Luft, *Ibid*, On the contributions of social vulnerability scholarship, Luft writes, “Social vulnerability scholarship has helped to identify how “the challenges of life are a permanent disaster” for people already oppressed by class, race, gender, sexuality, disability, age, and other forces of systemic oppression. It moves to displace “natural” disasters as the greatest risk to human well-being and to replace them with an understanding of the social and ongoing conditions that produce daily risk, suffering, and trauma. It also helps to explain the behavior of people who already experience daily hazards because they live at the intersection of poverty, racism, and/or sexism when they face what appears to be a discrete disaster. pg. 506-7

U.S. imperialism, the ‘national oppression’ of Blacks, and the disenfranchisement of women and children.” An approach that, according to Luft, was conceived to chip away at the policy decisions that made Katrina’s devastating outcomes possible and to frame them as the, “standard operating procedure of the U.S. government; [likening] displacement, impoverishment, and service deprivation of hurricane survivors to the chronic conditions of racialized poverty.”<sup>105</sup> In so doing, these organizers hoped to shift and sustain the momentum generated by the public response to the circumstances of crisis—defined as something that happens suddenly and without warning—to socially engineered crises occurring not only in New Orleans, but at the national and global level as well.

Thus, bringing us to the third and final wave of social movement described in “Beyond Disaster Exceptionalism,” which becomes increasingly conceptualized as a resistance against U.S. policy and hegemony, borrowing terminology and practice from global struggles for human rights advocacy all over the world. According to her research, the seeds of this third movement were planted while the floodwaters were still high in New Orleans, keeping hundreds of thousands displaced from their homes; most without stable evacuation sites or the ability to return to New Orleans. Many organizers in the city prepared for a long struggle on behalf of displaced resident and individuals with the People's Hurricane Relief Fund carefully chose the term “right of return” as their heralding call.<sup>106</sup> Terminology which, Luft suggests, was chosen for its international and post-colonial significance:

Though PHRF organizers understood that it might jeopardize some allegiances, they evoked the Palestinian national struggle, seeing the Katrina response as the

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<sup>105</sup> Rachel E. Luft, *Ibid*, pg. 507

<sup>106</sup> Rachel E. Luft, *Ibid*, Luft describes the challenges facing those attempting to get home after Katrina. She writes, “The host of obstacles to return—which still keep many of the approximately one hundred twenty-five thousand absent New Orleanians from home at the time of this writing in early 2009—include having neither an affordable home to return to nor transportation back, employment, health care, flood protection or basic infrastructure” pg. 516

latest assault by "the U.S. capitalist system and . . . the system of African American national oppression . . . [which] is in violation of human rights" and a "crime against humanity." In a critical post-Katrina manifesto published by Saladin Muhammad on September 15, 2005, the first-generation language of "right of return" became the slogan of PHRF and the motto of the reconstruction movement, used widely within and beyond movement circles.<sup>107</sup>

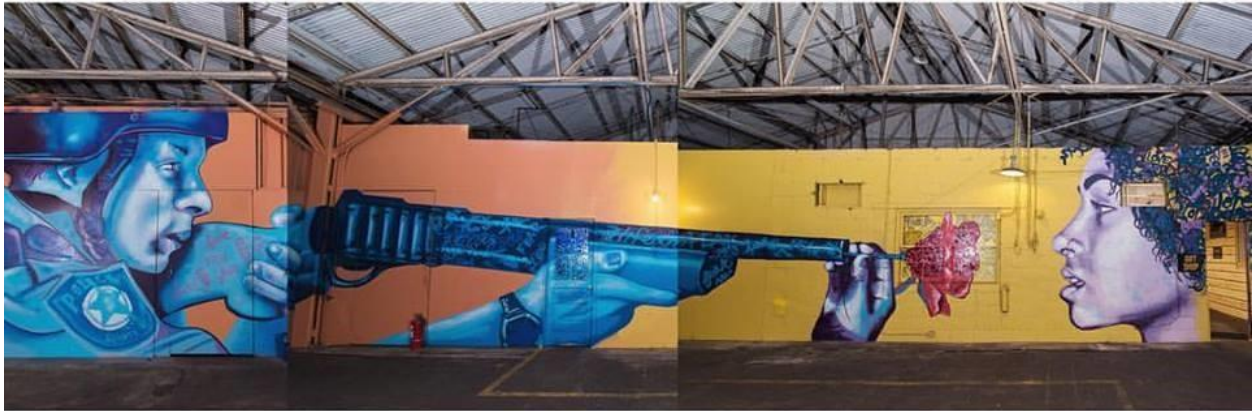
For many of these disenfranchised domestic groups, adopting a human rights orientation meant cultivating international support for Katrina survivors and reframing domestic issues in terms of a larger global struggle. Tactics such as the production and dissemination of public reports, tribunals, and press releases were utilized to critique the U.S. government's response to Katrina and to reinforce the human rights claims and violations under investigation. In one such instance, members of Advocates for Environmental Human Rights submitted a shadow report titled "Racial Discrimination and Ethnic Cleansing in the United States in the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina." According to Luft, "the report charged the United States with denying the rights to protection from police brutality, to equal treatment before the law, and to housing, public health, and medical care after the hurricane."<sup>108</sup> Highlighting the hypocrisy of the U.S. implied by its history of foreign and domestic policies also speaks to a larger goal of giving local, regional, and international activists common ground on which to build an intersectional global movement. Moving forward, I analyze art and literature chosen for their political resonance as well as their shared considerations with activists and organizers critical of systemic racism, social inequality, and U.S. policy at home and abroad.

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<sup>107</sup> Rachel E. Luft, *Ibid*, pg. 516

<sup>108</sup> Rachel E. Luft, *Ibid*, the heart of the report is a critique of the Stafford Act, which it compares to the Guiding Principles. The report identifies four fundamental flaws in the Act: the transfer of responsibility for recovery from the federal government to the states, the absence of a right to assistance and return, the refusal to recognize disparate impact as an indication of racial discrimination, and the absence of rights to housing, education, and health care. CERD noted in its response to the shadow report that "it remains concerned about the disparate impact that this natural disaster continues to have on low-income African American residents." pg. 519

## I. Promoting a Message of Black (Self) Love Amidst the Ruins of Hurricane Katrina



**Figure 5. Mural featured at Studio Be by Brandon “BMike” Odums**

Love over hate: this is the message that is broadcasted across every wall of Brandon “BMike” Odums first solo exhibit located at Studio Be in New Orleans. Odums is a NOCCA (New Orleans Center for Creative Arts) and UNO (University of New Orleans) graduate, from the New Orleans West Bank or Algiers. His father was a marine and so Odums spent much of his childhood living in different cities on various military bases throughout the world, but summers were always spent in New Orleans among his mother’s family in West Algiers and New Orleans was his first association of “home.” When Odums began high school, his father retired, and his family relocated to Algiers. After Katrina Odums moved to Atlanta for a year and a half but returned to the West Bank as soon as that was an option. Since then, Odums has been making a name for himself as an artist who uses his platform to empower the city’s youth to channel their creative energy into positive projects. In a 2014 article for *Complex*, Odums was deemed one of “20 New Orleans Artists You Should Know,” and author Jennifer Woods had the following to say about this fresh new talent: “As the founder and director of 2-Cent Entertainment, a youth organization that bridges the gap between pop culture and social awareness, Odums uses art as a tool for activism. Working in a variety of media, Odums has used both the lens of his video

camera and the nozzle of a spray paint can to highlight the challenges of modern-day New Orleans.”<sup>109</sup>

Odums first gained nationwide attention in 2013 for “Project Be,” a series of graffiti murals painted on the walls of a public housing project in the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward of New Orleans, depicting African American icons such as Muhammad Ali, Martin Luther King Jr., and various heroes in the struggle against institutional racism. The building was scheduled to be demolished and rebuilt, however, like many structures around the city, it was still standing in its storm ravaged and neglected state. In the abandoned space, Odums saw an opportunity to make an empowering statement to the predominantly low income African American neighborhood in which it was based. In an article titled “Artist Transforms Abandoned Buildings In New Orleans With Powerful Art,” published by the *Huffingtonpost* in 2017 Sarah Ruiz-Grossman profiled Odums, writing that the “New Orleans native aims to criticize how the city neglected under-resourced neighborhoods after the 2005 natural disaster—but also wants to celebrate the residents of these mostly-black neighborhoods and the pride and beauty of their communities.” Ultimately, the Housing Authority of New Orleans boarded up the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward housing project, deeming it unsafe for public visitation and Odums took his vision to a vacant apartment complex once known as “De Gaulle Manor” in an Algiers neighborhood, abounding with blighted or condemned spaces. There he encountered an ally:

Bill Thomason, a director at the RDLN Foundation, a small nonprofit dedicated to charitable building projects that owned the property, came across Odums’ art in the space and loved it. Rather than kick him out, he told Odums to keep going. So in 2014, Odums brought together dozens of artists to contribute their talents and launch ‘Exhibit Be,’ a multistory art show celebrating black history and culture

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<sup>109</sup> Jennifer Wood, “20 New Orleans Artists You Should Know,” *Complex*, July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2014.

with images of Harriet Tubman and quotes like ‘You are your ancestors’ wildest dreams.<sup>110</sup>

Unlike his previous venture, Odums had the permission of the developers to work in the space, however, the apartment complex was not open to the public for viewing. So, an agreement was reached, and Thomas consented to open the site temporarily during Prospect 3, an international art festival based in New Orleans. On Saturday, November 15<sup>th</sup> 2014 Exhibit Be opened to the public and, at the time, the graffiti instillation was recorded to be “the largest street art exhibit in the American south.”<sup>111</sup> Scheduled for an eventual demolition so that a sport center can be built in its place, Exhibit Be proved to be one of the most exciting additions to the lineup for Prospect 3, which featured 58 official shows, selected by and paid for by the Prospect.3 management.

I was not fortunate enough to visit the space while it was open to the public, however, the historic occasion was thoroughly covered by local and national media outlets. In a report for NOLA.com/The Times-Picayune, Doug MacCash described the environment at Exhibit Be as suitable for “adventure-seeking art lovers only,” differing from most curated museum experiences, as the abandoned housing project was surrounded by rocky terrain, stray debris, and cracked/dirty streets. MacCash writes:

The heart of ‘ExhibitBe’ is the peaked recreation building that is now little more than an orange, two-story shell. It is faced by two L-shaped, five-story apartment buildings striped with concrete walkways. A cast of other remarkable street artists has pitched in with Odums to transform the enormous architectural canvas into a surrealistic collaboration that runs the emotional gamut from enormous haunting portraits of a teenage New Orleans murder victim [15-year-old George Carter] to bubbly purple dinosaurs.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Sara Ruiz-Grossman, “Artist Transforms Abandoned Buildings in New Orleans with Powerful Art,” *Huffingtonpost*, October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017

<sup>111</sup> Doug MacCash

<sup>112</sup> Doug MacCash, “‘ExhibitBe,’ a spectacular outdoor graffiti environment, on view Saturday only” NOLA.com/The Times-Picayune, [http://www.nola.com/arts/index.ssf/2014/11/exhibitbe\\_spectacular\\_outdoor.html](http://www.nola.com/arts/index.ssf/2014/11/exhibitbe_spectacular_outdoor.html)

Working with artists from many diverse backgrounds, Odums has remarked they didn't always see the political resonance of the work they were doing, in the place where they stood. In 2016, I sat down with the artist, to talk about some of the unexpected difficulties he encountered while attempting to realize his vision for Exhibit Be and Odums had a great deal to say on the subjects of graffiti art, collaboration, and white privilege. When Odums reflected on his guiding principles for this project, it's clear he'd always pictured Exhibit Be as a powerful platform to celebrate black leaders and culture, but he also wanted to facilitate conversations he felt were sorely needed across communities. Aware that they'd been granted a very small window to say and do something memorable, Odums decided to remind visitors to Exhibit Be that they were coming into a poor community; one that had been overlooked and neglected long before the storm. As such, the absence of this community, and others like it, spoke volumes about the demographics of displaced New Orleans residents post Katrina and developer's future outlook for the city.

The atmosphere of uplift and critical awareness could hardly be denied during the closing ceremonies which took place Jan 19<sup>th</sup>, the day before the demolition was scheduled to begin. Nia Porter, reporting for an online news outlet, recounts that on the day of the ceremony “a transformative energy permeated throughout New Orleans’ Algiers community this Martin Luther King Day as spectators soaked in the final day of ExhibitBE, a community-centered art project at the abandoned De Gaulle Apartment Complex.” According to Porter’s glowing account of the festivities, “the likenesses of powerful, Black leaders lined the walls of some of the rooms. Like apparitions, they beckoned to you with their wisdom—their philosophies. ‘You can’t lead the people if you don’t love the people. You can’t save the people if you don’t serve

the people,' read a graffiti image of Dr. Cornel West.”<sup>113</sup> Images from the event, display immense crowds, clamoring to view the art for the last time it would ever be on display and to enjoy the performances of some New Orleans based talents such as Trombone Shorty and Christian Scott, and Grammy-award winning singer, Erykah Badu. According to Odums, “Over 10,000+ people came to the space and it shook up New Orleans to show people the power of the art, how art can heal, can inspire and empower others.”<sup>114</sup>



**Figure 6. Exhibit Be** <sup>115</sup>

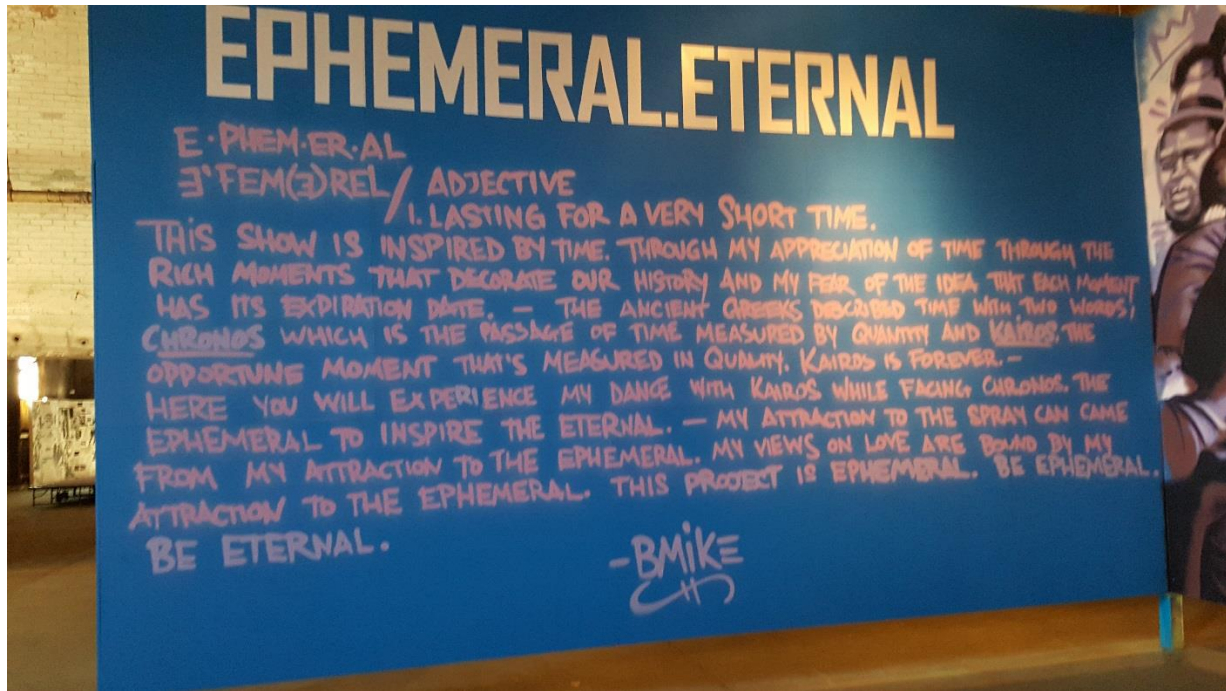
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<sup>113</sup> Nia Porter, “New Orleans Street Art Exhibit Closes” *Saint Heron*, Jan 22, 2015.  
<http://saintheron.com/news/new-orleans-street-art-exhibit-closes/>

<sup>114</sup> Brooke Obie, “Meet Brandan ‘BMike’ Odums, the New Orleans Artist Featured in ‘Queen Sugar’ ” *Ebony*, Oct 13<sup>th</sup>, 2016  
<http://www.ebony.com/entertainment-culture/queen-sugar-brandan-odums#axzz56J4405Sh>

<sup>115</sup> Odums reached out to over 35 artists, together they transformed a 150-unit complex .Original photo taken by Joshua Brasted and obtained from <https://traveler.marriott.com/new-orleans/nolas-street-masterpieces-graffiti-artist-brandan-odums-on-art-with-an-edge/>





**Figure 7. Ephemeral.Eternal, Studio Be in New Orleans** <sup>116</sup>

*Ephemeral.Eternal* is Odums first solo exhibit, located inside a 35,000 sq. ft. warehouse on Royal Street. The exhibit is comprised of four rooms that vary according to themes the artist has chosen to inspire and instruct in the importance of black love, resistance, and survival.

Artists, athletes, and various black icons, such as Fannie Lou Hamer, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Muhammad Ali, and Fred Hampton decorate the walls in colorful murals dedicated to their lives and their legacies. In a recent interview for *Ebony* magazine, Odums theorizes that “One aspect of the show is historical... and the other half is about reimagining the present and the future from the lens of the past.”<sup>117</sup> As a graffiti artist, Odums works in a medium that is

<sup>116</sup> Ephemeral.Eternal : E Phe Er Al / Adjective 1. Lasting for a very short time. This show is inspired by time. Through my appreciation of time through the rich moments that decorate our history and my fear of the ideas that each moment has its expiration date. -The ancient Greeks described time with the two words, chronos which is the passage of time measured by quantity and kairos, the opportune moment that’s measured in quality. Kairos is forever. - Here you will experience my dance with kairos while facing chronos. The ephemeral to inspire the eternal. My attraction to the spray cane came from my attraction to the ephemeral. My views on love are bound by my attraction to the ephemeral. This project is ephemeral. Be ephemeral. Be eternal. -BMike (photo by me)

<sup>117</sup> Brooke Obie, “Meet Brandan ‘BMike’ Odums, the New Orleans Artist Featured in ‘Queen Sugar’”

inherently self-aware of its impermanence, requiring bold colors and big statements to make a lasting impression. As the title of his show suggests, his work is all about the challenge of making a significant contribution to the world with the limited time we have.

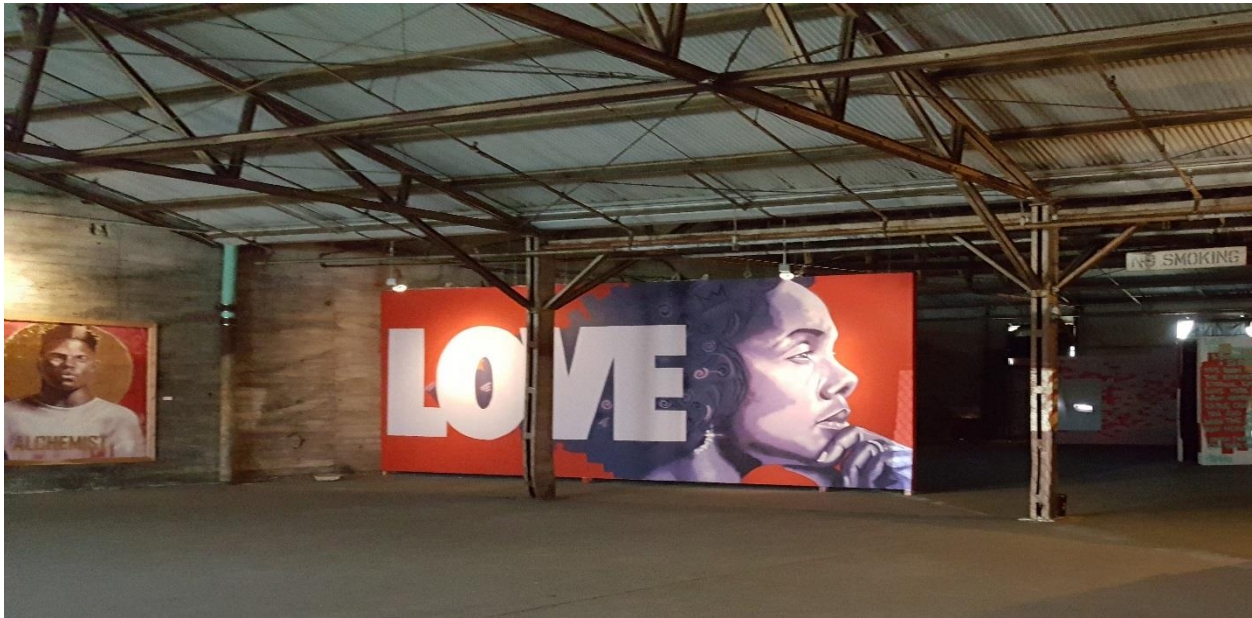


**Figure 8. Hallway Featuring Fannie Lou Hammer, Langston Hughes, Cornell West, etc**



**Figure 9. Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, Eric Garner and Oscar Grant <sup>118</sup>**

<sup>118</sup> Odums work was featured on episode of the television drama *Queen Sugar*, written and produced by Ava Duvernay. On the episode, Brooke Obie of *Ebony* writes, ““directed by Neema Barnette,[in the episode] Nova



**Figure 10. Coretta Scott King, Love**



**Figure 11. Martin Luther King, Jr., Supreme <sup>119</sup>**

Bordelon (Rutina Wesley) takes her nephew Micha (Nicholas L. Ashe) and her new activist girlfriend Chantal (Reagan Gomez) to #StudioBe. While Nova interviews Odums for a story, Chantal takes the opportunity to use Odums’ paintings of Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, Erica Garner and Oscar Grant to teach Micah about the Black Lives Matter movement.” The work reproduces signs worn by protestors in the Civil Rights movement of the 50s and 60s, reading “I Am A Man.”

<sup>119</sup> In the exhibit, Coretta and Martin gaze in each other’s direction. Photos by Me. In Brooke Obie’s article titled “Paint it Black: New Orleans Artist ‘Bmike’ Odums on Being Featured in Queen Sugar and Celebrating the Glorious Beauty of Blackness” she provides readers with an atmospheric description of the installation. She writes, “As one stands in the doorway looking into the second room, it almost looks as if the wall that Coretta Scott King is painted on is connected to the one Martin Luther King Jr. is painted on. From that angle, she’s looking directly at



**Figure 12. I Am My Ancestors Wildest Dreams**



**Figure 13. They Tried to Bury Us. They Didn't Know We Were Seeds.**

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him, and the words on both walls read from left to right, "Love Supreme." But as you enter the "Love" room, there is an obvious, wide gap between Coretta's and Martin's walls. It signifies, for Bmike, the complexity of their relationship."

In October of 2016, I walked through Studio Be to experience this moving and massive exhibit for the first time. Later, I got the opportunity to sit down with the artist to have a conversation about the value and contemporary relevance of his work. Upon emerging from my solo walk through of *Emphemeral.Eternal*, my first impression of the exhibit was that it was best described as a spiritual experience, designed to cleanse individuals encumbered by negative associations of blackness (i.e. criminality, disposability, and shame) so that they could then walk out into the world with a sense of their worth, their proud history, and their beauty. This space was intended to be the antidote to some of the cultural toxicity produced by white supremacy, a counternarrative that tells little black boys and girls who they are and who they can become if they walk in the footsteps of their ancestors. Some of the most compelling images to me were those that stood in clear defiance of the devaluation of black life such as “Figure 9. Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, Eric Garner and Oscar Grant,” and which opened the doorway for potential conversations with a younger generation regarding African Americans long and troubled history with the police and, by extension, the justice system in this country. These slain black men stand, with halo’s painted around their heads, holding signs that read “I AM A MAN” which harkens back to signs once carried by protestors in the struggle for Civil Rights. The continuity of this struggle may be our inheritance, but like those before us, we possess the grace and strength to fight for our right to be regarded as human.

“Baptized when the levees broke” is the one room of the exhibit, dedicated to the survivors of Hurricane Katrina, with large scale installations from floor to ceiling and television monitors playing a continual loop featuring sound bites from Katrina coverage and various storm imagery. When you first enter the room, you’ll notice half of a wooden ship protrudes from the wall, brandishing the words “refugee?,” Noah’s ark, The Middle Passage, and Survive. In the

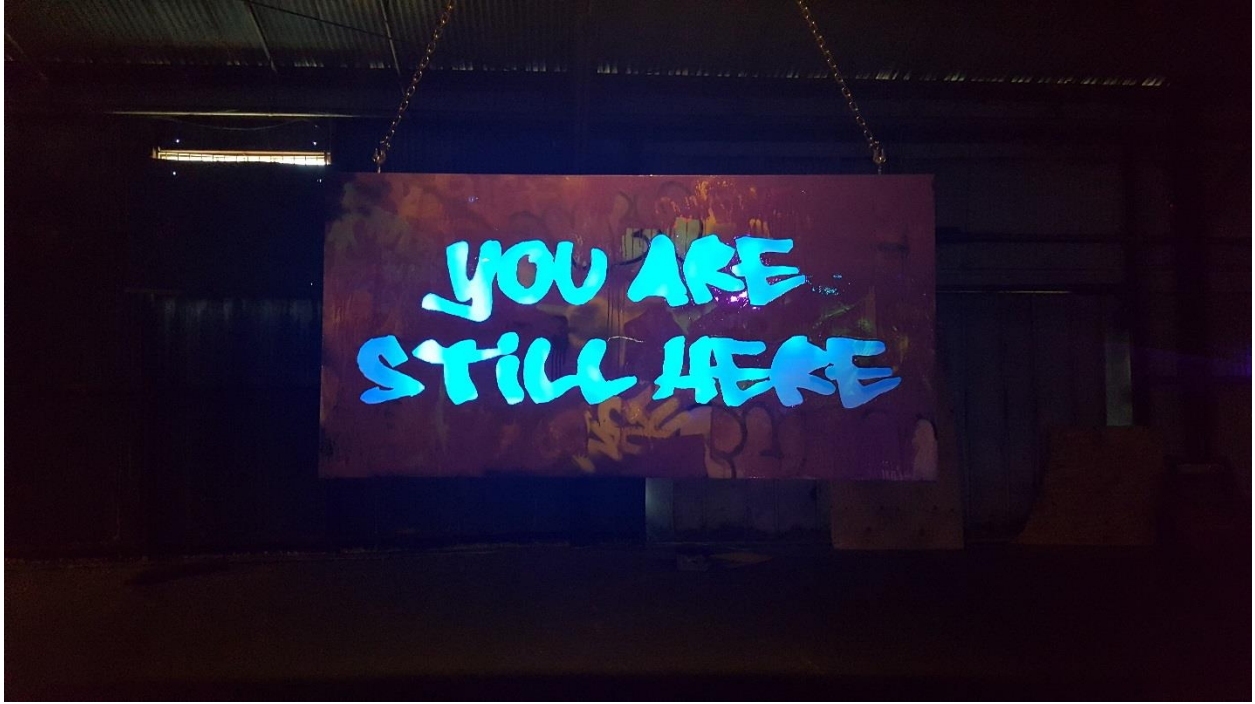
right corner of the room, the façade of a living room is set up and decorated with a TV, couch, and family pictures on the wall, much of which is covered in purple paint intended to signify how high the water levels reached in some of the flooded homes. Brooke Obie's "Paint it Black: New Orleans Artist 'Bmike' Odums on Being Featured in Queen Sugar and Celebrating the Glorious Beauty of Blackness" conveys a vivid sense of her experience of Odums work. She writes:

An installation in the middle of the room is the eye of the hurricane, with white clouds and wind and shadows, and words for the survivors: "You're Still Here." A video compilation captures the dichotomy of the storm: Old gospel songs play over footage of thousands of black folks getting baptized in a river, intercut with footage from failed Katrina rescue efforts, Kanye West's "George Bush doesn't care about black people" moment, and a cartoon of Noah's family praying and trembling inside the ark.<sup>120</sup>

The religious references present throughout the exhibit serve both as a reminder to viewers that when the city flooded there were some who compared the city-wide devastation to the biblical story of Noah where God sends a flood to drown/punish the wicked, and to further emphasize the room's key themes of survival and renewal. In this way, Odums attempts to override any narratives suggesting this catastrophe was "deserved" and to focus instead on what has been lost and how the city and its residents inspire/come back from such tragedies. The more personal your relationship is to these images, the more overwhelming they can be to process, but hope is a consistent message throughout.

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<sup>120</sup> Brooke Obie, "Paint It Black"



**Figure 14. You Are Still Here**



**Figure 15. Eye of the Storm, Rooftops Submerged**



**Figure 16. Living Room with Purple Water Line**

A small plaque hangs near the living room installation with a brief quote provided from a resident who goes by the name of Arnold “MidCityAb.” In it, Arnold tells the story of his survival atop a roof during Katrina and his ongoing struggle to cope amid his losses:

I was on the roof of a Grocery Store in my underwater neighborhood for 3 days and 2 nights, and I smiled the whole time. I had maybe 5 books, Goosebumps by RL Stine. I would read at night with only light coming from the moon. I saw dead bodies floating in water. I still remember the smell, hearing homeless people scream at night. My childhood home doesn't exist anymore. It's an empty lot now. Everything I knew about my existence left when my house was demolished. Childhood pictures, certificates, etc. Sometimes I wonder if my Pre-Katrina life actually happened. If all the people from my old neighborhood, whom I haven't seen in a decade, actually existed. Or if God, the Universe, or what have you is playing some type of game on me...MidCity, I love you. Went and tatted you on my chest, because you are all I knew. And now you're gone...

Arnold's trauma is apparent, and his losses are great, provoking an existential crisis likely shared by many residents who came back to a home they no longer recognized. But he clings fiercely to the memory of what home was and remakes himself in the image of this reconstructed past.



Generally, Odums does not shy away from the politics of his art, but instead, embraces his talent as a vehicle to do meaningful work: “My elders taught me, art for art’s sake is not true. Artists will always, as Paul Robeson said, be the gatekeepers of truth. As Nina Simone says, art is supposed to reflect the times. I come from that tradition. The people who taught me, they instilled that in me to be like, ‘Yo, if you’re gonna have this talent, you have to be conscious about how you use it and how it impacts other people.’ And that’s the type of work that I do.”<sup>121</sup> Odums show is expected to shut down temporarily over the summer, so it can be broken down and taken on the road to be featured in studios around the country.



**Figure 17. Slave Ship and/or Rescue Boat**

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<sup>121</sup> Quote from Odums, featured in Brooke Obie’s, ““Meet Brandan ‘BMike’ Odums, the New Orleans Artist Featured in ‘Queen Sugar’”



**Figure 18. Debris, The Fire Next Time**

## **Part II: Blood Dazzler**

Patricia Smith's most recent book of poetry, *Blood Dazzler* (Coffee House Press, 2008), and National Book Award finalist, chronicles the days leading up to, during, and after Hurricane Katrina from a number of perspectives, including the storm *herself*. The author's previous work includes the poetry collections *Teahouse of the Almighty* (Coffee House Press, 2006), *Close to Death* (Zoland Books, 1993), *Big Towns, Big Talk* (Zoland Books, 1992), and *Life According to Mowtown* (Tia Chucha Press, 1991).<sup>122</sup> Smith is a four-time National Poetry Slam winner, and a former reporter for the Boston Globe who currently resides in Tarrytown, New York. Upon

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<sup>122</sup> On the tone and subject of her previous work, Anis Shivani writes, "In her previous collections...Smith took up the expected depredations of African-American urban life, particularly for the male—dealing with gangs, imprisonment, drugs, AIDS, and random violence—in a variant of social confessionalism. She recounted the arrest of her teenaged son and the killing of her father, with a shot fired at the back of his head, at sixty-two. Often the poems were sparked by headlines of mayhem, addressed to Motown celebrities, or went at the empirical data of urban misery, almost with a sociologist's hatchet." From "The New Poetry of Lament", *Michigan Quarterly Review*; Winter 3010; 49, 1; ProQuest Central pg. 132

being asked, what inspired her to write her most recent book, Smith responded in the following way:

During Katrina, the story that kept nudging at me, the one that grew increasingly insistent until I had no choice but to write, was the story about the thirty-four nursing home residents abandoned and left to die as the water rose to swallow them. In thirty-four small stanzas, I wanted to rewind the clock, give those elders a bit of their voices back so they'd have a chance to tell us who they were. I write quite often in persona, so I was able to get out of the way and let the drama unfold again, with the voices of those who were lost guiding the story. This poem, "34," led to the rest of *Blood Dazzler*. I didn't start out with the idea of crafting an entire book, but I didn't know how much of what I had witnessed during Katrina needed to be processed, revisited, and remember in a way that I hope will last.<sup>123</sup>

In the days following the storm, tragedies such as this one were reported with sobering regularity. With just over 1,800 fatalities, Hurricane Katrina was one of the most heavily televised disasters in recent history (rivaled only by the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>) and events in the city were captured through many mediums, including camera lenses broadcast directly into homes across America. However, no matter how gripping or graphic the details of these stories may be, our literal and figurative distance from traumatic experiences often results in our collective tendency to forget or repress their memory. In so doing, we deny ourselves an opportunity to process said trauma or to learn from our mistakes, and we do a disservice to the victims as well.

Smith's comments suggest that art serves several purposes in response to trauma or the unimaginable made real, including, but not limited to, allowing the artist and her audience an opportunity to process complex emotions, as well as actively resisting the impulse to turn away from, repress, or minimize the suffering of others. This thoughtful pause, meditation, or remembrance, however small, is significant in its attempt to make us confront and reflect upon things we'd rather forget. Throughout *Blood Dazzler*, Smith employs the poetic form of the

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<sup>123</sup> Anonymous, "Why We Write Now", *Poets & Writers*; Jan/Feb 2009; 37, 1; pg 64-5

persona poem or dramatic monologue to capture the unheard voices of the elders as well as those whose suffering, trauma, and overall experience of the storm resonated most profoundly with her. In a review of her work, Ginny Kakczmarek remarks that, “Smith paints an intensely compassionate picture of New Orleans and its inhabitants, including human, animal, and even meteorological characters. Each poem has its own rhythm and music, many in casual African American vernacular, and its own formal style, from free verse to tanka to sestina. As the events of the storm unfold, several characters recur, most of them poor, black New Orleanians who were unable to evacuate.”<sup>124</sup> Smith’s choice of characters to inhabit, particularly, her decision to focus on the experiences of poor black residents mirrors the media coverage so prominently associated with Katrina. However, her artistic choices also purposefully supply these individuals and their stories with more dimensionality and humanity than the hopeless caricatures, so often displayed on the TV screen. In “The New Poetry of Lament,” Anis Shivas concludes that one of the lessons of Smith’s work is “...to make us *want to care* is really not the point of successful political poetry, but rather to make us simply see the absurd relationships between the components of such a tragedy.”<sup>125</sup> An absurd tragedy it may be; one of the more compelling and politically relevant aspects of *Blood Dazzler*, for myself, is that Smith clearly reveres and utilizes the power of representation to place us on the ground amid the chaos, hope, and despair of individuals who’ve come face to face with their insignificance on behalf of their god and their government, in a world where that sentiment is increasingly felt by the “least valuable” among us.

Smith opens her collection with “Prologue—And then She Owns You,” a poem that depicts a version of New Orleans many readers familiar with the city’s popularized persona will

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<sup>124</sup> Ginny Kakczmarek, “Review: Choruses of Experience”, *The Women’s Review of Books*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (July/August 2009) pg 20

<sup>125</sup> Anis Shivas, *Ibid*, pg 133

recognize. “Call her New Orleans,” the narrative voice instructs in line sixteen, as we are introduced to a city/character that is unapologetically brazen, harsh, sensual, and feminine. Throughout, Smith’s prologue her descriptive imagery evokes both disgust and desire, alternating between them from one stanza to the next, as though these were compatible characteristics. However, the poem performs an intentional misdirection, as the seduction we witness—one that stimulates fantasies of escape from conventional existence for the perpetual tourist, visitor, or outsider—is not only one sided, but is also an elaborate performance, masking the weariness of the city we find so enthralling. In line seventeen, Smith writes, “Each day she wavers, not knowing how long she/ can stomach the introduction of needles,/ the brash, boozed warbling of bums with neon crowns,/ necklaces raining” (vii). Ultimately, Smith’s introductory poem exposes a city that deals with the dirty and broken remnants of the previous night’s excess, who then prepares herself for the continuous onslaught of the revelers, and who struggles with the monotony that plagues her routine existence.

The “appeal” of New Orleans, singled out the second half of Smith’s poem is revealed to be the lusty and drunken projection of the Other as well as a calculated routine on behalf of the city herself. Here, Smith succeeds in delivering something familiar, harkening back to a long legacy of literary portrayals of New Orleans, all the while shinning a light on all the gritty aspects of the city its admirers often fail to see, thereby highlighting the hypocrisy of a romance based on misconceptions and illusions. Significantly, this is the first and final glimpse that readers get of a New Orleans we recognize, with its previous, pre-Katrina reputation somewhat intact. Anis Shavis suggests this is crucial decision on the part of the author, observing that “The Outside” or the “typified...myth of New Orleans as lawless city gambling on its own existence day by day, because of the sheer fact of its physical location, yet breeding innovative art and

thought in a place immune to the law-and-order impetus of the conservative revolution—had to visibly disappear, for [Smith] to coin new myths about its relevance.”<sup>126</sup> Moving forward, the New Orleans of the Prologue symbolically recedes into the past, and although it informs the present, it is no longer the dominant or dictating mythology of the text. Throughout much of the book, the city serves as a marginal or minor character, with much more emphasis placed on the experience of residents in the city during the storm.

One of the consistent devices Smith utilizes throughout *Blood Dazzler* is a carefully chosen epigraph placed at the beginning of several poems in the collection, selected from various source material such as television soundbites and statements made on behalf of public officials. One of the first epigraphs to appear is from the National Hurricane Center and precedes the opening poem of the collection, simply titled “5 P.M., TUESDAY, AUGUST 23, 2005.” It reads, “Data from an Air Force reserve unit reconnaissance aircraft...along with observations from the Bahamas and nearby ships...indicate the broad low pressure area over the southeastern Bahamas has become organized enough to be classified as tropical depression twelve.”<sup>127</sup> The storm’s formation and subsequent upgrades in strength are depicted in a series poems, all spoken in the first person, delivered in the form of a creation narrative of a petulant entity with the self-importance of a god: “A muted thread of gray light, hovering ocean/ becomes throat, pulls in wriggle, anemone, kelp,/ widens with the want of it. I become/ a mouth, thrashing hair, an overdone eye. How dare/ the water belittle my thirst, treat me as just/ another/small/ disturbance,/ try to feed me/ from the bottom of its hand?”<sup>128</sup> We don’t know the source of the

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<sup>126</sup> Anis Shivas, *Ibid*, pg. 147

<sup>127</sup> Patricia Smith, *Blood Dazzler*, pg. 1

<sup>128</sup> Patricia Smith, *Ibid*, pg. 1

speaker's egotism, but we do know how this story ends, so from the storms metaphorical first breath the reader is aware of its undisputable significance.

It's not until line fifteen that we are told that our force of nature is female, with a penchant for destruction and the calm assurance that her power will grow to epic proportions. "every woman begins as weather," the unnamed entity observes, "sips low thunder, knows her hips. Every woman/ harbors a chaos, can/ wait for it, straddling a fever."<sup>129</sup> Ultimately, this series concludes with the poems "5 P.M., THURSDAY, AUGUST 25, 2005," when the National Hurricane Center upgrades Katrina to a hurricane, and "7 P.M., THURSDAY, AUGUST 25, 2005," when Katrina makes landfall in Florida. Critic, Anis Shavis, deems this series of poems Smith's, "...most effective, repeated personification...As the news advisories tell of a hurricane...[from the ]moment of creation...[to] nebulous precreation, to formation and immediate articulation of the ego, [and] the petulant woman reveling in chaos." Shavis concludes that "these are not so much evolutionary transformations as [an] abruptly discrete series in a predestined tragedy."<sup>130</sup> Smith revisits this series later on in her collection for the last time with her poems "8 A.M., SUNDAY, AUGUST 28, 2005" when Katrina becomes a Category 5 storm, which is the highest possible rating and "10:30 A.M., SUNDAY, AUGUST 28, 2005" when the storm descends on the city and prayer becomes the devoted churchgoers only refuge.

Upon being given a name, Katrina takes on increasingly human characteristics, including a pulse, a mouth, and fingers which she uses to do her "own choking." As we are repeatedly shown, her destructive impulse was always present, however, the difference in being given a name is that it grants her the ability to demonstrate her power with a physicality and

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<sup>129</sup> Patricia Smith, *Ibid*, pg 1-2

<sup>130</sup> Anis Shavis, *Ibid*, pg. 134

intentionality that was lacking prior to this symbolic moment. Ginny Kakczmarek remarks that Smith's personification of the storm "...transforms a random weather event into a vengeful goddess...Hurricane Katrina has her own agenda, and the characters in her path soon meet their inevitable fates...Ninth Ward drag queens and abandoned dogs become heroes in an epic narrative with a sweep as grand as the *Odyssey*; they are mortals enduring the wrath of the supernatural."<sup>131</sup> Smith's goddess of chaos, like her Greek counterparts, may have human qualities, but that is where the similarities stop. Without the pesky presence of the ego or super ego, Katrina is pure id, and the storm's eye is its central, most compelling and brutal force. Smith writes, "My eye takes in so much—/ What it craves, what I never hoped to see./ It doesn't care about pain, is eons away/ from the ego's thump, doesn't hesitate/ to scan the stark, adjust for distances,/ unravel the world for no reason at all, except that it/ hungers."<sup>132</sup> "Its" desire is so substantial and difficult to contain, it is described in "5 P.M., THURSDAY, AUGUST 25, 2005" as its own autonomous presence, but Katrina and her eye are one and the same. It is, however, the driving force behind the devastation to come.

Confronted with a storm of mythic proportions, Smith catalogues a variety of responses from those in its path through a chorus of voices, thoroughly desensitized by what I'd describe as "storm culture." Storm culture is the result of living in a place that is continuously barraged with the threat of Mother Nature's destructive potential, which occurs with such regularity that it becomes inextricably linked to one's way of life and self-identity. This can manifest in many ways, including, but not limited to, the hubris of "still standing" (been there, done that, bring on the next one), the hoping and praying mentality of the mobility challenged (board up your

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<sup>131</sup> Ginny Kakczmarek, *Ibid*, pg. 20

<sup>132</sup> Patricia Smith, *Ibid*, pg. 4



windows and wish for the best), and the chronic storm watchers, poised and ready to flee at a moment's notice (or sit endlessly in the slow moving hell of evacuation traffic). We encounter them all in Smith's collection, beginning with "MAN ON THE TV SAY." "Go." the poem begins, "He say it simple, gray eyes straight on and watered,/ he say it in that machine throat they got./ On the wall behind him, there's a moving picture/ of the sky dripping something worse than rain./ Go. He say. Pick ya'll black asses and run."<sup>133</sup> Undoubtedly, poor black residents of the city are Smith's most frequently invoked voices throughout *Blood Dazzler*, a choice that speaks volumes considering these are the individuals who were most vulnerable to the threats Katrina posed. Initially, the tone of the speaker suggests a mock criticism for such overly simplistic instructions which, while direct and emphatic, fail to consider the "how" so central to his or her predicament. "Go." The poem continues, "Uh-huh. Like our bodies got wheels and gas,/ like at the end of that running there's an open door/ with dry and song inside. He act like we supposed/ to wrap ourselves in picture frames, shadow boxes,/ and bathroom rugs, then walk the freeway, racing/ the water. *Get on out*. Can't he see that our bodies/ are just our bodies, tied to what we know?"<sup>134</sup> The speaker's questions are in line with much of the criticism following Hurricane Katrina regarding the States poorly facilitated evacuation protocols, which failed to consider and make provisions for those individuals who lacked the resources to get out of harm's way.

Although economic immobility is the speaker's primary grievance, it becomes apparent that the prospect of leaving their home behind can be a paralyzing prospect for the New Orleans native. At one such moment in the poem, the speaker compares the newscaster to God pointing

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<sup>133</sup> Patricia Smith, *Ibid*, pg. 7

<sup>134</sup> Patricia Smith, *Ibid*, pg. 7

the way out of paradise, retorting with “Even he got to know our favorite ritual is root.” Not to be minimized, this sense of rootedness plays a tremendous role in people’s decisions to stay or go, as Smith’s biblical allusion deftly demonstrates. She further explores this premise in “ONLY EVERYTHING I OWN” which speaks to the intergenerational roots present in many New Orleans communities that render homeownership, particularly, in poor black neighborhoods a symbol of their family’s proud legacy in the city. “This is my house,” the speaker of the poem asserts. “This was my grandfather’s house./ This is my thin wood, spidered pane./ These are my cobwebs, my four walls,/ my silverfish, my bold roaches.”<sup>135</sup> The home isn’t glamorous, or filled with expensive objects and yet it is the single greatest thing of value to its owner, because it is the remaining link to the people he’s lost and a testament to the lives they led. This is further demonstrated by the ritual of caretaking that the poem describes as the speaker reflects on the literal and figurative sustenance that the land provides. Smith writes, “I bury my hands in that little garden,/ cool them in the broken earth./ My food comes from my garden./ At my table, I slice the peppers, seed the tomatoes, chop mint,/ rip bitter green into wooden bowls./ The tiny pine table is my whole kitchen,/daddy’s legacy, my certain warm nurture./ I dream loud in this house...”<sup>136</sup> So much more than a house, the home in “ONLY EVERYTHING I OWN” functions much like a totem for this third generation speaker, signifying the extensive ancestry often found in this city and the spiritual significance that can be deeply engrained in one’s relationship to place.

“WHAT TO TWEAK” is one of the most overtly political and critical pieces of writing in her text, it’s also one of the longest; rivaled only by “34,” her ode to the thirty-four seniors

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<sup>135</sup> Patricia Smith, *Ibid*, pg. 8

<sup>136</sup> Patricia Smith, *Ibid*, pg. 8

who were deserted and drowned at St. Rita's Nursing Home. Although the complete collection is intended to make a condemning statement regarding the gross inadequacy of the U.S. government and its mishandling of Hurricane Katrina, this poem singles out FEMA and then director Michael Brown in particular. As the narrative arch swells to deliver its inevitable dramatic blow, Smith depicts Hurricane Katrina flooding the city, and we are revisited by the storm herself as well as voices from the Superdome, the Convention Center, those stranded on roof tops, and a dog abandoned by its owners. She even includes a poem that takes place on Air Force One as then President George W. Bush flies overhead, twanging away on his guitar. Each one is heartbreaking in its own way, however, "WHAT TO TWEAK" is a frustrating, and at times infuriating, display of human inadequacy in the face of mounting suffering and need. The epigraph preceding "WHAT TO TWEAK" contains instructions for the reader on how to decipher the poem's structure and contents. It reads: "Italicized excerpts are from an Aug. 31, 2005 e-mail from Marty Bahamonde to his boss Michael Brown, head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Bahamonde was one of the only FEMA employees in New Orleans at the time." And Smith's poem begins in the following way:

Aug. 31, 12:20 p.m. Re: New Orleans

*Sir, I know that you know the situation is past critical. Here are some things you might not know.*

Rainbows warp when you curse them.  
I have held a shiver of black child against my body.  
The word river doesn't know edges.  
God wouldn't do this There's a Chevy growing in that tree.  
Here, I am so starkly white.  
Sometimes bullets make perfect sense.  
Eventually the concrete will buckle.  
They won't stop screeching at me.  
I have passed out all my gum.  
So many people are thirsty.  
A kid breathes wet against my thigh.

He calls me father.

*Hotels are kicking people out...*<sup>137</sup>

The poem continues in this way, with the updates sent from Bahamonde to Brown in italics, intercut by Smith's words which serve to emphasize the glaring inadequacy of the correspondence between these two men to sufficiently convey the level of crisis, need, and suffering they must address. However, unlike Jesus with his loaves and fishes, the Bahamonde of Smith's poem is pathetically un-miraculous, gradually unraveling in response to a lack of resources, mounting problems, and hordes of angry people, towards whom he feels a growing disdain, looking at him for answers and assistance.

To Smith's credit, she doesn't explicitly demonize these men for everything they fail to deliver in the long run for the people relying on them. Instead, she conveys these chaotic circumstances with a certain degree of sympathy for everybody involved. Bahamonde and Brown may be the "authorities" on the ground, but their incompetence is rooted in broken systems that were never actually prepared to be the people's great deliverance, as his updates indicate. *"thousands gathering in the streets with no food or water...Hundreds still being rescued from homes...Evacuation in process. Plans developing for dome evacuation but hotel situation adding to problem. We are out of food and running out of water at the dome. Plans in the works to address the critical need."*<sup>138</sup> Never are these "updates" reflective of coordinated rescue efforts in the city. Rather, they seem to convey the urgency of inferior beings charged with helping other people, flagrantly devoid of the necessary resources to do so. And with each update, the poem

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<sup>137</sup> Patricia Smith, *Ibid*, pg. 25

<sup>138</sup> Patricia Smith, *Ibid*, pg 26-7

becomes increasingly agitated, depicting some of the most cruel and ineffectual responses visited upon the actual survivors of Hurricane Katrina:

Stifle the stinking, shut down the cameras,  
Wave Dubya down from the sky.  
Subtract the babies, unarm the flailers,  
*Hose that wailing bitch down!*  
Draw up a blueprint, consider detention,  
Throw them some cash from a bag.  
Tell them it's God, ply them with preachers,  
Padlock the rest of the map.  
Hand them a voucher, fly in some Colonel...

Tolerate ranting, dazzle with card tricks,  
Pin flags on absent lapels.  
Try not to breath them, fan them with cardboard,  
Say that their houses will rise.  
Play them some music, swear you hear engines,  
Drape their stooped bodies with beads.  
Salute their resilience, tempt them with future,  
Surrender your shoes to the mud.  
Promise them trailers, pass out complaint forms,  
Draft a law wearing their names.  
Say help is coming, say help is coming,  
Then say that help's running late.  
Shrink from their clutches, lie to their faces,  
Explain how the levies grew thin.  
Mop up the vomit, cringe at their crudeness,  
Audition their daughters for rape.  
Stomp on their sleeping, outrun the gangsters,  
Pass out American flags...<sup>139</sup>

Empty gestures, lies, and stall tactics seem to be the only readily available “resource” these officials have to offer, which, given the circumstances, only adds insult to injury. And just as the poem climbs to overwhelming heights, we are struck with the final/devastating straw of Brown’s lackluster response to the updates he’s received: “*Thanks for the update. Anything specific I need to do/or tweak?*” Which is such an absurd and unacceptable response that it borders on the tragic/comic, eliciting the kind of laughter that can only be followed by ceaseless tears. Moments

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<sup>139</sup> Patricia Smith, *Ibid*, pg. 27

such as this one—where the complicity of the State in the people’s despair is so evident—recur in Smith’s text. Writer Anis Shavis observes that God and the State share the following characteristics in *Blood Dazzler*: “[e]scalating need, the desire to absorb all, omnipresence, omnipotence, insatiability, [and] the craving to be worshiped.”<sup>140</sup> And Smith’s poem serves as a humbling reminder that institutions built by small and foolish men are rarely, if ever divine.

The third act of *Blood Dazzler*, much like first wave of grassroots organization that took place in the city, is invested in the most pressing needs of those in the immediate aftermath of Katrina as people assess damage, look for bodies and bury their dead, and ultimately return home to rebuild and recover. Like many of the poems in her collection, Smith produces an array of characters who are learning to cope under extreme circumstance, with few options but to try and return to some semblance of normalcy and keep up with the demands of everyday life. And, they must do so with little to no room to stop and process the ongoing trauma of the storm. The debris and wreckage must be cleared, work and school must resume, and a path to healing must be created...but how? Smith cannot definitively answer these questions for her readers, nor does she try, but with poems such as “BACK HOME,” “REBUILDING” and “VOODOO VII: SPIRITUAL CLEANSING & BLESSING” she makes room for hope and faith in the human spirit and our determination to survive, even in the aftermath of the unthinkable. “Pain the rubble pretty,” she writes, “hues gone berserk/ with dry hope. It seems we have been programmed/ to set chaos upright, scrub at the stain, / build our homes on rivers, waltz in the rain.”<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Anis Shivas, *Ibid*, pg. 134

<sup>141</sup> Patricia Smith, *Ibid*, pg. 70

### Part III: Beyond Katrina

In the concluding section of my chapter I will be discussing the work of poet Natasha Trethewey and her hybrid memoir titled *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast*. In 2007, Trethewey won a Pulitzer Prize for her collection *Native Guard*. She was also appointed the poet laureate for the United States from 2012-2014, as well as the poet laureate for the state of Mississippi. Currently, she is a professor of English at Northwestern University in Illinois. What distinguishes *Beyond Katrina* as a hybrid text is its narrative structure, which incorporates personal letters, poems, and photographs to convey Trethewey's experience of returning home post Katrina. According to her book's jacket, "Trethewey found inspiration in Robert Penn Warren's book *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South*, in which he spoke with southerners about race in the wake of the *Brown* decision, capturing an event of wide impact from multiple points of view." So, while the story she tells is a personal one, it also consists of reconstructed conversations with friends and neighbors about local culture and Gulfport's increasing reliance on tourism and the casino/gaming industry. Furthermore, Trethewey's meditation discusses how decades of wetland development resulted in the Gulf Coast increased vulnerability to the destruction it sustained during the storm.<sup>142</sup> Like Smith and Odums, Trethewey is attentive to the ways in which the natural disaster is only partially responsible for the detrimental outcomes visited upon lower income African American communities. And unlike the previous artists I've discussed, Trethewey wants to expand her

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<sup>142</sup> On the man-made threats to the landscape of the Gulf Coast, Trethewey writes, "Among the most valuable ecosystems on earth, wetlands are greatly responsible for cleansing polluted water, recharging groundwater, and absorbing storm wave energy. In Gulfport and Biloxi, where dredge-and-fill commercial, industrial, and residential development has been extensive, scientists have recorded high rates of marsh loss. Indeed, it was this man-made problem that rendered the Mississippi Gulf Coast more susceptible to hurricane devastation—the shoreline more vulnerable to the powerful storm waves that battered the landscape along Highway 90." pg 43

audiences' focus from the effects of Katrina in New Orleans, to the damages sustained on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, which is an even less visible segment of the population whose suffering is also ongoing.

Quoting famed southern author Flannery O'Connor, *Beyond Katrina* opens with the following rumination: "Where you came from is gone. Where you thought you were going to never was there. And where you are is no good unless you can get away from it." Divided into two sections, the narrative jumps back and forth through time as Trethewey connects some of the stories/themes that have led her to her current moment, reflecting on the Post Katrina events that have altered her relationship to the place she once called home. Part one, designated by the year 2007 documents Trethewey's first return to the Gulf Coast following the catastrophic storm, underscored by her grandmother's conflation of the two storms that have had the most profound impact on her life, hurricane Camille in 1969 and now, Katrina in 2005. This segment of the book includes the poems, "Theories of Time and Space" and "Providence" as well as sections of prose titled "Pilgrim," "Before Katrina," and "Liturgy, which incorporate some of the initial interviews she conducts with family and neighbors about the recovery efforts taking place along the Coast and the challenges of rebuilding. Weaved throughout, is the story of North Gulfport, the predominantly black neighborhood where Trethewey grew up and her brother Joe's own coming of age narrative, recounting his eventually decision to take over the family business and become the landlord of several rental properties in the area. Undoubtedly, she has many stories to tell, and, at its core, Trethewey's memoir is acutely aware of the necessity of collective memory and storytelling to the continuity of cultural heritage: "This too is a story about a story—how it will be inscribed on the physical landscape as well as on the landscape of our cultural memory. I wonder at the competing narratives: What will be remembered, what



forgotten? What dominant narrative is now emerging?”<sup>143</sup> Whatever stories emerge, *Beyond Katrina* demonstrates that the personal is very often political and significantly influenced by the local/cultural histories we share.

As the defining storm of Trethewey’s childhood, hurricane Camille looms large in her text. Like many people from the area, she grew up with the pervasive threat of another natural disaster’s occurrence. Early on, she reflects “...not until after Katrina did I come to see that the history of one storm, Camille—and the ever-present possibility of others—helped to define my relationship to the place from which I come. And so *Beyond Katrina* begins...with a journey home—my *nostos*.”<sup>144</sup> Scholar Joseph Donica explains that the theme of *nostos* in Greek literature depicts “the hero's return home often by way of the sea. But the *nostos* isn’t just about a return. The journey changes you, and home changes while you are on the journey.”<sup>145</sup> Within his essay “Negative Memory after Katrina: The Persistence of Memoir,” Donica considers the function of memoir to provide cultural stability for those coping with devastating loss. Of course, he stresses the distinction between the pain of nostalgia and the distress of an event like Katrina, where the familiar disappears in a matter of moments instead of more gradually, over time. He writes, “We may look to sites like memorials or ceremonies commemorating loss, but in the case of Katrina the entire Gulf Coast is a site of memory in which a geographical landscape was

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<sup>143</sup> Natasha Trethewey, *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast*, pg. 11

<sup>144</sup> Natasha Trethewey, *Ibid*, pg. 2. Frequently, Trethewey recounts the ways in which the memory of Camille haunted residents of the Gulf Coast. She writes, “Every hurricane season I can remember began with footage of Camille on the news. Always there were the scenes of waves crashing onto the beach, palm trees leaned far enough over to brush the sand with their fronds. And then there were the images of destroyed houses and apartment buildings, a grave voice warning us to evacuate as the camera pans over the devastated site of a hurricane party where the revelers all died in the storm.”

<sup>145</sup> Joseph Donica, *Ibid*, pg 47

transformed.”<sup>146</sup> For the post-Katrina generation, the threat of natural disasters remains a condition of life on the coast, but as Trethewey points out “[t]he history of the coast is full of such transformation, and this is not the first time that economic decisions have instigated the overlaying of a new narrative on the Gulf Coast, reinscribing it—transforming it.”<sup>147</sup> In this way, her “pilgrimage” is a journey inspired by the threat of erasure with the compelling purpose to preserve something of the cultural heritage that remains.

Discussing the work of authors like Trethewey, Donica suggests that memoirs, much like memorials, provide an essential bridge between private and public memory, particularly, when confronted with what he terms “negative memory.” In his words negative memory contains “evocations of places that no longer exist in their pre-disaster forms. Negative memory works on the spaces that are no longer there, those spaces we wish to return to but cannot. Or at least we cannot return to them as they once existed.” As such, Donica argues that this figurative return to these particular sites of memory produces a dynamic engagement with the past and the present for the memoirist:

There are at least three functions of negative memory: to reclaim identity, to repair injured social relations, and to negotiate one's relationship to the local community and one's relationship to the nation. So negative memory allows a dynamic movement from individual to social to national and even global issues. Through contemplating what is no longer visible in the geography of a place, one's imagination maps former memories onto the changed landscape. This process necessarily projects one from personal contemplation to something larger and more social, and it has the ability to allow personal memory to reconstruct itself and orient that memory toward the future of a changed landscape and toward those who live there now, who have been as devastated as the landscape.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Joseph Donica, “Negative Memory after Katrina: The Persistence of Memoir,” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (FALL 2015) pg. 43

<sup>147</sup> Natasha Trethewey, *Ibid*, pg. 12

<sup>148</sup> Joseph Donica, *Ibid*, pg 44

This is certainly true of Trethewey's journey to the Gulf Coast and her ensuing quest to learn how its current residents are coping post Katrina. The tone of her writing is even journalistic at times, resembling a well-researched editorial with the sources and statistics to back up its claims. This occurs at several moments in the text when Trethewey applies a wide-angled lens to the social issues pointedly considered by her work such as the miss allocation of federal funds on behalf of the state of Mississippi post Katrina. However, the personal is consistently her point of entry to these broader conversations.<sup>149</sup>

The tension routinely explored in *Beyond Katrina* is that of the lopsided nature of the recovery efforts taking place across Gulfport, rendered that much more apparent as Trethewey finds herself staying in the casino's hotel during her visit, which have all been restored to their pristine pre-Katrina grandeur. "Walking through the lobby in the morning," she writes, "I am struck by the incongruousness of the high-end jewelry and clothing stores, the crowds of people bustling with excitement, the countless opportunities for consumption juxtaposed with what I know is just beyond the great entryway with its soaring glass doors."<sup>150</sup> In fact, she doesn't even have to leave the casino to find examples of grossly disproportionate state spending. The following is an encounter that takes place between Trethewey and the security guard at her hotel:

Her story is not uncommon. After the hurricane her rent increased—despite the terms of her lease, she tells me—from five hundred dollars a month to eight hundred dollars, though her pay did not. When I ask her about assistance from the

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<sup>149</sup> In one such example, Trethewey discusses the neglect of lower income residents while discussing the struggles her cousin, Tamar Jones, and her neighbors. She writes, "According to the *New York Times*, the state of Mississippi—a couple of years after the storm—had 'spent \$1.7 billion in federal money on programs that have mostly benefited relatively affluent residents and big businesses.' Instead of helping the poor, like most of the residents in Tammy's neighborhood—many who are renters—the money has been used to help utility and insurance companies and middle-and upper-income homeowners. Some houses around Tammy's have been repaired a badly damaged house, the city demands that it be torn down. 'But demolition is expensive,' she tells me. 'They'll come out and do it for you, tear down what's left of your house and break up the slab and haul it away—but most people out here can't afford what the city charges for demolition.' She points to an empty lot beside her house. 'If you wait long enough, they'll just tear it down anyway—even if you want to repair your house.'" pg. 22-3

<sup>150</sup> Natasha Trethewey, pg. 17

government, she wags her head fiercely: ‘Nobody has seen all the money. It’s been two years, and we are still suffering. They said they wouldn’t price gouge, but they are doing it.’ In fact, even as the cost of living has risen on the coast, programs dedicated to helping the poor have benefited from only about 10 percent of the federal money, even though the state was required by Congress to spend half of its billions to help low-income citizens recover from the storm.<sup>151</sup>

Although it’s unsurprising that one of the leading recovery goals led by the state would be rehabilitating local economies through the refurbishment of businesses and tourist centers, the outright neglect of particular segments of the population suggests that, this too, is an intended consequence of the future Mississippi now imagines for itself. Trethewey, furthers this claim reporting that, “although state officials...insist that the state does not discriminate by race or income when giving aid to storm victims, many poor residents can’t afford homeowner’s insurance and thus are ineligible for some aid programs. Renters are altogether excluded from many of them.” As such, several renters, many of whom had occupied the same property for decades, were forced to leave any residence determined to be blight—vacant lots or damaged structures that the city can demolish or seize for re-sale—heavily concentrated in areas such as North Gulfport.

The crisis effecting renters and low-income residents comes full circle through the narrative of Trethewey’s family lineage in Gulfport, particularly through the story of her brother Joe, whose decision to take over their great Uncle Son’s rental properties ultimately brings great misfortune into his life. In a section titled “Before Katrina,” Trethewey goes into great detail to tell not only the story of Joe’s birthright, but the story of the predominantly African American community where they grew up as well. Tracing her family’s lineage in Gulfport back to her great grandparents, Will and Eugenia Dixon, who moved there at the turn of the century and took up residence in North Gulfport, otherwise known as the black section of town. Trethewey

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<sup>151</sup> Natasha Trethewey, pg 16-7

juxtaposes the events of her grandmother's childhood with the increasing urban development and resort lifestyle being cultivated/promoted along the coast, culminating in her great Uncle Son acquisition of the land where he would build his nightclub after World War II. The success of Son's business, would, in turn, allow him to purchase several plots of land throughout the area:

Between 1940 and 1950, when Son Dixon began building tiny shotgun houses and duplexes in North Gulfport, Gulfport's population increased by 50 percent. The installation of the [man made] beach stimulated the postwar economy in southern Mississippi—the Gulf Coast was again a tourist destination and Gulfport was growing. People needed places to live, and Son Dixon's properties—which as recently as the early 1990s rented for only two hundred dollars a month—were affordable.<sup>152</sup>

After his death in 1992, Son left most of his properties to his sister Leretta and her grandchildren, but without consistent upkeep, many of his shotgun houses began deteriorating around the few tenants who remained. That is, until Joe, equipped with years of construction experience, began fixing them up. He was like his great uncle incarnate and soon became the hope of the neighborhood, which had been plagued by the steady encroachment of businesses eager to buy the land and displace its residents. "By the start of the summer of 2005," Trethewey writes, "nearly all the houses were renovated and rented. In a few months, with a profit, Joe could get them insured."<sup>153</sup> However, Katrina made landfall August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2005, damaging several of the structures Joe had spent his savings remodeling. Unable to pay for the repairs, the city demolished the structures, leaving him with limited options to pay the taxes on his vacant land.

Part two of Trethewey's memoir propels us forward to the year 2009 and it is the most personal and, perhaps, the most difficult portion of her story to tell. Once again, we encounter the poet on a journey back home, this time, to bury the grandmother that raised her and to attend her

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<sup>152</sup> Natasha Trethewey, *Ibid*, pg. 42

<sup>153</sup> Natasha Trethewey, *Ibid*, pg. 49

brother's sentencing. The circumstances of her brother's arrest are revealed in pieces, scattered throughout the concluding section of her book. Typical of her storytelling style, the narrative jumps back and forth in time, providing the reader with a number of poignant memories that keep us perpetually tethered to the themes of recovery and loss. We're told that her grandmother was reluctant to evacuate for Katrina and that she had to be convinced to leave. She spent her final years post Katrina living in an eldercare facility in Atlanta, with placating promises from her granddaughter that she'd one day return to Gulfport, the place of her birth and the only home she'd known. Trethewey reflects on these conversations with discernable remorse, confessing that some part of her was waiting for the coast to completely recover to take her grandmother back to Mississippi. But recovery efforts have been slow and uneven, with greater resources being concentrated in commercial areas and North Gulfport residents struggling to remain in their homes. "One of two historically African American communities," Trethewey writes, "that sprang up along the Mississippi Gulf Coast after emancipation, North Gulfport has always been a place where residents have had fewer civic resources than those extended to other communities."<sup>154</sup> Therefore, North Gulfport's post Katrina neglect can be situated within a long history of racial discrimination, which has only contributed to community outsider's perceptions that it is a dangerous place or "run down and low income."

Stylistically, part two of *Beyond Katrina* opens with a brief collection of poetry titled "Congregation" and is preceded by the words "Believe the report of the Lord; Face the things that confront you," which, we're told, is printed on the marquee of Greater Mt. Rest Baptist

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<sup>154</sup> Natasha Trethewey, *Ibid*, pg. 86 Trethewey goes on to say that "in recent years, as developers have acquired land in the community for commercial purposes—as the city has redistricted homesteads as commercial rather than residential property—many elderly citizens have lost their homes. Higher property taxes have forced people out even as property values have declined. For Sale signs abound, and developers seeking to fill in the nearby wetlands continue to threaten the environmental safety of North Gulfport's residents."

Church in Gulfport. Whenever discussing her childhood, Trethewey makes it apparent that she attended church regularly with her grandmother, but she is not a religious woman, yet her memories of home, and *Beyond Katrina* itself, are intricately bound to its religious language and references throughout. “Prodigal,” the sixth and final poem of the series illustrates the extent of Trethewey’s ancestral ties to her former home as well as the profound distance that separates her from her origins. “Once, I was a daughter of this place:” the poem begins, “daughter of Gwen, granddaughter/ of Leretta, great of Eugenia McGee./ I was baptized in the church/ my great-aunt founded, behind/ the drapes my grandmother sewed.”<sup>155</sup> The women in her family literally built the sacred space where she stands and the physical product of her grandmother’s labor still hang in the shabby structure, and yet she feels disconnected from it. Trethewey continues, “What is home but a cradle/ of the past? Too long gone, I’ve found/ my key in the lock of the old house/ will not turn—a narrative of rust;/ and everywhere the lacuna of vacant lots,/ *For Sale* signs, a notice reading *Condemned*.” In many ways, the past is uninhabitable for us all, but Trethewey appears to be haunted by this fact as she confronts these uncanny scenes from a life she once led, aware that these places may disappear altogether:

I wanted to say I have come home  
To bear witness, to read the sign  
Emblazoned on the church marquee—  
*Believe the report of the Lord*—  
and trust that this is noble work, that  
which must be done. I wanted to say I see,  
not I watch. I wanted my seeing to be  
a sanctuary, but what I saw was this:  
in my rearview mirror, the marquee’s  
other side—*Face the things that confront you...*

watching. I could barely hear the organ,  
the hymn they sang. But when the congregation rose,  
filing out of the pews, I knew it was the call  
to altar. And still, I did not enter. Outside,

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<sup>155</sup> Natasha Trethewey, *Ibid*, pg. 79

as I'd lingered at the car, a man had said  
*You got to come in. You can't miss the word.*  
I got as far as the vestibule—neither in,  
Nor out. The service went on. I did nothing  
But watch, my face against the glass—until  
Someone turned, looked back: saw me.<sup>156</sup>

Noticeably, the shift from the passive “watch” to the active “see” is indicative of Trethewey’s desire to bear witness to the effects of Katrina on this place where people still live and work and worship, struggling to make sense of all that’s happened to them. In this house of God, Trethewey does not align herself with a religious view of the world, although it likely brings some comfort to the parishioners as they observe their rituals. However, she remains connected to them, a member of their “congregation,” through her efforts to find meaning—or, in her case, to produce meaning through writing—and to take comfort in being among those whose loss and struggle is shared.

“Cycle” is one the culminating sections off Trethewey’s memoir and it contains multiple letters she receives from her brother in jail. Eventually, the reader is informed of the circumstances of Joe’s arrest, but not before Trethewey has the opportunity to give us a robust picture of her brother as a man who worked hard his whole life, who assisted with rescue efforts post Katrina, and who applied for, but was denied financial assistance on several occasions. Trethewey writes, “...in the spring of 2007, nearly two years after landfall—with no money left from all the work he’d done on the houses before the storm, with taxes due on the vacant land and no buyers for the property, Joe made a desperate decision. When someone he’d known a long time asked him to transport and deliver several ounces of cocaine, he did. He made four thousand dollars. So he did it again.”<sup>157</sup> The next time Trethewey encounters Joe in the text, he is

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<sup>156</sup> Natasha Trethewey, *Ibid*, pg. 81

<sup>157</sup> Natasha Trethewey, *Ibid*, pg. 92



a prisoner of the state, granted temporary release to attend their grandmother's funeral, handcuffed and flanked by two deputies. In his letters, Joe expresses much of what remains unsaid between he and Trethewey during their weekly phone calls, offering us a small window into his meager existence as a prisoner and his efforts to remain hopeful. When she speaks to her brother, Trethewey recalls:

I try to keep my voice steady when we talk, to hide that I am afraid. I keep thinking that this is best for his state of mind, but I know better. I am keeping a silence to protect myself from knowing. So often this is what the silences—in families as well as in the public discourse of difficult events—are all about: if something isn't spoken, it isn't fully known, and we can absolve ourselves of the responsibility that knowing entails. And yet our civic duty as citizens requires that we not turn away from knowing and that we use what we know to continue working for the best society we can hope to achieve.<sup>158</sup>

Joe's story is folded into a larger narrative that stands out among all the personal pain and trauma that Trethewey associates with the hurricane. Ultimately, He is sentenced to fifteen years and Trethewey's family is informed that he'll have to spend at least three years in prison before he is eligible for parole. Confronting this reality, we're told, makes it essential for Trethewey to confront other "difficult events" in the ongoing narrative of Katrina. In her words, "... this means uncovering the difficult stories about the aftermath and 'recovery' that are often suppressed. It means remembering both the natural disaster of the hurricane that hit the Mississippi Gulf Coast *as well as* the man-made disaster of the levee break in New Orleans."

Throughout *Beyond Katrina*, Trethewey's use of photography and her frequent reference to absent bodies is a conspicuous symbolic device employed at many moments in her text.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Natasha Trethewey, *Ibid*, pg. 102

<sup>159</sup> In one such instance, Trethewey references that bodies that were discovered in houses post Katrina. She writes, "Everywhere there are houses still bearing the markings of the officials who checked each dwelling for victims. It's an odd hieroglyphics I learn to read—an X with symbols in each quadrant. My brother's girlfriend, Aesha Qawiy, tells me to look for the numbers at the bottom of the X; it shows how many dead were found. I am relieved each time I pass a house and read a zero there." pg 18

“Throwaway Bodies in the Poetry of Natasha Trethewey” considers Trethewey’s body of work alongside scholar Patricia Yaeger’s *Dirt and Desire*, identifying what scholar Jill Goad describes as the poet’s project to render discarded bodies visible. She writes, “Trethewey’s work features overlooked or unacknowledged figures in history, invoking discarded bodies such as soldiers, sharecroppers, and domestic workers. Trethewey often references photographs to comment on broader public issues and complicate perceptions of southern history.” Goad goes on to examine Trethewey’s poetry in the context of Yaeger’s work, arguing that, “according to dominant ideology, throwaway black bodies are part of the landscape yet are symbolic of abjection, something to be discarded. They are there and not there, materially present yet transparent. Having fallen into gaps in history, these bodies demand attention.”<sup>160</sup> Although *Beyond Katrina* is not among the texts Goad discusses, her ideas readily apply to the poet’s memoir as well.

Often, the photographs featured in the text serve as a visual extension of the stories she tells, such as a black and white photo of Trethewey’s grandmother, Leretta Dixon, standing on the “colored” section of the formerly segregated beach, circa 1940. Many photos feature family members, dating as far back as 1922, and all were taken in Gulfport. However, the most consistently referenced “discarded bodies” belong to the absent, former residents of North Gulfport whose homes have been put up for sale, demolished, or condemned. Clearly, Trethewey does not intend for those absences to go unnoticed or considered:

In another post anniversary article from the local South Mississippi *Sun -Herald*, the editor—noting that the Mississippi Gulf Coast has been rendered ‘invisible’ by all the coverage devoted to New Orleans—calls for the coast’s story to be told. But the version the editor wants to tell—like many residents who responded to the article online—is the triumphant narrative of ‘the poor little state’ that cleaned up, rebuilt, and succeeded in ways that Louisiana failed. This story, with its little-

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<sup>160</sup> Jill Goad, “Throwaway Bodies in the Poetry of Natasha Trethewey,” *South: A Scholarly Journal*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Spring 2016), pg 266

engine-that-could nostalgia, ignores the ongoing experiences of so many poor people whose lives have yet to be rebuilt.<sup>161</sup>

Many narratives can and have emerged regarding the Gulf Coast's recovery, but Trethewey wants to ensure poor African American residents some visibility in the story that endures. Toward the end of her text, increasingly, the photos she features are of she and Joe at various stages of their childhood, and eventually it becomes clear that he, too, is an absent or discarded body in her memoir. But, as Goad asserts in her essay, "while this personal history [in Trethewey's poetry] is important, it must be seen as part of the public histories that have been erased, censored, and/or forgotten, not as isolated, individual history"<sup>162</sup>

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Hellen Taylor's essay on the Post-Katrina cultural revival of New Orleans discusses the considerable amount of film, music, and literature produced to celebrate, mourn, and commemorate a city that has clearly made a tremendous national and international cultural impact. "Since 2005," Taylor writes, "Hurricane Katrina has inspired an outpouring of international grief and anger, political and demotic tributes." Comparing the city's flooding to the death of Princess Diana in Britain 1997 or 9/11 in the U.S., Taylor approaches the innumerable responses to Katrina as benchmarks of a profound shift in attitudes across the world:

Katrina was seen as heralding the death of a unique city, exposing American racism and neglect of its poorest citizens; as the nation's loudest wake-up call to the realities of global warming; and the beginning of the end of Bush's popularity and credible presidency. In global television images and coverage, press photographs and personal interviews, daubs on T-shirts and sheets stretched across roofs, and scrawls on cars and saturated front doors, the world saw a city drowning and a national government and emergency services absent, fiddling and self-justifying.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Natasha Trethewey, *Ibid*, pg. 89-90

<sup>162</sup> Jill Goad, *Ibid*, pg. 268

<sup>163</sup> Helen Taylor, "After the Deluge: Post-Katrina Cultural Revival of New Orleans," *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 3, Hurricane Katrina: Five Years After (August 2010), pg. 484

Some of the more well-known responses to the storm include, Spike Lee’s documentary *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, a cultural tribute to the post- Katrina city, scored by the New Orleans trumpeter Terence Blanchard, with a cast of both unknown and distinguished New Orleanians. Yet another project that received global attention is the television series *Treme* for the HBO network, which is the co-creation of David Simon and Eric Overmyer who produced the successful series *The Wire*. Stories and films driven by a shared desire among global communities to bear witness as New Orleans demonstrates to the world that it is capable of coming back from anything—or is it? “And yet,” Taylor writes, “the whole history of New Orleans has been one of new starts, transformation, destruction and rebuilding.”<sup>164</sup> Understandably, each “transformation” ushers in a new age and the city and its residents must orient themselves to change.

Five years after Katrina made landfall, Taylor reports that New Orleans is teeming with community and cultural activities, much of which, it is hoped, will attract tourists, convention trade, and new business. For those unaware of this cultural surplus, Taylor provides plenty of examples of plays, novels, anthologies, and hurricane-themed albums such as John Biguenet’s plays *Rising Water: A New Orleans Love Story* and *Shotgun*, James Lee Burke’s novel *The Tin*

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<sup>164</sup> On the many revivals of reinventions of the city, Taylor writes, “The oldest part of the city, Vieux Carre, has burned down more than once, it has flooded countless times, the river has changed course and its physical contours have been considerably shifted by the building of canals and bridges. It has been sinking ever since its foundation in 1718 in the swamps at the mouth of the world’s third-largest river, and its fortunes have been as varied as its peoples - from the Native Americans who first inhabited the inhospitable lands, to the French and Spanish who colonized it, the Acadians who settled around it, the American Protestants who built the Garden District, and the African Americans who came here as free people of colour or slaves, and most vividly gave it cultural prominence and fame. Many times has the city’s death been predicted, but it somehow rises again - even under the uncaring presidency of George W. Bush.” pg. 485

*Roof Slowdown*, and Tom Piazza's *City of Refuge*, to name a few. On this massive cultural archive still under production, Taylor writes:

There are collections and anthologies of essays by locally renowned journalists and writers such as Rosemary James, Andrei Codrescu, Chris Rose and Philip C. Kolin, many of whom donated all profits to hurricane relief. Bookstores overflow with personal reminiscence pamphlets, picture books of animals rescued from derelict houses, and photo collections of the damaged wards, homeless people and lost, maggot-riddled slogan-plastered refrigerators placed on the sidewalk to moulder. Essay and photograph collections, pamphlets, fridge magnets, CDs, websites and blogs galore recorded people's experiences and memories, as well as anger about what happened to their beloved hometown.<sup>165</sup>

As one might expect, there is a significant desire to “reconstruct” or preserve what remains of the past among city residents, as well as, a profound interest in how New Orleans’ culture will be affected by shifting demographics. The cultural revival catalogued in Taylor’s essay looks beyond the work of African American writers and artists influencing the “new” New Orleans cultural landscape. As such, her work provides a broader, more comprehensive representation of the Post Katrina “Southern Renaissance” my chapter works to unpack and explore.

For both Taylor and myself, the anxiety that continues to emerge within conversations about the continuity of New Orleans cultural heritage revolves around the significant population of African Americans dispersed by the storm. In her recollection of the November 2008 Cultures of Rebuilding conference, Taylor notes that keynote speakers Andrei Codrescu and Jay Edwards both agreed “the culture of the city's poor was what made it unique -be it the music or the "shotgun house" architecture. Both warned that the post-Katrina corporate rebuilding plans might obliterate the unique multicultural motley that is New Orleans, leaving behind another bland, tourist-focused American city.<sup>166</sup> As Taylor suggests, “The growing importance of cultural

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<sup>165</sup> Helen Taylor, *Ibid*, pg. 489-90

<sup>166</sup> Helen Taylor, *Ibid*, pg 500

heritage and tourism to many countries and cities has changed the way in which we all think through disaster, climate change and sustainability, and the demographic, racial and social transformation and evolution of particular places and spaces.”<sup>167</sup> That said, the artist and authors featured in my chapter have demonstrated that poor black communities are often treated as the “undesirables” in our society, discarded when and where the opportunity presents itself. Nevertheless, Taylor remains confident that New Orleans will not be allowed to disappear from the map “...largely because it is globally adored and revered, and - more importantly - because its population is fiercely loyal to the only home most of them have ever had. Before the storm, 80 percent of residents had been born and bred there - an extremely high percentage for an American city.”<sup>168</sup> What I will say in reference to work I’ve discussed throughout, is that not every community enjoys the visibility that New Orleans has, and despite the significant neglect of lower income African Americans in this city, this neglect is endemic and their plight is shared by people of color throughout this country, in communities deemed far less worthy of our attention.

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<sup>167</sup> Helen Taylor, *Ibid*, pg 497

<sup>168</sup> Helen Taylor, *Ibid*, pg 486

## Appendix

Interview Transcript, 10/21/2016

Discussing Studio Be and Exhibit Be with Brandan, BMike, Odums

**JB:** Alright, and we are recording...so I threw a lot at you...but I like to be more free form, and anything you want to...and from reading and interacting with the exhibit in there, I mean, there are also like specific questions I want to ask about some of the choices that you made to include different feedback. For instance, I was really like caught up in reading some of the criticism and I was surprised that it was...not that its out there and that it exists...but that it's in there.

**BMike:** Yeah, I mean, I guess for me doing, like, that criticism part was like...I think the overall idea about Project Be/Exhibit Be was that it was a successful public project that was immediately well received and um...that wasn't the case, uh...and so I guess for me knowing that part of the story and people who were close to me knowing that part of the story, I wanted to make that the public story, because I didn't want people to think that...it was not without internal struggle or internal disagreements, um...whether it was like Project Be with HANO or those who just didn't understand quite what was happening to the point where I felt like...cause initially we wanted what happen at Exhibit Be with that big epic block party...that's what I pitched to HANO for the housing project but they just didn't have the vision for something...a space that's destroyed and forgotten could ever be like...they didn't have the vision to see how something beautiful could happen in there.

**JB:** right

**BMike:** They just thought it could be wiped clean and built from the ground up again...and my position at that time was just like...as artist we were going there and making the space valuable again, but not wiping it away. Like using what was still there, understanding that it wasn't a blank canvas, those walls weren't blank canvases, that they were walls rife with stories from people who lived there, from people who experienced those spaces, um, but yeah, they just didn't have the vision...so whether it was that opposition or whether it was just the opposition from...like what you read on those walls, this misunderstanding I guess of how political the use of art in public spaces can be. Um...that was something that I wasn't even expecting to confront. I knew there was a, I knew when I looked at myself and I looked at other artists or the other street artists, graffiti writers, I knew there was a difference physically and I, I mean its like a secret society, so I couldn't go around and just publicize that...and kinda that's my way of publicizing it, by putting it in there. Since it is public, they wrote those on my public pages...so it was a way of publicizing the fact that a lot of what you see, with the graffiti you see in public spaces are created by people who aren't, who don't even have the same empathy about those communities that they're painting in. Like where they saw what I was doing as a problem because I focus my communication to black people, which in turn were the people who lived in those areas.

**JB:** right

**BMike:** It wasn't like I was excluding anyone, I was just speaking directly to what was closest to the spaces that needed the most healing. And I just saw from those words that a lot of people saw that as like a diss. Like, I think white people have a problem with not being included in the conversation and since I chose, the start of this thing and even now, I chose not really to omit them, just not talk directly to them.

**JB:** right

**BMike:** And that's the whole thing, me, what I've been learning... I mean these last four years have taught me since then... that art is a very strong political act even when you're not conscious of it. I mean, artists are... or just the idea of black people creating... always, like a... it always has layers that you're not even aware of. Like I think it was Kara Walker who said something... when she said she could paint a wall full of smiley faces and someone would still say why are you so sad? Or why are you so angry? And I think a lot of people bring their own baggage into watching the culture that black people create. So that's what I was experiencing and that's what I still experience, you know, people come on this tour and they... just a couple days ago we did a school tour and one of the teachers was white and she left out the tour crying and like, you know, she said "I know my ancestors did terrible things, but you have to talk about," she said, "In the tour you have to tell these students that all white people aren't bad." And I just felt like, not once in the tour did I mention white people... this was a specific conversation, but anyway...

**JB:** That's interesting, because I didn't... that wasn't one of the messages that I saw in there. You know, to feel like that needs to be said, that's her own projections, you know...

**BMike:** Exactly and that's the way that I perceived it, because I had to think about the tour because I try to change things, but I had to think about it... like, did I go off on a tangent this tour? I was like, nah, I strictly talked about the histories painted on the wall and what inspired those histories, and nothing was... none of that was an assault on any individual. It was an uplifting of an individual, it wasn't an assault on an individual... and even with the conversation of black lives matter is that whole argument. Some people feel like, to love yourself is to hate them and that's not the case with the art... I think its always been about understanding where I come from, understanding the environments that raised me, and then be true to that and then be true to those individuals and to those people... um... and that's the legacy of the art that I see in New Orleans that I always responded to. Like, whether it was the people who played instruments, the people who sung, or who were the best cooks... these were all people who were ordinary people, who was accessible, who were a regular person that looked like me and... yeah so...

**JB:** Well, so, two things that you said, that kinda struck me. One of the things was about you and your relationship to this world of graffiti artists and it being its own kind of secret society and I mean, there is a way in which, I hadn't really thought about that before... I mean about you as the artist and the project and the way in which you are sort of positioning yourself... and all of the different layers and the groups that are involved, um... where do you see yourself fitting in now in terms of say how the project has taken off and developed... you know...



**BMike:** From the very beginning of the first project, I was very uncomfortable with defining myself as a graffiti artist, because I understood what graffiti was and I knew from the beginning that I was not doing that. I felt like I was inspired by the energy of graffiti at its best but what I was saying, like it was definitely a big part of what started this, being a fan of or understanding the power that I was...at its best, like its potential...I saw graffiti as this revolutionary act where people, at the expense of their own luxury or freedom, they were willing to create this art...that's what I always related to...as I got more engaged into the space and started to get to know a lot of the people who were graffiti writers, I immediately realized that there was a lot that we didn't have in common. Um, you know, all art is about communication and graffiti as a culture is built on this idea that they communicate with each other.

**JB:** right

**BMike:** And, a lot of cases, its like many of the graffiti artists disconnected...like what's it called when you get kicked out of a family?

**JB:** Excommunicated

**BMike:** Yeah. The minute a graffiti artist is excommunicated is when they choose to communicate with a member of the general public.

**JB:** Oh, okay.

**BMike:** And that's when...because they can't understand why one would do that outside of trying to get some notoriety or fame or richness for themselves. You are choosing to avoid this inner circle of people and speak to the masses, then they're like "oh, obviously you're trying to get paid or you're trying to...you're selling out." Similar arguments happen within the hip hop community, right?

**JB:** Right

**BMike:** You see like a hard-core hip hop backpack artist who would be critical of the commercial rapper who is just trying to get a song on the radio. Unlike that, one could make the argument, cause they feel like, in backpack hip hop they feel like they're more authentic to the spaces and places where it comes from or in tune with...so that typically, the backpack artist would be the one whose not afraid to talk about police brutality, and whose not afraid to talk about the issues of the world, so we think about those hip hop artists while people like Mos Def and Talib Kweli, didn't do it for the commercial success...its not like that in the graffiti world because what's been happening is, um...like especially here, what I noticed was that there was this lack of concern with the spaces that it was happening in. It wasn't because...it was almost as if the privilege that they existed in didn't allow them to see just beyond what they were doing. Like, just beyond the adventure of what they were doing. When I was in these same spaces as them, like for example, in an abandoned housing project that hasn't been occupied, at the time it hadn't been occupied since Katrina...and this was 8 years after Katrina...it was hard for me to be in those spaces and just see a black canvas for me to do whatever I wanted to.

**JB:** Right

**BMike:** There is a lot of privilege that allows you to have that perspective, to say I don't see what was here before... I see what I want to see. And a lot of those artists existed in that privilege and they didn't even understand or acknowledge it. So for me, when I went to those spaces, I immediately get confronted with the images... whether it was people that I knew who had lived in those apartments, or people who... or just understanding that people who look like me occupied these spaces and they're not here. So, it becomes immediately difficult just to see this wall as a blank canvas... now I'm dealing with all these other images, all these other themes and that's where the terms and the forms came from what I was doing. Painting Dr. King or the Black Panthers because that's the headspace that I'm in as a result of where I'm standing and to not be in that headspace is a type of privilege and that I feel... I argue and they could probably argue against it... but I feel its because of... its closely tied to white privilege.

Its this understanding that you don't have to consider these narratives, you don't have to consider that there were poor people here, you don't have to consider it, because its not even within your spectrum... and so initially that was the first layer of me not really understanding what was happening but concerned because I wanted to work with these individuals because I felt like they were overlooked by other artists. I felt like the spaces that they painted in where often... not seen for the true artistry and true courage that it was, so... when Exhibit Be happened my intention was to bring all these graffiti artists together, even though they weren't black, even though they weren't from that space, but I felt like it was important for the art world to acknowledge, the same way I acknowledge, that this was some great courageous work happening.

**JB:** Right

**BMike:** So that was the first layer and the first idea that I thought... the project I, I had three rules. So, 1 was to be true to the artform itself, which I was at the time extremely excited about the possibility of graffiti as it related to street art, so I was wanting to be true to that by having people who were doing it the longest and some of the best to be present in that space. The 2<sup>nd</sup> rule was to be true to the community, to be true to the idea that 1 this wasn't just a black canvas and we had to be considerate and confrontational about the fact that this was a space that people probably would've never come to, but we knew that if they were going to come we'd have to confront them with where they stood. When Exhibit Be was open to the public and all those people were there we wanted to make them know, that you are standing in a very poor community that you've probably never been to. And then the 3<sup>rd</sup> rule was to um... I forgot what the 3<sup>rd</sup> rule was... oh and also, the 3<sup>rd</sup> rule was to build a bridge between the community and the developer. Because we understood that we were in a space that was owned by a developer and that they had plans for the space and we wanted to make sure that... that he was held accountable for what people... because we had no room to like... we weren't persuading him or had any influence on what he would eventually do, but we wanted him to be aware of who that was. So the goal was to build a 3 way bridge with 3 individuals that don't usually talk to each other: the community, the developer, cause often times the developer comes in and says we know what's best for the space even though we're not talking to the people who actually would know what's best for the space. The graffiti artist, who typically is running from the developer and not ever

like building with...and then that disconnect between the graffiti artist and the community that evolved from the first project that these individuals just didn't understand how powerful their work could be...if only they listened to the people who were in the spaces that they were painting.

So, those were the 3 layers that I found myself navigating and um, I felt like Exhibit Be was successful in a way that we, that the community was proud of...the people who lived there, they were proud when they walked through the space and felt like we used to live here or people from New Orleans in general who were familiar with the idea of blight, they were proud of how this can be a story of how blight can be reimaged. However, what I didn't anticipate was that the graffiti community was not pleased.

**JB:** really?

**BMike:** They were not able, a lot of them...even if you asked them today, a few of them would say like they wish they were never a part...there was this perception that...I haven't yet to get to the bottom of what it was rooted in, but there is this perception that, I manipulated them to basically...for my own personal gain and that's because they couldn't understand...I would do all of what I did...the idea that I did that for the sake of why it needed to be done and how important it was, they told me it was a cop-out. That I had to be honest and say that I did that because I wanted to make money or that I wanted to be famous...aint no matter how much I argue that this was not the case, that's the only way they can internalize why someone would do it. I had to understand, well maybe from their perspective they can't grasp why, the black artist in general has always...represented much more than themselves.

We've always...like I remember a teacher told me a long time ago, he was like, he was probably quoting someone else, he was like, "when I walk through the door my race walks with me" and that idea is like, I could easily see how artists who aren't of color, and most of the artists who got upset with me after that project are white artists, they can't grasp that, um...but I think that's the legacy that I come from, this idea that when I paint, I'm not just painting for Brandan, I'm painting for...I'm trying to basically paint for, use that as a platform for as many people like me as I can. And so maybe that's why they had this disconnect and even to this day...yeah, like a lot of friendships were broken as a result of that project...yeah, I'm rambling now, probably...those were the layers and even with the developer there was a lot that I learned in terms of how to demand value. I felt like we, we could of as artists, as a united front, we could have effectively changed that space after the project, but we were not aware of the scale of success and then how we could have used that success for the benefit of that space...but that's something that we didn't really get...

**JB:** Well, were you surprised at all by the press and the scope and the size, like how big the attention and the platform got?

**BMike:** I was surprised, but not. I anticipated that people would respond positively to it, but it was like this idea...if only I could get them there, type thing. Because if only I could get y'all to see it, y'all gonna get it. So I thought the problem would be trying to convince people to even show up...you know what I mean...it was kinda unorthodox, like come to this abandoned space

and see this work that's outdoors, painted by...I felt like the pitch was going to be hard. But I knew once people got out there they would feel it. So as things started to like, grow, organically, virally almost, like one person would come and then like people did the job for us, like as soon as they walked in there they took out their phones and they'd start taking pictures, so everybody became like our own market and advertisers or whatever, so once that started to happen and we started to see that we knew that it would get attention...um, I think there was a...but there still wasn't, like even within that there was no way to scale how big it would have been. Like I would have been satisfied if it was just a few 100 people validating all this was cool, but when it kept growing and growing and growing it was like, okay this amazing.

And there so many things, where I don't know if you read while you were back there, but a friend of mine Jules, she wrote on ruin porn and just the idea that people are extremely interested globally and nationally about going in to these abandoned spaces. I knew we benefited from that. We also benefited from this new explosion of people just interested in street art and I felt like this was unique also because it was a reimagining of what everybody agreed was a problem in New Orleans which was the blight. But we were reimagining it in ways, which hopefully opened some eyes to the possibilities of why blight was there and what could be done with it. So yeah, I guess in short, it was a bit of a surprise...you know, you always...artists communicate so its always exciting when people are listening. And then it forces you to continue to talk and as a result of all the people who were listening to that project are still listening to...we're still having this conversation, so...

**JB:** And in terms of the content, because I notice that you have, like "please tag any photos taken," do you feel like, I feel like there is no sense of ownership or propriety in the way that you sometimes will walk into an exhibit and there will be this insistence on no photos, you know, like that kind of thing. So I just want to understand a little bit more about...who do you feel like the work at this point belongs to? Who did it belong to then?

**BMike:** I feel like the work has taken a few steps in different directions and after everything that occurred with the last project, which was all about the context of that space and the community in that space and we found so much joy in being an alternative art environment for people who weren't conscious of how engaged they were within the arts. So, to give school tours to people who'd never been to an art gallery or museum before, and to have that be their experience and their entry point into arts and the possibilities of art...I felt like that was so exciting and cool and that it was important to continue on being this alternative art space, so that's what the thought was behind this space.

When I was in school I didn't have a lot of space that I could go to see art with people that looked like me, so the fact that we can do school tours all the time and there is only people of color painted on these walls, I think that's extremely exciting as the possibilities are about what these young people can be as they are thinking about, processing imagery, I think its important to see these images painted up on 12 foot canvas...so these previous spaces were open to the public, it wasn't about the other side of the art world which is in a lot of ways about money, you know...so those projects were void of that.

However, one of the critiques that meant a lot to me post Exhibit Be, was from Willy Birch, who is like one of the elder statesmen in the art community and one of the most successful artists living here...you know, he's well represented, sells work for lots of money, and he came to this space and was very congratulating and really genuine about how impressed and proud he was of myself and the other artists working closely with me. And then afterwards he sort of like, kept asking, "is the work still up?" "Y'all should cover that work up, you shouldn't leave it there." And it was all about asserting value. He was saying that "You have to assert your value." He was upset that we didn't charge, because he was saying like, "no one is going to give you...apply your value, you have to assert it yourself." "You have to say this is how much what I'm doing is worth." He was saying that's very important, and I was like, at that time I was like, under the impression that the entry point of money was just going to muddy everything up, it was just going to make everything questionable...like, oh, so I was listening to those voices who were critical already and thinking that this is what my goal was, so I was like, I can't introduce money into this...And even though we were struggling and we were trying to keep it open...we had to pay insurance, security...so he was basically saying, like, "you don't realize that you have to sustain yourself" so he's thinking as an artist whose been doing this for 50 years. I'm thinking as somebody who, this is my 3<sup>rd</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> year as an artist and I'm like no, I got the energy, I can keep doing this for free forever and giving it to the public. So, after that conversation with him about sustainability and asserting your value and he said, "If you keep working for free for people, they are going to constantly expect you do that...constantly want everything from you for free and they're going to absorb everything you have and just throw you on the side and keep moving."

**JB:** yeah

**BMike:** I'd never thought of that before, but good well-intentioned people will do this and I was like, "okay." So, moving in to this space that was like the biggest bridge to cross, charging admission, having the paintings be available for sale, like, trying to still exist in this alternative outside but also learning from the institutions of art as well. So this kind of was modeled after the CAC or the NOMA where we have a free day that's open to the public and every other day is admission, you can get membership, so there is that idea of it, the sustainability and that's how we have employees and keep the space open...and then the idea of me selling the work, having the work available, was important to show all these young people...I wanted to show that its not married to idea of struggle. That the idea of being conscious about your voice and speaking on behalf of, or speaking these messages that are extremely important, socially aware, and conscious, is not married to struggle and to starving artist and I think too many people are afraid to do this type of work because they're afraid that, rightfully so, people are immediately critical, when you create a painting that says black lives matter but then you have a price tag on it, you know what I mean. I feel like there is this gray space that has to be explored in terms of sustainability and not cupidity and not saying that I'm selling these paintings because I want to be rich and I want to have the biggest car or the biggest house, but its about sustainability. So, to have a young person view the work and then for them to see that there's a price tag on it immediately changes their perception in terms of what art can be and what artists can do.

And I tell the story of those cans I painted, I tell them look, I payed 9 dollars for this can, but then after I use it, I doodle on it or then I draw on it and then I sell it for 700 dollars and these kids are like, whoa, that's crazy, and I'm like this is what art can be...it's a part of art that is important for us to learn and know. So these past three years have been all these different lessons that I'm learning organically about art...about the responsibility of art, about the power of art, but then also about, like, the value of art and how unfortunately people of color, especially in this city, are often abused because we're from this culture which says we do it because we love it and because its important...and then people who understand that, they come in, manipulate and abuse these artists because they understand that they are going to do it anyway, you know. We're not going pay them because that's what they love to do. Look at Jazz Fest, what they pay the local artists versus what they pay artists that they fly in from out of town. And the perception is, oh you going do it anyway, why not do it in front this big crowd. And I got so tired of that pitch, I got so tired of the art institutions in this city only hitting me up to ask me to donate art for auctions...it was just like, yo.

**JB:** Yeah, I mean, unfortunately one of the logical threads of the chapter that I'm writing is about, you know, how somebody, the price tag is uncomfortable, but it finds its way there...you know, somebody ends up putting a price tag there and its often, not us.

**BMike:** Yeah, definitely

**JB:** And, you know, the problem being that, unfortunately, we as a community are still struggling to sort of profit from and require the kind of compensation for the value that we bring and so I do know what its like to be in those conversations where you feel uncomfortable asking for something, when a large part of you is producing with these kinds of like altruistic intents and you just kind of feel like money makes it feel so dirty, but at the same time, I would love to see more of us feel entitled to be paid for the work that we do and to not feel like it's a sin or a mucking up of the good work that's being done.

Interestingly enough, the fact that you guys are doing tours is really fascinating...or school tours more specifically, because as I was walking through, I was thinking about the fact that in a way I was seeing all of these images that kind of coalesce into the notion of what a black education, contemporarily, should look like. You know, all of the sort of pieces of, these new conversations that parents are worried about having with their kids in light of unarmed shootings...you know, like how do you start that conversation, how do you talk to your kids about those kind of things, but also how necessary it is that they know who Travon Martin is and that they know that its dangerous, unfortunately, for them to exist, to wear hoodies, and also the necessity of instilling and teaching black love, um, self-love, and the fact that that has to be a component of the education as well. So, how did the school tours become something that is more, now, like a regular institution here?

**BMike:** I remember one time at Project Be, which was the extremely illegal version, it wasn't open to the public yet, we weren't allowed to exhibit...and I remember one time seeing a Facebook post where a teacher had brought her students there and they were just like, yo, ugh, did they know that they were breaking the law, but it was just this idea that she as a teacher

found it so important for her students to see this space and what was happening there that she brought them out there and like, a couple weeks later, I went there and there was a school bus posted outside and like, the principal, had brought a group of select students there, the principal came...so just seeing this and wondering and understanding why, but like asking that question why as I'm looking and learning and watching/seeing how they were applying...they saw it as a perfect way to apply some of the concepts that they were teaching and people who they were teaching about and also introduce new individuals who they hadn't learned...and so it just became like a no brainer that that was the perfect opportunity for young people to be introduced to a whole lot of ideas and concepts...whether it was the idea of art, graffiti and street art, the idea of blight of gentrification, all these different concepts that these teachers were courageous enough to connect the dots with...it wasn't like we had offered a curriculum based thing...so going in to the next project...but we couldn't promote it because it was illegal.

So with Exhibit Be, it was a mixture of 2 things: 1 we couldn't afford to keep it open as much as we wanted to, we had to have security every time we opened, it was all these things that we basically just didn't have the capital to make happen, but we knew there was a demand to see it, so we figured...we pitched a loop hole which was that if we offered school tours we knew exactly how many people would be there, we didn't have to hire security and it was a way for us to open it up to more people, but to kind of control it in a way where it was...where the owner wouldn't be upset. And then we announced that we were doing school tours and it was just like this immediate response where it seemed like every day there were students coming to just see the work.

But the cool thing...this time with the school tour it was decent lead, so there was this opportunity to allow the artists involved to make some money, it wasn't a lot of money, but it was an opportunity...I was like, "If any of y'all wanna lead a tour, its like 50 dollars a tour" so that was cool for me to get to extend that opportunity to the other artists, but then it was a way for us to talk about the work, to figure out, how do we speak about all of the different artists and pieces, what do we say...and that was just a cool conversation to have. And then we ended the tour with an activity where the kids were allowed to paint, every school had a different activity, but they all where in some form painting in the space: painting on concrete, painting on tires, painting on the walls and that was just a whole nother layer of doing something...it was just a cool way for us to see visually, to walk around with a bunch of kindergarteners and see their curiosity and the questions they would ask. Once you do that, you can never go back.

And so, with creating this space, I was creating work that was a little bit more conscious of the educational component of it. Like that hallway was specifically about introducing people...I can explain it from an artistic perspective, but it was definitely about introducing these figures to young people, like, who was Nikki Giovanni, who was John Lenon, you know what I mean. And it was also a way for us to kind of work closely with teachers about how some of these themes could be tied into curriculum...and it was just always an important part. Its kind of like the validation that makes the most sense to me, like the validation from the art community and the art experts aren't as important as when a group of kids walk in and say "wow." And you know, getting all this stuff in the mail. That's way more validating than to get like some art

report that says oh you're doing something that we acknowledge...their acknowledgment is way more important. Anyway, so that's the whole story behind the tours.

**JB:** So, when you lead a school tour, is it more sort of organic and off the cuff, I imagine that you've talked about the work enough at this point that you could probably walk through and have a conversation happen, but at least initially were there points you wanted to hit or...

**BMike:** Yeah, so we have...I think its 4 docents, um, and depending on the size of the school, because with this place we are able to do a lot more because of the size of the space...so we can break them in to like 4 groups of 20 in order for everyone to be in the space at once...I provide like a skeleton to make sure what I want is said and then the docents they all add their own different layer to it, I mean I, sometimes I go off on tangents, but its pretty much always the exact same thing. But it depends, like if the group I'm talking to, if its an older group of kids, I might go a little deeper into some spaces...if it's a mixed grade group, I might purposefully introduce certain ideas that...because I don't want people, because sometimes we do a tour where its all white students and I think the easiest thing for them to do is to remove themselves from the equation as if, this is not a conversation for them, so I want them to be very aware that this is also about them too. That this history, they are tied to it whether they acknowledge it or not. And so sometimes, by having that conversation, to show them that the Civil Rights movement wasn't just to make black Americans better but it made this...the idea was to make this country better as a whole, everyone as a result benefited. And so those are things that they probably, because of the institutions that they come from, probably just see black history month as a way to just cater to black students and then they can exist in their own bubble continuously, so sometimes when giving tours with white groups its about being confrontational from that perspective. So, there are things that are different.

When its little bitty kids its more so about the colors...its less political in a way, still getting them to think about certain concepts. And at the end of most tours we give each group a theme before the tour starts, so one group would be "my ancestor's wildest dream," one group would be "love supreme," one group would be "baptized when the levees broke," one group would be "alchemist," we tell them as they do the tour to be mindful of their theme and to hear it when it comes up or figure out how this works, speaking to this theme. After the tour is done, they all come together as a large group and then they figure out within their own smaller group decide who is going to get on stage and articulate what their theme is and what it means as it relates to them and as it relates to the work. So that's always exciting to see and depending on how mature the young groups are, we start that as early as 3<sup>rd</sup> grade...the school tours are super exciting.

**JB:** I know, I'm jealous...do you have one scheduled any time soon?

**BMike:** Lynn, when is the next school tour? That's college though, tomorrow we have a group from Tulane coming...Yeah, so Wednesday we have tour...Friday is when we have most of them, like we had one today that was pretty amazing, this group from the National school...its so fun, their energy, their curiosity, some of them are like...when the teachers prep them, or not even prep them, but like when they are working on a unit that has something to do with civil



rights or something to do with equity or something to do with...when those students come in, they are like super on it. Like one girl, she told me what every painting means. I couldn't even it explain it, she was like, "oh, so what this one is saying is, when you are not good with people..."

(laughter)

I'm like oh, okay, yeah. And the teachers just like, yeah this is every day. So Wednesday, yeah, I can send you that information.

**JB:** Alright. And its not a problem if I come?

**BMike:** No, its not a problem at all. Mostly it will be like parents in the background making sure the kids aint acting up anyway so...yeah, it's all good

**JB:** Okay, great. Um, I guess I should have asked you biographical questions before I got into this...it was just...like I said the work was so compelling I wanted to get to that first. But can you tell me a little bit about the neighborhood you grew up in and um...

**BMike:** So, I have a unique background as it relates to this space, um, so my mother and all my family on my mom's side is from Algiers, from West Algiers. My grandfather was literally born in the house on Opelousas street in old Algiers...he went to Landry, my mom went to Walker, I went to Edna Karr, all these schools in Algiers. However, my mother married my father who was in the marines, and he's from, my father's from Shreveport, so from like zero till 8<sup>th</sup> grade, every two years we were living in a different city and a different country sometimes, but we always spent summers in New Orleans and when you're living on military bases its always understood that you're not from that space so people would always ask, "where are you from" and I would always say "New Orleans" even though, at that time, my relationship with New Orleans, I did three school years here prior to high school, um, kindergarten and then 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade, so there was a few years that I was here like for the whole year, but in most cases I was in and out.

But this was my only memory of a home. But because I travelled so much I had a different perspective from my peers, I always had a global perspective that I think helped me not to fall into some of the same traps as my peers because I always knew there was something else out there. Like it wasn't just this street, it wasn't just this beef with this person, it was always...I had lived in Japan, like I knew that there was a world out there. So, from 8<sup>th</sup> grade, my dad said he was going to retire because he didn't want us moving around no more...so from 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I went to Edna Karr and then I went to NOCCA, graduated, went to UNO, from that point on I stayed here. After Katrina I moved to Atlanta for like a year and a half. Yeah, so Algiers, West Bank is still where I live, is where I call home, is where I know the most people, where all my family is, aunts, uncles, everybody's a cousin, yeah, literally everybody's a cousin. I can't introduce nobody to my grandfather, he be like "what's your last name?" "I'm kin to you."

**JB:** Sounds like my parents

(laughter)

**BMike:** And that's what's beautiful about New Orleans is that its not like other places, but that close-knit family vibe...like its not anything for my entire family to just have dinner...like, "oh,

you at the house? Well we coming by.” And literally its like Thanksgiving, but it’s a random Tuesday. You know, and going to other spaces where people travel to get together...so that’s why I think New Orleans, it’s the beauty and the struggle because a lot of people are afraid to leave, even myself now, because a lot of my family is getting older, so I’ve been doing a lot more outside of the city, but I’m also conscious of not trying to stay away too long.

**JB:** I understand, I struggle with being a real nativist and with being a bit of a nomad. Like I didn’t have to commit to any place for a long time and so I like that kind of...in a couple years I know I’ll pick up and I’ll move to that next place...verses say knowing that there is this place that I’m always going to feel compelled to come back to...you know my whole family is here...I don’t know how to raise kids anywhere other than New Orleans, you know...

**BMike:** That’s a good point. My brother’s married and he keeps talking about when they have their first kid they are going to move to Austin and I’m like, you say that now because it sounds good, but I’m like, when you really think about it, you’re not...like even with my family, like with my mother, its hard to believe that she’s lived in all these different places and countries because now its like, if I say I’m going across the river, she’s like “you going across the river? Be safe, you know how it is.” And I’m like, its so like what a New Orleans person is in terms of keeping the same cycle and not changing much, so I’m like you lived all these other places, traveled, got on plans, and now you’re just done. You’re staying here forever, like, this is the house you live in, this is the route you goin take home every day...and I try my hardest not to fall into those types of traps that can so easily happen in this city. Which is that regular, mundane cycle of just existing, which is, you know...I’m not gone judge nobody but it is what it is.

**JB:** I know, it’s really surprising, because to me there is always something really dynamic I’m discovering about New Orleans that I didn’t know yesterday and I have so many friends and family who talk about this place like its tired, its old, they do...but that’s because they do the same shit all the time, you know.

**BMike:** Right, you know, like growing up...my family is very very religious...so we didn’t do Mardi Gras at all...I remember when younger, my grandmother would take us, but like nah, no parades, no beads, nothing. But then I remember as an adult, like, probably within the last 5 or 6 years really familiarizing and learning about the black indian culture here and just being some dumbfounded by the deepness of this history, that as a New Orleanian that I was not even privy to and I’m thinking about, like, this is the same place that my parents live and yet this world doesn’t even exist to them. Second line culture, in general...I remember my brother got married and his wife, they had a Second line band and my whole side of the family is like joked out because they are looking at my brother Second lining and they’re like, “look, he don’t even know what to do.”

(laughter)

And so my first response, as an adult, like when I moved out of my parents house was to explore all those nooks and crannies of this very city. Going to these spaces, going to the second line, meeting, getting to know all the brass band, going to these hole in the wall jazz clubs or even the hip hop scene or rap scene, like going to these spaces that people say are dangerous and getting

to know the people and that's been exciting for me here and having a good time doing it. But I think its like that in a lot of cities, in a way.

**JB:** Right.

## Chapter 3

### **Wisdom of the Elders in New Orleans: Cultural Continuity Amid Personal Remembrance for an Aging Generation of Post Katrina Residents**

With fewer people in the area who remember the pre-Katrina landscape and culture, there's a much greater chance that it will be forgotten. Too, the memory of such events requires the collective efforts of a people—each citizen contributing to the narrative—so that a fuller version of the story can be told. In that way, one hope we can have for the future, beyond the necessities with which we must concern ourselves—environmentally sound rebuilding, fair and equal recovery—is the continuity of culture and heritage fostered by ongoing change and honest, inclusive remembrance of the past.<sup>169</sup>

- Natasha Trethewey, *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast*

In March of 2016, I became the project manager for a program called Wisdom of the Elders in New Orleans Louisiana (WOE), a partnership between Vanderbilt University, Voices from our America (VFOA), The New Orleans Public Library, Xavier University, and the Louisiana Museum of African American History, which was all made possible by a grant from the Andrew W Mellon Foundation. By design, Wisdom of the Elders is a workshop intended to document overlooked community histories, especially those of African Americans, by allowing participants to play an active role in producing and preserving their narratives. The methodology for recording these histories varies, with previous workshops producing community artifacts such as history books, genealogy quilts, short stories, poetry, and cookbooks. Generally, regardless of its location or those participating in its replication, WOE works to facilitate genealogy research and collect oral histories that retrace and record family lineages. Created by Professor Ifeoma Nwankwo of Vanderbilt University in 2012 as a combination public scholarship program and health study, WOE was first implemented in Murfreesboro Tennessee,

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<sup>169</sup> Natasha Trethewey, *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast*, pg. 61

where it ran successfully until 2015.<sup>170</sup> Once WOE in Murfreesboro's grant funding through Vanderbilt University came to an end, the City of Murfreesboro stepped in with financial support and the elders drew on their newfound knowledge, connections, and experiences to create African American Voices of the Past and Present (AAVPP) along with their organization the African American Heritage Society of Rutherford County (AAHSRC).

WOE began as an outgrowth of Voices From Our America (VFOA), a project that was started in 2007 with the intent to collect and disseminate the oral histories of Panamanians of West Indian descent.<sup>171</sup> In an article for the *Afro-Hispanic Review*, Nwankwo and co-author Lucius T. Outlaw Jr., describe VFOA as a project that "...seeks to build on the earlier work and address remaining gaps by capturing the beautiful and ugly experiences of West Indian descended individuals in Panama in their own words, generating a distinctive set of primary sources that will prove useful to researchers and others within and beyond these communities seeking new insight."<sup>172</sup> At its core, VFOA is committed to collecting, preserving, and publicizing "forgotten, hidden, or unknown" stories of Hemispheric American experiences, which extends to many subprojects, including an initiative called "Middle Tennessee Worldviews." According to the official website, "this segment of VFOA seeks to collect, compile, and disseminate narratives from this diverse and growing region. One aspect of it

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<sup>170</sup> Professor Nwankwo is an Associate Professor of English at Vanderbilt and the Associate Provost for Strategic Initiatives and Partnerships. Her research centers on nineteenth and twentieth century U.S. African American and Caribbean literature and culture.

<sup>171</sup> Throughout the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Black British West Indian men, recruited by the U.S., relocated to assist in the often-perilous efforts to construct the Panama Canal and to pursue the promise of economic opportunities. VFOA's research focused on collecting the stories of modern-day Panamanian West Indians, told in their own words, thereby contributing their voices and stories to the histories they'd previously been left out of. The Center for Latin American Studies, the Department of English, and the Center for the Americas at Vanderbilt provided key support for this project.

<sup>172</sup> Ifeoma C. K. Nwankwo and Lucius T. Outlaw Jr. "Voices from Our America," *Afro-Hispanic Review*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Spring 2009), pg. 152

focuses on stories of African-American life in the region, with a particular focus on life in the 1950s.”<sup>173</sup> As such, the model for WOE developed in Middle Tennessee, provided the framework for a replication of the program in New Orleans with all the traditional considerations in place, such as childhood aspirations, educational experiences, and individual/communal responses to Jim Crow segregation, with additional attention paid to the specific multi-cultural and multi-ethnic influences of the region.

As with any prospective replication of WOE outside of Middle Tennessee, the focus soon became how to customize the genealogy workshop for our New Orleans’s participants and how to source material that could be shared both privately with their families and with a public audience. WOE is typically a collaborative enterprise, with local facilitators contributing their time and expertise as well as bringing their own unique distinctive touch to the program’s basic structure. In the case of WOE in Murfreesboro, Professor Nwankwo collaborated with academic partners, James Powers, MD, Vanderbilt-Reynolds Geriatric Education; William Turner, Ph.D., Peabody College and community partners, The City of Murfreesboro Department of Parks and Recreation, Dr. Barbara Hodges and Leroy Hodges, Dr. George Smith, and Ms. Mary Watkins, to develop a workshop to “track the general health, mental health and social engagement of the seniors.” In its pilot year, facilitators partnered with the Tennessee Parks and Recreation’s Patterson Park Community Center and the city of Murfreesboro was awarded a mini research grant from the Meharry-Vanderbilt Community Engaged Research Core to “gather data on the

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<sup>173</sup> Professor Nwankwo describes VFOA as “an international scholarly project that uses oral history and life history interviewing as a basis to build towards a vision of America in which all voices are heard, in which everyone’s stories and histories are valued and in which our connections within and across racial, geographical, socioeconomic boundaries are paramount. VFOA has two core goals: 1. Generating new primary sources on American communities for which there are little or no primary sources or for which there are major gaps in the known source base on specific topics. 2. Modeling, guiding, inspiring, and facilitating the use of those new primary sources for and by scholars, K-12 teachers, youth, and community organizations.”  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2VFJEcOTomI&app=desktop>

impact of a mental health intervention engaging African American seniors aged 65 years or in the production of an autobiography (through print and/or visual media) and intergenerational exchanges.”<sup>174</sup> In New Orleans, our funding was secured through the Melon Foundation, and all workshop facilitators, including myself, possessed some expertise in genealogy research and cultural studies. Our roster included Professor Lisa Flanagan of Xavier University,<sup>175</sup> Leon Waters of the Louisiana Museum of African American History,<sup>176</sup> along with Sharon Kohl, Christina Bryant, Greg Osborne, and Amanda Fallis of the New Orleans Public Library.<sup>177</sup> Xavier University students, Nicholas Reese and Kerionne Lewis, also contributed to the program, in light of WOE’s emphasis on intergenerational exchange, by assisting our senior participants with the technological components of their genealogy research.

During our initial planning/strategy meetings it was decided that in addition to WOE in New Orleans’s focus on tracing family lineages and conducting individual life history interviews, we would also produce a community cookbook together. The community cookbook/recipe share was designed to give participants an opportunity to share food memories

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<sup>174</sup> This information was obtained from an article titled, “The Wisdom of The Elders Program Won Tennessee Recreation and Parks Association (TRPA) 2013 Four Star Award for Best Community Center Program in the Youth, Families, Seniors or Intergenerational Category,” located online at: <https://as.vanderbilt.edu/english/WOETRPA2013AwardArticle.pdf>

<sup>175</sup> Professor Flanagan is an assistant professor at Xavier University in their department of Mass Communication whose research focuses on the poetics of place, the body and space; early twentieth century avant garde performance; visual and material culture; performative writing and mystory; interdisciplinary, collaborative, and community based performance

<sup>176</sup> Mr. Waters is an author, historian, and licensed tour guide, as well as the director of Hidden Histories—a publishing, touring, and research company—and a founding member of the Louisiana Museum of African American History. His work focuses on social histories that have been neglected or suppressed, social inequality, and resistance.

<sup>177</sup> Sharon Kohl is the branch manager at the Rosa F. Keller Library and Community Center, located in the Broadmoor neighborhood of New Orleans, Louisiana. Christina Bryant is the head of the Louisiana Division/City Archives and Special Collections at the Main Branch of the New Orleans Public Library. Greg Osborne and Amanda Fallis work with Christina in the Louisiana Division/City Archives and Special Collections as an archivist who specialize in genealogy research.

from their childhood and to discuss the cultural significance of food in a city like New Orleans. And finally, we determined that weekly sessions would be conducted at the Rosa F. Keller library and community center in the Broadmoor area. With these decisions made, we publicized for WOE in multiple branches of New Orleans Public Library and on social media and, ultimately, a total of eight participants enrolled in the workshops by the registration deadline. Some of the most significant dimensions of the program came to light during the orientation, where it was brought to my attention by those in attendance that an interest in genealogy research, while shared by all, was a secondary consideration for those interested in the program. One of the main incentives for those participating in WOE was to recover some of the documentation and family memorabilia that had been lost to the flooding of Hurricane Katrina. Their own personal archives had taken a considerable hit and familial mementos/keepsakes such as pictures for which no duplicates existed were simply gone, but with the right guidance they could locate new artifacts and begin to rebuild. Moving forward, this negotiation between what could and couldn't be recovered, both in terms of personal remembrance and cultural continuity/heritage for the city of New Orleans remained central to the work we'd be doing together.

Significantly, this generation of black New Orleanians (ages 65 and older) represent a diminished population from a bygone era for the city. Since Katrina made landfall, an estimated 100,000 African Americans have been unable or unwilling to return to their homes. And while African Americans remain the city's racial majority, shifting demographics have, understandably, resulted in a significant cultural impact for residents and visitors alike. To expand on the critical implications of this generation's firsthand accounts and cultural remembrances, I reference Arlene R Keizer's idea of "postmemory," introduced in *Black*



*Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery.* Keizer's concept of "postmemory" applies to a disappearing generation of Afro-diasporic descendants who directly experienced slavery in the "New World," and yet, it has applications for my work as well. As Keizer explains, "The contemporary narrative of slavery began to take shape at precisely the moment that the last of those who had experienced New World slavery first hand passed away. The questions of who would be a witness to slavery and how it would be remembered became critical at the moment this first-hand experience disappeared from living memory."<sup>178</sup> Accordingly, the fictional accounts of slavery her work explores function as "counter-histor[ies] to mainstream U.S. and Caribbean historiography," which, prior to 1960, often neglected individual accounts of human bondage. Keizer writes:

The moment at which the last survivors of a cultural trauma die is a critical juncture for the culture in question...Postmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through projection, investment, and creation. That is not to say that survivor memory itself is unmediated, but that it is more directly connected to the past. Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are displaced by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that they can neither understand nor re-create.<sup>179</sup>

In turn, I would characterize Hurricane Katrina as a cultural trauma (to a lesser degree) that presently defines many resident's relationship to the city, however, that trauma is most acutely experienced by the elderly population; many of whom were born and raised in New Orleans and who are seeing it change dramatically over a condensed period of time. Their memories of Pre and Post Katrina New Orleans will someday exist in written or tap-recorded form only, and in the 'postmemory' of descendants of the survivors. And, if my work with this particular group of

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<sup>178</sup> Arlene R. Keizer, *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery*, Keizer notes that "two of the earliest contemporary narratives of slavery from the United States, *Jubilee* (1966) and *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) are explicitly based on the memories of African American elders." pg. 5

<sup>179</sup> Arlene Keizer, *Ibid*, pg. 6

African American seniors is any indication, their generation has countless stories to tell and they are unwilling to let “history” leave their voices out of both contemporary and future conversations about “their city”.

Several scholars, including Joseph Donica whose concept of “negative memory” I discussed in chapter 3, have indicated the considerable role that memoir or personal narratives can play in both the individual and communal processing/recording of a cultural trauma. Donica defines negative memory as “evocations of places that no longer exist in their pre-disaster forms” while discussing the emerging genre of the Post Katrina memoir and the function of memory after disasters or large scale cultural change. Here, I’d like to reiterate two points raised by Donica’s work that speak directly to WOE in NOLA’s developing objectives. On the function of memory and memoir Donica explains, “[t]his process necessarily projects one from personal contemplation to something larger and more social, and it has the ability to allow personal memory to reconstruct itself and orient that memory toward the future of a changed landscape and toward those who live there now, who have been as devastated as the landscape.”<sup>180</sup>

Although WOE in NOLA’s participants didn’t produce memoirs in the traditional sense, all of their work incorporates memoiristic elements including the community cookbook, which features food interviews that I conducted with each member of the group. That said, sharing these stories beyond the limited scope of this small collection of African American seniors, thereby adding to the communal well of knowledge, has always been an essential part of the vision. Furthermore, Donica reminds us that after Hurricane Katrina, “the nation saw lives lost...[m]ost of the bodies belonged to those from a section of the population and an area of its

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<sup>180</sup> Joseph Donica, “Negative Memory after Katrina: The Persistence of Memoir,” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (FALL 2015) pg. 44

geography that the nation often sees as unremarkable. Unremarkable too, so the narrative goes, were the lives of those who barely survived the storm.”<sup>181</sup> In my experience, what’s equally problematic is that those deemed “unremarkable” are often convinced of its accuracy, believing that their stories aren’t worthy of being told or recorded. Undoing this particularly harmful misconception is of primary importance to WOE’s overall mission as well as to those participating in each workshops production.<sup>182</sup>

When conducting African American genealogy research, there are a few challenges one must anticipate when investigating slave ancestry including the range, accuracy, and availability of written historical records. In this way, our participants encountered multiple obstacles that limited the scope of their research and challenged our perceptions of what could be “known”. *Worrying the Line* by Cheryl A. Wall discusses Black women writers and the African American literary tradition as having had to develop creative methodologies for reconstructing family genealogies when there are sizable gaps in the archive. For Black women writers, this challenge has been met with a creative and expansive understanding of what can be counted as narrative,

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<sup>181</sup> Joseph Donica, *Ibid*, pg. 45

<sup>182</sup> Furthermore, scholarship on early black autobiography suggests that this process of self-expression is always fraught with tension. Ifeoma Nwankwo writes, “Both Zora Neale Hurston and W.E. B. DuBois call attention to ways in which the dominant white gaze not only affects, but also frequently limits or proscribes the possibilities for Black peoples’ approaches to conceptualizing, presenting, and representing themselves in public. Hurston spotlights two of the cliched, stock figures that recur in what white publishers will print—the ‘exceptional’ and the ‘quaint’ Negro. Too often, she argues, when stories of Black people appear, they are only those of either the extraordinary or endearingly primitive (and therefore exotic) Negro. We do not get to read the stories of ‘the average, struggling, nonmorbid’ Black person. This despite that fact that, as she points out, their ‘revelation to the public is the thing needed to do away with that feeling of difference which inspires fear, and which ever expresses itself in dislike.’ W.E. B. DuBois reflects on the ‘peculiar sensation’ with which Black folk are forced to live; ‘this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others’ and ‘of measuring one’s soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.’ There is no escaping it, he suggests. We are always consciously or subconsciously aware of what the ‘other world’ assumes we are or want us to be.” “Race and Representation in the Digital Humanities: An Inter-American Case Study,” *African Diaspora in the Cultures of Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States*, University of Delaware Press: Newark, 2015. pg. 149

which, in turn, has redistributed some of the legitimacy exclusively extended to written accounts of the past. Wall explains:

Genealogies are woven together out of individual and collective memory, encoded in stories, songs, recipes, rituals, photographs, and writing. Black women writers' rereading of the African American and American literary traditions produces what Adrienne Rich called a quarter century ago 're-vision'—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction.<sup>183</sup>

As such, newfound insights are brought to surviving and unconventional “texts” in an effort to bypass what has been lost or what was likely never recorded at all. Instead, Wall writes, when the quest for answers is thwarted, “...access to the past comes from what Morrison describes in ‘Rootedness’ as ‘another way of knowing,’ ...subvert[ing] the conventions of literary tradition so that the connection of the past can be forged nevertheless...[t]hrough memory, music, dreams, and ritual...”<sup>184</sup> As has so often been our burden, African descendants in the “New World” have learned time and again to take what little we’re left with and to transform it into something masterful. Quoting Sherley Anne Williams, from her author’s note in *Dessa Rose*, Wall reiterates that ““Afro-Americans, hav[e] survived by word of mouth and made of that process a high art”<sup>185</sup> Which is why projects sponsored and produced by WOE often pull from both an extensive African American oral tradition and additional extra-literary forms of personal expression, family history, and local cultural to render a more holistic picture of our participants’ experiences.

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<sup>183</sup> Cheryl A. Wall pg 5-6

<sup>184</sup> Cheryl A. Wall, pg 9

<sup>185</sup> Cheryl A. Wall, pg. 18

Food historians and scholars such as Patricia E. Clark have work to upgrade our conventional understanding of the recipe to a mode of text that has literary, cultural, and historical resonances because of what Clark refers to as the “narrativity of recipes.”<sup>186</sup> In the case of Clark’s research, approaching the recipe as text, expands the criteria of authorship, allowing black women relegated to domestic work retrospective access to some means of self-expression. For my purposes here, I’m also interested in the significant cultural fragments which she argues recipes can contain for descendants of the African Diaspora. Clark explains:

Without a doubt, these recipes bear the trace of the transregional and transgenerational oral transmission of traditional food preparation among African women during the slave trade. Despite the difficulty in tracing the African antecedents and the many modifications made to their traditional dishes over the centuries ‘with absolute accuracy,’ according to Jessica Harris, one can still gauge African influences in the cuisines of the Americas, the Caribbean, and other parts of the world.<sup>187</sup>

These traces, however small, represent a connection to one’s ancestral heritage that extends across time and place, and that has withstood the countless traumas of the Atlantic slave trade. Like Wall, Clark references the ways in which black female writers such as Alice Walker have had to look outside of conventional literary texts to find the “...lost aesthetic of generations of unknown black women, deprived of education and rooms of their own, whose artistry was expressed through their gardens and their kitchens.”<sup>188</sup> As such, when the time came for us to

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<sup>186</sup> Patricia E. Clark, “Archiving Epistemologies and the Narrativity of Recipes in Ntozake Shange’s *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*” *Callaloo* 30.1 (2007) Expanding upon the narrativity of recipes, Clark writes “What can be generally said of the elaborations of a recipe presented here is this: a recipe assigns the appropriate actions to be taken by someone toward a specific goal, namely the creation of a dish. Moreover, a recipe designates where, when, and the order in which the appropriate actions should occur to effect an auspicious outcome. A recipe, then, is a text that contains imperatives that are sequentially organized with specific aims or goals, which are suggestive of a narrative...Luce Giard, a cultural historian, has another take. In her discussion on the language of recipes, Giard notes that recipes contain ‘actions words and descriptions of skillful knacks’...While Girad’s definition contains the idea of a recipe as a set of instructions, she emphasizes the performative quality of the language in a recipe, suggesting that the instructions might be read as speech acts.” pg 153

<sup>187</sup> Patricia E. Clark, *Ibid*, pg. 150

<sup>188</sup> Patricia E. Clark, *Ibid*, pg. 151

produce our community cookbook, I choose to share an excerpt of Ntozake Shange's *if I can Cook/ you Know God* with WOE in NOLA's participants because the poet/playwright's hybrid text contains numerous examples of how elements of memoir can be incorporated in an unconventional approach to the genres of both the recipe and the cookbook.

Ultimately, Shange's cookbook is an Afro-diasporic account of the widespread influences of black food and culture combined with some of her own experiences, travels, and recipes she's acquired along her way. *If I Can Cook* begins with a relatable dilemma: Shange attempting to prepare an extravagant southern inspired holiday meal for herself and her daughter while living in Clinton, Washington, isolated from the rest of the Owens/Williams family. She writes, "like most American families strewn far and near 'cross the mainland, many African-American families, like my own, experience trans-cross Caribbean or Pan-American Highway isolation blues during global/national holidays."<sup>189</sup> Inspired by the potent memories of family gatherings passed, the two embark on a late-night excursion to a local market where she hopes to locate the ingredients for a meal that will represent a sustained tradition for herself and her daughter. The intended menu for her Christmas/New Years dinner include southern staples such as pig's tails, black-eyed peas, collard greens, and chitlins. Among this spread, Shange's recipe for "Collard Greens to Bring You Money" exemplifies her unique interpretation of the recipe format:

Add to you greens that are covered with water either ¼ pound salt pork, bacon, ham hocks, 2-3 smoked turkey wings, 3-4 tablespoons olive oil, canola oil, and the juice of 1 whole lemon, depending on your spiritual proclivities and prohibitions. Bring to a boil, turn down. Let'em simmer till the greens are the texture you want. Nouveau cuisine greens eaters will have much more sculpted-looking leaves than old-fashioned greens eaters who want the stalks to melt in their mouths along with the leaf of the collard. Again, I add 1/3 cup syrup or 2 tablespoons honey, or 3 tablespoons molasses to my greens, but you don't have

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<sup>189</sup> Ntozake Shange, *If I Can Cook/ You Know God Can*. Beacon: Boston, 1998, pg. 7

to. My mother thinks I ruin my greens that way, but she can always make her own, you know. Serve with vinegar, salt and pepper, and hot sauce to taste.<sup>190</sup>

Most of the “cookbook” is delivered in this way, with casual asides and small anecdotes embedded in each recipe as Shange gestures towards an audience she presumes will recognize and share in some of the traditions and conditions that have contributed to her presentation of Afro-diasporic culture/identity. At the same time, *If I Can Cook* rarely strays from its overarching consideration of how dispersed black subjects have nourished themselves both literally and figuratively, across time and place, and often, under impoverished and enslaved conditions.

## **II. New Orleans Food and Culture, Among Other Recollections**

On the subject of oral histories Professor Nwankwo distinguishes these interactive texts according to the following criteria: 1) They are richer and more interesting than conventional histories, because they have more layers and dimensions 2) They are nontraditional and non-chronological 3) They contains interjections and personal commentary 4) One person typically includes multiple voices and multiple perspectives 5) Less structured 6) Responses are informed by both the speaker and the person asking questions. According to Nwankwo, WOE is rooted in methodology that tries to bring forward all the multiple ways of reading and writing as well as all the multiple ways of knowing. It’s a methodology that considers how we write ourselves in a particular setting with a particular person. WOE also considers the following: What does heritage look like? What are some of the qualifications brought to bear when attempting to measure someone’s communal belonging? Language? Food? Ethics/System of Values? What life

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<sup>190</sup> Ntozake Shange, *Ibid*, pg. 11

strategies do elders in a community have that can be conveyed to young people? How do we assist in that intergenerational transfer of knowledge?<sup>191</sup>

In the interest of consistency, I asked each participant to contribute at least 4 recipes to the cookbook accompanied by a brief biography. I also asked them sit down for one-on-one interviews that focused on food memories and associations of home. None of the participants considered themselves to be strong writers, so the food interviews were also my attempt to sidestep this discomfort, to learn more about the context behind the recipes they chose, and to better capture their voices. For those who didn't have access to the original recipes, we searched online to find approximations of their childhood favorites that would serve as a basis for them to reproduce these familiar flavors. What follows are my reflections on the interviews I conducted with four of our elders that demonstrate the synthesis of personal remembrance and cultural commentary we were trying to capture in the final product.<sup>192</sup> Hortense Spillers posits that, "with food...we are both 'at home' and 'abroad,' a product of a particular urban block or a spot of provincial countryside *and* a worlding of multi-languages and cultures."<sup>193</sup> With each respondents story and their recollections of the foodways that raised them, the many layered complexities of their cultural upbringing came into view.

Typically, I began each interview with the question of which recipes the participants had chosen to share and why. My first interview was with Gailene St. Amanda, an artist and jewelry

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<sup>191</sup> Ifeoma Nwankwo, On Zora Neal Hurston and Oral Histories, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFG3GUIOVBO&app=desktop>

<sup>192</sup> The four participants featured are Gailene St. Amanda, Theodore Dubuclet, Barbara May, and Josie LaCour. All participants sign a consent form prior to their enrollment in WOE, certifying they understand the project's description/aims and allowing any portion of their story to be made public. Full interview transcripts can be viewed in the appendix to this chapter

<sup>193</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, *Black, White, and In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 2003. pg 42



designer based in LaPlace, Louisiana. From the beginning of the program, when the recipe share was first proposed as a group activity, Gailene made it clear that many of her family recipes were regarded as “top secret,” not to be casually shared with outsiders, especially their gumbo. However, I got her to consent to sharing some details, so long as it was understood that a few ingredients would be omitted, thereby remaining prized family heirlooms. My conversation with Gailene stood out for several reasons, one of them being her commentary on the pronounced Post Katrina dispersal rates that have affected the size and frequency of her family gatherings. People from New Orleans rarely leave New Orleans and the city’s retention rates among African Americans are particularly high, however, a lot has changed since the storm, including, at the personal level, proximity to loved ones. Additionally, Gailene’s experience of living in New Jersey and attempting to maintain her regional identity through cooking is a struggle I’m familiar with. However, her journey to the international markets, to locate the familiar among the unfamiliar, seems to have been both an occasion for growth and discovery in addition to affirming previously established notions of her cultural identity.

Theodore Dubuclet is a veteran, a father and grandfather, and a current resident of the Mid City neighborhood of New Orleans. Within just a few weeks of meeting each other, Theo had quickly established himself as the “troublemaker” of the group, inclined to make controversial statements that elicited spirited responses from the other participants. His “love me or leave me” mentality, while off putting to some, seemed to earn him just as much affection and praise. And, at times, it was very easy to see him as the young man he described in his interviews; spirited, hardworking, and prone to laughter. During his interview, Theo’s recollection of Christmas dinner at MaMou’s, led to an extended reflection on the complicated family dynamics he’d observed as a child as well as a discussion of his father’s inspiring

entrepreneurship. All of which was absent from his written account of these holiday gatherings that he'd initially submitted for the cookbook. As a storyteller, Theo turned out to be a highly visual thinker, both in his reconstruction of his grandmother's house, and in his retracing of the altered city landscape that was once so familiar to him. He describes a version of the city where self-made black men, particularly tradesmen, succeeded in building something substantial for themselves and their families.

Barbara May is a former teacher and school administrator, who currently lives in the Uptown area of New Orleans. Each of my conversations with Ms. May revealed that she came from a tight-knit family and that that closeness extended to the community she grew up in. In my interviews with her I was often surprised and delighted by how many "characters" she contained within her. In her hands, every recipe and recollection became a story and each story contained an assortment of voices that Ms. May skillfully brought to life. For me, Ms. May's interview serves as a rumination on how traditions (large and small) are made and preserved, and how they can become altered over time. She chose to share the recipes and rituals that she vividly associates with the distinctive character of the family members she's lost and community ties that have since vanished. Raised in what appears to be a very traditional home, where conventional gender roles were strictly enforced, Ms. May's own household subverted many of these expectations, largely because of the demands placed upon herself and her husband. Her generation remade itself in response to the changing necessities of their time, as did the next, preserving as much of their valued past as they could.

Josie LaCour is a resident of Gentilly who came to us from a local senior center. Bused to the library weekly, she frequently attended sessions with her sister and fellow WOE participant, Orpha Lee Brown. Both Josie and Orpha added unique perspectives to the group because they

had experienced a dual upbringing in the country and in the city. The ladies grew up on their grandparent's farm in St. Francisville, Louisiana. According to Orpha, they grew up being able to put their left foot in Louisiana and right foot in Mississippi, in an area called "the line" by the people who lived there. And according to Josie, their grandmother Lou was a highly skilled cook, who prepared food for many people in the community. The way Josie describes it, growing up in the country was full of unexpected surprises, much like her grandfather's "secret" gambling excursions in the woods at night. Hearing her describe the significant role her grandparents played in both the community where they lived and in she and her sibling's upbringing, reinforced the narrative of family/communal support that I was hearing from everyone in our group. Apparently, these forms of assistance were much more commonplace, particularly in poor and laboring black communities where resources were readily shared. However, it was Josie's statements about her father that resonated most with me, particularly because of the work we were doing together. He, and many of his peers, were unable to write. As such, he'd grown up in culture where baring "witness" to one's history was the next best thing, an oral tradition that was then passed on to Josie. Committing to memory all the names, important dates, and the significant stories, handed down from one generation to the next, was how they'd survived for so long and there are still so many stories left to tell.

### **III. Sharing our Stories: From Private to Public Remembrance**

Catherine Michna's article titled "Stories at the Center: Story Circles, Educational Organizing, and Fate of Neighborhood Public Schools in New Orleans," considers how memorials commemorating acts of social resistance in New Orleans resonate with audiences in the present day, inspiring contemporary community engagement. Michna's reflection is

prompted by her attendance at a ceremony where the Plessy v. Ferguson commemorative plaque was unveiled to residents in 2009 at the historic site of Homer Plessy's arrest in the Ninth Ward. Post ceremony and public remembrance, Michna argues that a history of collective and individual resistance is a fundamental feature of the African American heritage of the city and that "...building public memorials to marginalized histories can empower dis-privileged residents to critically engage with dominant historical narratives about their city and their neighborhoods."<sup>194</sup> This history of resistance is an important component of New Orleans' cultural legacy to its African American residents. Michna writes:

Close-knit ties in New Orleans's African-American, working-class neighborhoods made possible the civil rights campaigns that transformed New Orleans in the 1960s. For instance, not only did the Ninth Ward serve as the site of Homer Plessy's arrest, but it was also the neighborhood where four young girls—Ruby Bridges, Gail Etienne, Tessie Prevost, and Leona Tate—walked through crowds of hissing, egg-throwing white mothers in order to integrate what was then the district's system of white-only public schools. Both the Brown vs. Board decision and longstanding community-based efforts to achieve integration in New Orleans's schools stood behind and beneath these young girls' brave first steps into New Orleans's white schools.<sup>195</sup>

Ultimately, Michna's work critiques the Post Katrina market-based charter school system as one that perpetuates and exacerbates educational segregation and inequality in the city. As such, she considers what lessons might be learned from Pre-Katrina neighborhood based public school

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<sup>194</sup> Catherine Michna, "Stories at the Center: Story Circles, Educational Organizing, and Fate of Neighborhood Public Schools in New Orleans," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 3 In the Wake of Katrina: New Paradigms and Social Visions (Sep., 2009) pg 529-555, Michna goes on to discuss the significance of public spaces of remembrance, specifically for histories of resistance in African American communities. She writes, "Creating public city spaces for the remembering and celebration of grass roots resistance movements and local counterhistories of place can transform democratic practices in cities because doing so intervenes in lived, spatial practices in a way that encourages city residents of all class, gender, race, and ethnic backgrounds to come together and think critically about the historical structures underlying present-day inequalities. As Dolores Hayden has shown, unearthing sites that help local residents remember and celebrate marginalized histories can 'help to reclaim the identities of deteriorating neighborhoods where generations of working people have spent their lives,' and can present urban planners and policy makers with 'a context for greater social responsibility.'" pg 530

<sup>195</sup> Catherine Michna, *Ibid*, pg. 547-8

programs that promoted storytelling and the production of counter-histories as a means of achieving communal empowerment and advocating for educational equity. In turn, Michna argues that “...unless the process of telling stories about a city's past is combined with public forums for narrative exchanges about residents' divergent experiences in the city, monuments to marginalized histories will become "static" markers of history that are unconnected to critical engagement with history in the present.”<sup>196</sup>

There is a similar philosophy undergirding Wisdom of the Elders and its emphasis on the communal benefits of documenting counter-histories that extend beyond the individual gains experienced by those taking part in the program. In one example of its community outreach, WOE held an exhibit at the Sarratt Student Center on Vanderbilt’s campus on September 26<sup>th</sup> of 2014 to showcase the work produced by senior participants, which included life stories, photographs, and art. The exhibit titled “The Wisdom of the Elders: Life Lessons from and for African American Seniors” was a retrospective from the program’s first three years, which was free and open to the public. In an article covering the event, Ann Marie Deer Owens speaks with participants and organizers, reflected on the individual and communal benefits of the work done thus far. Summarizing statements made by Professor Nwankwo at the exhibit, the event reporter writes “participants feel appreciated and valued as individuals with unique stories and perspectives on life. In addition, the program is preserving Tennessee history that is not likely documented anywhere else...” After their experience of WOE in Middle Tennessee, “participants have formed the African American Heritage Society of Rutherford County, which

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<sup>196</sup> Catherine Michna, *Ibid*, pg. 532

will work in partnership with Wisdom of the Elders to encourage people to research, value and convey their family history to younger generations.”<sup>197</sup>

For our part, upon the completion of the community cookbook, copies will be made available in each branch of the New Orleans Public Library and a public reading will be held at the Rosa F. Keller Library and Community Center so that our senior participants may share their stories and their recipes with city residents. The hope is that the program will continue to grow, including future replications of WOE in additional locations around the country. Personally, I chose to participate in this project, not only because of my interest in New Orleans culture, oral histories, and African American genealogy research, but because facilitating this work ties back to my desire to *act* on my love of the city of New Orleans. I want to help capture these stories and to empower black storytellers who don’t often recognize the value of their experiences. In the grander scope of the dissertation this type of cultural production appears alongside the more acclaimed work of authors and poets because it’s no less worthy of our consideration of how New Orleans is performed, constructed, and remembered.

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<sup>197</sup> Ann Marie Deer Owens, “Listen: Elders save and share wisdom in Vanderbilt interdisciplinary study” Sep. 18, 2014 <https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2014/09/18/elders-wisdom-exhibit/>

## Appendix

### Food Interview, Gailene St. Amanda

**JB:** Start by telling me the recipes you chose and why

**Gailene:** I focused on the gumbo, because the family would get together to put it together...you know, somebody had to pick the shells out of the crab meat, somebody had to peel the shrimp, take the dookie out like my dad used to say (laughter) and he would use the shells from the shrimp so he could make the seafood stock. Somebody had to chop up the seasoning, somebody had to slice the sausage and cook it, so it was like a family activity.

Kids would be outside playing and of course, nobody wanted to cut the okra and cook it, but somebody had to. And it was always easier for all of us to get together and do a part and then my dad would do the final thing with all of the ingredients. And it was one of the meals that we enjoyed and we don't eat it, but maybe three times a year, usually during the holidays when somebody is putting a pot of gumbo together. Sometimes it can be really expensive. And everybody loves it and everybody knows gumbo, right? Even though everybody's gumbo recipe is different, you know, and I'm sure if 10 people stood in here and gave their recipes that they'd all be totally different and of course we all know that French bread can go with that

**JB:** Okay, what were the other ones?

**Gailene:** The other recipes? Well, we're really funny about our recipes...I don't know where my mother found this recipe for Lemon Lush...and its for something that she prepared alone and it was flour, chopped walnuts, cream cheese, powdered sugar, la creme topping, and lemon instant pudding and pie filling and milk. And it was something that I really liked because it was very light, delicious and it wasn't too sweet...and one of the reasons I picked this is because it was the last thing that my mother prepared for me before she passed...because she knew I loved it and we were getting ready for July 4<sup>th</sup> and she passed on July 3<sup>rd</sup>. Initially we couldn't eat it, because it was almost like...if we ate that, she would be gone. That was the reason why I picked that.

Mirliton is another thing that I chose because I'm the only one who prepares it in the family. My mom showed me how to fix it and I don't really think anybody wants to learn how to make it because they want me to do it...and I don't know if you want me to talk about what I put in it or how I prepare it...but it was strange when I went to New Jersey to live for 10 years and I was walking around looking for mirliton...nobody knew what I meant by that cuz its actually called...what is it...its actually called chayoto..chayota...I can't remember what its called and mirliton actually refers to the Finish dish as opposed to the vegetable that you put in it, but you know how New Orleans people are...(laughter)

**JB:** right

**Gailene:** And I remembered you asking us if anybody, dead or alive, could prepare something for us, what would it be...and for me it would be my mother's turkey stuffing and her dirty rice with livers...oh my goodness, nobody can make it like she does.

**JB:** Do you come from a big family?

**Gailene:** It was five of us, mother, father, and I'm the oldest of five children

**JB:** Okay. It sounds like there were a lot of family gatherings

**Gailene:** Well that's the way we were....it was three sisters who had children, my last two siblings didn't have any, so the best thing to do would be to go by ma'ma on Saturday...the kids could go outside and play together, we would go in the kitchen and talk about what was going on and prepare dinner...and that really used to be the highlight of our week, that get together by my mom's. And, pretty much that was it, plus the kids would play with a few kids in the neighborhood. Family gatherings and talking and just being with each other is what we really like doing.

**JB:** Since your mom passed, have ya'll relocated that or...

**Gailene:** No...because, well, for a little while after she died we would get together, but the kids grew up, one sister moved to California, then my, that's the sister next to me, Claudia, then my baby sister moved out there, Patrice, I went to Jersey to live for 10 years, Katrina happens, and it relocates my sister to Texas and her daughter. My dad and my brother, well my dad lost his home so he moved in to an apartment, so we're kind of scattered now, you know. My daughter had already relocated to Texas, you know, she got married and had children and my son managed to stay here, so when holidays come, it's just me, my brother, and my dad now. Father's Day is coming, and my sister was coming in from Texas, but I don't know because now we have a funeral Saturday, his brother passed. So, the family is getting smaller and smaller and those gumbo days and activity days and gatherings, that's nonexistent now...sad to say

**JB:** I mean it happens...a lot changed in my family when my grandmother passed away, because she was the person that everybody gathered around. And I see my mom and her sisters doing what they can to reproduce that for the younger generations, but I do wonder, you know, with my cousins and I, if we will manage to make it as much of a priority as my mom and her sisters do and if we don't manage to do that together then that's all gone.

**Gailene:** Yeah, that gets lost.

**JB:** So, yeah, it's a moment in time and it's something that at least for a little while probably felt like it would always just be the way that things were, you know? But yeah, I know. Growing up at my grandmother's house was a lot like that

**Gailene:** And New Orleans...we miss that...for the holidays nobody is on the streets because everybody's at their moms or some family...I think we're really considered a Catholic city even if you're not Catholic...a lot of people will live by the old habits of seafood always on Fridays and getting together for the holidays, you know. It's really about family down here, so, you know, it's hard, it's hard...there was something else I was going to say in regards to what you were saying, but let me just say this as a comparison...we had the five children and then our siblings and then the mates of the siblings and we had to set up the ping pong table...that's how many people we had to seat, so you know, everybody could sit down, and now it's gone down to three people. Plus, my baby sister passed away 2 years ago...



**JB:** I'm sorry

**Gailene:** That was hard. So, moving right along...go head

**JB:** So, I wanted you to say a little bit more about your time in New Jersey and what was that like? Did you find yourself trying to reproduce home through cooking?

**Gailene:** That's the only way you can. For instance, when I tried to make the first gumbo we went to what's called an international market and it was this huge, huge building like a Sam's inside and there were all of these imported foods and they kept seafood live until you ordered it (incredulous tone) and I said, I need some blue crabs, and it was an Asian guy, and he said how many you want and I told him and he gave me the bag and I could feel things moving...well we used to buying them frozen...they were still alive, oh my god, freaked me out! Oysters, you know, I wanted to buy some oysters to make the dressing and instead of getting these nice little small ones, there were these huge oysters the size of a tongue...ughhh, anyway, the only way I was able to get Tony Chachere's seasoning, which is what I use in place of salt and pepper..we went to a restaurant in Hoboken, New Jersey and they happened to have Tony Chachere's seasoning on each table. Now, you wouldn't have thought it was a New Orleans theme because it was called Good Fellas, but there were pictures of Mardi Gras sites in the French Quarter and I had to ask the guy if there was any way he could sell me a couple of those, because they don't sell that up there of course, and he just gave it to me so that sort of activated the New Orleans flavoring of my food.

The markets are, there's a lot of fresh food that you can buy and I love that, the Asian markets and the Indian markets and the Pilipino markets...there was stuff I never saw before, I had to really search and look for the things that we cook with because I think I may have ended up going to a chain store, like, what's it called...like a Winne Dixie, to find that things that we use that I was familiar with, so little by little I was able to get it back...matter fact I think it got better (laughter)

I was creating some delicious food, really. But certain things were priced really high like to get the lump crab meat, but you know, I made it. And at the same time, people think that you aren't going to enjoy the food up there...there is some awesome, awesome food up there, delicious food. I prefer at home, to eat mines, the way I cook, but I was willing to try different types of food out there...It was good...can't get French bread though (laughter)...out the question, you can't get hot sausage patties, out the question, you know there were just some things you couldn't find, till I'd visit and I'd get those things.

**JB:** See, I'm spoiled, my mom would send them to me, or if I came in town, she had a care package ready that I could bring back to Nashville, so I had my hot sausage and things I definitely needed (laughter)

**Gailene:** But it's cool, culture shock though, serious culture shock. People weren't extremely friendly...they, how can I say...they stayed in their ethnic groups...so the Mexicans stayed together, the Puerto Ricans stayed together, the Africans...you know, the West Indians...I became part of a group of women that lived two blocks from me, one was Dutch Italian, one was

Russian Italian (laughter), one was from Antigua, oh and one was Chinese, so we had this real mixture of people that got together and found a lot in common. So we used to, once a month, somebody would cook a meal...so, I had a chance to eat different kinds of food from different kinds of places...Chinese, Italian, but it was helpful...I miss my friends up there.

### **Food Interview, Theodore Dubuclet**

**JB:** So, we'll talk about the recipes that you chose to share and why and then just a little bit of information about you know...growing up, who was the person who cooked in your household (?) Did anybody show you how to cook (?) Did you learn more so by watching (?) or individual instruction...that kind of thing...so yeah, lets start with some of the recipes that you chose to share

**Theo:** D-U-B-U-C-L-E-T (laughter), It has three vowels, that means it has three syllables, and its French, so the LET is LEY

**JB:** Dubuclet /dubuclay/, okay

**Theo:** So, what is it you'd like to know first

**JB:** What recipes did you choose to include?

**Theo:** Okay, the recipes that I chose and the reason I came up with them was thinking back on a scenario, any particular Christmas Eve or even a major holiday, and I chose Christmas time because those were times when all five of the sisters got together, because I had an aunt in Washington and an aunt in New York...so, they would come down of course and I chose a time around eleven years old or twelve years old...you're kinda coming into your own around that junior high school year age, and my story would have been that as we walked into the house, my grandmother's, we called it my MaMou's, but of course I even wrote in my account of it that it was really my grandfather's house, he and my grandmother's house, it was given to him...

That being said, as we entered into a light blue living room area, fire place of course, a mantel as those types of homes in the seventh ward were, we call them shot gun doubles, first room again was the living room, at that time of course we had black and white TV, but that was also a gathering point for the family, especially on Sunday to come watch as my grandmother called it the "Ed Solomon" show (laughter) instead of Ed Sullivan. Of course, that was accompanied by episodes of Amos and Andy, so you'd see cousins gathered around TV, you know, grownups around, next room was the dining room, huge round table and it must have sat a dozen...easily... because that was the grown up table, that was the big table, there was a huge buffet, with drawers that held the linens and serving things of that nature...she had a Chrystal cabinet...and she also had what they called back then, it was kind of like a roll away bed, couch, that was also for visitors...next is the main bed...no, no, the guest bedroom, then the bathroom. When the house was original, that's where the house stopped, at the bathroom, and the kitchen was up front. But then, they added on the bedroom in the back and a kitchen and a shed, where at that time we had free range chickens, fresh eggs, and the main staple of the back yard was a fig tree...that fig tree

lasted almost as long...well...if she planted it at 18 and died at 106, that's about as old as that tree was.

Okay, so we've gone through the house and of course the last room was the kitchen, which is where the kids table was, we ate in the kitchen...I don't think I moved to the big table until I was around 15 or 16...so at any rate, now you have all the sisters around, its Christmas Eve night, everybody's got something to do...somebody's chopping seasonings, you're going to have a turkey, you're going to have oyster "dressin'ing"...as they say, you're going to have stuffed mirliton, you're going to have rice, gravy, and green peas, have potato salad, some of the delicacies would be, I've got a crab cake recipe, but we usually did the stuffed crab...the way we used our crabs was stuffed crab...and uh, you know it started all off with the gumbo, the preparation of the gumbo and that's one of the recipes I shared with you...course the seasoning was chopped up...you're just chopping up a bunch of onions, bell pepper, celery, *the trinity*...a bunch of it because it's going in every dish...from the gumbo all the way to the stuffed crabs. So there's a lot of seasonings being cut, that's why they doing it there, and of course there is a bunch of conversation going on, of course we not privy to hear and back in those days you could hear...talk some of that broken Creole (laughter) you know, and you'd hear em say "eh la fa" that's you actin' a fool, and you might hear "comme ci comme ca" you know, those things...and of course if that year, things went well through the families, there was no worries about marital stress, but there was very little of that then...you know, you had bills that you'd need paid and somebody want to spend the number elsewhere, you know you're going to have a rile up...and again, so the menu was prepared and everything was fixed...you can't leave out...I would call the sweat potato casserole as opposed to just the candied yam thing...that's beatin the yams up, butter em up, creamin em up, cinnamon'in up, sugar'in up, vanilla'in up (did mention lots of butter?) and you whip that up, put your raisins in it, top it with the marshmallow, pop it in the oven for 25 min, bake till the marshmallows brown, you're good to go.

**JB:** That sounds like something my grandmother made

**Theo:** And, um...I'm sure I mentioned the potato salad, if I didn't, you know we had to have potato salad at that dinner and stuffed eggs...you know, some of those kinds of things you put on...cookies, cakes, pies, things of that nature. Ice cream possibly. Of course, if my grandfather was around you were going to have "claret"

**JB:** What's that?

**Theo:** Carrot wine, babe

**JB:** Carrot wine?

**Theo:** Claret, yeah. C-L-A-R-E-T, it's a red dinner wine, which the sauvignon has taken its place these days...so that was kind of similar to the Claret, back then you had Gallow, all these different criminals had their labels on the wine bottle...you know...one thing we would have to look forward to was...one uncle...he was a big shot, who worked in the post office, but thought he was a big shot...cigar, he gambled, drank a lot, you know, he was a social guy...the Good Fellas social pleasure club used to be on Galvez...on Miro, between St. Bernard, no, no, I'm

lying...it was between D'Abadie on...the second block off of...you can see it now, its abandoned...a cinder block building...there was also a bar on the corner. There is still a bar at the corner of D'Abadie and Miro. But he would go there and get his cheer on...when he came to the dinner, he had his cheer on.

But he wasn't a very...he was mischief maker and used my father as the target. My dad only had, stretching an eighth-grade education, that's stretching...his daddy left, for instance he was 14 years old, he was out there trying to help his ma'ma with his siblings, so that was his upbringing. So, we tip our hat to him, with a limited education, he was able to form his own business...which was refuge and he worked with the Sears corporation, Barone St., Gentilly, and eventually he got the warehouse as well collecting the refuge...he used refuge, doing then what they doing today, he recycled...corrugated card board boxes that your refrigerators came in, they threw those away right on my daddy's truck that we stacked up, 2,300 or 4,000 lbs of cardboard, bring it down there and sell it, that's an extra 3/400 hundred dollars a week. Same thing when they came in your home and brought you a new refrigerator...any appliance, they took the old one...well guess what, they threw that old one away, right on my daddy's truck, put it in our yard that worked as a junk yard, dismantling...collecting precious metals, like they do today...out selling copper out these houses, ripping the houses off for copper, but he would take the motors out...all of them had motors that had copper, whatever they had around...insulation is the word I'm looking for...that would be another 50 or 60 dollars. The motors were cast iron, that sold, aluminum is always selling...now you could sell aluminum cans as a living, as a hustle...

So, back to Uncle Milton, he came in and of course, they're around the big table and he's taking pot shots at my father, and my father was self-conscious about his education, what have you, but he had nothing to tuck his head over...you know...I never lived in a rented home. So, he built his own home, he broke four lots down on flake street before Crown Royale was built and developed...the street East...West of Crown was Flake Avenue...that's a terrible street, you hear stories about Flake Avenue. But back then, it was the new frontier for New Orleans, that was what they called "Gentilly East" ...Gentilly extended from Franklin Avenue out east...when you crossed Canal it was Gentilly East. So, he built the house. Back in those days, everybody was tradesmen...my dad owned, what turned out to be Joe and Jeans, which you would remember on Prayer and Laperouse, if I'm not mistaken. He sold it, it was Rudy's Tavern, to them. See my daddy was (snaps) tearing it down

Actually my daddy started out as a peddler with a horse and carriage...(sings out) "Oh lady, I got the potatoes, blah, blah, blah"...and actually he sold that to what would turn out to be my *parrain* (godfather), who carried that over, of course he brought a truck...my *parrain* did, so he was a fruit vendor...so, ugh, he built that house there, we left from there Pontchartrain Park, established his own security company, who was the first security guard company in Pontchartrain Park...the first security guard at SUNO, with just that meager education. So, he really had no reason to feel inferior, bc the fact of the matter was, he was more man than the uncle was bc he took the insults and didn't whip his ass (laughter). That couldn't happen with my generation, you understand...you open your mouth, I'm gon pop you at the dinner table...dinner's over (laughter) And let me tell ya man, my dad wasn't no push over especially

when he had that Tavern, used to bust em in the head with that 38...when they got rambunctious at the club he got to protect his place...he wouldn't shoot nobody, he'd bust em in the head with that 38, he had to pistol whip em good (laughter)

So, with that said, unc got a pass...

**JB:** I was about to say, weren't we talking about gumbo at some point...

**Theo:** (laughter)

**JB:** Gumbo, Gallow wine...

**Theo:** Yes, that's what transpired...the gumbo, I have to check, I wrote that gumbo recipe down

**JB:** Well, if not, that's what you need to do today...cuz I have the recipe that I copied and its supposed to be 4 total...

**Theo:** As we speak, it's the crab cakes, stuffed crab, that's two and you should have four

### **Food Interview, Barbara May**

**JB:** Lets talk a little bit about the recipes you selected and why

**Barbara:** Okay, all my recipes are about family...we were taught the family was all important and that family is first.... are we recording now?

**JB:** uh huh

**Barbara:** Okay, so my mother and dad were very...they came from the same place...they came from Plaquemines Parish, they knew each other as children and they grew up together and ultimately, they got married. And from that union there were five girls and one boy. The favorite recipe I want to talk about, that I didn't include in my packet is the one about fish heads. My mom was...I always thought was being very serious and not tolerating any foolishness, but this story reminds me that she must have had a great sense of humor because after having two girls...no three girls and one boy, she kinda got used to having girls around and when my brother came around he was like...she didn't really know what to do with him.

He didn't like books, he didn't like to be obedient...well the girls were that, they were all kind of in the same mold, we all went to school, we had no problems and we all understood what momma and daddy really wanted...how they wanted us to act and what the expectations were. However, when my brother came along, he was quite different and so, my mother didn't really quite understand him at all, even though she had come from a family of five sisters and three brothers...I guess she forgot that boys are quite different and so when my brother started acting out...he would take the bike and when he come home the bike would be in half. He took our skates, he put our skates in the oven and in that time the skates had leather straps so when he took the skates out the oven the straps were no longer good, they were parched and cracked so we couldn't use those. So, momma got tired of that and she couldn't understand...he'd go to school, and teachers would tell em' all he wanted to do was eat lunch, he really didn't want to do

his work. So, momma looked at her boy and she said, “I don’t think he has enough brains to understand what he’s supposed to do, so she said, I think I’m going to cook some fish heads and maybe he’ll get some understanding from those fish heads.”

So, she’d go to the meat market and she’d ask for these fish heads and she would do it all the time, she would cook...she’d say, “today we’re going to have a special dinner for Freeman,” that’s my brother’s name, “we’ll have a special dinner for him and Lawd please let him get some brains or some sense from these fish heads.” So, when momma first did it we were all appalled, you know, like “fish heads, why would you wanna serve that?” She said, “well, there is a tradition that if you eat brains, you can develop brains.” I don’t know if she made that up on the spot or... (laughter) but that’s what she told us. And this meal consisted of, she would cook these fish heads, she’d cook them in like a gravy, the gravy was tomato paste or sauce, water of course added to that with onion, bell pepper, garlic, parsley, and then she would simmer all of that together, and then she would serve it over rice, white rice, and I don’t know if it ever got him to be any better, but she seemed to think that if he ate that and we ate it with him, it would encourage him to act the way he should act and be as he should be. I don’t know if she really got to see him act that way because she died early on, she died when my brother must have been about maybe, I would say 17 or 18. But, I think he got some sense...he was always rambunctious, we loved him for that. As a matter of fact, my baby sister, she came about seven or eight years after him and she just attached herself to him and she was almost like him in a way because she was prone to do all the bad things that he did. They weren’t really bad, they were mischievous. She played more boy games than girl games, and she really, when he died, she really missed him because she said that was her favorite of all the siblings. So, that’s a story that I like to see that my mother had a sense of humor, when she’d be preparing it she was happy, and when she was serving it she was happy, and I think she knows that it did have a happy ending because my brother was the first to join my mother in death. She died when she was 46, 47. He was still a teenager when she died, but I do believe she loved him more than us, because that was her only boy.

She took care of him, she even shinned his shoes, she would press his clothes and we’d have to shine our own shoes and press our own clothes, but she took care of her boy. And I think in the final analysis that she did give him some sense because I don’t know if he matured into it or the fish heads did it, but that’s the story I choose to share...that’s it.

**JB:** Okay, fish heads. Alright, what were the other recipes?

**Barbara:** I did one on ice cream, how my mother used to make...for certain events, I would say like Christmas, Easter, maybe Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, we had this special ice cream. And it consisted of momma making a custard, ice cream custard which was milk, sugar, vanilla, and it was kind of simmered over a slow cook...and eggs, you couldn’t cook it fast because you didn’t want it to burn, but it had to be cooked a long time because you wanted it, you needed it to thicken...maybe she put some flour in it as well. And this recipe called for the cooked ice cream custard and you put it into a cranking device...this device had a large cylinder that was either steel or...it must have been steel or aluminum. And it was covered with a lid made of the same material and then around that cylinder of custard there was ice and it was packed, the ice was

packed around that cylinder with salt in it...they used to call it ice cream salt, it was thick, thick, salt and you had to crank turn it, everyone had to take a turn turning it. And being the oldest I started the turning it and that was when it was the easiest because the custard had not hardened in to ice cream yet. So, I would get on first and I would do it real fast and then the next sister would get on and she would be going a little slow because it was turning in to real ice cream and then third one, by the time the third person got, of course it was really hard, it was hard to crank up, and everybody's saying, "Is it ice cream yet? Is it ice cream yet?" and momma said, "No, not, I'll tell you when." So, by the time we got to my brother and my last sister we would say, "momma, is it good, we still gotta do more work? We tired, we want a drink, we want some ice cream." Finally, when the little one came on and she say, "I can't turn it anymore, I need help." Well the oldest had to go back and help her push and that was me. And we'd help her push it and we'd finally get to the place where you couldn't turn the crank anymore...when you couldn't turn the crank anymore that meant the ice cream was ready. And sense I was the first to start the ice cream process, cranking, I thought I would be first to get the ice cream, but momma said "No, the baby gets the ice cream first." And I was thinking, "Oh, my gosh, I wanted to have it first because I'm the oldest." I had all kinds of rationales and she said, "No, the baby goes first." But, I was patient, even though I was rolling my eyes and acting out a lil' bit, not where my mother could see me but, I finally got to get the ice cream and it was so delicious. If you think Bluebell is good, this ice cream was so much better. And the greatest time would be when Mr. Ivory, my neighbor across the fence would make his home-made pound cake, so when we had those two together we just thought we were in heaven. And, I would get on the fence when were cranking ice cream and I would wait and I'd tell Mr. Ivory, "Mr. Ivory, did you make cake today?" and Mrs. Rose, his wife, would say, "we'll let you know when its done." Well he didn't have to let me know when it was done because it smelled up the whole neighborhood. So, cake and ice cream got made together and we would get that ice cream and that delicious pound cake which was full of butter. (laughter) So that's my ice cream story.

The next one I did was on biscuits. My mother made the most...these biscuits were as high as you could stretch any dough, everybody new about these biscuits, the neighbors would come by on Sundays before we went to church, my cousin would come from church, he'd come over, these biscuits were so light and fluffy. She had her own recipe, she didn't tell me exactly what it was, but I went online and found out that the secret was, she used shortening instead of, uh, it was what they used to call lard, cut into the flour, and of course, she put eggs in it and that was another thing that made it tasty and...but I don't know how, I guess the eggs helped it to rise too, because she put the baking powder in but nobody's biscuits were as light and fluffy as mommas, so that meant before church we would have these wonderful biscuits and coffee. I call it coffee milk because we put more milk into the coffee...my daddy used to like strong coffee, so he kept his strong coffee with chicory...it was like, when it coated the cup, it was so brown, it looked like mud (laughter) but we'd put a little bit of coffee in it and we'd have a whole glass of milk. So, there was biscuits, with that milk, wow, it was delightful and by the time we got to church...I guess almost comatose because we had eaten that much food before we went to church. And that was family time because my mother and father, at some point, worked. My mother used to help my daddy, my daddy was a landscape gardener and my mother would go out and help him sometimes with landscape gardening, but Sunday was our family time. So, we really looked

forward to having those big biscuits and our milk coffee, maybe some orange juice but, we had to have those biscuits and coffee.

And the last one I did was...oh the pig's feet. We, as a community, when I was a little girl, we ate everything off the pig, we ate the pig's fee, we did the tongue, my mother used to be able to cook pig's tongue, ham hocks, we did ham...just everything off the pig. We didn't do the pig's lips...I didn't eat pig's lips until I was grown. When I discovered what they were, well I decided I didn't like them too much. We always had chicken, or fish, or beef stew...like Monday we had red beans and rice with pork chops, then the next day we might have white beans with chicken, the next day we might have lima beans with such and such and it always was that kinda meat, but sometimes we'd get bored and we'd say "momma we tired of that." So, she'd say, "we gonna have a special dinner today," so she said, "we're gonna get pig's feet." You'd hear pig's feet and naturally you'd go, "ewww, no that's not special mom." But she said, "you gonna like this." And so, she'd send me to the store to get, I'd get two jars of pig's feet which...they had, they were pickled, they were inside a jar and they had been prepared with vinegar and some spices so they'd be palatable, but momma would add her delicate ingredients which consisted of a tomato gravy, I don't know if she used the paste or the sauce or if she used both of them, and she added water to that after she had simmered her vegetables like, onion, garlic, bell pepper, parsley, and she would make the gravy and let that simmer for a while, probably about an hour on a slow flame and then at the end she would drain those pig's feet. She would wash them off, trying to wash all that vinegar off, cause my daddy hated vinegar...she washed all the vinegar off and then she put the feet in the gravy and she let that maybe simmer for a half hour maybe half hour and then she'd serve that over white rice. With our favorite vegetable, which was either sweet peas or some type of turnip greens, mustard greens or something like that. And of course, everything was accompanied with lemonade. At dinner time we always had a fresh pitcher of lemonade. So, we all ate all our meals together...even breakfast. We ate lunch at school, but then at dinner time we had to make it home in time for dinner, but on Sunday we had my daddy and momma at the dinner table whereby in the week day we didn't, because daddy might have to work late so we ate without him, but on Sundays we all ate together and we all looked forward to that time.

That's it, those were the recipes I did.

**JB:** So, do you still do a lot of cooking either for yourself or your family?

**Barbara:** I don't cook for myself because I live alone, but when I was married I did a lot of cooking. My oldest child is 47 this year, the youngest is 42. So, when they were little, I did a lot of cooking. Their dad liked chicken, so we did a lot of chicken and he loved cabbage, but those are kind of labor intensive meals to me so now I just do fish and I get a potato salad that comes out from the store like Rouses and I'll add maybe like a vegetable like green beans, but, I don't do a lot of cooking cuz its just me.

**JB:** Well, when you had your own family, was eating together, or preparing meals together, was that a big part....

**Barbara:** A big part, we never ate alone. If they're daddy worked late then we would wait for him. Late was usually around six, because I was a school teacher, so I was usually home between



four and five and I would take a power nap for about fifteen minutes and then I'd start towards the kitchen, so dinner was at five thirty and I was just tired and ready to call it a day. I'd grade papers, or do something of that sort, help with homework, and I was done.

**JB:** Right. Did you teach your kids how to cook or have they...

**Barbara:** Their dad taught them how to cook. Because, after a while, he was, first of all he was working at a ship yard...they laid him off and then he started working for himself cuz he was a plumber, he wasn't certified, but he was a plumber, so if he had a lot of work he would stay longer and if he didn't he'd start dinner. When the boys got home, they'd see him doing dinner, cuz later on from teaching I'd moved on to administration so I was late some days, many days, so he would start cooking, he would start the chicken, he would start the pork chops and whatever else, so they learned how to cook from him, they learned how to cook, wash clothes, sow, iron...from their dad. Because we were at the age then when he was kinda working for himself, so he had more time than I did. So, he taught them, and their wives were just tickled that they could do all that. (laughter) cuz they can do it all, they don't need to have...they don't sit and wait for dinner. Whoever gets home first, starts dinner. And my youngest is married to a doctor so sometimes she's late. And they have three kids, they can't wait for mom. So, they've always said, "Thank you, mother May, cuz our husbands can help us...", they better because they were taught. We didn't have a job for mom or a job for daddy, because when I get home sometimes I didn't get home till 9. And so, their clothes would be ready, there would be...dinner would be done, their homework was over...a lot of times I'd be depressed from the day and I'd come home and see that they were okay, that their daddy had taken care of them.

### **Food Interview, Josie LaCour**

**JB:** Talk to me about the recipes you chose for your contribution

**Josie:** I chose Mayonnaise, Bread Pudding, and cheese ball, and chicken salad

**JB:** You make your own mayonnaise?

**Josie:** uh huh, at times, I do. I have a recipe...most people back in the day, in the early 40s, they didn't buy jar mayonnaise until Blue Plate came along, making the mayonnaise, but most of the people on Friday, they made their own mayonnaise. And its very simple. So, you do the dry ingredients together...you want me to tell you my recipe?

**JB:** I mean, sure. Or you can tell me what made you chose those or um, you can go back a little further and talk about what it was like, say, growing up in your own house, who did the cooking (?) who taught you to cook (?) If anybody...you know

**Josie:** Oh, my grandmother. We were little and my parents worked twelve hours a day, most people worked twelve hours a day, you'd be on the job for twelve hours but you had to get there, so that means that you'd either be thirteen or fourteen hours away from your children, so when we were small they had to work and with them working here in New Orleans, my grandmother lived in St. Francisville, and she kept us until we were old enough to go to nursery school ...but while I was there, she was doing the cooking...she cooked for nearly everybody around there.

She cooked, uh, she baked cakes, pies, and biscuits, and cornbread and stuff like that...she canned vegetables, fruits, fish, meats...she smoked the meats because, when I was little there was a house just away from the house, that, it was a big room that had shelves around the walls and they had hanging meat and then they had meat in the barrel, I think that could have been pickled and smoked and all that was up hanging up and around. Vegetables was in jars, she canned and all. So, she would let us peel the potato with a spoon and then also, she let us bite a piece, so you'd know the taste of the potato and it wasn't bad. I learned to eat...turnips, raw turnips, raw beets...all that stuff that was good for the area.

She did most of the canning for the people around the area, white folks, black folks, mostly white folks would come, sit there, in fact bringing vegetables and stuff so she could cook it and jar it and then they'd come pick it up.

**JB:** Had she ever worked as a cook?

**Josie:** No, she cooked at her house, they brought it to the house. She had this big barrel thing outside, like you wash clothes in, she cooked in that and then she had a big pan, she'd cook on the wood stove and cooked in that until they got gas and oil and all that stuff. Her husband, he had a store, they sold good dry goods and stuff to the community and shoes and all of that stuff, and the mail came to the store and people would come and get their mail, so he'd act as a distributor of mail after the mailman brought the mail to the store.

He was a big-time gambler

**JB:** My grandfather too (laughter)

**Josie:** He gambled in the woods, took people, the boat captain would come there, send word that he would be in the neighborhood and so that particular time...they would go Saturday night and gamble because the store is closed on Sunday. And they gambled. He had a still and he made beer and wine...people would come, in the area, but he would know, talk to the people and stuff, find out who they were and all and send them on their way. But they had a way of signaling other people, like "whoop," they called it whooping...they didn't have no telephones, so they would know and that's the signal. But some people may be greedy, wanted more money and didn't want to pay attention and so, uh, they got caught. But he had a big spender that wanted to...if you were on the road passing, and you turned in to his plantation...where he's living at they had a big gate with a heavy chain on it, but they had something else that you could pass through without dropping the chain...so you know strangers coming...before you know it, folks were at the gate, they drop the chain, that's a stranger, so they'd get to the front...on the front porch, you'd go out to the porch, there's a level out there, the door is right behind...there is a gun, each door, you go back inside there is a gun over the door and over the windows, so living out there, you learn to shoot and you learn to listen and all of this stuff. So, when the boat captain comes in, they'd go in the woods and sit, they didn't want me to know...but because I was too nosy.

**JB:** (laughter) I was going to say, well how'd you find out?

**Josie:** Well, I knew what he was doing. But he wouldn't let us see where he was going. He'd go off in the woods at nighttime with a lantern where he'd gamble, 30, 40 thousand dollars in the woods.

**JB:** whoa

**Josie:** mmhm. The captain bought his people, his children land, as far as you could see. In Ethel, Louisiana, going up on the 19, I think it's the 19, as far as you can see, that's their land. He bought it for them. No question, that was his children. So, this one here, good time pa, he hid his money and died with it, he hid it in the woods...but he loaned money out too, to people when their crops didn't come in, he loaned money out, he could count, he had a good memory, he could tell you, if it was two years ago, he could tell you on that day what you brought there and what you talked about. He had good brains...mines not that good.

**JB:** Yeah, that's how my grandmother used to be, she remembered so many details from people that she'd worked with...that had happened like fifty years ago and my memory is not that good, so I was really impressed by how much she could retain.

**Josie:** Well that's like my father. My father...most black people, many of them, back then you couldn't write things down, so you were a witness and so, you told a story from like way back and way before he was born. It was told to him...stories about who married who, when, and where...and so there was all these people, talking and knowing these things, it come down to me, it was given me, but my other cousin says "yall ought to get a tape recorder and record all this," I didn't...last names, and whose married to this and when they died and all, we all the witnesses. And see, so when Roots came out, our folks had already been doing all that...they go all the way back, way back, and where they came from and all this stuff. Just telling the story and so we had many relatives here that you'd be surprised to know...who were all my age and can go back a little bit and tell the last names and where they were living at and all that stuff...uh hu, I can't do all that.

**JB:** So, how big was the community that yall lived in? I know you had your farm and then neighbors...

**Josie:** My grandfather set up the store, wherever he wanted to be, so he'd have everything he needed in the store...and since that time, maybe 20 years ago, they burned the store down to make sure...say that its not there. Some white folks, but truly, if I look at it, they don't belong there anyway because when my mother's step brother got married, he married somebody from Ohio, and she already had a child, and from him, he had children, and that's who is living there. The step-people, her children are staying there now....

Anyway, my grandmother, she was the best cook, she'd win prizes and stuff. And most people out there are, especially the ones that come from Mississippi, they could really bake.

**JB:** And so, did she teach you how to cook or did you learn just by watching?

**Josie:** By watching...because she tells me I used to want to whip the cake up, like beat it, but she'd say "Oh no, I started already with my right hand, you're left hand." She couldn't let me do

it because I would mess up her cake. And she had the best tasting cake...she did that. And they have a potato house out there, so the potato house had a roof on a slant like this and we would climb up on there and slide down, like a slide. But they had a piece of tin that was turned up a little bit and I came down the wrong way and I cut my foot right up under the little toe...I had to tell my grandma and I was walking bare feet...and we got ready to go to the rodeo because we rode up to the rodeo which was about, maybe 4 miles, you know you could walk there. And so, I grabbed my shoes, "put your shoes on," and I had a big purple ball under my foot, under my toe, she didn't know. "what's wrong, why you can't get the shoe on?" She looked and saw all that got in it because I'd been walking around with bare feet, but didn't tell because she would have taken care of it...oh yeah, she and my great grandmother and another lady sat there, it was a Sunday, had come from church so it was like 3 or 4 o'clock in the evening, like, my sister, brother and friends they were all walking to the pasture way out there, they gave me something and they're sitting there talking, before you know it, I'm going to sleep...I don't know what they did, but all I know is that when I woke up it was good. And you can't see today where I cut it, nothing.

**JB:** Nice, well are there things that you like to cook or liked to cook for your family or for yourself?

**Josie:** Oh, I like to fix myself, I treat myself fine and my family. (laughter) I love shopping, for food, gotta get fresh food and stuff like, fresh food and vegetables and all, so for a cheaper price I buy stuff when its fresh because most vegetables are sweet and if you get it later like corn and its almost at the end of the season, they have made three or four ears off the corn, so now you look at the corn and it won't have that milk in it and its dry...so you look at it and see if it has milk in it, white corn is much better than yellow corn for us...anyway, I would get up at 5 in the morning, fix my breakfast, fix the kids breakfast and stuff, put it on the table in the dining room with a table cloth, set the table and let them eat, this was every day except Saturday. That was my day off...I'm going somewhere (laughter)

So, I would fix them a vegetable, and they ate salad, they ate that every day. Sunday, I'd cook and that's like family dinner, you'd drop over and I've got the big spread...I'd have goose...goose is sweet meat, its like a turkey, expensive, it don't have that much meat on it, its almost like a duck...

**JB:** So, did your kids ever help in the preparation as they were growing up?

**Josie:** No, no. They gone, my kids, like, when they got old enough to go to school, "oh ma, I'm late, I'm late" would leave without breakfast. Finally, I stopped fixing breakfast.

## Afterward

### Southern Literature, Black Southerners, and the “New”/Global South

The South is many things to many people and working on this project has forced me to confront the many ways it informs the writer, scholar, and global citizen I’ve become. I’ve long known, even if I was reluctant to admit it, that the South would always be my home, regardless of where I live. As Chris Rose, a New Orleans native and author of *I Dead in the Attic: After Katrina*, poignantly wrote, “You can live in any city in America, but New Orleans is the only city that lives in you.” I whole heartedly agree with this sentiment. And yet, New Orleans and by extension, the South, remains contradiction come to life. Love and hate, nestled under the same roof, waiting, as we often have for the storm to pass. It’s a dull ache and an ever-present longing to return to some misremembered past. On the subject of this peculiar and vexing city, Hortense Spillers had this to say: “One of the nation’s most complex and fascinating sites, this city, especially if one is standing at any intersection in the old Latin Quarter, does not feel like the South at all, even the new New one, and not like most of the nation’s cities. If the United States were a family, New Orleans would be the ‘odd’ child in the mix—the one with the brilliant mind, a whimsical attitude, and an utterly unpredictable sartorial manner.”<sup>198</sup> Clearly, it’s a city that leaves its mark, withstands the test of time, and reinvents itself according to its own rules.

That said, we are at a moment in the humanities where inquiries into southern history and culture have ventured into a New and Global South, all the while, remaining perpetually tethered to a more recognizable and regressive version of the U.S. South we’ve alternatively come to shun and embrace. Characterized by discontinuities and disorientation, I’ve assembled an assortment of scholars who cast the South in several new and unexpected roles, all the while,

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<sup>198</sup> Hortense Spillers, *Ibid*, pg. 60

attempting to grapple with the familiar. And I do so in an effort to understand where and how New Orleans is situated within these new and emerging South(s). Some questions considered by this work include: What is the (New) South? Where is the (Global) South? How does New Orleans fit into new configurations of the South(s)? How do black southerners get included or overlooked by these conversations? And how has the field of Southern Literature evolved and expanded over the last decade?

As a southerner, and more specifically as a black southerner, I know how destructive it can be to internalize the toxic perceptions of others. Black southerners have long been persecuted for our supposed inhumanity, disposability, and criminality which, like a slow acting poison, distorts and destroys from within. These are not easy sentiments to discard as discussed in ZZ Packer's introduction to her edited volume of *New Stories from the South, 2008*.<sup>199</sup> Throughout the authors commentary on the South, New Orleans and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina are never far from Packer's field of vision as she considers some of the hard-won lessons that have come out of this complicated place. Ultimately, her bittersweet and entertaining take on southern literature and identity, confronts some of the personal conflict that go hand in hand with self-identifying as a black southerner. In her role as editor and critic of this short story collection, Packer describes several conundrums of "Southern" identity in the modern world, where she herself resides, caught somewhere between southern shame and pride. As such, Packer goes through great pains to make the following distinction to her reader at the onset of her text: "Though I'm not a 'Southerner,' I am a 'southerner.'" What, you may wonder, is the fundamental difference signified by Packer's conspicuous use of an upper and lowercase S?

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<sup>199</sup> Initially, I was drawn to this particular short story collection because I'm a fan of Packer's work, but upon further inspection I learned that she spent a significant stint in Post Katrina New Orleans as a writer-in-residence at Tulane University in the Fall of 2007 and that NOLA has been a significant creative resource for her forthcoming novel about the Buffalo Soldiers during *New Stories from the South, 2008's* assembly/production.

Well, as she goes on to explain, a distinction becomes clearly drawn between a more traditional/conservative South and a modern/liberal South. “These Southerners,” Packer writes, “in full possession of that capital ‘S,’ stroll through life with an unassailable sense of right and wrong—right: chicken-fried steak, Jesus, zero taxation; wrong: vegetarianism, psychiatry, Birkenstocks. The ‘southerner,’ lowercase, does not stroll so much as simper.”<sup>200</sup> As we come to understand it, the “Southerner” with a capital S is more noticeably a relic of the past, whose certainty immediately signals a problematic attachment to the most stereotypical affiliates of southern culture: fatty foods, Christianity bordering on religious zealotry, and anti-government oversight. Whereas anything that might be considered progressive or liberal is immediately denounced and discarded. The “southerner” with a lower-case s seems painfully aware and rightfully pained by his or her affiliation with the unflattering legacies of the past and less certain of which inheritances, if any, they should embrace.

And while these two versions of “southern-ness” exist alongside one another, the black southerner, as Packer describes him or her, is distinct from, but inevitably tied to these conjoined identities. Turning to the subject of black representation within the Southern Literary tradition, Packer sources the potent and resilient imagery of writers such as William Faulkner to produce an amalgamation of the models that black southerners, such as herself, grew up encountering on the printed page. She writes:

Black Southerners, if we’re to believe Faulkner’s Quentin Compson, ‘laugh at things that aren’t funny and cry at things that aren’t sad.’ They are sage subliterates who, if not Mammys or Uncle Toms or Amoses or Andys, are most certainly minstrels of another stripe: the lazy—albeit colorful—buffoon, the saucy Negress, the barbarized insurrectionist; add water and the parade of Kara Walker silhouettes blooms to life. When they accompany whites...however, they are Magic Negroes, imminently risible, ready to help or aid someone else’s story from slipping into irrelevance without good old-fashioned grounding in common

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<sup>200</sup> ZZ Packer, *New Stories from the South* 2008, pg. viii

sense. They are not intelligent so much as wise, they are not studious so much as talented, they are not hard-working so much as naturals, they are not eloquent so much as articulate. They have no agency, these black Southerners. Except, of course, when they commit crimes.”<sup>201</sup>

Packer’s collage of the black southerner is clearly a configuration of the worst imagery that literature has to offer, and yet, the overarching sentiment of her introduction is that we must actively participate in telling of our stories and that the best stories are those which embrace what’s ugly as much as what’s admirable about the South we love to hate. Packer writes, “...no era of Southern history has dovetailed peaceably into the next...It has always been bloody and embattled: colonization, slave revolts, the Civil War, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, the fight for civil rights, integration, the heady commercialism of the ‘New South.’”<sup>202</sup> Packer goes on to memorialize and remember the many instances which the South, and black southerners in particular, produced pioneers and strategies for the improvement of this flawed nation. She insists, “We cannot forget Selma, the Edmund Pettus Bridge, the Greensboro Four, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Rosewood, or those four murdered girls in the church basement in Birmingham, Alabama...And yet we can’t forget that the solution to the problem—the sit-ins, the marches, the hope of better days—began in the South as well.”<sup>203</sup>

Within the Academy, one’s introduction to the tradition of Southern literature typically accompanies a national narrative, noticeably encumbered by the South’s continual reckoning with its distinct and “backwards” history. Southern Literature, much like southernness, becomes tainted by the stain of such legacies as chattel slavery and white supremacy. Ultimately, we’re taught, this literary inferiority complex has some complicated basis in falsehoods versus reality

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<sup>201</sup> ZZ Packer, *New Stories from the South 2008*, pg. viii

<sup>202</sup> ZZ Packer, *Ibid*, pg. ix

<sup>203</sup> ZZ Packer, *Ibid*, pg. xii



and a North versus South mentality that has never quite left us as a nation. Jennifer Ray Greeson's *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature* characterizes this divide by referring to the South as an "internal other for the nation," which she suggests is an "intrinsic part of the national body that nonetheless is differentiated and held apart from the whole." As such, early U.S. literature both documented and contributed to an evolving concept of national identity that attempted to reckon with these internal inconsistencies, while navigating its rapidly acquired status as a global power. Greeson writes:

Our South provides a different sort of juxtaposition. As an internal other from the start of U.S. existence, it lies simultaneously inside and outside the national imaginary constructed in U.S. literature. Our South thus serves in that literature as an unparalleled site of connection between 'the United States' and what lies outside it—a connection to the larger world, to Western history, to a guilty colonial past and a desired and feared imperial future.<sup>204</sup>

To this end, Greeson describes the south as a matter of obsession for U.S. writers from the beginning, albeit a south that is best understood as cultural construct or a "site of national fantasy," rather than a real or fixed place in terms of our collective imagination. That said, her work argues that some of the most consistent and predominant concept(s) of the south in U.S. literature, ranging from 1775 to the turn of the twentieth century, provide insights that extend far beyond our national borders. In Greeson's own words, literary constructions of the south and nation serve as, "a site of connection to the larger world" thereby requiring a comparative, transnational geographic frame of analysis.<sup>205</sup>

One of the "problems" with our south, its history, and its literature, according to Greeson's study, is that it disrupts the fantasy of exceptionalism deemed essential to the story of

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<sup>204</sup> Jennifer Rae Greeson, *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature*, pg. 3

<sup>205</sup> Jennifer Rae Greeson, *Ibid*, pg 3

our nation's origins. From the time of independence, U.S. writers have perpetuated a national narrative which claims the U.S. came into being untarnished by what she describes as the "binary power extremes" that structured every other human society (i.e. monarch/subject, master/servant, empire/colony). However, U.S. Southern literature contradicts this origin story in large part because the south is at once "colonial and colonized" or, as Greeson posits, because it "diverges from the nation writ large on the basis of its *exploitativeness*—as the location of the internal colonization of Africans and African Americans in the United States—and on the basis of its *exploitation*—as the location of systemic underdevelopment, military defeat, and occupation."<sup>206</sup> For these reasons, the U.S. South has consistently stood out and apart from the stories we've told in this country about who we are and how we came to be a nation of significant influence, wealth, and status. Much like Greeson, I am invested in the ways that the south, as a cultural construct, has served as the national scapegoat for racial hierarchies, social inequality, and discriminatory policies and practices that are deeply entrenched in U.S. culture more generally. However, the chronological scope of my project is far more condensed as much of the literature I decided to incorporate and discuss throughout the dissertation was written in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. That said, as with any critical endeavor to consider literature produced on the U.S. south and with New Orleans, Louisiana as my primary subject, I'm beholden to similar historical contexts as Greeson, including some cultural and political developments that predate her focus, occurring in pre-independence colonial U.S.

Despite the south's perpetual status as a national liability for the contradictions it exposed in our national narrative and democratic rhetoric, southern regionalism has also been celebrated and embraced at times of considerable change in this country. In *The Nation's Region: Southern*

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<sup>206</sup> Jennifer Rae Greeson, *Ibid*, pg 3

*Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism* Leigh Anne Duck outlines some of the ways that the south has been alternatively embraced as well as criticized for the values and practices it represented in the early twentieth century. In one such example, she writes, "...the trope of the backward South comprised not only alarm at differences in economic and cultural development but also celebration of communal forms of affiliation: the region was said to maintain social values that modernization was purportedly eroding in the broader nation."<sup>207</sup> A growing desire for stability and continuity resulted in a newfound appreciation for regional cultures which in turn gave rise to the practice of American folklore, ethnography, and cultural tourism across the country; a subject I will discuss at length in Chapter 1. Similarly to Greeson, Duck is invested in the theme of the "backwards south" pitted against the "enlightened nation." However, *The Nation's Region* is not only critical of conceptual frameworks that attempted to "localize" discriminatory practices such as racial segregation to regional/southern cultures, Duck also strives to re-conceptualize regional affiliation, in the vein of southern writers before her, as a "productive entryway for discussions of multiplicity in U.S. practice and experience." As such, she proposes the following critique/reconsideration of regionalism in the initial pages of her text:

regionalism, which many critics have come to understand as an inevitably conservative form of mystification, need not result from nostalgic or essentialist ideas of cultural identity; it could instead provide opportunities for organizing around goals vital to geographies and cultures not bound by national borders, shared economic or environmental concerns, or challenges to aspects the nation-state that suppress democratic possibility. But such developments can only be supported by a clearer understanding of the ways in which U.S. nationalism has tended to code its investments in racial hierarchies as regional traits.<sup>208</sup>

Such terminology cannot be redefined without due consideration of its original context, but as Duck explains she is drawing upon and contributing to a legacy of writers, liberal government

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<sup>207</sup> Leigh Anne Duck, *The Nation's Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism*, pg 3

<sup>208</sup> Leigh Anne Duck, *Ibid*, pg 14

officials, and activists who attempted to rethink regionalism and nationalism in ways that would facilitate rather than impede democratic social change in the early twentieth century. Like Duck, I see regionalism as a potentially useful and malleable concept with the ability to bring people together and to assist in our efforts to organize based on mutual, geographically specific needs we share as individuals, such as emergent environmental concerns.

Although both scholars I've discussed thus far are primarily interested in the South's symbolic value, I draw upon the work of Greeson and Duck for their balanced approach to hyper regionalism, local thinking, and international/global perspectives; an increasingly relevant and necessary methodology for the study of U.S. Southern literature, history, and culture across disciplines. I am, alternatively, trying to strike a balance in my work that demonstrates an equal investment in the South as a "site of national fantasy" and the South as a real assortment of places or as multiple sites of production for stories and art that audiences around the world critically consume. I believe this balance to be essential throughout my work because of the tremendous influence of representation (or the lack thereof) and the real-world consequences our perceptions produce for communities, cultures, and economies across the globe.

More recent attempts on behalf of scholars across disciplines to define or demarcate the "Global South" are noticeably encumbered by a multitude of questions and a hesitancy on the part of "First World" academics, weary of perpetuating colonial legacies via literary and cultural studies. As I've learned, the Global South isn't a place with strict geographic parameters, rather, it's much more accurate to describe the global south as multiple processes of exchange and affiliation. What follows are two methodological approaches presented at the beginning of interdisciplinary journals and texts, aimed at defining and mapping the Global South as well as qualifying the more pressing concerns for scholars invested in this new area of

study/investigation. Far from arriving at any comfortable consensus, these authors go to great lengths to destabilize terminology, remap and unmap familiar territories, and reorient the questions brought to bear upon any contemporary study of U.S. Southern literature, history, and culture.

In their preface to *Global Contexts, Local Literatures: The New Southern Studies*, Kathryn McKee and Annette Trefzer suggest that two consistent indicators for locating or identifying the global south are a history of a plantation economy and vulnerable coastlines, subjected to the frequent onslaught and destruction of hurricanes, in what these scholars refer to as the “Caribbean condition.” Together, they work to conceptually relocate the U.S. South to a zone or network of international ports, whose exchange of goods and commodities have linked people from disparate communities for centuries.<sup>209</sup> As such, these authors describe the U.S. South as a “porous space” that has long been implicated in a two-way process of importation and exportation which, they contend, further destabilizes the global/local binary discussed throughout the text. They write:

As part of the global economy, the South, as a place marked by patterns of migration and immigration, imports goods, foods, and culture from everywhere in the world while also globally exporting its own local specialties, from Delta blues to Faulkner...changes in the South, as our colleagues in history, geography, and social anthropology remind us, are in no small part the result of global, economic, and demographic shifts, including the transnational flows of populations, goods, and capital.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Kathryn McKee and Annette Trefzer on the subject of the global interconnectedness of the U.S. South in an extensive history of economic and cultural exchange. They write, “...in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, ‘the South was a node in a network stretching from Europe through the Caribbean to the coast of what was still being colonized.’ It was only after this ‘quasi-global period,’ marked by a plurality of cultures and languages, including French, Spanish, and English, that the South turned inward around 1830 and invented its identity as an isolated and exceptional region.” *Global Contexts, Local Literatures: The New Southern Studies*, “Preface,” pg. 681

<sup>210</sup> Kathryn McKee and Annette Trefzer, *Ibid.* 679-680

Ultimately, this ‘quasi-global period, as they call it, was defined by cultural and linguistic multiplicity, however; the U.S. South experienced an eventual turn inward in the 1800s, resulting in the cultivation of a more insular identity. Another significant node in this conversation worthy of our attention is the decidedly interdisciplinary approach to New Southern Studies, or what McKee and Trefzer refer to as the “...multidisciplinary conversations that unmap, remap, and demap the U.S. South.”<sup>211</sup> Although their focus is U.S. Southern literature, the contributors to *Global Contexts, Local Literatures* specialize in a range of academic fields and specialties including Native American and Indigenous Studies, Women and Gender Studies, Post-Colonial Studies, Environmental Studies, Historians, Anthropologists, Geographers, and many more.

For scholars engaged in this reconceptualization and relocation of the U.S. South, textual identity becomes an increasing concern as the canon expands to include the literatures of Latin America and South America, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Cuba, among other global southern locales. Resultingly, there is growing unease about the unwieldy parameters of the global south, begging the question: what precisely is a Southern text? According to McKee and Trefzer, the authors in their text don’t attempt to definitively answer this question but focus instead on redirecting the conversation around textual identity to consider the functional benefits of a concept like the global south. They ask:

How does a text function or perform within the new parameters of the global South? What new methodologies and theories are needed to think of the U.S. South and its literature as affected by and contributing to globalization? How are global and transnational processes reflected and produced in literature, literary history, and cultural practice that could be said to constitute a global South? How can the integrative global identity of the U.S. South be illuminated by its literature and our new ways of reading it? What becomes visible?”<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Kathryn McKee and Annette Trefzer, *Ibid*, 688

<sup>212</sup> Kathryn McKee and Annette Trefzer, *Ibid*, pg. 682

As this is a relatively new field of inquiry, many of the key questions are still being identified and answered, however, current events would appear to suggest that this conceptual relocation is well underway. For instance, days after Hurricane Katrina, McKee and Trefzer recount that “...observers and newscasters began registering their discomfort by repeatedly comparing the city to a ‘third-world’ country, so that the U.S. South came to reside, surely, in some other part of the globe.”<sup>213</sup> I will not, at this time, add the numerous caveats to this statement it warrants, I will, however, defer to the authors and their own admonishments about doing this kind of work. In our excitement to break down old boundaries, McKee and Trefzer remind us that the political boundaries established by nations and institutions have very real manifestations (i.e. walls, check points, barbed wire) and that we as academics writing from sites of privilege must be aware of our own situatedness. Additionally, in our own work we should avoid replicating the exclusivity of these political boundaries or reducing the global south to yet another set of stable/perceived borders and restrictions.

In their introduction to *The Global South and World Dis/Order*, Caroline Levander and Walter D. Mignolo offer up a description of the “global south” that, once again, shuns specific coordinates or boundaries, but instead registers as multiple sites of resistance in a global struggle for democracy and decoloniality. Together they argue that the Global South is the “geopolitical concept replacing ‘Third World’ after the collapse of the Soviet Union,” and, as such, the Global North serves as the implied “First World.” As such, their journal and its contributors attempt to imagine the productive democratic possibilities that might emerge from these marginal zones amid this new world order. They write:

The global south is the location of underdevelopment and emerging nations that needs the ‘support’ of the global north (G7, IMF, World Bank, and the like). However, from the perspective of the inhabitants (and we say consciously

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<sup>213</sup> Kathryn McKee and Annette Trefzer, *Ibid*, pg. 683-4

inhabitants rather than ‘citizens,’ regional or global), the ‘Global South’ is the location where new visions of the future are emerging and where the global political and decolonial society is at work...In a nutshell, the ‘Global South’ (like democracy, development, and many other concepts) is now the place of struggles between, on the one hand, the rhetoric of modernity and modernization together with the logic of coloniality and domination, and, on the other, the struggle for the independent thought and decolonial freedom.<sup>214</sup>

Although the U.S. South has its place in their articulation of the global south, its parameters extend beyond the Americas to incorporate the local histories of places throughout the hemispheric south, including South Africa or sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and South East Asia. Accordingly, Levander and Mignolo insist that, “in the US, the global south refers to a South that reaches beyond the geographical borders of the country—a South that is implicated in many global networks.”<sup>215</sup> More significant than the question of where the global south resides is the notion that global interconnectedness, among those who reside in sites of struggle for independent thought and social justice, can foster new ideas in the world-wide struggle for non-imperial democratization.

Each of these writers re-cast the South as a site of disruption/resistance and New Orleans as a node in a world-wide struggle for non-imperial democratization. As a component of the Global South, the North American South is plagued by economic disparity, underdevelopment, and injustice of every kind, but it is also the place where new visions are emerging for a more democratic future. For those of us willing to listen, art and activism throughout the Gulf South is sending a resounding message on behalf of the displaced and the disenfranchised, adopting increasingly global frameworks in an effort to implement wide-spread change. How we chose to

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<sup>214</sup> Caroline Levander and Walter Mignolo, *The Global South and World Dis/Order*, “Introduction,” \* a special issue of the *Global South* published by Indiana University Press, pg. 3,4,5

<sup>215</sup> Caroline Levander and Walter Mignolo, *Ibid*, pg 6



respond will determine the role that we, and the South by extension, play in the ongoing struggle for equitable reform and social justice.

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