Hurricane Katrina: Before and After, Inside and Out

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Hurricane Katrina: Before and After, Inside and Out

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The Racialization of Disaster

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Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005 and left tragedy and destruction in its path. Katrina first made landfall as a Category 4 storm near Buras-Triumph, LA and continued along the Louisiana coastline into Mississippi. Five hours after its initial landfall, New Orleans was flooded when the levees that protected it from Lake Ponchartrain and the Mississippi River were breached. Likewise, many small, coastal towns in Louisiana and Mississippi were razed to the ground. In Mississippi, many of the major buildings in Biloxi and neighboring Gulfport were obliterated.[1] Hurricane Katrina killed 1,200 American citizens and caused approximately $80 billion in damages, making it the costliest natural disaster in U.S. history.[2] Images of displaced Louisianans in need of food and water assailed the American audience's sense of right and wrong while the government scrambled to provide relief.

Not all of the victims of Hurricane Katrina were representing equally and the residents of New Orleans were often portrayed in a much more sinister light than were the residents of neighboring areas. Since the framing of these victims will reside in the public consciousness for the remainder of time, it will affect the outcomes of policy debates and the allocation of funding during the rebuilding of the Gulf Coast and for the rest of our lives. The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina exposed an ignored history of structural racism that shocked much of the viewing public, but its resonance was often minimized by biased reporting. Hurricane Katrina is an opportunity to expose and examine residual racist attitudes that remain buried in our cultural understandings. In order to examine how the predominately African-American residents of New Orleans were portrayed by the news media, we examined one week of nightly news coverage of CNN, NBC,

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[1] "Katrina Damage: Town by Town," (WLBT3-Jackson, MS-Katrina Damage, 2001-2005), http://www.wlbt.com/Global/story.asp?S=3789025&nav=1L7tdyS5, (Accessed 12 December 2005).

[2] "Monthly Tropical Weather Summary," (National Weather Service, 1 December 2005), http://www.srh.noaa.gov/data/NHC/TWSAT, (Accessed 10 December 2005).

CBS, ABC and FOX News. In particular, we focused on how these victims were framed discursively in order to identify media biases that were disseminating to receptive viewers.

Kenneth Burke first defined framing as the "building of mental equipment (meanings, attitudes, character) by which one handles the significant factors of his time."[3] Based upon this early definition, framing grants the framer an incredible amount of power with which to construct the understanding of an event. Robert Entman clarifies framing as "selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution."[4] Unless a human being lived and experienced the disaster and aftermath of Hurricane Katrina firsthand, they have no choice but to understand it through media constructions. A frame becomes increasingly important once it is mass mediated because of the widespread influence that the mediated text can have.[5] This process of selective representation simultaneously focuses attention on some aspects of an event while deflecting attention from other, perhaps more notable, aspects of the event.

The surplus of media coverage following Katrina provides ample opportunities to study the practice of framing disasters. These frames can also serve to mold personal and public memories of events, which affect future memorials and public policies. Mediated texts are often considered sites of contestation over meaning, where groups struggle over how an event or movement is represented. In order to evaluate whether or not minorities or groups struggling for a public voice were disadvantaged or stereotyped by the news coverage, we, as scholars, must examine the coverage and identify any trends.

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[3] Kenneth Burke. *Attitudes towards history.* (Los Altos, CA : Hermes, 1959 p 34).
[4] Robert M. Entman. "Cascading Activation: Contesting the White House's Frame After 9/11" *Political Communication* 20 (2003): 420.
[5] W. Gamson and A. Modigliani. "The changing culture of affirmative action" R. Braungart (Ed.), *Research in Political Sociology* (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1987: 137-177).

These trends are important because as Bandura posits in his social cognitive theory, television viewing makes the symbolic world appear to be the literal world in shaping the "viewers' beliefs and conceptions of reality." [6] Considering that mediated texts directly influence how viewers perceive their social realities, the framing of the events that took place in the aftermath of Katrina increase in significance. Eisenberg and Miller found that by exposing audiences to messages or images evoking high levels of empathy, these audiences were more likely to participate in pro-social behavior in order to help the affected victims.[7] In this context, the framing of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina has a direct influence on the relief effort that took place during the flooding, the allocation of funds for rebuilding, and the rapidity with which government agencies will work to rebuild the city of New Orleans.

The representation of Katrina and its victims included many cultural assumptions or myths which reinforced negative stereotypes. Myths are a major part of television programming and have a special relationship with news journalism. Myths are stories which are set in the past but that have a direct influence on our cultural assumptions and understandings of our social realities. They have become so normalized into our cultural understandings that they become lenses through which we perceive our social realities.[8] Since this exploration of the journalistic coverage of Hurricane Katrina focuses largely on the influence of racial ideologies, we present several myths about African-Americans that linger within common cultural understandings and affect how audiences perceive mediated events. One common myth is that African-American

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[6] A., Bandura, (1994). Social cognitive theory of mass communication. In Bryant, J. & D. Zillmann (Eds.), Media effects: Advances in theory and research (pp. 61-90). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

[7] Eisenberg, N., & Miller, P.A. (1987). The relation of empathy to prosocial behavior. *Psychological Bulletin, 101,* 91-119.

[8] R. Barthes, *Mythologies* (A. Lavers, Trans.). London: Cape, 1972.

males are inherently angry, violent, and sexually aggressive.[9] Research shows that the darker the skin tone of an individual male the more likely he is to be associated with criminality and aggressiveness, while a darker skinned female is more likely associated with poverty and laziness.[10] These are a few examples that have become ingrained into social understandings of race, but which gain exposure in the news coverage of Hurricane Katrina.

These cultural frameworks continue to shape our perception and understanding of other people and events. The association between African Americans and crime is so strongly consistent and frequent that it is practically automatic.[11] These racial assumptions are so ingrained that stereotyping becomes an automatic process that one does not realize. The mere image of an African American male can trigger thoughts of crime in white audiences. Certainly no single factor garners this effect, but undoubtedly the visual medium of television and American media trends reinforce this mode of thought. Not only are African Americans more likely than whites to be portrayed as criminal suspects in news stories about violent crime, but they are also more likely to be depicted as physically threatening in national network portrayals.[12] A news journalist confirmed how news organizations reinforce myths about non-Whites when he stated that:

> Everything to do with colored people takes place against an underlying premise that they are the symbols or embodiments of a problem. Whether we like it or not, that is the state of public opinion as perceived by news editors; and that is what tends to influence professional news judgment.[13]

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[9] Mark P. Orbe, "Constructions of reality on MTV's 'The Real World': An Analysis of the Restrictive Coding of Black Masculinity" *The Southern Communication Journal* 64 (1998): 33.

[10] M.E. Hill. "Color differences in the socioeconomic status of African American men: Results of a longitudinal study" *Social Forces* 78 (2000) : 1437-1460.

   M.E. Hill. "Skin color and the perception of attractiveness among African Americans: Does gender make a difference?" *Social Psychology Quarterly* 65 (2002): 77-91.

[12] Jamieson, Kathleen H. 1992. *Public Opinion.* New York: The Free Press.

[13] Hartman, P., & Husband, C. (1974). *Racism and the mass media: A Study of the role of the mass media in the formation of White beliefs and attitudes in Britain.* Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield. 164.

In a 1998 study of three local Philadelphia news stations, 14 weeks of nightly news coverage were examined, only to find that "white actors were overpresented as victims of violence compared to their roles as perpetrators, and persons of color were overpresented as perpetrators of violence against white actors."[14] This research is supported by two more recent studies of one day of television news coverage across fifty and one hundred stations nationwide which determined the same pattern in crime stories.[15] News coverage that frames African-Americans as perpetuators of violence reifies the myth in the minds of audience members that African-Americans are inherently dangerous and violent.[16] As a result of years of biased coverage, reporters are most likely to continue framing violent crime in relation to African-Americans and non-whites are more likely to perceive African-Americans as violent criminals.

The media coverage of Hurricane Katrina exposed these racial biases lurking beneath the surface of the American consciousness. These biases demonstrate that in spite of some meaningful strides toward racial equality in the past generations, a great deal of opportunity for further change exists to eradicate the racially biased attitudes that sometimes unwittingly guide our perceptions. In order to understand the significance of the images and discourse within the media's representation of Katrina and its victims, we must understand the ways in which cultural frameworks such as those previously discussed shape not only the media's representation of Hurricane Katrina but also the way that Americans understood the disaster.

Racist Language in Media Discourse

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[14] Daniel Romer and Kathleen H. Jamieson and Nicole J. de Coteau. "The treatment of persons of color in local television news: Ethnic blame discourse or realistic group conflict?" *Communication Research* 25 (1998): 286.

[15] Klite,P. Bardwell, R.A., & Salzman, J. (1997). Local TV News: Getting away with murder. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 2, 102-112.
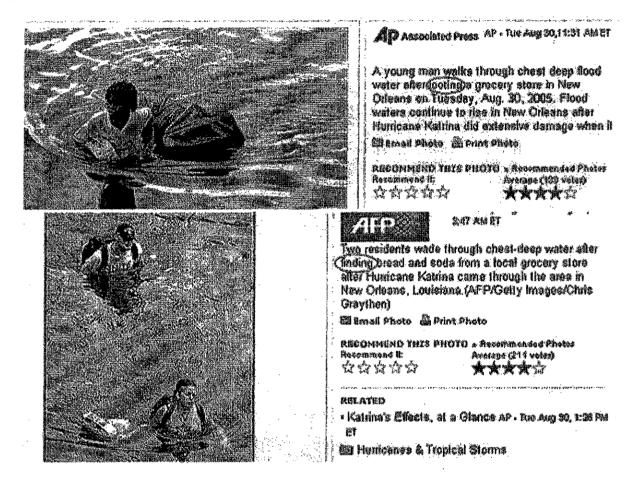
[16] Gilliam, F.D., Iyengar, S., Simon, A., & Wright, W. (1996). Crime in black and white: The violent, scary world of local news. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 1, 6-23.

Within the framing of the disaster that ensued in Katrina's wake, racism pervaded the discourse of the news reports. Pre-existing myths have a powerful role within the process of representation and the language used in the coverage of Katrina revealed some of the problems of these myths. The reiteration of these myths or naturalized cultural assumptions in the production of news reporting can point the viewers attention towards events or ideas that reinforce the myths. At the same time, these normalized myths build the frame through which the event is described and understood. Often times these frames divert attention away from social, historic, or economic factors that have shaped the events. Since the discourse of the reporting, in all of its nuances, can frame the story, it is important to examine this discourse and determine what myths, stereotypes, and cultural assumptions are being destroyed or disseminated. Scholars have found that there is a relationship between language, behavior, and society. Speech behavior and social behavior exist in a state of constant interaction and racism can be reflected in language and therefore language in turn can help to project and perpetuate racist attitudes.[17] Therefore, in the context of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina when the Gulf Coast needed as much support as possible, we must evaluate how the language of the reporting could have affected viewers' perceptions of the events and in turn affected the subsequent relief efforts.

The desperate situations that many New Orleanians found themselves in following the disaster left many to fend for themselves, yet the way this was portrayed by the media differed according to the racial composition of the subjects. Perhaps what came to be the most controversial and blatant example of discursive differences when dealing with actors of different races were the uses of the terms of "looting" by non-Whites versus the term "finding" by whites

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[17] Norbert Dittmar. *Sociolinguistics: A Critical Survey of Theory and Application.* (London: Edward Arnold, 1976: 238)

in the captions of two Associated Press photographs. The following two Associated Press

photographs became a matter of heated debate when they were shown juxtaposed online:

The juxtaposition of these two images ignited a serious debate over the news media's

incongruent treatment of blacks and whites faced with the identical circumstance of desperation.

When analyzed more critically, the importance of the language used to describe each subject

gains a new significance. The word "resident" implies a sense of permanency and therefore

makes it more natural to expect that these white residents would have rights to their

neighborhood's resources. In contrast, the African American man on the left is not afforded with

the same status or claim; rather he is described as an opportunistic social deviant. Based on the

commonly-held beliefs that African-Americans are criminals, it is easy to understand how

journalists and viewers could have ignored the implications of these descriptions. These differing portrayals of substantially similar actions expose some disturbing realities. Studies in the social psychology of race relations emphasize how both producers and consumers of mass mediated texts can base narratives and judgments on myths about "others."

Many studies have shown the significance of social psychology regarding the ways that images are received and interpreted. White college students who observed a staged argument between a black and a white person in which one person shoved the other described the push as "violent" when the perpetrator was black, but "playing" or "dramatizing" when the perpetrator was white.[18] Junior high school boys described the actions committed by a black male in a drawing as "meaner" and as more threatening than the identical behavior performed by a white male.[19] These studies of the lens of racial bias illustrate how identical behavior by actors of different races is perceived differently because of the historical reinforcement of negative stereotypes based on pre-existing myths in mediated texts. These stereotypes resonate today because producers and consumers of media texts have naturalized these stereotypes until they seem so reasonable that neither group can determine where the racial bias exists.

In addition to this differing language and treatment, there were other significant examples of racially biased discourse used by journalists that were not immediately realized by the public, but were nevertheless significant as indicators of problematic framing. News networks continuously referred to the victims of the hurricane that remained trapped in New Orleans following the storm as "refugees." This terminology can be found on the major news networks

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[18] B.L. Ducan, "Differential social perception and attribution of intergroup violence: Testing the lower limits of stereotyping of blacks," *Journal of Personality and SocialPsychology, 34* (1976), 590-598.
[19] H. Sagar and J. Schofield (1980). "Racial and Behavior Cues in Black and White Children's Perceptions of Ambiguously Aggressive Acts, " *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 39.* 590-98.

covered in this study including Fox News Network, CNN, NBC, CBS, and ABC. In addition, shelters for victims were referred to as "refugee camps."

The media's preferred use of the term "refugee" ve rsus the term "evacuee" i gnited objections from leaders within the African American community, who claimed that the word carried negative connotations. *The New York Times* reported the criticisms of the Rev. Jesse L. Jackson and Bruce S. Gordon, head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, towards the usage of the term. The Rev. Jackson was quoted as saying that: "To see them as refugees is to see them as other than Americans and that is inaccurate, unfair, and racist."[20] In addition Mr. Gordon argued that, "[t]he people who are affected are Americans living in this country, and we need to invest in their recovery the same way we have invested in other recoveries, be they domestic or international."[21]

Despite these legitimate complaints, the media continued to use this descriptive term claiming that it was neutral and that it meant to imply simply that these were people seeking refuge. Geoffrey Nunberg, a Linguistics professor at Stanford, discussed this controversy on National Public radio's show "Fresh Air" on September 8th and argued that this term was not neutral. Nunberg posited that:

> "In Nexis wire service articles mentioning Katrina over the past week, articles containing "evacuee" outnumber those containing "refugee" by 56% to 44% (n=1522). But in contexts in which the words appear within 10 words of "poor" or "black", "refugee" is favored by 68% to 32% (n=85). And in contexts in which the words appear within ten words of "Astrodome," "refugee" is favored by 63% to 37% (n=461). Those disparities no doubt reflect the image of refugees as poor, bedraggled, and forlorn, and they suggest that there's a genuine basis for the impression that the word tends to single out one group, even if unwittingly."[22]

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[20] John M. Broder. (2005, September 5). "Storm and Crisis: Racial Tension; Amid Criticism of Federal Efforts, Charges of Racism Are Lodged." *The New York Times.* Retrieved March 3rd, 2006, from http://www.nytimes.com
[21] Ibid., March 3, 2006.
[22] Geoffrey Nunberg. "When Words Break Down: Longer version of *Fresh Air* Commentary on September 8, 2005." Retrieved February 28, 2005, from http://www-csli.stanford.edu/~nunberg/looting.html

This demonstrates that although the media is not consciously creating racist frameworks, the language used is racially biased and makes representations of victims problematic.

There were various other examples of similarly problematic discourse that was used by the news media in order to describe the images we watched on our television screens. One of these was reporters' use of the term "third world" to describe the damage and subsequent lack of social order that unfolded in New Orleans. This enabled Americans to understand the events, which already seemed unreal or cinematic, as outside of their personal realm of concern. News commentators described New Orleans as similar to "shanty towns" and or "downtown Baghdad." [23] Additionally they expressed the fact that, "they had never seen an American city like this." Fox News network's Shepard Smith expressed his disbelief with what was unfolding by saying, "The things that I am seeing resemble a refugee camp. A refugee camp! A *refugee* camp in the United States of America?" Most Americans associate the term "refugee" with someone who is not American, but foreign and different. The comparison of the images to the Third World implies similar un-American values. Typically the term Third World is used to refer to other, non-European countries that are underdeveloped and non-white. Therefore the usage of these terms enables viewers to imagine that poverty and non-whiteness are non-American things, since the United States is the land of progress, equality, and success.[24]

The representation of the victims of Hurricane Katrina who were primarily non-white as the "other" allowed white viewers to quickly and readily detach themselves from empathic emotional responses and from the harsh reality that the tragedy was taking place within their country's own borders. The images of suffering African-Americans combined with discursive

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[23] C Jim Murphy (Executive Producer). (2005, August 31). CBS Nightly News [television broadcast]. New York: Columbia Broadcasting System.
[24] Virginia R. Dominguez. "Seeing and Not Seeing: Complicity in Surprise," (Social Science Research Council) **http://understandingkatrina.ssrc.org/Dominguez/** (accessed February 20, 2005).

descriptions that framed the events as foreign, third-world invoked ideas of African-Americans as part of underdeveloped and war-torn tribes in Africa. Yet the consumption of these texts differed significantly by the racial background of the audience members. A national poll conducted during the first week following the disaster revealed that 70% of African Americans polled felt angry about how the government had handled the disaster, while only 46% of whites shared these types of emotions. [25] This is a significant difference in emotional responses that can be understood given the history of myths and cultural assumptions about non-whites that have been so prevalent in mediated texts in the United States. Clearly journalists framed the victims as "non-American others," which allowed for a detached response from some white audience members. Viewers actively interpret news texts to fit their cultural assumptions and remember texts in ways that conform to their beliefs.[26] This active, selective interpretation is the process that allowed these white viewers a privileged detachment. Yet these frames of "otherness" that reinforced societal myths and cultural assumptions about African-Americans were not the only frames utilized. Journalists also discussed the lawlessness, chaos, and rampant looting that was taking place while replaying images of African-Americans breaking into buildings and carrying around goods.

The idea that the refugees were foreign and different from all the middle-class American viewers was only furthered by the fact that white actors were portrayed as voices of authority. For example, almost every reporter on television covering the disaster was Caucasian and they often made condescending and judgmental comments about the looters. Senator Blanco, a white, wealthy female, made a statement on August 31st condemning the looters and placing blame for

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[25] The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. "Two-in-Three Critical of Bush's Relief Efforts: Huge Racial Divide Over Katrina and its Consequences," http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=255 (accessed March 1, 2005)

[26] Vidmar, N. & Rokeach, M. (1974). Archie Bunker's bigotry: A study in selective perception and exposure. *Journal of Communcation*, 24(1), 36-47.

the anarchy on anyone who scavenged for supplies. When two white, middle-class, male paramedics tried to exit the city with a group of African-Americans, they were interviewed and portrayed as the voices of reasoned authority in a sea of African Americans. On NBC News on August 31st, a white middle-class couple of volunteers were interviewed in order to give their perspective on the relief effort.[27] On September 1st, a white nurse was interviewed on FOX News to explain the dire situation in the Superdome.[28] The positioning of white, middle class professionals as voices of authority who are privileged to comment on the situation in New Orleans only reinforces the idea that the African-American "refugees" were out of control and unable to help themselves. It plays on the myth that African-Americans are uneducated and dependent on the benevolence of white citizens and the government.

CRIMINALIZATION and SENSATIONALIZATION

In addition to the racially harmful language used by the media, another more troubling pattern emerged within the coverage that framed the victims of the hurricane as criminals. While the news coverage of areas affected by Katrina generally focused on the destruction and human suffering, in the case of New Orleans, there was a greater focus upon social chaos and lawlessness. In the coverage on August 30th, ABC News discussed the situation in New Orleans for four minutes and devoted one minute of that to looting.[29] Each station examined devoted special sections of their news coverage to looting and framed it as the most important issue with

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[27] John Reiss (Executive Producer). (2005, August 31). NBC Nightly News [television broadcast]. New York: National Broadcasting Company.

[28] Steve Hirsh (Executive Producer). (2005, September 1). Fox News [television broadcast]. New York: FOX News Network.

[29] Jim Murphy (Executive Producer). (2005, August 30). CBS Nightly News [television broadcast]. New York: Columbia Broadcasting System.

which to be dealt. In order to understand why crime became a major theme within the coverage and why Americans accepted this as truth it is essential to understand the interrelatedness of racial stereotyping and visual processing.

Recent studies in social psychology have shown that racial stereotyping has become an apparently automatic process because of the predominant portrayal of African Americans in mainstream contexts equates blackness to violent crime. In a recent study, researchers found that American's racial assumptions materialize through the way individuals process images.[30] Participants were rapidly presented with a series of images of white and black faces so that they did not have time to process individual features. Therefore race alone resonated. Then participants were asked to identify blurry images of common objects. The researchers found that stereotypes affect the way individuals perceive visual imagery. The exposure to images of black faces initially triggered a form of "racialized seeing" in which participants were significantly more likely to identify the blurry objects in front of them as crime related objects [in comparison with those who saw predominately white faces before evaluating the objects].[31] Studies such as this demonstrate that visual processes are rooted in cultural understandings. It is important to remember that consumers of media texts are active agents who interpret these texts in ways that will not disrupt their normalized mythic understandings of race and class.[32] Therefore they can reveal race-based associations that reinforce negative stereotypes. The images of poor African Americans stuck in the devastated city of New Orleans were presented and processed in ways that support these findings.

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[30] J.L. Eberhardt, P. A. Goff, V. J. Purdie and P. G. Davies. "Seeing black: Race, crime, and visual processing." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 87 (2004): 876-963.
[31] J.L. Eberhardt, P. A. Goff, V. J. Purdie and P. G. Davies. "Seeing black: Race, crime, and visual processing." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 87 (2004): 876-963.
[32] [32] N. Vidmar and M. Rokeach. "Archie Bunker's bigotry: A study in selective perception and exposure" *Journal of Communcation* 24 (1974): 36-47.

For the first few days following the hurricane, network news reporters focused on sensationalized stories of crime and violence. The images of displaced black residents struggling towards the Superdome became a sinister backdrop for stories of looting, murder, rape, beating, and marauding gangs. When analyzed through the visual medium of television, race becomes salient within the coverage of the criminal acts and 'utter lawlessness' descending upon the city. Beginning on August 30th, news networks steered the majority of their focus upon the looting and social chaos within the city of New Orleans. NBC began its coverage with the title sequence "Conditions Ripe for Lawlessness" and discussing the death toll, possibility of disease and flooding Brian Quintanilla stated, "Tonight, the REAL concern is looting."[33] On ABC News reporters stated that police were "unprepared and overwhelmed" and that "most neighborhoods are pure anarchy," while replaying clips of young, black men running with bags.[34] CBS News even gave looting and chaos its own "Inside Story" and showed a clip of a white police officer pointing his weapon at a young, black man.[35] Each major news network analyzed included special reports on the rampant looting situation that was developing in the city, the lack of authority and the absence of a jail. Fox News coverage included a white, middle class tourist explaining that the looting was insane and she described the situation as similar to Baghdad.[36] The lack of authority and order led to rumors that shots had rang out around the Superdome and that a police officer was reported to have been shot by a looter.[37] Unverified rumors and

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[33] John Reiss (Executive Producer). (2005, August 30). NBC Nightly News [television broadcast]. New York: National Broadcasting Company.

[34] Johnathan Barnes (Executive Producer). (2005, August 30). ABC Nightly News [television broadcast]. New York: American Broadcasting Company.

[35] Jim Murphy (Executive Producer). (2005, August 30). CBS Nightly News [television broadcast]. New York: Columbia Broadcasting System.

[36] Steve Hirsh (Executive Producer). (2005, August 30). Fox News [television broadcast]. New York: FOX News Network.

[37] David Doss (Executive Producer). (2005, August 30). CNN [television broadcast]. New York: Cable News Network.

sensational reports of murders, fires, and snipers did not end here and continued on through the following day.

The next day, August 31st, the focus on looting and crime became even more dramatized. CBS nightly news reported "gangs and thieves roaming the streets, they are even looting the local hospitals."[38] NBC also reported that tensions were rising between rival gang members and that residents were plundering at will.[39] ABC nightly news demonstrated that they were more actively involved in stopping the looting problem. The show included a segment of a white reporter reprimanding a black resident who had just walked out of a local store with things in his hands. Dressed in crisp clean clothes the white reporter asked in an authoritarian manner, "Do you think that's okay?" The resident, who looked exhausted, responded with a puzzled, "What?" The reporter retorted strongly, "You stole that!" The man responded sheepishly with another, "What?" and then walked away.[40] Lastly, CNN reported that "officers called off the rescue effort in order to deal with the widespread lawlessness."[41] This type of interview highlights socially deviant behavior by hurricane victims, labels it as negative, and separates white, middle class obedience from African-American lawlessness.

This theme of lawlessness became the infotainment of Katrina news coverage and major news outlets began to report even more sensationalized reports of rapes and murders in the Superdome and Convention Center. While news networks could not verify the supposed rapes and murders, they nonetheless reported them without questioning their veracity and interviewed police officers and local officials who supported these rumors.

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[38] Jim Murphy (Executive Producer). (2005, August 31). CBS Nightly News [television broadcast]. New York: Columbia Broadcasting System.

[39] John Reiss (Executive Producer). (2005, August 31). NBC Nightly News [television broadcast]. New York: National Broadcasting Company.

[40] Johnathan Barnes (Executive Producer). (2005, August 31). ABC Nightly News [television broadcast]. New York: American Broadcasting Company.

[41] David Doss (Executive Producer). (2005, August 31). CNN [television broadcast]. New York: Cable News Network.

By September 1st, these reports of lawlessness and socially deviant behavior inspired fervor in journalists. ABC Nightly News reported that there were gun shots heard around the city and that fears of snipers and disgruntled citizens were boiling. Reports of arson and shots being fired at rescue helicopters led officials to declare that they would stop the evacuation process from the Superdome.[42] These rumors were further hyperbolized on NBC, which reported that New Orleans had descended into sheer bedlam. Brian Williams introduced the show by informing the audience that he and his news team had to make personal judgments concerning their personal safety, and that therefore they had decided to report the news from a suburb outside of New Orleans. Despite his admitted detachment from the source of the news, Williams began describing the situation within city: "...there are tens of thousands of hurricane refugees trapped in a city that is dissolving into chaos...there is looting, there is shooting...evacuation operations had to be shut down today because there had been reports of shots fired at rescue helicopters."[43]

While New Orleans was the site of an unprecedented American disaster, it is curious that such irresponsible journalism focused on the most sensational accounts of unverified activity. Certainly the reputation of New Orleans as a city of sin and indulgence only fueled the notion that such lawlessness was endemic to the area. However, it seems more credible that when the nation learned of the racial and economic composition of those seeking shelter in the Superdome and Convention Center, it would only support previous myths and assumptions about the city and its inhabitants. The question that we must ask ourselves as Americans is whether we would have been as accepting of the rumor-based reporting of rapes and roaming gangs if the

[42] Johnathan Barnes (Executive Producer). (2005, September 1). ABC Nightly News [television broadcast]. New York: American Broadcasting Company.
[43] John Reiss (Executive Producer). (2005, September 1). NBC Nightly News [television broadcast]. New York: National Broadcasting Company.

Superdome was filled with white victims. This acceptance was soon brought into question when reports were found to be untrue.

On September 29th, 2005 *The New York Times* published an article exposing the sensationalized and unverified reporting that had taken place in the days following the landfall of Hurricane Katrina. The report of a sniper turned out to be the relief valve on a gas tank. Superintendent Compass, who had stated that tourists were being raped and beaten later confessed that "We have no official reports to document any murder. Not one official report of rape or sexual assault."[44] When the SWAT team rushed the convention center to chase muzzle flashes from weapons; no guns were recovered. When an 18 wheeled refrigerated truck arrived at the Superdome to collect the 200 or more bodies, its drivers found only 6 bodies. Four of these individuals had died of natural causes and two had committed suicide.[45] Beyond furthering harmful stereotypes and cultural myths, the real negative impact of this sensationalized reporting and fanning of rumor flames was that these reports hindered the relief effort considerably.

Reports of shootings and roaming gangs and the fear that they evoked "changed troop deployments, delayed medical evacuations, drove police officers to quit, and grounded helicopters."[46] The *New York Times* reported that a paramedic team was refused entry into Slidell because of reports of a roaming mob. Based on rumors of a 400 to 500 person mob, two police officers quit immediately and abandoned their posts.[47] Enforcement and security forces were forced to chase down false snipers and rapists, drawing protection away from people who

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[44] Jim Dwyer and Christopher Drew, "Fear Exceeded Crime's Reality in New Orleans." *The New York Times*, 29 Sept. 2005. A1.
[45] Russell R. Dynes and Havidan Rodriguez. "Finding and Framing Katrina: The Social Construction of Disaster," (Social Science Research Council) http://understandingkatrina.ssrc.org/Dynes_Rodriguez/ (Accessed February 20, 2006).
[46] Dwyer, Jim and Christopher, Drew. "Fear Exceeded Crime's Reality in New Orleans." *The New York Times*, 29 Sept. 2005. A1.
[47] Ibid., A1.

truly needed it. Additionally, volunteers and EMS personnel at times were refused certain assignments in areas where 'shootings' and total mayhem had been reported.

In addition, these reports made surrounding communities less welcoming towards displaced victims. As sure as the media coverage affected the support and protection apparatuses, it also affected how citizens treated their fellow man in need. While the authorities and residents in these surrounding nearly all-white communities did not object to evacuees in an overtly racist fashion there were obvious racial undertones and assumptions present. In St. Helena parish, for example, white residents were strongly opposed to the construction of temporary housing for the evacuees. One white male resident made his position clear at a parish meeting when he purported:

"The only thing we see about these people in the news is what happened in the Superdome. They're rapists and thugs and murderers. I'm telling you, half of them have criminal records. I've worked all my life to have what I have. I can't lose it, and I can't stand guard 24 hours a day."[48]

This man has moved beyond the representation of the victims by the media and has insinuated that half of them must be criminals. Therefore the framing of individual examples of crime and violence are filtered through the individual psychology of the viewer and this becomes their perception of the victims at large.

Responses such as this represent one aspect of the contemporary concept of new racism, specifically modern racism. Traditional forms of racism have for the most part become unacceptable in public discourse but negative racial attitudes have not completely disappeared; rather today racist undertones emerge more subtly.[49]

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[48] Jeremy Alford. *The Evacuees: In One Parish, Divide Over Housing Newcomers. The New York Times.* September 28, 2005.
[49] J.B. McConahay, J. B. Harde and V. Batts, "Has Racism Declined in America? It Depends on Who is Asking and What is Asked." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 25: (1981), 563-579.

Studies that have evaluated the influence of news media on the viewing public have found that viewers tend to process information and images concerning crime in accordance with the "crime news script" that is uniformly used in local news coverage throughout the country. This script tells audiences that crimes are inherently violent and that these crimes are consistently committed by African-American males.[50] When lacking concrete evidence about crimes and perpetrators viewers tend to infer what must have happened based upon their common understanding of the usual script. Part of the news script is contained in cultural assumptions and myths that producers and consumers draw upon in order to understand and predict events during times of uncertainty.[51]

In one particular study, participants watched a news report in which no information concerning the identity of the suspect was provided. When later asked if they recalled having seen the suspect, 60% claimed that they did. In 70% of these cases the suspect was described as an African American.[52] This study says a lot about our cultural assumptions concerning crime and race. The negative racial stereotypes exist within American cultural frameworks and the American media reinforces these. It is a continuous cyclical relationship that undoubtedly sustains racial bias even if one is not aware of it.

These assumptions materialized in the wake of Katrina and they had literally fatal consequences. Many people died while waiting for help, yet the relief efforts were halted at various times because of exaggerated reports of crime.

EPISODIC REPORTING AND INDIVIDUAL BLAME

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[50] Franklin D. Gilliam and Shanton Iyengar, "Prime Suspects: The Influence of Local Television News on the Viewing Public," *American Journal of Political Science 44*, (2000), 560.

[51] Ibid., 560.

[52] Gilliam, F.D., Iyengar, S., Simon, A., & Wright, W. (1996). Crime in black and white: The violent, scary world of local news. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 1, 6-23.

While the media did not portray all of the victims that remained in New Orleans as criminals, there were other aspects of the way in which they reported the stories emerging from the city that did not shed the displaced in a sympathetic light. One example of framing that we found throughout the news coverage that we viewed was an episodic framing of events. An episodic frame selectively presents a problem in terms of an individual experience or a single event, which causes viewers to abstain from involving themselves in the solution to the problem and to believe that individual causes were the reason for the problem. It ignores that historical, social and economical reasons behind a problem and places blame on individuals or groups.[53]

The episodic framing of victims in the initial coverage of the disaster was detrimental to the public perception of the victims. Rather than reporting the broader context of the poverty that made it impossible for most victims to leave, news networks focused on the stories of individual victims. On August 30th, FOX News Network interviewed an African American woman who had just arrived at one of the FOX-proclaimed "refugee camps" who described how she was so angry with herself for deciding to stay in her home. She explained how her and her husband had finally learned their lesson. Network commentators followed this interview by stating that so many stayed because they thought they could survive the storm.[54] In the same report, FOX interviewed a young, black man who stated that "they wanted me to go to Mississippi, but I didn't want to...I shoulda gone."[55]This framework is problematic because it enables viewers to

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[53] Shanto Iyengar. *Is anyone responsible? How television news frames political issues.* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[54] Steve Hirsh (Executive Producer). (2005, August 30). Fox News [television broadcast]. New York: FOX News Network.

[55] Steve Hirsh (Executive Producer). (2005, August 30). Fox News [television broadcast]. New York: FOX News Network.

be unsympathetic to the victims at large by assuming that they made a mistake. While they might sympathize with their plight, it was still largely their fault that they are in that position.

CBS Nightly News also contained damaging episodic frames. While driving through the flooded streets of the city in a boat, a reporter stopped in front of a home where several black residents were sitting on their porch above the flood line. When the reporter called out to them, they yelled back that that they were happy where they were and that they didn't want help.[56] This episodic frame is even more damaging than the first because it makes it seem as though these people don't even want help.

These reports of widespread criminal acts led to authorities expressing their disappointment with the lack of individual responsibility on the part of those who remained in the city. On August 31st, News networks aired Governor Blanco's speech concerning her disappointment with those who were left in the city. She declared that what bothered her most about the situation is that usually disaster brings out the best in people and here in New Orleans she's seeing the worst.

Blanco essentially purports that other victims have traditionally bonded together and gotten through disasters. This paternalistic expression of disappointment towards the rumored behavior of these poor displaced people seems to sprout from discriminatory cultural associations concerning the inherent nature of poor black populations. Not only was it unwarranted considering the exaggerated contexts of the reports, but it is also impractical to describe the situation afflicting these people who literally have been abandoned to other disaster victims.

These frames appearing in the early coverage of the disaster are very problematic because it enables viewers to blame the victims for not leaving, rather than discussing the larger context

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[56] [56] Jim Murphy (Executive Producer). (2005, August 30). CBS Nightly News [television broadcast]. New York: Columbia Broadcasting System.

of the inability of most of the displaced to evacuate. Therefore these frames definitely affect the way viewers see the victims and the way they respond to the crisis. Compounding upon the criminalization of the victims, these frames also place blame upon the victim and make audiences less sympathetic and responsive to the desperate situation.

Eventually, some news media made an effort to convey the broader social, economic, and historical contexts for the race and class demographics of the city of New Orleans. Finally, viewers were provided with knowledge that many of those who remained in the city did so out of necessity. NBC reported that:

"Sixty-seven percent of New Orleans' residents are black. And huge numbers of them are poor. Nearly 30 percent of people in New Orleans live below the poverty line...according to estimates, half of all children in Louisiana live in poverty...It was already bad before Katrina — most of the poor didn't have insurance. Some needed to wait for their government checks, due the first of the month, three days after Katrina hit. Some 134,000 people couldn't leave because they couldn't afford transportation. This natural disaster illustrates what experts have known all along — disasters do not treat everyone alike. Surviving is easier for whites who have than for blacks who don't. And when push comes to shove, it's every man, woman and child for himself."

While this story attempts to explain the plight of those left in the city, there are still many problematic frames that are set up in their representation of the victims. For example, the description of the victims as needing to wait for the government checks gives the rather snarky impression that these people are lazy, making it ever easier to blame the victim and not the government for their unfortunate situation.

In addition the white male voice of the reporter narrating the story sounds detached and negative while he described that the "the ugly truth is that many of these victims are black and poor."[57] While drawing attention to this fact it sounds detached and repulsed by these facts rather than sympathetic. For many viewers, this could aid in the creation of detached feelings

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[57] John Reiss (Executive Producer). (2005, September 1). NBC Nightly News [television broadcast]. New York: National Broadcasting Company.

towards the victims rather than a greater understanding of their situation. Even this attempt to communicate a broader context is episodic reporting because it explains the specific context of the individuals who remain trapped in the city. It informs viewers that there is a large segment of the population that is black and below the poverty line in New Orleans but there is no discussion of the historical or structural forces that created their situation.

The general effects of exposure to episodic reporting are summarized in the following:

"Americans describe chronic problems such as poverty and crime not in terms of deep-seated social or economic conditions, but as mere idiosyncratic outcomes. Confronted with a parade of news stories describing particular instances or illustrations of national issues, viewers focus on individual characteristics rather than historical, political or structural forces. In this respect episodic framing encourages reasoning by resemblance – people settle upon causes and treatments that 'fit' the problem."[58]

In the context of this episodic discourse that was presented was a constant stream of images of African-Americans walking around New Orleans, carrying their belongings, and sitting on curbsides. Visually, this reinforces the idea of individual blame because it reiterates the myth that African-Americans are lazy and depend on the support of the government. The images restated "Why don't these people DO something?" instead of sitting and waiting even though the commentary commonly stated that the situation was desolate. Lastly, by rarely showing images of white citizens who stayed in the city and who were subsequently stranded, the parade of images broadened the scope of individual blame into racial blame. Essentially, it was no longer the individual's fault for his or her situation by the entire African-American community for no leaving and or looting. Since television viewing can alter a viewer's perceptions of his or her social reality, the normalized myths about African-Americans will only be reinforced by the

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[58] Shanto Iyengar. *Is anyone responsible? How television news frames political issues* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

news coverage of Hurricane Katrina and an opportunity to engage in an open conversation about the real history of structural racism may be squandered.

Yet as scholars, we must question some of the reasons for the racialization, criminalization, and sensationalization of the journalists reporting following the flooding of New Orleans. One reason is that violence has become increasingly more popular in movies and on television programs. For example, U.S. news sources reported on homicides quadrupled even though homicides decreased nationally by 33% during the 1990s. [59] Since news organizations have a history of reporting violence, it makes sense that reports of arson, homicides of tourists, citizens, police officers, and national guardsmen, and unchecked looting would fuel a news frenzy. The dissemination of this type of news coverage has lead to the creation of the "crime news script" that has lead media consumers to believe that crimes are violent and committed by non-white males. [60] In the case of Katrina, producers and consumers of news texts used this script in order to predict and understand the events that were taking place in New Orleans. This "crime news script" is simply the reiteration of previous cultural myths about African-American men and women.

Part of this script is the "Hollywood" conception of disaster- that a major disaster will lead to the breakdown of all social order and chaos will ensue. [61] The "Hollywood" conception is a conflict frame that portrays heros versus villains and ignores any complex explanations for disorder. Unfortunately, the "Hollywood" frame creates a self-fulfilling prophecy where people

[59] Katherine Beckett and Theodore Sasson. *The Politics of Injustice: Crime and Punishment in America* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishers, 2004).

[60] Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr. and Shanto Iyengar. "Prime Suspects: The Influence of Local Television News on the Viewing Public" *American Journal of Political Science*, 44 (2000): 560-573.

[61] S.R. Couch. "The cultural scene of disasters: conceptualizing the field of disasters and popular culture" *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters*, 18 (2000): 21-38.

expect anarchy because it is what they had seen previously in their cultural media.[62] Lastly, this type of conflict or "Hollywood" frame of disaster is what the American public desires, or at least what producers of texts believe that consumers desire. This desire exists because it is the frame that consumers are accustomed to and that will not disrupt their cultural expectations or mythic beliefs. A complex frame that examines all of the societal factors for crime and chaos following a disaster could possibly be more than the media consumer desires. The "Hollywood" conflict frame is made more popular by 24 hour news stations who must work to keep the viewer's attention by constantly having new updates and sensationalizing the coverage.

In accordance with these findings, the average American viewer will limit their understanding of the problem exposed by Katrina to be poverty in New Orleans. If sympathetic to the problem, their solution will therefore probably be a donation to the poor victims. The larger problems concerning race, class, and institutional racism which were undoubtedly an intrinsic part of the larger context that led to the disaster that unfolded in New Orleans will not be considered within the realm of the problem and therefore will not be addressed.

CONCLUSIONS

The criminalization of the victims continued to be a problem months after the initial devastation. The portrayal of the evacuees as violent gangs resonates throughout public perception. A recent survey, conducted by Rice University sociologist Stephen Klineberg and published in the Houston Chronicle, found that 76 percent of respondents believe that the 150,000 evacuees have put a big strain on the city and sixty-six percent blame the evacuees for an increase in violent crime. Houston police reinforced this perception by stating that an

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[62] C.M. Bahk and K. Neuwirth. "Impact of movie depictions of volcanic disaster on risk perception and judgments" *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters, 18* (2000): 63-84.

increase of murders at the end of last year was the result of New Orleans gang wars that moved to Houston with the evacuees. While it is not known for sure whether crime has actually increased because of the evacuees, it is clear that the evacuees remain criminalized in the media and in the mind of the public.

While Hurricane Katrina did disrupt the ignorance or complacency of the problems of race and class in the United States, it did not reach the vast majority of Americans, in part, because of how the events following Hurricane Katrina were framed. In response, recording artist Kanye West attracted national attention towards the issues of race and class that lied at the bottom of the disaster coverage during a nationally televised fundraising concert for the victims of Hurricane Katrina.[63] He intentionally broke away from his scripted lines in order to express his disappointment with the way African Americans were portrayed as criminals and the slow government response. Most shocking was his final remark regarding the president's response that "George Bush doesn't care about black people."[64]   West's statement was crude but honest, and resulted in a heightened level of awareness about the framing of hurricane victims and institutional racism. A variety of organizations spurned from this awareness, including colorofchange.org, that pledges that "We will never let this happen again."[65]

Hurricane Katrina was one of the greatest natural disasters to hit the United States but more important than the magnitude of the disaster is the magnitude of inequality that it exposed. The disaster and the media coverage is a platform from which to address the prevalent myths of race and class that have become so normalized within common social understandings. These cultural assumptions need to be recognized and directly addressed in order to produce change

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[63] John Reiss (Executive Producer). (2005, September 2). NBC's Live Concert Fundraiser for the Victims of Hurricane Katrina. New York: National Broadcasting Company.
[64] Ibid.
[65] ColorofChange. (Colorofchange.org). http://www.colorofchange.org (Accessed February 20, 2006).

and social progress. Katrina provides an impetus for change because it exposed the lingering racial wounds still affecting the American psyche. The stark and unforgiving reality of Katrina is that racial progress of the past generations may have been superficial. The changes have been systematic but not systemic. They have helped but they have not cured. Perhaps the only positive to be gleaned from this tragedy is a realization that further introspection must occur as a nation in order to reach the place of racial equality that we assumed was nearby.

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Religion, Rhetoric, and Social Change after Hurricane Katrina

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Religion, Rhetoric, and Social Change after Hurricane Katrina

Traumatic events cause people to look towards God for answers, and many people find comfort in their faith. Asking *why* a horrific event, like the destruction of the Gulf Coast and New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina, happened is a very natural reaction. How could the good and merciful God of most Americans' spiritual beliefs cause or allow such a tragedy to happen? The problem of theodicy, or in the words of John Milton, "the problem of justifying the ways of God to men," is an issue that emerges after nearly every terrible event, and Hurricane Katrina has been no different.[1] There have been two major strains of rhetoric that have dominated the public discussion about how to explain Hurricane Katrina. The first has had to do with the idea of God's divine retribution for the sins of New Orleanians and Americans more broadly. The second has been that Katrina was a singularly unnatural natural disaster, and that humans, not God, are responsible for it.

These two conflicting ideas reveal a lot about American society. For one, they reveal the uneasy tension that exists in the political life of this country between the deeply conservative and religious and the deeply secular. The combination of the two sentiments also reveals a great deal about how the country has responded to the disaster and the underlying poverty that made the consequences of the disaster so terrible. In this paper, I examine the rhetoric of the search for meaning that occurred after Katrina by looking at newspaper articles and websites. I find that, as is often the case in the United States—a great borderland of conflicting and intermingling ideas, cultures, races, genders, classes, and religions—multiple meanings of Hurricane Katrina have emerged. These meanings are numerous, but for the sake of organization, I identify three major meanings: divine retribution, manmade disaster, and a call for social change.

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[1] qtd. in Mary Zeiss Stange, "Good God?" *USA Today*, October 31, 2005, pg. A11, www.proquest.umi.com.

Divine Retribution

One meaning of the hurricane that emerged fairly quickly after it hit the Gulf Coast is that Katrina was sent by God as a punishment. The target of the punishment differed depending upon the particular beliefs of the person declaring divine retribution, but the general theme has been the same. Some, such as Rev. Dwight McKissic, senior pastor at Cornerstone Baptist Church in Arlington, Texas, saw the hurricane as God's response to the particularly sinful residents of New Orleans:

> New Orleans flaunts sin in a way that no other places do. They call it the Big Easy. There are 10 abortion clinics in Louisiana, five of those are in New Orleans. They have a Southern Decadence parade every year and they call it gay pride. When you study Scripture, it's not out of the boundaries of God to punish a nation for sin and because of sin…They openly practice voodoo and devil worship in New Orleans. You can't shake your fist in God's face 364 days a year and then ask, 'Where was God when Katrina struck?'[2]

Others agreed with Rev. McKissic. Alabama State Senator Hank Erwin wrote that "New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast have always been known for gambling, sin, and wickedness. It is the kind of behavior that ultimately brings the judgment of God."[3] New Orleans City Council President Oliver Thomas commented soon after the hurricane, "Maybe God's going to cleanse us."[4] Reverend Franklin Graham, son of the famous evangelist Billy Graham, also made comments tying the image of New Orleans as a city of sin to the reason for

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[2] qtd. in Selwyn Crawford, "In Disasters, some see the wrath of God," *Knight Ridder Tribune News Service*, October 5, 2005, pg. 1, www.proquest.umi.com.

[3] qtd. in *Advocate*, "Ala. Senator: Katrina was God's punishment," September 29, 2005, pg. 5BS, www.proquest.umi.com.

[4] qtd. in "New Orleans City Council President: "Maybe God's Going to Cleanse Us," LifeSiteNews.com, September 1, 2005, http://www.lifesite.net/ldn/2005/sep/05090111.html.

the storm: "There's been Satanic worship in New Orleans. There's been sexual perversion. God is going to use that storm to bring a revival. God has a plan. God has a purpose."[5] Charles Upshur noted that, "New Orleans was preparing for its Annual Day of Decadence. In a few months over 100,000 homosexuals would have converged on the streets of this city. During these festivities gross sexual acts take place in public. Now tell me was that hurricane and tidal wave a coincidence or was it God allowing nature to rebel against such wicked behavior of human nature?"[6] The conservative group Columbia Christians for Life reportedly sent an email out to its members claiming that satellite photos of the storm looked like a six week old fetus, and that this was evidence that God was punishing New Orleans for its five abortion clinics, saying that "the city of New Orleans has sown innocent bloodshed and violence in the womb for years and years and has now reaped bloodshed and violence on her streets... may New Orleans be delivered from her many sins!"[7]

Others have focused on more national instances of sin that God was trying to punish with the hurricane. Pat Robertson linked Katrina and terrorist attacks on the United States to the legal status of abortion in America through the Book of Leviticus on the September 12, 2005, broadcast of his radio show "The 700 Club."[8] Hal Lindsey felt that Katrina signaled the beginning of "the prophetic times" he has been expecting. Lindsey said, "the judgment of America has begun. I warn continuously that the last days' lineup of world powers does not include anything resembling the United States of America."[9] Radio commentator Charles

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[5] qtd. in "Graham: 'I would never say this is God's judgment," CNN.com, October 4, 2005, http://www.cnn.com/2005/US/10/04/cnna.graham/.

[6] Charles Upshur, "The truth about Katrina," *New Pittsburgh Courier*, October 5-11, 2005, Vol. 96, Iss. 42. pg. B2, www.proquest.umi.com.

[7] qtd. in Tim Grieve, "Antiabortion group celebrates Katrina's work," posting to Salon War Room, September 6, 2005, http://www.salon.com/politics/war_room/2005/09/06/columbia/index.html.

[8] Media Matters for America, "Media Matters: Religious Conservatives Claim Katrina was God's Omen, Punishment for the United States," *U.S. Newswire*, September 14, 2005, www.proquest.umi.com.

[9] qtd. in Media Matters for America, ibid.

Colson said that in response to the question of whether God had anything to do with Katrina, his answer is that "Katrina gave us a preview of what America would look like if we fail to fight the war on terror…[God] allowed it and perhaps he allowed it to get our attention so that we don't delude ourselves into thinking that all we have to do is put things back the way they were and life will be normal again."[10] It has not only been Christians who have seen the hurricane as a form of divine retribution. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, a Shas leader and the former Chief Sephardic Rabbi, claimed that God sent the hurricane because of President Bush's support for the recent Israeli withdrawals from the Gaza Strip and because the people of New Orleans "have no God."[11] North Carolina pastor Jesse Steins agreed: "If we continue on with this Road Map – not to peace, but to hell – Hurricane Katrina is only the beginning of disasters that will hit this nation."[12]

What do such extreme religious interpretations of the hurricane say about America? First it is important to recognize that such interpretations do not constitute the mainstream opinion about the hurricane. Indeed, according to an ABC News/Washington Post poll, only 23% of American adults thought Hurricane Katrina and the other hurricanes that occurred shortly afterwards were "a deliberate act of God."[13] There was also a slew of editorials, letters to the editor, and responses on blogs criticizing the interpretation of the hurricane as divine retribution. Nevertheless, the fact that these figures and these sentiments constitute a loud voice within the public discourse about the hurricane is important. Perhaps the appeal of these kinds of Biblical interpretations and rhetoric is indicative of a deep spirit of individualism in this country. We like

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[10] qtd. in Media Matters for America, ibid.

[11] Israel Insider Staff, "Rabbi Ovadia Yosef: Katrina punishment for pullout and lack of Torah study," *Israel Insider*, September 7, 2005, http://web.israelinsider.com/Articles/Politics/6530.htm.

[12] qtd. in Stan Goodenough, "Americans see Gaza-Katrina link," *JNW Headline News*, September 6, 2005, http://www.jnewswire.com/library/article.php?articleid=699.

[13] Mark Doliver, "The Divine and Profane as Hurricane Factors," *Adweek*, October 10, 2005, Vol. 46, Iss. 39, pg. 46, www.proquest.umi.com.

to think that people sink or swim on their own, that the United States is a meritocracy, and that

the American Dream is not a myth but a reality. It is very difficult to see natural disasters in this

light, unless we can link the actions of the victims to the disaster itself. In this way, explanations

of divine retribution are a way of disavowing collective responsibility.

Manmade Disaster

A second meaning that has emerged is almost exactly opposite of the idea that the

hurricane was divine retribution. Instead, there has been a great deal of discourse about how

Hurricane Katrina was an "unnatural natural disaster." In contrast to the overtly religious nature

of the explanations noted above, several commentators have noted that God has been absent

from the more mainstream public discourse about the hurricane. Robert McClory of the *Chicago*

Tribune notes that after Hurricane Katrina, the question of "why?" was less about why God

would have let such a tragedy happen and more about "why there was inadequate preparation for

the storm and why the response to the tragedy was so slow and initially so ineffectual. Attention

was diverted from the ultimate cause of destruction to the humans who should have done

something before, during and after—but didn't. So God got a virtual pass for almost two

weeks."[14] Similarly, Peter Steinfels observes that the American people have been focused on

the humans to blame in the tragedy. In his words:

> One might logically step back from asking how God could allow the brimming, turbulent
>
> Lake Pontchartrain to break the levees to asking how God could allow self-interested or
>
> shortsighted politicians to put off reinforcing the levees or allow enterprising engineers
>
> and developers to decrease the capacity of the environment to buffer storms. How could

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[14] Robert McClory, "God always takes responsibility; The tsunami and Hurricane Katrina were alike in many respects but had one major difference," *Chicago Tribune*, September 25, 2005, pg.2, www.proquest.umi.com.

God allow the negligence, racism, indifference, or hard-heartedness that long gnawed at the social fabric of New Orleans – or the blindness or incompetence of officials who should have understood the brewing human storm, as well as the meteorological one? That such questions about divine providence have been so little pressed in this way testifies to a tremendous modern – and American – belief in human freedom and responsibility. On the Gulf Coast, humans fell short, not God; humans and human institutions should be called to account, not God.[15]

Steinfels' insightful editorial identifies one of the key attributes of the mainstream discourse after Hurricane Katrina: the incredible willingness to blame human institutions for the tragedy. This feeling is evidenced by the fact that the big news stories following the hurricane were about whether people knew the levee system was insufficient to handle a storm as powerful as Katrina and about the poor relief efforts of the Bush administration and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Editorial after editorial asked where the government was in the aftermath of the storm. For example, an editorial in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* said that "the rest of America can't fathom why a country with our resources can't be at least as effective in this emergency as it was when past disaster struck Third World nations. Someone needs to explain why well-know emergency aid lessons aren't being applied here."[16] Editorials in the New York Daily News and the Dallas Morning News both asked, "Who is in charge?" and identified a need for strong leadership and the restoration of order in the city.[17]

The degree of culpability assigned to humans ranged from actually causing the hurricane through global warming to failing to prevent the flooding that occurred to a lack of preparation

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[15] Peter Steinfels, "The scarcely heard question is how God could have allowed the catastrophe to occur," *New York Times*, September 10, 2005, pg. A15, www.proquest.umi.com.
[16] qtd. in "Editorials on Hurricane Katrina aftermath," *Knight Ridder Tribune News Service*, September 2, 2005, pg.1, www.proquest.umi.com.
[17] "Editorials on Hurricane Katrina aftermath," ibid.

for the aftermath. Probably the most widely publicized global warming connection came from

Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. with this post on the Huffington Post blog:

> Now we are all learning what it's like to reap the whirlwind of fossil fuel dependence
>
> which [Mississippi Governor Haley] Barbour and his cronies have encouraged. Our
>
> destructive addiction has given us a catastrophic war in the Middle East and--now--
>
> Katrina is giving our nation a glimpse of the climate chaos we are bequeathing our
>
> children. In 1998, Republican icon Pat Robertson warned that hurricanes were likely to
>
> hit communities that offended God. Perhaps it was Barbour's memo that caused Katrina,
>
> at the last moment, to spare New Orleans and save its worst flailings for the Mississippi
>
> coast.[18]

Kennedy's post generated a great deal of controversy, and the idea that Governor Barbour

really caused the hurricane's devastation in his state, which was probably intended to be tongue

in cheek in the first place, was widely decried. However, the idea that human actions have

changed the climate is relatively well-supported by the American public. In the same ABC

News/Washington Post poll cited above, a majority of respondents believed that global warming

is taking place, and 39% believed that the recent hurricanes are a result of global warming.[19]

While neither view can really be considered a collective belief, that fact that more people would

rather blame the actual cause of the hurricane on human action rather than an act of God is

indeed telling.

The desire to hold humans accountable for forces of nature says something important

about modernity, for as we become ever more reliant on wonder drugs, speedy microprocessors,

and instant communications, we have become blinded to the true power of nature. We are

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[18] Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., "For They That Sow the Wind Shall Reap the Whirlwind," posting to The Huffington Post, August 29, 2005, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-f-kennedy-jr/for-they-that-sow-the-_b_6396.html.
[19] Dolliver, ibid.

deluded into the idea that we can control nature, and certainly some of the anger that Americans felt after Katrina's wake was tied to feeling so helpless in the face of something that we could not control. We are not used to feeling helpless, and so we latched on to a blame game that created the impression that the devastation of the hurricane was the fault of inept human leadership. As Edward Rothstein said, "it is remarkable how this natural disaster has almost imperceptibly come to be seen as the result of human agency, as if failures in planning were almost evidence of cause, as if forces of nature were subject to human oversight. The hurricane has been humanized."[20] Humanizing the hurricane places it in the realm of what we can control. While Steinfels sees this tendency to blame people rather than God as evidence of "the culture's resistance to genuine self-scrutiny," I think that, when not taken to the extreme, recognition of the human role in Hurricane Katrina could actually be a healthy dialogue. It is important to recognize that as humans we made some collective choices that very much shaped the consequences of the storm. Rather than blame the victims of the storm for bringing on the wrath of God, as those who have seen Katrina as some form of divine retribution, the meaning of the hurricane that emerges from the idea of a manmade natural disaster is that there was a human element shaping the disaster that occurred.

Call for Social Change

Hurricane Katrina has opened the nation's eyes to the bitterness of the poverty of many of our citizens. Certainly, the media covered issues of poverty following the hurricane with a depth and breadth not often seen in this country. A recent sociological study by Emily Rho and David Grusky has found that on the whole, Hurricane Katrina did not change Americans'

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[20] Edward Rothstein, "Seeking Justice, of Gods or Politicians," *New York Times*, September 8, 2005, pg. E1, www.proquest.umi.com.

attitudes towards poverty too greatly, but it did increased awareness.[21] Rho and Grusky

compared surveys from October 2004 and October 2005 and find that while 11% of respondents

were classified as uninformed in 2004, almost none of the respondents were uninformed in 2005

about the issue. They argue that while attitudes had not changed greatly yet, the intense

coverage of the poverty and inequality issues means that Katrina "could be a turning point," if

leadership that people can rally around emerges on the issue.[22] Certainly, there have been some

calls for social change to fix the disparities that were revealed by the storm.

A major tenet of the social change rhetoric is that religion and morality must fill in where

the government has failed, and the rhetoric of relief efforts is largely dominated by this. The

growing acceptance of the premise that God must be a part of rebuilding the devastated areas is

evidenced by an increasing willingness to let our spirituality, or at least the spirituality of our

leaders, guide collective action. A great example of this phenomenon is the response to the

public discourse of New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin. At a November 2005 town-hall meeting in

New Orleans, James Varney of the *Times-Picayune* reported that Nagin was not well-received,

"but when he invoked God the crowd of hundreds was solidly behind him."[23] In an email, Nagin

wrote, "The churches, synagogues, mosques and other religious institutions are the foundation

for many people's lives here. I do not make decisions for my city based on my faith. Rather, my

faith gives me the capacity to continue hoping, striving, and working to rebuild New Orleans."[24]

Another example is Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco, who called for a state-wide day of

prayer following the storm, saying, "As we face the devastation wrought by Katrina, as we

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[21] Grusky and Rho's paper, "Did Katrina Recalibrate Attitudes Toward Poverty and Inequality? A Test of the 'Dirty Little Secret' Hypothesis," will be published in the spring 2006 edition of the *Du Bois Review*.

[22] qtd. in Lisa Trei, "Katrina did not raise awareness of poverty, study finds," *Stanford Report*, March 8, 2006, http://news-service.stanford.edu/news/2006/march8/katrina-030806.html.

[23] James Varney, "Religion, politics mix after storm," Times-Picayune, November 21, 2005, p.01, www.proquest.umi.com.

[24] qtd. in Varney, ibid.

search for those in need, as we comfort those in pain and as we begin the long task of rebuilding, we turn to God for strength, hope and comfort."[25] President Bush, who has never been shy about talking about his faith, also sounded the religious drums after Katrina. In his September 15, 2005, speech from New Orleans' Jackson Square, Bush's biggest address after the hurricane, the president used a great deal of religious rhetoric, saying that the ordeals of Katrina "remind us of a hope beyond all pain and death, a God who welcomes the lost to a house not made with his hands."[26]

Some see these instances of leaders using religious imagery as calculated political moves. For example, Jim VandeHei and Peter Baker of the *Washington Post* have noted that, "biblical citations and imagery are common touchstones for the president when he tries to connect to African Americans," who polls had shown to be especially upset by the slow federal response.[27] But there is also evidence of a sentiment that a little mixing of religion and politics is exactly what is needed during times of crisis in America. According to Reverend William Maestri, spokesman for the Archdiocese of New Orleans, "When you look at the great leaders of this country, they have repeatedly called on religion in times of crisis, and religion and religious purposes have helped unite us for great national purposes."[28] When faced with a tragedy that Americans by and large perceived to be if not caused by, then at least exacerbated by, human actions, and a recovery that has been perceived as slow, unorganized, and unhelpful, it does make some sense that we should see a turn towards religiosity for answers. Acceptance of the use of religious rhetoric is evidenced by the fact that groups that usually get upset by any intermingling of church and state are uncannily silent. Director of Louisiana's ACLU chapter,

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[25] qtd. in LifeSiteNews.com, ibid.
[26] qtd. in Jim VandeHei and Peter Baker, "Bush pledges historic effort to help Gulf Coast recover," The Washington Post, September 16, 2005, pg. A01, www.proquest.umi.com.
[27] VandeHei and Baker, ibid.
[28] qtd. in James Varney, ibid.

Joe Cook, says that "Freedom of religion simply isn't an issue right now," when there are more pressing concerns.[29]

Indeed, following the hurricane, there were countless stories of religious organizations doing relief work, people praying for their fallen countrymen and women, and the private generosity for which Americans are so well-known. Far from the fire and brimstone rhetoric of those interpreting the hurricane as divine retribution, there has also been an outpouring of support for the victims of the hurricane from religious sources. Jennifer Moses notes that is has been the " 'good' Jesus – the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount, the one who, through his people, clothes the naked and feeds the hungry…who's been making the rounds," after Hurricane Katrina.[30] Religious based charities have been a major part of the funding for both short-term relief and for long-term recovery. Of *The Washington Post*'s list of the top ten private charities involved in Katrina relief, six are faith-based, with The Salvation Army raising $336.0 million, Catholic Charities USA $142.2 million, United Methodist Committee on Relief $69.6 million, International Aid $50.5 million, Feed the Children $47.1 million, and Habitat for Humanity $82.0 million.[31] Churches across the country have welcomed evacuees, and in the weeks following the hurricane, southern churches even sent buses to Louisiana to transport evacuees to their congregations, promising them a "new start in a new city."[32]

In addition to the relief efforts, there has also been a great deal of discourse about the underlying problems of poverty and racial segregation that were exposed by the coverage of the storm. Religious leaders, politicians, and journalists have all called for efforts solve problems of

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[29] qtd. in Varney, ibid.

[30] Jennifer Moses, "Why Jesus is Welcome in the Public Square," *The Washington Post*, November 3, 2005, pg. A21, www.proquest.umi.com.

[31] Jacqueline L. Salmon and Leef Smith, "Two-Thirds of Katrina Donations Exhausted," *The Washington Post*, February 27, 2006, pg. A1, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/26/AR2006022601383.html.

[32] Suzanne Sataline, "The Bus to Memphis Promises a New Life and a New Church," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 13, 2005, pg. A1, www.proquest.umi.com.

poverty based upon moral grounds. Their rhetoric is distinctly religious in its overtones. A letter to Congress from leaders of five mainstream Protestant congregations on September 13, 2005, asked for changes to the fiscal year 2006 budget that would undo the cuts to anti-poverty programs that were in the original bill. In the letter, the church leaders reaffirmed their commitment to "working for economic policies infused with the spirit of the One who began his public ministry almost 2,000 years ago by proclaiming that God had anointed him 'to bring good news to the poor.'"[33]

Religious institutions lobbying on behalf of the poor is not a new phenomenon, but perhaps the acceptance of the idea of having a moral imperative to think more broadly about the common good and those less fortunate is, if not new, then at least something new in its degree. Religion has been a tenet of the message of the conservative right since the 1960s, but only recently have politicians on the left considered using religious arguments to further their causes. Several commentators have pointed to Hurricane Katrina and the underlying problems of poverty and racism as an opportunity for leadership with an ideology from the left to emerge, and the use of religion and morality is a major element of this new ideology. In a sense, this appeal to religious dialogue in secular politics is an indication of the feelings of helplessness that Americans experienced post-Katrina, as well as our tendency to blame the government and government officials for the problems both created and exposed by Katrina. Jennifer Moses put it this way, "If one common mistake liberals make is assuming that the great majority of Bible-thumping (or tapping) comes from the right, a second…is equating this style of religiosity with something as simple as narrow-minded ignorance. Rather, bringing God and his word as expressed in the Bible into the debate points to a profound lack of meaning and vision in our

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[33] qtd. in "In Katrina's Wake, Church Leaders Urge Congress on Federal Budget, Poverty Concerns," *U.S. Newswire*, September 13, 2005, pg.1, www.proquest.umi.com.

public discourse, and a searing pessimism that anyone, or any institution, in public life might put things right."[34]

Now it seems that politicians on the left are beginning to recognize this pessimism and respond to it by changing their rhetoric. Reverend Jim Wallis, author of *God's Politics* and editor of the progressive Christian magazine *Sojourners,* is a key example of someone infusing politics with religion in order to make a call for social change. Wallis sees the post-Katrina moment as "an opportunity to provide leadership. If the Democrats don't start talking about poverty now, the party will die, and it will deserve to. This is a moment of transformation."[35] Wallis sees the hurricane as having "washed away our national denial of the shockingly high number of American living in poverty and our reluctance to admit the still-persistent connection of race and poverty in America, and perhaps even eroded the political power of a conservative anti-social services ideology that, for decades now, has weakened the idea of the common good."[36] Whether the Democratic party steps up to provide the leadership Wallis sees as lacking is an open question, but certainly some prominent Democrats are talking about it. Former Senator John Edwards is a good example. Poverty issues were a part of his presidential bid in 2004, and now his message might find new resonance with Americans post-Katrina, especially since he is framing the issue as one of morals. In a recent speech at Vanderbilt University, Senator Edwards spoke about Katrina at length and identified "a void of moral leadership" on issues of poverty.[37]

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[34] Moses, ibid.
[35] qtd. in Emma Graves Fitzsimmons, "Activist: Political change requires spiritual drive," *Austin American Statesman*, September 23, 2005, pg. B1, www. proquest.umi.com.
[36] Jim Wallis, "What the Waters Revealed," *Sojourners Magazine,* November 2005, http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj0511&article=051110.
[37] John Edwards, Speech at Vanderbilt University, March 22, 2006.

Contexts and Conclusions

Hurricane Katrina revealed a great deal about America and Americans, and it continues to do so as we continue to struggle with how to rebuild. One of the major things that Hurricane Katrina showed us about ourselves is that we are a deeply religious people and that the conflicting religious and humanist interpretations that played out in the press following the storm do reveal a borderland within American society, a place where "two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different cultures occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle, and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy."[38] On one hand, there are those who passionately attribute Katrina to an act of God, while others (possibly the majority) see human beings and human actions as the cause. That the most widely covered divine retribution theories came from the conservative Christian right shows the power of this group in our national debate, and that these theories drew the most controversy shows how contentious and how polarizing this debate over "morality" really is. Katrina also revealed how the use of religious rhetoric in political life is important in this country. From the mayor to the president, political leaders consistently called upon God for strength and used religious imagery in their public remarks following the hurricane. For a country where "separation of church and state" is a phrase that nearly every middle school social studies student knows, this mixing of faith and politics is one of the deepest contradictions of American culture.

The process of creating multiple meanings of the disaster is not unique to Katrina, but perhaps the degree of emphasis on the human culpability in the consequences is. Historically, there have been segments of the population who view disasters as sent by God as either warning signs or punishment and, at least since the late 1800s, these interpretations have not been in the

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[38] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Book Company, 1987), preface.

mainstream. Ted Steinberg, author of *Acts of God*, notes that after the major earthquake in Charleston in 1886, the blacks in the city saw the earthquake as God's judgment and responded with incredible panic, while the white ruling elite insisted upon viewing the earthquake as a "natural disaster."[39] In doing so, Ted Steinberg argues that they "may have implicitly suggested the reverse [of a morality tale], that something was right, that the prevailing system of social and economic relations was functioning just fine…ultimately, a view of the seismic shock as only a natural disaster amounted to little more than a thinly veiled attempt to return the poor back to the city's economic treadmill."[40] Steinberg essentially argues that throughout the course of the twentieth century, interpreting natural disasters as beyond the control of humans, but not as deliberate acts of God, has allowed developers and government officials to radically change the landscape of the country. People have filled in and built on marshes, destroyed barrier islands, and built in earthquake zones and on floodplains, without any degree of culpability for the increasing property damage that has resulted from storms, floods, and other "natural" disasters. Seeing hurricanes and the like as acts of God implies divine displeasure at something that humans have done, but a simple "natural" disaster allows us to go about the business of maintaining the prevailing social and economic order.

The public discourse after Hurricane Katrina, in contrast, emphasized the human causes of the storm and the human failures to control it. What is perhaps different about Katrina, compared to other U.S. disasters, is that there has been more of a focus in the public discourse on the inequality of relief and the social and economic conditions in place in New Orleans before the hurricane. In the past, the business elite in cities hit by "natural" disasters worked hard to minimize the devastation in order to protect property values and business interests. According to

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[39] Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 10-13.
[40] Steinberg, ibid., p. 19.

Steinberg, this boosterism "amounted to a form of class warfare waged against South Florida's working poor," in the case of the 1926 hurricane that struck Miami because it effectively stopped the flow of relief funds into the region.[41] The post-Katrina discourse is in stark contrast to this type of treatment: instead of being completely cut out of the national press coverage of disasters, the poor were a major element of the Katrina story, and this has led to a call for social change following the storm.

This tendency to blame human institutions for the disaster is not only a thoroughly modern spirit, it is at least somewhat unique to American disasters. Following the Asian tsunami of December 2004, there were many calls for relief and aid for the region, but there were few, if any, real calls for social change. This is because God was very present in the theodicy discourse that followed the tsunami. McClory notes that "when the public began to realize the extent of the tsunami's death and damage, an overwhelming question was raised: Why would God allow such a tragedy? The responses were many, though none totally satisfying. However, when the full extent of the New Orleans disaster began to be displayed on television 24/7, God received scant attention."[42] Because most people blamed God for the tsunami tragedy, there was no need to call for change of human institutions and practices.

In contrast, the discourse of a humanized hurricane that emerged following Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath brought the problems of poverty and racial inequality into mainstream discourse in a way that they have not been talked about in a long time, and certainly religion and morality are a part of, if not dominant in, the rhetoric that frames the discussion. How this discussion might ultimately result in social change is up in the air, but there does seem to be some recognition that the much touted American spirit of individualism causes us to ignore

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[41] Steinberg, ibid. p. 58.
[42] McClory, ibid. p.2.

serious inequalities and social problems. Joe Klien of *Time* sees Katrina as having the power to "spark a reconsideration of what has become a casual disdain for the essentials of governance and our common public life," and to take to heart the sentiment expressed in President John F. Kennedy's 1961 Inaugural Address, " 'Here on earth God's work must truly be our own.' "[43] Will Hurricane Katrina become a catalyst for social change in this country? Will this sentiment of doing God's work, of doing the "moral" thing, become a rallying point for the Democratic party? Will religion become ever more interwoven into the fabric of our political culture as we search for ways to address the social good? Will religion replace secular debates and secular policies as we continue to feel abandoned by an inefficient and uncaring government? Will Americans, with our short attention spans and distaste for seeing poor people on TV, turn back inside ourselves to focus on our own lives, our individual needs? Time will tell, but certainly Hurricane Katrina has shown us the underbelly of the American Dream, and if nothing else, we can no longer sit back in denial of the poverty and inequality that exist in this country.

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[43] Joe Klien, "Listen to What Katrina is Saying," *Time*, September 12, 2005, Vol. 166, Iss. 11, pg. 27, www.proquest.umi.com.

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Tourism Post-Katrina: Constructive or Destructive?

Corinne Militz and Lindsay Thomas
AMST 297—Senior Project April 14, 2006

Tourism Post-Katrina: Constructive or Destructive?

When disaster struck New Orleans in the form of Hurricane Katrina last August, no one

could have predicted the damage it wreaked upon the city and its inhabitants. While America

watched, a city was flooded and virtually washed away. Thousands of people lost their homes,

their businesses, their possessions, their jobs, and many of these people even lost their lives.

However, the destruction went beyond what CNN and news stations across the country covered

extensively for the next several weeks. The collateral damage Katrina initiated continues today

and will continue for years to come. Among this devastation is the depletion of the tourism—an

industry which New Orleans' economy has long profited from, in part due to its unique Creole

culture and voodoo mystique and in part because of its infamous revelry. Before Katrina, Mardi

Gras alone brought in a billion dollars a year to the city.[1] "According to the Louisiana

Department of Tourism, New Orleans is losing an average of $15.2 million a day in direct

tourism income. Last year, the $5.5-billion Louisiana tourism industry, which employs more than

75,000 people, lost more than $1 billion because of Katrina". [2] Clearly, this has contributed

greatly to the distressing plummeting of the city's economy at a time when they most need funds

for the relief effort and rebuilding.

The damage Katrina wreaked on New Orleans dominated news networks, newspapers,

and other forms of media for weeks after the tragedy, placing the disaster at the forefront of

Americans' thoughts, regardless of where they lived or if they had ever been to New Orleans.

However, much of this news coverage enforced racial and social stereotypes without being

completely accurate in their portrayal of the effects of Katrina and how New Orleans residents

were surviving its aftermath. Comparing the differences between insiders—defined as people

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[1] Matt Davis, "New Orleans pins hopes on Mardi Gras" *BBC News* (24 February 2006). ProQuest (11 April 2006).
[2] Richard A. Webster, "Fewer tourists mean meager business for New Orleans-area tour operators" *New Orleans CityBusiness* (Jan 10, 2006). ProQuest (28 March 2006).

who survived Katrina and currently still live in New Orleans—and outsiders—people who have

never lived in New Orleans and have also never visited—presents a unique opportunity to

promote tourism post-Katrina as a way to expel the false images many Americans may have seen

and associate with New Orleans as a result of the disaster. By visiting the city, perhaps outsiders

can realize the truth behind the tragedy and, if not moved to help in the relief efforts, at least be

able to understand more about New Orleans post-Katrina which could ultimately change the way

Americans view New Orleans to a more positive perception. Tourism has the potential to help

insiders as well, by boosting the economy and presenting the possibility of recruiting outsiders to

aid in the relief efforts, which could directly help locals.

The relationship between New Orleans and tourism, now the city's biggest industry, has

never lacked tension. These tensions have evolved over the years and different groups have

emerged to take different sides in the debate. During the early 1920s, business and New

Orleans' unique culture were engaged in a battle to see which would prevail, a battle over which

would bring the city the most economic benefit. When the Association of Commerce in New

Orleans was first formed, "Tourism received scant attention because, in the ideal business

climate promoted by the Association of Commerce, leisure was deemed equivalent to laziness."[3]

Rather, the Association chose to "promote industry and commerce" and direct its efforts towards

potential investors rather than potential revelers.[4] However, over time this tension melted away

as businessmen chose to focus their efforts at economic recruitment on convention attendance.

In order to promote New Orleans as a unique place to hold conventions, they had to promote the

uniqueness of the culture itself. In addition, the Great Depression hit just as businessmen were

beginning to realize the value of the city's culture. "The failure of industrial enterprises

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[3] Anthony Stanonis, "Creating the Big Easy: New Orleans, American Culture, and the Emergence of Modern Tourism, 1915-1950." Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 2003, 82.
[4] Stanonis, 80.

nationwide along with the slowing of commercial traffic not only shattered the business ethos that led to the promotion of New Orleans as a convention city in the 1920s but also made all New Orleans businessmen anxious to boost tourism of whatever type."[5] After the Great Depression, when businessmen began attracting tourists to the city by highlighting social events such as Mardi Gras, the cries of protest came mainly from "'local cynics'" who were separated economically from the city's business leaders and who "persisted in throwing 'up their hands in holy horror.'"[6] As the values of America as a whole have evolved, the groups that have embraced and denounced tourism have also changed. While Katrina brought to light an insider/outsider distinction, it is important to note that tourism and New Orleans have always shared a somewhat unstable relationship, even while tourism has been so vital to the city's economy.

In an attempt to jumpstart the tourist industry and thus hoping to contribute to the city's economy in a positive way, a couple of New Orleans tour companies have designed tours that take visitors through certain areas of the city which have been destroyed by Katrina, in hopes that they will encourage people to learn the truth about the disaster and that they will bring this knowledge and concern home with them in the form of activism. Deborah McLaren, author of Rethinking Tourism and Ecotravel highlights the importance of tourism as an opportunity to provide a chance to talk with locals about issues that affect them—in this case Katrina and its aftermath—which provides a forum of exchange through listening and learning. She adds that supporting local efforts and creating cross-[state] organization can be a positive aspect of tourism.[7] The two companies undertaking this endeavor are Gray Line Tours and a smaller company called Tours by Isabella. Both companies were greatly diminished as a result of

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[5] Stanonis, 123.
[6] Stanonis, 169.
[7] Deborah McLaren, Rethinking Tourism and Ecotourism. Bloomfield, Connecticut: Kumarian Press, Inc, 2003, 45.

Katrina and both are struggling to survive. Gray Line went from sixty-five employees pre-Katrina to their current staff of six. [8] Tours by Isabelle was started by Isabelle Cossart, a native of Flanders, France who came to New Orleans in 1975 in order to teach. She started her tour company in 1979 and by the summer of 2005, she employed twenty-two people and got about 1,000 visitors on her tours a month. Since Katrina, she has only been able to keep two people on staff and has guided an estimated about forty-five total clients. [9] These are only examples two companies that have been affected, though surely all tourist-related companies in New Orleans have suffered similar downsizing and substantial loss of revenue.

The tour Isabelle herself conducts began several weeks before Gray Line's inaugural disaster tour. Originally, Isabelle's tour took visitors through the Ninth Ward, where destruction was infamous, as well as parts of Chalmette and Lakeview. [10] However, Councilwoman Cynthia Willard-Lewis did not view these tours as a positive way to inform visitors of New Orleans' hardships. The tours are controversial in many locals' eyes and have brought up mixed emotions in New Orleans. The City Council, led by Willard-Lewis, passed an ordinance banning tour buses from the most devastated neighborhoods, including the Ninth Ward, a focal point on Isabelle's tour.[11] Isabelle herself says that, "They think I'm making people gawk at misery for my profit... I want to show [tourists] my state needs help. I'm saying, please don't forget us."[12] Though she and Gray Line are no longer able to enter the Ninth Ward on their tours, there is no shortage of neighborhoods for her tour to pass through that are equally ravaged and representative of the terrible results of Katrina.

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[8] Jim Auchmutey "Katrina's aftermath fascinates New Orleans tours try to win allies for rebuilding efforts" *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (26 February 2006). ProQuest (28 March 2006).
[9] Syd Kearney, "Take guided tour, see a hurricane disaster up close / Immense damage is a reminder of Katrina's fury" *Houston Chronicle* (22 January 2006). ProQuest (27 March 2006).
[10] Kearney
[11] Auchmutey
[12] Kearney

The Gray Line tour, which is entitled, "Hurricane Katrina Tour: America's Greatest Catastrophe", also goes through many destroyed neighborhoods without entering the 9th Ward or New Orleans East. The website (www.graylineneworleans.com) highlights the important aspects of the tour including: that it is narrated by, "licensed tour guides who are local New Orleanians with their own personal Hurricane Katrina stories to tell," that $3.00 of each ticket sale will go to the visitor's pick of four local charities (America's Wetlands, Habitat for Humanity-Musician's Village, Tiptina's Jazz Foundation, or the SPCA), that each passenger will have the opportunity of signing a petition that will be sent to various government officials each week, and finally, that there will be a draft of a letter they can send their legislators asking for federal funding and support for New Orleans. Although the tours have been controversial and Gray Line is making money while showing New Orleanians' losses, it is not just a ploy to make money. Of course, in order to stay in business, tour companies have had to adapt to their new situation, yet the idea of educating outsiders about Katrina from a local perspective seems to be the most constructive thing that they could do in the situation. Though there are many dangers to tourism, including the exploitation of local communities through the consumption of lifestyles and identities in a "thing like form," these tours do not appear to fit this mold.[13] Both Gray Line and Tours by Isabelle do not allow visitors to get off the tour vehicle, which prohibits those on the tour from simply "gawking at misery" as Isabelle phrased it. Rather, the tours are all run by locals who have a personal connection with the city and have no desire to exploit it. In addition, Gray Line's approach has the capability of getting people from all over the country involved in the relief and lobbying efforts by providing a petition and letters to legislators. Bella Dicks, author of Culture on Display: The Production of Contemporary

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[13] Bella Dicks, Culture on Display: The Production of Contemporary Visitability. Berkshire: Open University Press, 2003, 11.

Visitability, warns of some of the dangers of commodifying a culture through tourism. She believes that consumerism, which goes hand in hand with tourism, tends to turn particular cultures into 'quotations' or samples and fragments in the form of souvenirs and museums, rather than allowing for the full expression of complex identities.[14] However, one might argue that Gray Line and Tours by Isabelle are achieving the exact opposite by providing a first-hand look at Katrina's impact. The tours are not selling souvenirs or a piece of New Orleans culture, they are selling the truth about Katrina as seen from a local's perspective, something that the visitor could not have gained without actually being in the city and viewing the damage for themselves. Further, Katrina is a huge part of New Orleans' identity and always will be, therefore it is important for those visiting the city not to just stay within the relatively untouched areas such as the Garden District and the French Quarter. Rather, in order to fully grasp what happened and to ensure that the nation has a better understanding of it, outsiders must be able to view Katrina's impact rather than be sheltered from it. It does no one any good to have visitors returning to their communities and downplaying Katrina's effects after viewing the city and not gaining any real perspective on what happened.

Part of the reason these companies run the tours is because they saw for themselves that showing outsiders the truth allowed for some real potential for change. *The Washington Post* recently ran an article on the Gray Line tour which revealed some of the reasoning involved in creating the tour. Quoting one of the tour guides, Sandi Smith, it shows that the creation of the tour was not merely thought up one day and implemented the next. Rather, there was a lot of thought put into its creation. "She says she and her boss debated the pros and cons of putting together a Hurricane Katrina tour and profiting from the disaster. They decided that the right thing would be to take tourists out to the rubble and ruins to show them that New Orleans is still

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[14] Dicks, 7.

hurting."[15] Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco (D), realizing that many of her state's legislators could not comprehend the scope of the tragedy unless they witnessed it first-hand, organized bus tours for elected officials and saw real changes in their attitudes towards lobbying the government for relief funds.[16] McLaren believes that changing the tourism industry for the better begins with ourselves. She says, "We can read, learn, make personal changes, be more involved in our own communities, pressure governments and corporations, denounce exploitation, [and] change policies...."[17] In a sense, this kind of activism in exactly what these tours are promoting, though it is up to the visitors themselves to follow through. At the very least, it allows people to bring back the story of Katrina to their own hometowns, perhaps inspiring others to write letters or join in the relief effort of merely wish to travel to New Orleans themselves and contribute to the economy and take the tour themselves. At the most, people who attend the tour might start a relief effort in their own towns, or create their own petitions, or send in letters to their legislators and hold meetings at which people in their communities can do the same, which perhaps can further persuade government officials to lobby for allocation of necessary funds to the relief effort. While there continue to be mixed feelings on the issue, it is clear that people in the community do see the importance of educating the rest of the country on what really happened to New Orleans during and after Katrina, and what they can do about it in order to help.

One thing people can do is contribute to the tourist industry by simply traveling to New Orleans and supporting the economy. This year, New Orleans decided to throw Mardi Gras, however it was a much more scaled-down affair. The decision to hold Mardi Gras rendered as

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[15] Linton Weeks, "Bus Tour Of Hurricane Hell; Katrina's Wake Is Gray Line's Hottest Sightseeing Ticket" *The Washington Post* (18 February 2006). ProQuest (28 March 2006).
[16] Weeks
[17] McLaren, 139.

many concerns and as much disapproval as the decision to create the disaster tours. However, some people see the importance of Mardi Gras as a way of saying that New Orleans will not simply lie down and give up. Some think it is important to show that New Orleans can and will survive, with Mardi Gras as a symbol of this determination. In this section of the paper, there will be a comprehensive discussion on Mardi Gras as it relates to New Orleans tourism and whether or not it is in New Orleans' best interest to "party on".

Mardi Gras, as the city's primary tourist attraction, makes many of the smaller tours and festivals pale in comparison. Mardi Gras, when seen as a tourist attraction, does much to define New Orleans for the rest of America, and even for the rest of the world. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Mardi Gras holds even more importance for tourists, both as a curiosity and as a symbol of what New Orleans used to be. In 2006, however, Mardi Gras holds more potency than usual for the residents of New Orleans itself. This brings to light one of the fundamental tensions of Mardi Gras in light of the disaster: the tension between insiders and outsiders. Tied in with this tension is that between New Orleans, and more specifically Mardi Gras, as a tourist attraction and Mardi Gras as potentially disrespectful for those whom the hurricane still affects.

Though the words "Mardi Gras" refer in French to one specific day, Fat Tuesday or the day before Ash Wednesday and the start of the Lenten season, across the world Mardi Gras has come to represent the weeks of debauchery leading up to this day, which is, in the Catholic tradition, the culmination of sin before Ash Wednesday. In New Orleans, preparations for Mardi Gras last all year. At the surface it may seem like a lot of preparation and planning just for the tourists. However, Mardi Gras for those who live in New Orleans is much more than a tourist event. According to poet and essayist Andrei Codrescu, a resident of New Orleans and a commentator for NPR's *All Things Considered*, "In Mardi Gras' 400-year history, the societies

that ruled the krewes (masking and parading social organizations) and parades were the same power brokers that ruled New Orleans."[18] In light of this reality in New Orleans, Mardi Gras is and always has been an example of New Orleans society. Traditionally, there have been krewes, or social clubs, representing many different sectors of society and all putting on parades. The main problem, however, when looking at New Orleans in terms of who puts on the parades is that it takes money to develop and execute these lavish events. As Hurricane Katrina has highlighted some of the discrepancies in race and wealth in New Orleans, it has made problematic some of the very symbols of New Orleans.

Another aspect of New Orleans made particularly relevant by Katrina is the general atmosphere. At base, and especially in the eyes of tourists, Mardi Gras looks like a giant party. "The festival itself, imported from medieval Europe, was a mechanism for letting out the frustrations of the populace," says Codrescu. "Carnival is essentially satirical, depicting folly, vanity and the vices, all the usually hidden flaws of humans . . ."[19] People, for a weekend or for a day, allow their darker sides to be seen. Carnival scholar Mikhail Bakhtin notes that, "The laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life are suspended during carnival."[20] Even residents of New Orleans see this week or so of partying as distinct from the rest of the generally laid-back culture. On St. Patrick's Day this year the police vowed to crack down on the excessive drinking at parades. One parade organizer, John Hurley, has commented that "It's getting out of hand . . . They think it's Mardi

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[18] Andrei Codrescu, "Mardi Gras a parade of raw wounds," *Times Union* (28 February 2006). ProQuest (28 March 2006).

[19] Codrescu
[20] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Carnival and the Carnivalesque," in Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader, ed. John Storey (New York: Pearson Prentice Hall, 1998), 254.

Gras. It's not Mardi Gras. It's St. Patrick's Day."[21] This comment and others like it acknowledge

that Mardi Gras holds a special place with a special spirit for residents and tourists alike. These

unique conditions surrounding Mardi Gras have always existed. New Orleans history scholar

Anthony Stanonis comments about the 1947 Mardi Gras that, "The abandon enjoyed by tourists

walking New Orleans streets on the handful of days leading up to Fat Tuesday depended on the

definition of Mardi Gras as an exceptional time."[22] Mardi Gras' uniqueness compared to normal

New Orleans culture becomes potentially problematic when outsiders come to know New

Orleans through Mardi Gras alone. The feeling of a constant party allows outsiders to overlook

some of the more important tensions that define New Orleans, especially in the wake of

Hurricane Katrina.

As a symbol of New Orleans society Mardi Gras becomes much more than just a party,

much of which the tourist misses if he or she travels to the city mainly for the party. Especially

in the wake of Katrina, with the French Quarter and the Garden District up and running, it was

possible for one to venture all the way down to New Orleans and see little if any of the

devastation that remained from the hurricane. The hardest hit areas are those the farthest from

the party atmosphere and the tourists, which allows Mardi Gras as the main attraction in New

Orleans to mask the deepest-seated problems. A *Washington Times* reporter sums up what

outsiders should really know about the current situation in New Orleans. He points out that,

"Entire sections of New Orleans remain deserted. About 41 percent of the city's pre-Katrina

population has returned -- an estimated 200,000 of 485,000. More than 215,000 houses were

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[21] Brian Ballou and O'Ryan Johnson, "Cops vow crackdown on public boozing at parade," *Boston Herald,*
(17 March 2006). ProQuest (28 March 2006).
　　[22] Stanonis, 141.

destroyed."[23] Reporter Sheldon Alberts from the *National Post* puts it poignantly when she describes the difference between what tourists see and the actual situation of New Orleans. "Venture more than a dozen blocks south or east of the city's lively core and a different New Orleans emerges -- a vast urban wasteland of ruined homes and empty avenues still caked with mud . . . They are communities neither dead nor alive, but caught somewhere in a post-hurricane limbo between revival and collapse, hope and despair."[24]

Heading down to New Orleans this year the tourist would most likely cross a bridge into the city where, out the car window, he or she could see houses with waterlines, debris, and general destruction. However, if traffic was moving at a regular speed, he or she may have briefly commented on the horror of the scene and then moved on to some of the less-harmed areas, such as the Garden District which houses primarily wealthier white families. Once there, he or she might have seen a low-key version of past Mardi Gras. The parades were smaller, fewer people lined the streets than normal, especially on Friday and Saturday of the weekend before Fat Tuesday, but the unassuming visitor would come away with the general feeling that the party was still there. People laughed and joked about the astounding Katrina-related floats. And the beer flowed freely . . . one of the only times and places in the United States with no open-container laws. On Bourbon Street, the crowd was visibly smaller than in years past. Vanderbilt senior Reily Gay, a resident of Baton Rouge who has been attending Mardi Gras all her life, commented that normally one would not be able to walk down the street on the nights of Mardi Gras weekend. Whereas the two-week festival usually brings about $1 billion to the city,

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[23] Guy Taylor, "Katrina not invited to this party," *Washington Times* (28 February 2006). ProQuest (28 March 2006).

[24] Sheldon Alberts, "In New Orleans, not everyone ready to party," *National Post* (25 February 2006). ProQuest (28 March 2006).

many establishments downtown estimated a loss of 40 percent over last year's revenue.[25]

However, many tourists appreciated the smaller crowd. And for many, given the circumstances, it was much larger than expected. City officials in the end called Mardi Gras 2006 a success in terms of the revenue it brought in and the number of tourists it attracted. An estimated 70 percent of the normal crowd showed up to the parades, and much of that could be attributed to bad weather at the beginning of the weekend.[26]

Given the differences between what tourists see and the actual situation in New Orleans, it may seem that tourists should be the ones primarily urging the city to go ahead with their partying. Tourists could be seen primarily as outsiders who lack a correct concept of New Orleans at this crucial point in her history. While there seems to exist a true insider/outsider dichotomy, however, tourists seems to hold a capricious and unstable middle-ground, midway between outsider and insider views in understanding Mardi Gras. Many tourists learned the basic statistics about the situation in New Orleans and chose to go visit anyway, for various reasons. Before we can understand the tourist's point of view, however, it is important to better understand the dichotomy in attitudes between true insiders, or those who have lived and do live currently in New Orleans, and outsiders, people who are not from New Orleans and who refuse to go down to see either the destruction or the partying firsthand.

True outsiders possess a unique view of what should have happened at this crucial juncture, especially concerning whether or not the city should have held Mardi Gras this year. Many Mardi Gras planners heard more than what they had in the past from unhappy American citizens. Beyond the usual few protests saying the Carnival promotes society's degeneration,

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[25] Rukmini Callimachi, "Mardi Gras high on spirit, low in sales," *ABC News*, 1 March 2006, <www.abcnews.go.com> (13 March 2006).
[26] Jeff Duncan, "The good times roll again in New Orleans, as Carnival is deemed a critical success," *Times-Picayune*, (12 March 2006). ProQuest (28 March 2006).

this year America cried that it was even more inappropriate given the circumstances. Well-meaning outsiders who were familiar with the statistics about poverty and destruction were appalled that a city in so much disrepair could hold a celebration and invite others to it. Some call it "a frivolous party" and ask, "how can you celebrate and be happy when so many neighborhoods are still in ruins, when so many New Orleanians are still unable to return, when so many will probably never return, when so many people's lives have been disrupted, ruined or ended?"[27] One concerned Christian argues, "This is a completely disrespectful disregard of the value of human lives and suffering to benefit the few."[28]

Among the dissenters are former insiders who might now unfortunately belong more to the outsider category. Though their hearts may remain true to New Orleans, theirs could be considered a one-sided story, clouded by appropriate but unfortunate bitterness arising from the fact that they are still unable to return, and seeing their former home holding a party with seeming disregard towards their feelings. One refugee describes "them putting on Mardi Gras, without still having not [sic] addressed the basic human needs in this city" explicitly as "a slap in the face." He asks of the reporter who interviewed him, "I can't go home, but they can have a parade?"[29] In the same article, refugee Donna Smith admonishes, "Mardi Gras is the last thing that needed to happen."[30]

In this broken city of New Orleans tourism may be a way of turning outsiders into insiders, of bringing outsiders closer to understanding the way of thinking of current New Orleans citizens and their rationales for, for the most part, embracing Mardi Gras 2006 with an

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[27] "Editorials," *Northwest Florida Daily News* (6 March 2006). ProQuest (28 March 2006).
[28] Tara Lynn Myers, "Letters to the editor: not the time for a celebration," *The Daily News* (3 March 2006). ProQuest (28 March 2006).
[29] Paul Weber, "'I can't go home, but they can have a parade?'" *Chicago Sun-Times* (28 February 2006). ProQuest (28 March 2006).
[30] Weber

unexpected vigor. This transition from outsider to insider is perhaps displayed best by members

of a strange and specific group of people: former New Orleans citizens who returned the first

time for Mardi Gras and expressed a renewed understanding of why, "Some say New Orleans

can't afford to be putting on a party while it is still digging out from Hurricane Katrina. New

Orleans residents say it can't afford not to."[31]

A reporter for the *Times-Picayune* describes his return to New Orleans after seeing the

destruction with poignant words, comparing "New Orleans flipped over on its back" to "a bug

with its legs wiggling helplessly in the air." He describes how driving into the city and seeing

the destruction of the parts of the Ninth Ward that were visible to the highway depressed him.

Then, however, he switches tactics and starts describing the parade floats and their ridiculous

Katrina-related themes. He says, "And dear God, here came Death himself through the streets,

throwing beads, showing his bones, grinning his terrible death-smile. Death's costume was so

great it made me laugh. And I realized I had been laughing for a few minutes now. The Krewe

d'Etat had done the boldest thing imaginable: They had made art of the worst disaster in

American history."[32]

Another float-rider describes a similar experience when he boarded his float. He starts by

asking himself the question "Is such a boisterous spectacle appropriate at a time when the city

remains such a mess?" But, he continues, "the guilt subsided once we pulled onto Napoleon and

I saw the hands and the smiles."[33] On his road back in to New Orleans he realizes what parade

planners and other citizens, true insiders, had known all along about the value of Mardi Gras in

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[31] Bob Dart, "Mardi Gras pokes fun at city's troubles," *Columbus Dispatch* (25 February 2006). ProQuest (28 March 2006).
[32] Mark Childress, "Comedy rises from the darkness," *Times-Picayune* (8 March 2006). ProQuest (28 March 2006).
[33] John Porretto, "Float rider's perspective: New Orleans still loves parades," *The Associated Press* (28 February 2006). ProQuest (28 March 2006).

the face of all the destruction: it is alright, even good, to laugh. Sometimes it is the only thing keeping you going. *Times-Picayune* reporter Mark Childress comments that New Orleans' citizens' ability to "laugh at their own misery . . . is what will save her."[34]

Even tourists, through their trip towards being insiders, can only really understand at the basic level the importance of laughter to New Orleans residents. Laughter lies at the heart of what outsiders did not appreciate about insiders previous to Mardi Gras, and what baffled many tourists who saw it. Laughter has always been a crucial part of carnival all over the world. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, "Genetically it is linked with the most ancient forms of ritual laughter."[35] Besides being "a reaction to crises . . . in the life of the world and of man," this ritual laughter "deals with the very process of change, of crisis itself."[36] The fact that this year carnival indeed followed a crisis explains why it was all the more important for this year's festivities to include a healthy dose of laughter. Psychologist Dr. Janet E. Johnson, associate professor and director of medical-student education at Tulane University, had said that "Humor is considered a mature defense mechanism." She talks about New Orleans' residents' journey through dealing with the destruction and finally ending up with laughter. She says the "cataclysmic event" as well as the way the government handled it "seemed so absurd that people began processing the pain by embracing the ridiculous."[37] Another psychologist points to New Orleanians' laughter as "a remarkably good sign of healing."[38] Certainly not every insider who was able to laugh at the situation embraced it as a defense mechanism, but many realized that they somehow needed it. Mardi Gras historian Arthur Hardy says, ". . . sometimes you have to

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[34] Childress

[35] Bakhtin, 254.

[36] Bakhtin, 254.

[20] P.J. Huffstutter, "Big Easy jokes in misery," *Los Angeles Times* (18 March 2006). ProQuest (28 March 2006).

[38] Bob Dart, "New Orleans parties with a purpose," *The Atlanta-Journal Constitution* (18 February 2006). ProQuest (28 March 2006).

laugh in order not to cry . . . Mardi Gras is group therapy for us."[39] Part of the group therapy

could have been the way citizens used Mardi Gras to reclaim the feeling that even insiders had

lost after Katrina: the feeling that they were back in the old New Orleans. As one citizen points

out, "A flooded house is not a home, but the colors purple, green and gold; the song 'Mardi Gras

Mambo;' the parade ladders along St. Charles Avenue; and somebody's drunk uncle in a goofy

mask singing his fool heart out on Royal Street -- these are home."[40]

New Orleanians used Mardi Gras as a way of laughing at her own situation most

obviously through Carnival's Katrina-themed parades. In these parades, like with ritual laughter

in general, "ridicule was fused with rejoicing."[41] In the tones of many of the parades, especially

the smaller ones not put on by superkrewes like Endymion, Bacchus, and Duendnon, "Nothing

was sacred . . . certainly not the federal government."[42] The krewes employed parody, which is

"organically inherent" to carnival, to the extreme.[43] In some parades, almost every float was

decorated with something referring to FEMA, and the blue tarps that had been serving for

months as people's roofs covered many of the floats. Others embraced images of the insides of

refrigerators filled with maggots. One specific example, the Krewe de Vieux parade, themed its

parade "C'est Levee" and toyed with the idea that New Orleans would have fared better after

Katrina had Napoleon never sold the Louisiana Territory to America.[44]

Perhaps the most interesting implication of using parades as the main vehicle through

which New Orleanians could laugh at themselves is the nature of parades themselves. Viewing

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[39] Dart, "Parties"
[40] James Nolan, "Farewell to flesh on the Isle of Denial," *Times-Picayune* (28 February 2006). ProQuest (28 March 2006).
[41] Bakhtin, 254.
[42] Kim Cobb, "New Orleans' population swells for Fat Tuesday," *Houston Chronicle* (1 March 2006). ProQuest (28 March 2006).
[43] Bakhtin, 254.
[44] Gary Younge, "Zulu royals keep Mardi Gras alive," *The Guardian* (2 March 2006). ProQuest (28 March 2006).

the parades one gets an overwhelming sense of how "much was permitted in the form of laughter that was impermissible in serious form."[45] Parades, especially at Carnival, are places of extreme liminality. Not only do they transform the space through which they travel into a liminal one, this condition of being between fantasy and reality directly affects both the float riders and the spectators. At a Mardi Gras parade one realizes how difficult it is to discern someone's true identity with merely their eyes and nose covered. The costumes and the fact that many parades roll through town under the cover of darkness complicate the issue. This costuming serves a purpose greater than just giving the audience a sense of eeriness, however. It does much more for the float riders. Float riders occupy a place between reality and fantasy. They are no longer identifiable as the person they were before they hopped on the float, whether they were a resident of New Orleans, a returning citizen, or a celebrity. They have become characters, and people who are more readily able to laugh at the situation. By being unidentifiable they allow the audience to laugh with them. Seeing the faces of real people who were affected by the hurricane may be more than New Orleans can deal with at the moment, but it is somehow easier to laugh along with masked faces.

To say that outsiders and even tourists to some extent miss what the parades are all about does not go as far as many New Orleanians would like to go in separating themselves from outsiders. There is something more fundamental missing that someone who has not been through the tragedy itself cannot fully grasp, according to some residents: the experience of the tragedy. Kevin Barre and his wife Marie "wore white coveralls bearing the spray-painted 'X' that denotes a home that has been searched for bodies." For him, this served as a constant

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[45] Bakhtin, 254.

reminder of what it feels like to actually "understand what we've been through."[46] It is easy to imagine that the experience of seeing the coveralls differs from that of wearing them like the experience of seeing the disaster on TV differs from living through any part of it. Codrescu of New Orleans states flatly that, "Outsiders don't understand Mardi Gras" and said of his friend from Massachusetts, one of the outsiders, that she did not "fully understand the nature of our catastrophe, the worst of which was not Hurricane Katrina but flooding of the city through breached levees built by the federal government."[47] This inability to fully share the experience with outsiders and even tourists widens the rift between insiders and outsiders when it comes to Mardi Gras.

Part of this problem of misunderstanding has to do with the fact that Mardi Gras itself actually does mean something different for tourists and for residents, a difference only exacerbated by Katrina. For residents, Mardi Gras represents so much more than the party. Some, especially those with families, don't even experience the aspects that have earned Mardi Gras its reputation for debauchery. Staying in the more family-oriented Garden District and away from the French Quarter allows them to experience Mardi Gras in a different way. For these people, and even for those residents who do indulge, Mardi Gras was a way to "carry on." Even beyond that, "it was a concrete part of the rebuilding."[48] The festival was about reclaiming the city the residents felt they had lost, regaining ground and hope so that the rebuilding they still have left will be less painful and more productive. As a prominent jazz singer told his club, "This year Mardi Gras is about feeling normal."[49]

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[46] Mary Foster, "In New Orleans, reveling is relief following Katrina," *Associated Press* (1 March 2006). ProQuest (28 March 2006).
[47] Codrescu
[48] "Editorials"
[49] Howard Reich, "Fat Tuesday brings the joy back," *Chicago Tribune* (1 March 2006). ProQuest (28 March 2006).

As much as Mardi Gras was about insiders helping themselves internally, outsiders could for the most part understand two other driving forces behind Mardi Gras 2006 that have less to do with emotion and more to do with economics. First of all, Mardi Gras this year helped put New Orleans in a more visible light. In the wake of Katrina, the media paid unprecedented attention to New Orleans. However, much of the country is uncertain at best about the state of New Orleans now that months have passed since the tragedy. Mardi Gras was New Orleans' time to strike a balance between letting outsiders know that there is still work to be done and letting people see that there is enough of the city they remember left to provide hope that it will one day recover. Stephen Perry, president of the New Orleans Metropolitan and Convention Bureau, puts it perhaps most bluntly when he says, "It reversed months of negative imagery. CNN broadcast eight consecutive hours of nonstop coverage. You could not put a price tag on that type of value."[50] As a more nostalgic resident of New Orleans echoes, "I think we need to celebrate to show people we exist."[51]

Tied in with the needed visibility in the media is the monetary benefit that Mardi Gras was expected to, and which it did, bring to a New Orleans whose problems, like in any major American city, have always been tied in with the economy. The vitality of Mardi Gras to the New Orleans tourist-driven economy is not a new concept. After the Great Depression, Stanonis notes, "Although civic leaders initially frowned on subsuming the city's reputation for business to images of Carnival revelry, the same businessmen considered Mardi Gras vital to the city's economic health."[52] New Orleans Mayor C. Ray Nagin did not shy away from the issue when he stated that "New Orleans needed the money from Mardi Gras tourism and homegrown activity to

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[50] Duncan, "Good times"
[51] Duncan, "Good times"
[52] Stanonis, 143.

shore up the city treasury."[53] According to Perry, tourism accounts for about a third of Mardi

Gras revenue. The celebration itself sparked businesses from within New Orleans, "with the

private citizens and krewes that fund Mardi Gras contributing directly to the economy. They pay

for the floats, costumes, beads, doubloons and other direct costs of the parades; this year krewes

also helped to pay for extra security measures."[54] Everything from hotel stays to costume

making to liquor sales on Bourbon Street undeniably brought money into a city where money has

long been the issue. In some cases it is even debatable whether revenue met last year's

standards. On Bourbon Street, Tropical Isle reported an increase over last year while a

neighboring bar, The Cat's Meow, said its revenues decreased by 40 percent, which was typical

for many bars on Bourbon Street. Economically as well as emotionally, for New Orleans

insiders it was, to use Nagin's words, "a party with a purpose."[55]

It might make more sense to an outsider, and to a tourist in his or her struggle to

understand like an insider, to view Mardi Gras this year as a compromise, a concept many

residents acknowledged even while they affirmed its overwhelming value. For after all, there

would be nothing to laugh at, nothing to recover from, and nothing for outsiders not to

understand had the tragedy of Katrina not been at the back of everyone's mind. Even the tourists

noticed it as they caught their brief glimpses of the destruction or overheard snippets of

conversation from the residents. For all of the revelry, Mardi Gras also revealed a compromise

between what insiders really understand about their own and their neighbors' situations and what

they need to do to feel better and have the party they know will be good for them. The

melancholy tone of some residents lent an eerie air to the party theme. Andrew Hunter, a

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[53] Cobb, "Fat Tuesday"
[54] Amber Corrin, "Mardi Gras gives boost to New Orleans," *Charleston Daily Mail* (28 February 2006).
ProQuest (28 March 2006).
[55] Cobb, "Fat Tuesday"

resident who "lost everything," responds to Mardi Gras with the statement, "What the heck. This helps us keep our spirits up, and we need all the help we can get with that."[56] According to a *Washington Post* reporter, "New Orleanians are tired and distracted. On the face of it, they seem normal and as light-hearted as ever, but they are not. [Mardi Gras] is exuberant on the outside, but strange and different and diminished by loss on the inside."[57] New Orleanians choice of Tabasco tycoon Paul McIlhenny as Rex, King of Carnival, represents their understanding of the need to take into consideration everything that Mardi Gras means to the typical insider. He was cognizant of the fact that people "who will be hailing him [on Fat Tuesday] . . . are taking a day off from rebuilding their homes, tussling with insurance companies, and wondering about their futures." Friends described this year's Rex as, "an ideal sovereign who will be able to walk the emotional tightrope, being neither ponderously gloomy nor cluelessly cheerful."[58]

Understanding these mixed feelings that lie behind much of the enthusiasm for Mardi Gras makes it easier to understand those who should be considered insiders since they live in New Orleans but who do not share the overwhelming outward excitement. These people are often the poorest of the poor, residents of the Ninth Ward, Gentilly, or New Orleans East, not the Garden District, and they are often black or poor and white. The category of people that we have been calling insiders may be indeed a false category, or at least a non-inclusive one. Many of the people who talked to reporters around and at Mardi Gras represented the wealthier, whiter population of New Orleans. But it may be that these same people who told outsiders they could not understand what it is truly like to be an insider right now really do not know what it is like for themselves. After all, few would claim that the experience of living in the Ninth Ward is the

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[56] Foster

[57] Linton Weeks and Peter Whoriskey, "Joy is forced for post-Katrina Mardi Gras," *Washington Post* (1 March 2006). ProQuest (28 March 2006).

[58] John Pope, "Rebuilding-year royalty," *Times-Picayune* (28 February 2006). ProQuest (28 March 2006).

same as that of living in the Garden District in years past, and it is certainly not so in the wake of Katrina as one area experienced much more destruction and devastation than the other.

A rift of the insider class now presents itself, with the poorer and the blacker sections both, as usual, less represented, in the media and in the average tourist's mind. The black voice has seen the most obvious silencing, especially in the media but also reflected in Mardi Gras celebrations. Specifically in New Orleans, it seems that two main factors have contributed to this silencing, the first that many black people living, because of segregation, in the hardest hit areas, had to move away and have been unable to return. New Orleans' extreme segregation made it a unique case in that the hurricane forced out not only poor blacks, but wealthier ones as well. Now, in fact, "this shrunken city" is "largely devoid of its black middle and upper classes, while the poorer blacks have begun to return to largely undamaged neighborhoods in the inner city in large numbers."[59]

The second factor contributing to the diminished black voice is that those blacks who still remain or who have returned are not ready to laugh and declined to show up to the party. This factor also affects many poor whites. Once again, the problem of what the tourist sees versus what the insider sees faces the analyst. In light of race and economic difference, it is a difference between what one insider sees and what another insider sees. One man, separated from his family and living on a cruise ship, tells how he still cannot even sleep at night. "Canal Street is lit up like a midway at night, but large areas of Gentilly and the Lower Ninth Ward still don't have electricity. Groups of workers poured beers, sold Lucky Dogs and served fine meals, but many New Orleanians are out of work and far from home."[60] In the light of this, many people still

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[59] Susan Saulny, "No Cinderella story, no ball, no black debutante," *New York Times* (2 March 2006). ProQuest (28 March 2006).
[60] Weeks and Whoriskey, "Joy is forced"

have not emotionally, mentally, and economically reached a place where they can laugh through their troubles and appreciate what Mardi Gras means to many insiders.

One of the main ways to obtain information about the differences along race lines is to look at what has happened to the traditionally black krewes in this year's Mardi Gras versus in times past. Since the krewes consist primarily of upper and middle class people who can afford the private membership fee, the fact that the black krewes are more diminished than the white ones holds special significance in light of the specific racial demographics of the changed New Orleans.

The divided nature of the krewes into black krewes and white krewes reveals much about the racist and unshared past of New Orleans. For example, in 1991 the city passed an ordinance that outlawed discrimination within organizations that participate in Mardi Gras parades. Though the crews are private clubs, during the parades they rely on public funding for many services, including sanitation. A traditionally all-white krewe, Comus, chose to stop parading rather than to start accepting black members.[61] In other instances, as a result of the discrimination they felt, many blacks merely formed their own krewes. The Original Illinois Club was formed by a group of middle class blacks who felt the pressure of discrimination. This year, however, "their notable absences highlight the changed demographics [of New Orleans and Mardi Gras]."[62] Also absent are large portions of the Mardi Gras Indians, an all-black krewe which formed because its members felt they could identify with the experience of the American Indians' displacement. The ones who did march had to practice outside of New Orleans because they have yet to return to their homes.[63]

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[61] Saulny

[62] Saulny

[63] Jon Pareles, "Mardi Gras exalts in its old self, if only for a moment," *New York Times* (1 March 2006). ProQuest (28 March 2006).

The Zulu krewe provides perhaps the most well-known and poignant example of what has happened to the black krewes. According to its chairman, the krewe's membership is down to 250 from last year's 600 members.[64] Recently, 10 members died due to "health problems triggered or aggravated by Katrina."[65] The controversy over whether the krewe should participate in Mardi Gras, or whether the city should have Mardi Gras at all this year, is a microcosm of the country's feelings as a whole. David Belfield, a former Zulu King, spoke out wholeheartedly against Mardi Gras. He protests, "'I love Mardi Gras,'" but calls "the decision to hold the festivities 'shameful.'"[66] However, other members of the krewe, though many of them are not currently New Orleans residents, were able to anticipate what many other former New Orleans residents missed until they returned and got on the float. One man echoes the voices of many when he responds with an enthusiastic, "If we're serious about rebuilding the city, then we had to have Mardi Gras."[67] They even chose to end their route with a "second line" parade, when they got off their floats and marched down the street "back to club headquarters in a flood-washed section of northwest New Orleans" in the traditional New Orleans ending to a funeral.[68] Perhaps because of their special place as the most visible black krewe, even these displaced residents realized the importance of Carnival at this important time in New Orleans history. They also had the wisdom to echo the underlying uncertainty and melancholy with which so many others turned to Mardi Gras: "'It doesn't mean we're back to normal.'"[69]

Though it is quite possible that New Orleans may never return to 'normal' it is clear that it will never be the same city again. Katrina is now a very important part of New Orleans

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[64] Weeks and Whoriskey, "Joy is forced"

[65] Kim Cobb, "Zulus put aside their suffering," *Houston Chronicle* (28 February 2006). ProQuest (28 March 2006).

[66] Younge

[67] Younge

[68] Cobb, "Zulus"

[69] Younge

history, one that must never be forgotten. By incorporating the pain and distress New Orleans is experiencing into Mardi Gras, the city ensured that this year's festivities would not ignore its present state of disarray. Though as outsiders ourselves, we will never be able to truly understand what it was like to live through Katrina and see our beloved city and homes destroyed, it seems important for New Orleans to send a message to the rest of the country and the world that although Katrina was a terrible tragedy, New Orleans will rebuild and thrive once more. The city has begun to do just that by hosting tours of the disaster zone as Gray Line and Tours by Isabelle have done and increasing awareness and outsider activism in the process. New Orleans also accomplished awareness and kept their spirits up by throwing Mardi Gras with a new view to speaking their minds about the state of their city. These steps to renewal may seem small, but with time and effort, they have the possibility of growing in scope and power to create a large impact on the city and greater America. With help from respectful and concerned citizens of New Orleans and tourists around the country, there is a real chance that the tourist industry in New Orleans can benefit the city and those who visit it beyond the time these visitors spend there. With new awareness and understanding within the context of its geography and America as a whole, the Re-Newed Orleans can be a more socially conscious city with new hopes and goals for the future.

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Re-Newing New Orleans: Is New Urbanism What New Orleans Really Needs?

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AMST 297: American Studies Senior Project

Professor Elizabeth Boyd

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Re-Newing New Orleans: Is New Urbanism What New Orleans Really Needs?

"We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but

God did." So spoke Representative Richard H. Baker, a ten-term Republican from Baton

Rouge, regarding the unique opportunity he – along with many other Louisianans – feels

has been presented due to the catastrophic devastation that resulted from Hurricane

Katrina.[1] New Orleans has always been hailed as one of America's most distinctive,

romantic, and beloved cities in terms of culture, history, and spirit. Yet, the sobering

reality too often lost in the midst of the excitement, vibrancy, and zest of America's city

of indulgence is that New Orleans has been declining in both relative and absolute terms

since the 1960s. Further, little was being done in the years before Katrina to turn the city

around or to protect it from ultimate disaster.

Kennedy School of Government professor Edward Glaser painted a dire picture of

the state of pre-Katrina New Orleans in a *Salon.com* September 2005 panel discussion,

describing New Orleans as "an expensive locale with a mediocre climate and a history of

terrible government" whose population has declined almost ten percent (or by forty

thousand people) between 2000 and 2004.[2] Before the storm, high poverty levels, racial

discrimination, housing affordability constraints, education inequalities, and crime

plagued the city. According to the 2000 census, almost thirty percent of the New Orleans

population was at or below the national poverty line and nearly one-fifth of New

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[1] Charles Babington, "Some GOP Legislators Hit Jarring Notes in Addressing Katrina,"*Washingtonpost.com*, 10 September 2005, < http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/09/AR2005090901930.html > (4 March 2006).

[2] Joan Walsh, "After the Deluge, What Next? Part 2," *Salon.com*, 29 September 2005, < http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2005/09/29/rebuilding_new_orleans_2/index_np.html > (25 February 2006).

Orleanians received food stamps totaling over $101 million annually.[3] Thirty-one percent of New Orleans African American families – compared with five percent of white families – were below the poverty line and, according to a Brookings Institute compilation of New Orleans census data, nearly all public housing residents were African American.[4] In 2000, New Orleans was one of the ten most segregated metropolitan areas in the country and one of the top five cities for the least amount of decline in segregation between 1980 and 2000.[5]

In terms of housing affordability, while the median income of New Orleans homes in 2000 was a mere $27,133 and the median income for a family $32,338 (the per capita income for the city as a whole was $17,258),[6] the median house value was $87,300, the median rent asked for vacant units was $380, and the median gross rent in New Orleans was $488.[7] The metropolitan region's fair market rents – $578 for a one–bedroom unit and $676 for a two-bedroom unit – were put into perspective in a National Low Income Housing Coalition 2004 report which explained that these numbers "far exceed the means of low-income residents" in that "a worker earning the federal minimum wage of $5.15 would need to work 100 hours a week to afford a two-bedroom unit at fair market rent."[8] As for education, New Orleans, like most major U.S. cities, had

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[3] "Katrina: Demographics of a Disaster," *The Urban Institute*, 9 September 2005, < http://www.urban.org/uploadedpdf/900835_katrina_factsheet.pdf > (25 February 2006).
[4] Angela Glover Blackwell, "Policy Link: Lifting Up What Works - Equitable Gulf Coast Renewal: Creating Housing Opportunity Through Inclusionary Zoning," *AmericanProgress.org*, 12 October 2005, < http://www.americanprogress.org/atf/cf/%7BE9245FE4-9A2B-43C7-A5215D6FF2E06E03%7D/policylink _brief.pdf > (26 February 2006).
[5] Rachel A. Woldoff, "Katrina, Race, and Place: A Sociological Look at a 'Natural Disaster," *Starting Over: Loss and Renewal in Katrina's Aftermath*, < http://katrinaproject.journalism.wvu.edu/Dialogues/ katrina.htm > (25 February 2006).
[6] "New Orleans, Louisiana," *E-Podunk: The Power of Place*, 2006 < http://www.epodunk.com/cgi-bin/incomeCommute.php?locIndex=3502 > (5 April, 2006).
[7] "New Orleans, Louisiana," *City-Data.com*, < http://www.city-data.com/city/New-Orleans-Louisiana.html> (13 March 2006).
[8] Blackwell.

a largely segregated public school system pre-Katrina that was the direct result of largely segregated residential patterns. Sixty-five percent of New Orleans public schools in 2004 did not meet the state's standards – an especially disturbing statistic when one also considers that New Orleans' central city school district had the largest African American enrollment in the country (almost ninety-three percent) among such schools.[9] Crime statistics are equally startling in that while the U.S. crime index in 2003 was 329.7, New Orleans scored well above the national average with a 575.3.[10] According to an August 2005 MSNBC article, the city's homicide rate – after a decade of steady improvement from being the country's murder capital in 1993 – had climbed to nearly ten times the national average, a phenomenon officials attribute to public apathy, racial division, and a dysfunctional court system.[11]

So whether one believes that the devastation of (and after) Hurricane Katrina represented providential interference – as Representative Baker suggests – or simply views it as a man-made disaster caused by faulty levees, one must concede that New Orleans was clearly a city in dire need of rebuilding even before the Katrina disaster. A big part of the problem faced by those now attempting to rebuild New Orleans is the bifurcated nature of the city both socially and geographically. At the mouth of the hurricane-prone Gulf of Mexico and surrounded by the Mississippi River to the south, Lake Borgne to the east, and Lake Ponchartrain to the north, New Orleans was a disaster waiting to happen.

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[9] Woldoff.

[10] "New Orleans, Louisiana," *City-Data.com*.

[11] Associated Press, "New Orleans Murder Rate on the Rise Again: Homicide Rate Nowhere Near '94 Peak But Still 10 Times National Average," *MSNBC.com*, 18 August 2005, < http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/8999837/ > (13 March 2006).

Katrina made landfall on August 29, 2005 (the eye of the storm passing within ten

to fifteen miles of New Orleans) and ripped through New Orleans with power, timing,

and placement that were perfectly wrong. The city – which should have suffered from

heavy rains and strong winds downing trees – was left drowning in its own engineering

disaster when the 17th Street, Industrial, and London Avenue canals were breached.[12]

Built solely to avert flooding, these three levees failed, filling seventy-five percent of the

city with rushing water reaching a depth of twenty-five feet in some neighborhoods.[13]

As a result of the event, which has been referred to as the "largest civil

engineering disaster in the history of the United States," more than thirteen hundred plus

people lost their lives,[14] around two thousand residents are still deemed missing,[15] and

hundreds of thousands of families have been displaced.[16] In sum, three hundred and

seventy-four thousand New Orleans residents became evacuees residing in temporary

housing including shelters, hotels, the homes of friends and family, and FEMA trailers.[17]

The estimated damages are now well into the billions, climbing daily, and early estimates

speculate that the disaster and its aftermath for New Orleans will ultimately end up

costing more than fifty billion dollars.[18] And yet in the wake of the disaster – despite

traumatizing personal experiences, extensive property damage, the devastation of St.

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[12] MSNBC Staff, "Efforts to Revive New Orleans Get Back in Gear: Mayor Pushes Ahead with Plan to Allow Residents of Some Areas to Return," *MSNBC.com*, 25 September 2005, < http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9438536/ > (6 April 2006).
[13] Ibid.
[14] Eliott C. McLaughlin, "No More Hurricane Katrinas," *CNN.com*, 7 April 2006, < http://www.cnn.com/2006/WEATHER/04/06/hurricane.names/index.html > (7 April 2006).
[15] "Fewer Than 2,000 Still Missing from Katrina," *Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals*, 22 February 2006, < http://www.dhh.louisiana.gov/offices/news.asp?ID=192&Detail=803 > (6 April 2006).
[16] Ivor Van Heerden, *CNN Presents: Katrina, State of Emergency* (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2005), 176.
[17] Ibid.
[18] McLaughlin.

Bernard and Orleans Parishes,[19] and the desperate state the city was in even before the hurricane hit – fifty percent of the residents have made it clear that they have every intention of moving back to New Orleans and calling it home once again.[20] Consequently, the question on every New Orleans city planners' mind is where will *home* be and what will it be like?

The pressing issue of where to put returning New Orleans residents has become quite controversial. Katrina exposed the truth of New Orleans and, for that matter, of so many other American cities: neighborhoods segregated along lines of race and class and concentrated poverty within these areas due to decades of urban sprawl. New Orleans, however, is unique in terms of its sprawling in that the city itself was constructed on natural levees comprised of soft silt, clay, and sand sediments, which is the reason why the city has been sinking at a rate of about three feet every one hundred years.[21] The city had nowhere to expand until engineer A. Baldwin Wood realized that he could drain the back swamps surrounding New Orleans due to revolutionary improvements he had made on pumps and drainage techniques in the early twentieth century.[22] As a result, the city expanded from the higher ground near the river and natural ridges and sprawled into former swamplands and flood-prone areas. In the post-war years, the metropolitan area was expanding into the newly drained swampland at such a rapid rate that the area of metropolitan New Orleans doubled in size between 1950 and 1975.[23] The fear of racial

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[19] Thomas Gabe, Gene Falk, Maggie McCarty, and Virginia W. Mason, "Hurricane Katrina: Social-Demographic Characteristics of Impacted Areas," *CRS Report for Congress*, 4 November 2005, < http://www.gnocdc.org/reports/crsrept.pdf> (13 March 2006).
[20] Van Heerden, 176.
[21] Edward Haas, "New Orleans," *Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia*, 2005, < http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761554180/New_Orleans.html#s8> (26 February 2006).
[22] Peirce E. Lewis, *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape* (Santa Fe: Center for American Places, 2003).
[23] Lewis, 76.

integration being imposed on residents of the inner city resulted in another explosion of migration – a "white flight" into the suburbs in the 1960s. This resulted in the alienation of black and white populations; the introduction of newer, more homogenous, less architecturally diverse neighborhoods; and, the decay of inner-city – mostly African American – neighborhoods and public services.[24]

Yet, with seventy-five to eighty percent of the city flooded, Katrina took its toll on all segments of the population – both rich and poor. In looking at the quality and make-up of the land New Orleans rests on, it should come as no surprise there is a direct correlation between severity of flood damage in a given neighborhood and how low or high the land on which the area sits. When looking at maps, it appears that the portions of the city that were developed before 1900 – like Old Carrollton, Uptown, the Old Warehouse District, the French Quarter, Old Marigny, Bywater Espanade Ridge, Bayou St. John, Gentilly Ridge – and those built from mid-twentieth century dredging – like the set of Lake Shore developments between Lake Ponchartrain and Robert E. Lee Boulevard – were initially built on substantially higher ground along the river front and natural ridges.

While these older and higher areas were spared from the serious devastation, the lower and more flood vulnerable region of the city the Metro area had the most catastrophic damage, predominantly due to the storm surge and flooding that was channeled by the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (a fact that comes as little surprise given its low-land value and subsequent susceptibility to flooding).[25] Out of the three hundred and fifty-four thousand people who received moderate to severe damage in the disaster,

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[24] Lewis, 70.
[25] David Remnick, "High Water: How Presidents and Citizens React to Disaster," *The New Yorker Online*, 26 September 2005, < http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/articles/051003fa_fact > (6 April 2006).

nearly all were residents of this area – which includes both St. Bernard and Orleans parishes.[26] Seventy-five percent were black, twenty-nine percent lived below the poverty line, and more than ten percent were unemployed at the time of the storm.[27] One of the hardest hit and poorest sections of New Orleans was the Lower Ninth Ward, which had flooding up to twenty feet high in its neighborhoods. This area, which according to the 2000 census had a poverty level of over thirty-six percent and half of its residents living on less that $20,000 a year, was one of the last regions of the city to be developed due to its poor drainage system and its swampy land. Consequently, it became home to mainly poor African Americans and immigrant laborers who could not afford to live anywhere else.[28] Yet, as previously stated, all socio-economic and racial groups were affected by the storm, as seen in the fact that while sixty-six percent of Orleans Parish residents were black, eighty-eight percent of the arguably harder hit St. Bernard Parish were white.[29] The unfortunate reality here, however, comes with the important difference that lies between "most affected" and "most able to recover" – a difference that reminds us not only of the situation of New Orleans' poor population today but also the plight they faced before Katrina. So, while the hurricane and levees themselves may not have discriminated in that they destroyed everything in their paths, the disaster shed a very needed light on discrimination that was already present.

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[26]MSNBC Staff, "Study: New Orleans Could Lose Most Blacks – University Analysis Looks at Areas Hit Hardest and Who Lived There," *MSNBC.com*, 27 January 2006, < http://msnbc.msn.com/id/11060175/http://www.brown.edu/Administration/News_Bureau/2005-06/05-068.html) > (4 March 2006).

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

[29] David Billings, "New Orleans: A Choice Between Destruction and Reparations," *Fellowship of Reconciliation*. 2005 November/December. < http://www.forusa.org/fellowship/nov-dec_05/billings.html > (13 March 2006).

Maps and statistics regarding New Orleans reinforces the disturbing reality of the structure and conditions of the city pre-Katrina and force us all to recognize the implications that they have for not only the future of New Orleans but also the American city in a post-Katrina world. Concentrated poverty, racial segregation, and the discrimination that lies at the heart of urban sprawl are not unique problems and social phenomena of New Orleans but are unfortunately prevalent in most of America's multiracial, socio-economically diverse metropolitan areas. Unfortunately, socio-economic and urban renewal cycles in cities usually take decades to bring about tangible results – gentrification and other evolutionary changes are gradual and take time. But New Orleans has a unique opportunity to "cheat" the cycle in rebuilding the city to accommodate the half million people who long for home. Of the many and varied options for rebuilding, the concept of "new urbanism" often comes to the forefront of discussion.

The History of New Urbanism and Its Possibilities for the Future of New Orleans

Originally, the concept of new urbanism came as the answer to the problem of urban sprawl. Most everyone knows of the post World War II flight to the suburbs. Neighborhoods such as Levittown, New Jersey – America's first true suburb – are more than just houses: they symbolize the changing socio-demographic layout of America in the early 1950s.[30] The origins of the movement toward the suburbs can be traced even further back. Between 1900 and 1920, America saw car ownership skyrocket from eight thousand to eight million.[31] Higher numbers of cars meant better road systems in and

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[30] Sarah Ann Brownell, *The New Urbanism: An Alternative to Suburban Sprawl?* Vanderbilt University Thesis (M.A. in Art History), 1999, 8.
[31] Ibid.

out of cities.[32] As cities became more crowded with both people and cars, the suburbs seemed the perfect answer. Between 1950 and 1970, while the population of American cities collectively grew by ten million people, the suburbs of those cities grew by eighty-five million people.[33] The American dream flourished with larger houses and a yard enclosed by a white picket fence. Of course, the faces in the neighborhood were as white as the fences. Segregation occurred along lines of both race and class. Further, the movement of the middle and upper class to the periphery had a great impact economically on cities.[34] As money -- in forms of both consumer spending and the tax base -- moved away, downtown areas became increasingly destitute.

Of course "suburbia" has come with its own set of problems. Americans have become stuck in the car for a majority of their day-to-day errands. Architect and city planner Robert Davis puts this into perspective in stating, "We see this world through a windshield; we experience the public realm in a state of road rage."[35] The notion of the "corner store" has changed into the mega-strip malls run by large corporations.[36] No longer do people support the "ma and pop" stores of their neighbors and friends, but instead they frequent Wal-Mart. Walking in and out of a business, people have become faceless and nameless. Interaction has become limited to, "paper or plastic?" Long commutes and a decreased sense of community has resulted in American families living in large houses yet feeling isolated.

Clearly, the basic structure of suburban areas does not encourage neighborly interaction and bonding. Cities, which had previously provided a more-conducive

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[32] Ibid, 2.
[33] Ibid, 3.
[34] Ibid, 2.
[35]Todd Bressi, *The Seaside Debates: A Critique of the New Urbanism* (New York: Rizzoli, 2002), 7.
[36] Brownell, 6.

environment for social interaction, have become desolate and dangerous. The solution

lies in changing the structure of neighborhoods themselves. Former Vice President Al

Gore pinpoints the problems surrounding modern suburbia in a speech about the

importance of city planning:

> Many of our walkable main streets have emptied out and
> their small shops closed, one by one, leaving a night time
> vacuum for crime and disorder... The ill-thought-out
> sprawl, hastily developed around our nation's cities, has
> turned what used to be friendly, easy suburbs into lonely
> cul-de-sacs... In many such developments, an absence of
> sidewalks, amenities, and green spaces discourages
> walking, bicycling, and planting... A livable suburb or city
> is one that lets us get home after work fast so we can spend
> more time with friends and family and less time stuck in
> traffic.[37]

For many progressive architects and developers, new urbanism is the model that

holds the solution for many of the aforementioned problems -- with some of its

proponents even going as far as to proclaim the movement as a potential panacea for

some of America's most problematic cities. According to urban social theorist Michael

Bounds, "the movement... confront(s) the contemporary problems that beset all our cities:

problems of urban sprawl, crime, environmental degradation and alienation" -- the very

issues that historically have haunted New Orleans.[38] According to its proponents, the new

urbanism model accomplishes this through the "[promotion],... creation, and restoration

of diverse, walkable, compact, vibrant, (and) mixed-use communities..." that include the

"housing, work places, shops, entertainment, schools, parks, and civic facilities [that are]

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[37] Bressi, 39.
[38] Michael Bounds, *Urban Social Theory: City, Self, and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 111.

essential to the daily lives of the residents."[39] "Slowness," inclusiveness, and boundaries are the three central values that lie at the heart of the new urbanism movement and the means through which new urbanists bring about a greater sense of community within the neighborhood.[40] *Slowness* is the notion that the neighborhood itself should be accessible and is accomplished by building the community up around a "city center" that can be reached via a five-minute walk from any given location.[41] This layout fosters increased interaction between neighbors and consequently a stronger sense of community. The second value, *inclusiveness*, means bringing together groups of people from a variety of economic backgrounds, thus enabling neighborhoods to transcend divisions of race and class.[42] Lastly, new urbanism places great importance on neighborhoods having clearly defined *boundaries*. In theory, such borders give rise to a shared community identity – one that compels residents to become more personally invested in their neighborhood's preservation.[43]

Along with these three central values, the new urbanism movement is guided by ten key principles, all of which would *ideally* be present in a truly new urbanist community. Neighborhoods, for starters, need to be *walkable*, with houses and businesses in close proximity of one another. Streets should be easily navigable and laid out so that they promote *connectivity* throughout the neighborhoods. Housing, businesses, and schools should all be constructed close to one another – and intermixed – so that any given area in a neighborhood is *mixed use* with people being able to work, shop, and live

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[39] "New Urbanism: Creating Livable Sustainable Communities," *New Urbanism.org.* < http://www.newurbanism.org/pages/416429/index.htm > (20 February 2006).
[40] Bressi, 25.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Bressi, 41.
[43] Bressi, 25.

all in the same vicinity. *Mixed housing* should also be prevalent with a variety of housing types – condominiums, homes, and apartments – being available and affordable for a variety of household incomes. Homes, furthermore, should all reflect a similar architectural style – as outlined by the *quality architecture & urban design* principle – not only for aesthetics but also because it will visually give a community a shared identity. As stated previously, clearly defined neighborhood boundaries are also critical in that they promote a *traditional neighborhood structure*, which increases personal investment among residents in the community. *High density* is also a goal in these neighborhoods in that it is a more resourceful use of space and results in a greater number of residences, shops, and businesses available for locals – and within that five-minute walk of the city center. Public transit systems and other forms of *smart transportation* must also be created so that residents can travel throughout the city without such a heavy reliance on automobiles. *Sustainability* is another key aspect to the model and is achieved as a result of the minimal use of resources and impact on the surrounding environment that come from high density and walkability. Ultimately, new urbanist theory holds that if these principles are implemented in a community, a higher q*uality of life* will emerge as a result – a quality that will enable people of varying backgrounds to come together both to work and to live.[44]

When one takes these principles and considers them in the context of New Orleans, the new urbanism movement appears to touch upon some ideas and improvements that could very well have an important impact in the city's reconstruction. For one, new urbanism's focus on high density and self-sustainable communities that maximize space and place less pressure on natural resources are especially important in a

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[44] Ibid.

city like New Orleans. In rebuilding, developers are going to have to finally accept and

respect that it is dangerous for New Orleans to continue to sprawl out onto the drained

swamp land that surrounds the city and that high density – like it or not – is part of New

Orleans' future. Furthermore, planners are going to have to come to terms with the fact

that – even though the city's resources are depleted and many areas need funds for

reconstruction – a majority of the city's money is going to have to be invested into

developing and constructing stronger levees for the sub-sea level city.[45] Pre-Katrina,

seventy-seven percent of New Orleans workers traveled by car, truck, van, or motorcycle

to work every morning with an average commute time of twenty-six minutes for

commuters with their own means of transportation and forty-six minutes for those who

depended on public transportation.[46] By decreasing commute times and promoting

community living, new urbanism's mixed use neighborhoods would allow people to live

and work in a closer vicinity and result in less pollution from high traffic and more time

for people to spend with their families.

Furthermore, more advanced, smarter forms of transportation are also going to

need to be a priority in post-Katrina New Orleans – forms that cover more routes than the

three streetcar lines (the St. Charles line, the Riverfront line, and the Canal Street line)

and the bus routes that put those who rely on public transport at such an obvious

disadvantage.[47] Architecturally speaking, new urbanism's quality architecture and urban

design principle would fit well in a city like New Orleans that is known for its memorable

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[45] Julie Galle, "Vulnerable Cities: New Orleans, LA," *Local Weater.com*, 2006, < http://www.weather.com/newscenter/specialreports/hurricanes/vulnerablecities/neworleans.html > (5 April, 2006).
[46] "Transportation – New Orleans, Louisiana," *E-Podunk: The Power of Place*, 2006 < http://www.epodunk.com/cgi-bin/incomeCommute.php?locIndex=3502 > (13 March, 2006).
[47] "New Orleans: 'Tis the Season to Be Jolly – Streetcars Return," *Light Rail Now.org*, December 2005, < http://www.lightrailnow.org/news/n_no_2005-12a.htm > (6 April 2006).

streetscapes and distinctive historic neighborhoods, each of which stylistically reflect a particular culture — whether it be French, Spanish, Caribbean, or African — and style — whether it be the creole cottages and townhouses in Esplande Ridge, the California-style bungalows of Gentilly Terrace, or the raised center-hall villas found in the Garden District.[48] Andres Duany — the mastermind behind the new urban "beta test" community of Seaside, Florida and guru of the movement — sees much of this potential for New Orleans. Despite being a "very complicated place, very unique," he feels it is one that "must be preserved at all cost," and, like Representative Richard Baker, sees New Orleans as having an "unprecedented opportunity to do something about (the) many problems it had."[49]

And yet, despite Duany's optimism and the promise that many see when they apply the principles of new urbanism to a post-Katrina New Orleans, many detractors of new urbanism are convinced that the movement's theoretically perfect neighborhoods are nothing more than unreasonable (and somewhat naïve) ideals. Alex Krieger, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, for one, believes that new urbanism actually reinforces many of the problems facing American cities in that it creates even more isolated, inwardly-looking sub-divisions and neighborhoods within the larger city.[50] Furthermore, Krieger feels that these communities by design are flawed in that they make themselves vulnerable to outside influences from the start by relying solely on private management and placing complete control of their neighborhoods in the hands of developers who may not have the community's best interests at heart. Other detractors

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[48] "New Orleans Architectural Styles," *NewOrleansOnline.com*, < ttp://www.neworleansonline.com/neworleans/architecture/archtypes.html > (25 February 2006).
[49] Doug MacCash, "New Orleans: New Urbanism?" *The Seattle Times Online*, 16 November 2005 < http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/nationworld/2002626329 _neworleans16.html > (17 February 2006).
[50] Bressi, 51.

simply feel that new urbanism fails to offer innovative solutions to the problems of loss

of community and decaying inner city areas in that the movement focuses too much on

building new communities and not enough on investing in and fixing the old.[51]

While each of these detractions make compelling arguments, one of the most

convincing arguments against – and seemingly insurmountable problems of – new

urbanism emerges when one realizes how high the cost of living is in existing new

urbanist communities. Homes sell for an average of $400,000 in Seaside, Florida,

$450,000 in Laguna West, California, and an astonishing $600,000 in the Kentlands in

Washington D.C.[52] Detractor Michael Bounds makes his disdain for the movement clear

in regards to housing prices, asserting that "there is no mystery about for whom this new

urbanism is built. The design styles distill the most traditional social assumptions of

gender, class, and race... The past evoked [by Seaside] is the narrowest and most elitist

of the founding fantasies."[53] When put in the context of a city like New Orleans, where

the median house value, according to 2000 census data, was $87,300 and the median

household income was a mere $27,133, one cannot help but appreciate Bounds'

frustrations and question how viable new urbanism could really be for returning

hurricane-displaced residents of varying socio-economic status. Some would even go as

far as to describe the notion as naïve and impossible. A recent article in the Boston

Globe further places this problem into perspective noting that,

> Before the storm, more than four of 10 poor blacks in New
> Orleans lived in neighborhoods that were 40 percent or
> more poor... The city was among a very few in America
> where *racial segregation actually worsened during the*
> *1990s...* An extensive body of social science research

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[51] Ibid.
[52] Brownell, 65.
[53] Bounds, 200.

>concludes that racially segregated and high-poverty
>communities undermine the life chances of families and
>children, cutting off access to mainstream social and
>economic opportunities. We must avoid re-segregating
>New Orleans's poor and minority residents in isolated and
>distressed neighborhoods. (emphasis added).[54]

Another popular argument of new urbanism detractors comes from those who feel

that these communities by design would in fact reinforce segregation by building more

buffers between individuals and communities by encouraging strict neighborhood

boundaries. New urbanism in the opinion of these critics encourages self-absorbed, high-

priced, and exclusive neighborhoods -- a notion that causes great worry to those residents

who hope New Orleans planners will make racial and socio-economic integration a

priority in their reconstruction efforts. Citizens have watched segregation along lines of

race and class actually worsen in New Orleans over the last few decades, resulting in

poor government subsidized housing, cramped living conditions in poorer

neighborhoods, and educational inequalities that have perpetuated violence, poor health,

and a declining quality of life. The meaning of *structural inequality* has been felt on the

most literal and personal level in New Orleans -- and even before Katrina resulted in

those with the means to do so living as far away from the inner-city as possible. The

bifurcated social geography that this created allowed the "haves" to become more and

more detached from the plight of the "have-nots" -- a plight that Katrina (for better or

worse) placed back in the national spotlight and their individual consciences. For this

group of detractors, new urbanism might bring the "haves" geographically closer to the

city but will continue to keep them socially and economically as segregated as before.

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[54] Xavier de Souza Briggs and Margery Austin Turner, "Fairness in New New Orleans,"
TheUrbanInstitute.com. 5 October 2005 < http://www.urban.org/publications/900886.html > (25 February
2006).

This segregated structure is exactly what New Orleans' residents wish to avoid. In an article in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Whitney Gould explores the resistance that new urbanism has felt with respect to this issue. Gould references the work of Reed Kroloff, dean of Tulane's school of architecture, who blasts the new urbanism concept declaring that the "nostalgic, Disney version of tomorrow and revival-style, touch me, come to Jesus 'marketing techniques,'" of the movement will unquestionably "reinvent the hierarchical structures of the Old South."[55] Kroloff furthermore feels that new urbanism is "a one-size-fits-all approach to city design…" and proclaims that "in a city like New Orleans, where the patterns are already established, we don't need [the Congress of New Urbanism] to tell us how to rebuild. We know how to make a city. So go home, CNU."[56] Yet, thinking back to the state of New Orleans prior to Katrina, a rebuilding of the old structure – while perhaps not marking a return to the Old South – would without question do little to alleviate the problems of segregation along the lines of race and class. Listening to Kroloff, one cannot help but ask: "Does New Orleans in fact *really* know how to build a city?" And if the answer is "no," "Will New Orleans be willing to change its own ways – and does it even want to?"

New Orleans is a beloved city with a rich tradition and history – the type of city where resistance to change is all the more amplified. As Gould satirically comments, "Those poor new urbanists. To witness the drubbing they're taking from some of their critics, you'd think this movement of neo- traditional architects and planners was

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[55] Whitney Gould, "Spaces After Hurricane Katrina, Vision for Rebuilding Runs Into a Storm," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Online.* 12 December 2005. < http://proquest.umi.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/ pqdweb?index=4&did=940302861&SrchMode=1&sid=1&Fmt=3&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=30 9&VName=PQD&TS=1142804327&clientId=2335 > (25 February 2006).
[56] Gould.

peddling crack to babies."[57] With such resistance, one is confronted with the question of how New Orleans goes about rebuilding homes, reinventing neighborhood structure, and retaining their historic identity. Can new urbanism enable city planners to correct the problems that have plagued the city for decades while realistically accommodating everyone from the CEOs to the low-wage hospitality industry employer to those on welfare? In order to truly assess the validity of the arguments made by both new urbanism proponents and its detractors, one must look at how some of America's troubled inner-cities have implemented the movement's principles in their efforts to provide affordable housing and simultaneously work to transcend divisions of race and class.

A Case Study: The Hill District in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

It is clear that new urbanism works for high income areas, but the critical question is this: can new urbanism's principles be modified for a city like New Orleans so that the new urbanism model fits not only low-income needs but also government subsidized housing projects? One new urbanism community seems to have done just that – Crawford Square of the Hill District in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In an article titled *New Urbanism in the Inner City: A Case Study of Pittsburgh*, writers Sabina Deitrick and Cliff Ellis state, "Many critics seem unaware of the extent to which new urbanists are involved in projects that are not conversions of farmland on the urban fringe, but rather are located in revitalizing, older industrial neighborhoods."[58] In fact, Deitrick and Ellis go on to claim that they believe that the practical design application of new urbanism can easily be applied to "infill" projects – that is, revitalizing rundown urban areas – at an affordable

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[57] Gould.

[58] Sabina Deitrick and Cliff Ellis, "New Urbanism in the Inner City: A Case Study of Pittsburgh," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 70 iss. 4 (2004): 2.

cost. Deitrick and Ellis' main assertion is this: that new urbanism is simply a design principal. Thus, it can be adapted to fit other neighborhood models – not just beach towns and expensive suburban communities.[59] They use the Hill District in Pittsburg as an example of this main point.

The Hill District is a community adjacent to downtown Pittsburgh. Urban Design Associates, the developer of the community, began working on the Hill District's Crawford Square in 1990. Crawford Square is a four hundred and twenty-seven unit residential area that has a mixture of homeowners, renters, and government-subsidized housing.[60] The developers used the Hope VI grant – an endowment from the U.S. Department of Housing and Community Development that gives federal money to abolish run-down public housing and encourage decentralizing its residents – to combine new urbanism principles to government subsidized housing.

Historically, the Hill District community had deteriorated since the steel industry went into wane in the seventies.[61] Similar to the declining state of New Orleans at the time of Katrina, the Pittsburgh area lost one hundred and fifteen thousand manufacturing jobs between 1980 and 1986.[62] Further, while the national employment rate grew, Pittsburgh's dropped by eight percent.[63] Economic leaders realized that they needed to make advances in the economy to counter the declining steel industry – Pittsburgh's bread and butter; thus, the city's economy moved away from manufacturing to service industry jobs.[64] The city now leads the nation in employment areas such as health care,

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[59] Ibid.
[60] Bressi, 67.
[61] Deitrick and Ellis, 3.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.

education, and the financial sector.[65] These advances were made possible through a

pairing of community development corporations (CDCs) and non-profits that worked

toward revitalizing the city.[66] One aspect of this revival came in the early nineties with

the re-development of the Hill District.

A critical aspect of the community development was the role of the CDCs. As

Deitrick and Ellis explain, "CDCs have emerged over a nearly forty year history as

important suppliers of affordable housing in the U.S. conceived to bring about the social,

economic, and physical revitalization of their communities and to improve residents'

lives."[67] CDCs have evolved in their role in the community throughout this forty year

period, moving from the role of supplying housing to that of community development.

Thus, CDCs seek economic revival of downtrodden areas and demand measurable

outcomes of their success.[68] Deitrick and Ellis point to the irony that CDCs have stressed

community development, yet many have overlooked the viability of applying the new

urbanist model. They state,

> More attention should be paid to urban design community
> development because good design can improve the
> quality, durability, marketability, and community
> acceptance of inner-city revitalization efforts. Subsidized
> new urbanist projects can also enhance community
> efforts to promote housing integration and diversity...
> [The] Pittsburgh case study shows successful unions
> between community development and new urbanism
> based on a reciprocal learning experience between
> architects and community groups.[69]

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[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Deitrick and Ellis, 2.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Deitrick and Ellis, 3.

Thus, the approach that Urban Design Associates took in revitalizing the Crawford

Square area was not based on the contractor's plans, but instead from the community's

perspective in a strategy that worked from the ground up. Communication between

community residents and contractors allowed for the development of an affordable,

livable city.

Crawford Square was the first government-subsidized new urbanism community

in Pittsburgh. (Others have since developed in the city due to Crawford Square's success.

The community provides a fitting parallel to the more damaged areas of New Orleans in

the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, as the demographic for the area is about seventy

percent black with only twenty percent owning homes.[70] Also similar to the harder hit

areas of New Orleans, the Crawford Square neighborhood relies heavily on rental and

government subsidized housing. Crawford Square has over 400 units on 18 acres; in

phase I and II there are two hundred and seventy four rental units and forty-seven owner-

occupied houses, and phase III has seventy-four rental units and twenty for-sale houses.[71]

In order to provide the affordable housing, the developer used a low income tax credit for

the rental units.[72] Mortgage subsidies were used on the first two phases of the for-sale

houses, and the prices were set at $90,000-120,000 (compared to the median home-owner

costs of $87,300 in New Orleans pre-Katrina).[73] The last phase of housing went for

around $200,000, and, obviously, was not government subsidized. Yet this high-end

housing proves crucial in the new urbanist model, as wealthier family dwellings bring a

greater diversity of community members and more income into the area.

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[70] Bressi, 73.
[71] Deitrick and Ellis, 5.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid.

Community input greatly shaped the nature of the not only housing in Crawford Square but also the structure of the broader neighborhood.[74] Community members stressed the notion of connectivity, as they demanded more easily navigable streets with direct access to downtown. Secondly, the inclusion of local parks and open space revitalized the feeling of a shared space. The parks also contributed to a scenic view of downtown, which allowed for the building of more extravagant homes along the parks' edge.[75] These homes, which were part of phase III, attracted wealthier homeowners who also had the means to invest in the community.[76] The importance of aesthetics was also translated into the layout of the city streets in that the parking was hidden from view, located behind the housing units. Thus, the area looked and felt more like a walkable, livable city.[77] Further, the buildings themselves were designed and built to look like the architectural style of old Pittsburgh.[78] As Deitrick and Ellis note, "The Pittsburgh projects examined here are not theme parks or 'unreal' urban fragments. On the contrary, they are the very real future that was selected by local residents and community development."[79] The Crawford Square community wanted to go back to its roots, evoking a shared past that also invests in its future. As one can easily see, retaining of community identity through historic neighborhood preservation is not necessarily lost in the new urbanist model. Crawford Square challenges the belief that new urbanism only supports wealthy areas and is a "Disneyfication" of community living. Crawford Square is affordable and accessible to a variety of incomes, and further, has turned around a downtrodden

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[74] Bressi, 69.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Bressi, 70.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Deitrick and Ellis, 10.
[79] Deitrick and Ellis, 2.

metropolitan neighborhood into a livable community that embraces the look and feel of historic Pittsburgh.

Conclusion

In the effort to rebuild, New Orleans city officials must be honest in their assessment of the cities needs -- considering the problems and shortcomings of the city both pre- and post-Katrina. New Orleans has been declining since the 1960s in terms of its economy, education, segregation, crime, and poverty. Hurricane Katrina exposed a city in which the poor were living in substandard public housing with few opportunities and support services to escape the cycle of intergenerational poverty. Segregation of neighborhoods along lines of race and class "blinded" those with the means to help the plight of the poor, and gave the poor little hope that a better life was attainable. Corrupt city officials provided poor leadership, as little was done to protect the city from the threat of natural disaster whose potential had been on the horizon for years. Thus, New Orleans finds itself in the unique position to be a city which has suffered the ultimate low of destruction and devastation, yet has the heart and soul to come back even stronger. The key to success will come from city planning that openly recognizes New Orleans' faults and simultaneously celebrates its identity as a historic city.

Pittsburgh's revitalization of the Hill District's Crawford Square provides the critical insights into the way in which New Orleans city planners could apply the new urbanism model in renewing the devastated areas of the city. For New Orleans' developers, the critical component lies in making sure that community members have input in the way in which their communities will be reconstructed. Urban Design Associates (the developer responsible for Crawford Square) president Ray Gindroz

emphasizes the importance of community input. He states, "People living in cities understand how neighborhoods work. People responsible for building them don't... the process raises the consciousness of what a neighborhood is so people can start communicating."[80] For New Orleans' residents – who share both a history of segregation along lines of race and class along with a loss of community due to the devastation of homes and businesses caused by Hurricane Katrina – the new urbanism model could jumpstart the movement home for displaced residents by creating both housing and economic opportunities.

With the help of city planners, architects, developers, and community input, New Orleans can create a city that embodies the core principles of new urbanism – a livable city, shared by the community, accommodating a variety of economic levels – that also still looks and feels like the historic New Orleans that Americans know and love. Further, the new urbanism model, since it accounts for a mixed community of housing, shops, and businesses, might also provides a much-needed economic uplift to government subsidized areas. By creating opportunities for both housing and employment, new urbanism principles can help break some of the economic cycles of public housing and employment prevalent in pre-Katrina New Orleans and help jumpstart the New Orleans economy in the wake of the disaster. New Orleans has the chance to come back better and stronger – and as an example to other American cities – so long as detractors of new urbanism do not cause city decision makers to throw out the new urbanism baby with the bathwater.

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[80] Deitrick and Ellis, 10.

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Educational Problems and Possibilities in

Post-Katrina New Orleans

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Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent flooding of New Orleans have forced mainstream America to recognize the many problems within a large city's social organization and physical infrastructure. Prior to Katrina, the majority of public schools in New Orleans had been classified as underperforming or failing according to the standards of the No Child Left Behind Act. The destruction of much of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina not only drastically reduced the population of the city, but also destroyed much of the already crumbling school system. Hurricane Katrina has presented the city of New Orleans with the unique opportunity to rebuild its system of public education into one that is an effective social and academic institution. With the destruction of the schools has come the opportunity to implement innovative educational practices and to renew public confidence in the city's public education system.

The crisis facing schools in New Orleans is by no means unique to that city; urban districts across the nation face many of the same problems, and will be looking to New Orleans during this period of reconstruction for possible ways to improve urban public education. Hurricane Katrina was incredibly powerful and destructive, but we are optimistic that New Orleans' public schools will be better as a result of the hurricane's interference in the city. The problems in New Orleans' public schools were systemic and entrenched; Katrina has revealed the drastic and definitive nature of change required to revolutionize public education and to address its numerous problems. We are hopeful that if New Orleans can implement a successful model of public education in the city, other districts will be inspired to overcome the reluctance to forsake traditional practices in education in favor of a system that can not only address, but can also provide solutions for, the complicated issues surrounding urban public education in America.

Many in education, including those at the local, state and even federal levels, view Katrina's destruction of New Orleans as an opportunity to implement innovative practices and policies in education to improve the school system. Because many residents have been unable to return to the city, the population of New Orleans has decreased and the racial composition of the city is therefore much different. New Orleans' population was seventy percent African-American before Katrina, and experts predict that the city will lose up to eighty percent of its black population, and will experience significant gains in its Hispanic population.[1] In the light of these changes, New Orleans has the opportunity to reform its schools and to explore progressive, innovative practices through charter schools, public schools that operate under a charter agreement meant to hold them accountable for student achievement. The Louisiana State Board of Education (BOE) has seized control of the schools in New Orleans. The State BOE has reconstituted these schools either under its control or as charter schools. The majority of schools currently operating in New Orleans are charter schools. This unique concentration and preponderance of charter schools necessitates investigation into the viability of the model as a means to improve public education in New Orleans.

The first section of this paper will examine the causes of school failure in New Orleans to determine what changes must be made in the educational system as the city begins to rebuild if it hopes to avoid a return to those problems. While many of the problems in New Orleans' schools are common to most urban schools, we believe New Orleans' unique cultural and geographic history have played a pivotal role in the decline of the city's public school system. The second section of this paper will discuss the

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[1] MSNBC Staff. "Study: New Orleans Could Lose Most Blacks," http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/11060175/ (accessed January 29, 2006).

changes occurring in post-Katrina New Orleans as a limited number of schools have reopened their doors. Because the vast majority of schools currently in operation in the city are organized as charter schools, the final section of this paper will analyze the problems and possibilities of charter schools, with special focus on the viability of such a model in New Orleans.

We believe that residential and economic segregation in New Orleans are two of the major factors contributing to the failure of New Orleans' public schools, and that while charters schools have potential to bring huge changes to education, unless the standard problems of urban education, such as poor funding, segregation and a self-fulfilling cycle of low expectations, are addressed, there will be no permanent change in education in New Orleans. We are also concerned about the efficacy of a shift to a charter school model of public education, because we believe the charter model is not a guaranteed method, but one of problematic potential. We will investigate the successes and problems of charter schools outside Louisiana, and through this project will make conclusions about the possibility of improving academic achievement in New Orleans through charter schools. We believe that charters will bring important innovations to schools in New Orleans, but that unless these schools make a concentrated effort to avoid the problems that plagued schools prior to Katrina, the schools will only be a different façade in education and will not constitute real academic improvement.

New Orleans has the opportunity to implement a new system of education that, if successful, could influence educational practice throughout the United States. Significant improvement of the schools will also encourage people with school-age children to return to or move to New Orleans, which is crucial if New Orleanians hope to revitalize the city.

The educational problems plaguing New Orleans are not unique to that area. If New Orleans discovers a means to improve failing schools, this information could be applied to other struggling districts to raise the level of academic achievement in those areas. Katrina has revealed that the underperformance of schools is a multi-faceted problem which can only be addressed through drastic changes in the school system. Katrina has forced the New Orleans school system to make drastic changes, and the system appears to be moving away from the traditional model of public education. What New Orleans does in public education in light of Katrina has the potential to set the tone for other districts, and the success of schools will largely determine the future of New Orleans.

Why New Orleans' Schools Were Failing

There is no question that America's system of public education is rife with problems, and that the great disparity between suburban schools and urban schools must be addressed in order to improve public school districts. In high-poverty urban districts such as New Orleans, more than seventy five percent of students in public schools failed to achieve at even the "basic" reading level expected for children their age.[2] Urban districts face numerous hurdles in their attempts to educate their students; these districts strive to overcome financial burdens that negatively impact academic achievement, such as the inability to obtain qualified teachers, as they cannot offer competitive salaries to entice the best and brightest educators. Issues of pay and safety have driven many teachers away from urban districts, and in their desperate need for educators, urban schools have begun hiring uncertified teachers. Studies in urban education have revealed that "urban school districts are twice as likely as non-urban districts to hire uncertified

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[2] Henig, Jeffrey, Richard Hula, Marion Orr, and Desiree Pedescleaux. *The Color of School Reform: Race, Politics, and The Challenge of Urban Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3.

teachers."[3] Corwin and Schneider assert that the amount of experience a teacher

possesses is responsible for forty percent of student achievement increases; in urban

districts like New Orleans, the absence of qualified, experienced teachers is closely

linked with the failure of the public schools to prepare their students for academic

success.[4] Schools in urban districts also struggle to create and maintain a relationship

with the community that encourages academic achievement. Unfortunately, the racial and

socio-economic composition of these schools only aggravates these problems. Statistical

analysis reveals that the majority of the schools labeled underperforming or failing under

the provisions of No Child Left Behind are not only located in high-poverty areas, but are

also comprised of racially and ethnically diverse student populations.[5] The achievement

gap between white students and students of other ethnicities continues to grow as urban

districts become increasingly segregated and poverty-stricken. America's schools are

more segregated now than they have been since the end of legally-sanctioned

segregation. The segregation of public schools is both racial and economic, as two thirds

of black children attend high-poverty schools, while only twenty seven percent of white

children are in poverty schools.[6] As New Orleans begins to rebuild its public education

system, issues of race and poverty must be addressed, in order to avoid a return to a

segregated school system that is detrimental both socially and academically for its

students.

  Racial segregation is particularly problematic in New Orleans. As a Southern city,

problems of race and education have plagued New Orleans for decades. The legally-

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[3] Henig, et al., 3.
[4] Ronald Corwin and E. Joseph Schneider, *The School Choice Hoax: Fixing America's Public Schools* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishing, 2005), 192.
[5] Henig, et al, 11.
[6] Henig, et al., 12.

enforced segregation following the Civil War became socially- and economically-
enforced segregation in the wake of the controversy surrounding attempts to desegregate
the public school system in 1960.[7] Although some scholars blame factors such as outside
agitation and the elite's opposition to the integration of schools for the racial tensions in
New Orleans, the issues surrounding race and public education in New Orleans are
complex.[8] The process of desegregating public schools began in 1951, when ninety-five
percent of parents at a meeting of the Ninth Ward Civic Improvement League voted to
file a suit against the New Orleans Parish School Board citing the unconstitutionality of
segregation. The NAACP filed *Bush vs. Orleans Parish School Board* in 1952 in an
attempt to argue that segregation in public schools was illegal.[9] Uncertain of their
chances of victory in the courts, the authors of the suit included a clause asking the courts
to enforce the ruling of the *Plessy vs. Fergusson* case, which stated that schools were to
be "separate but equal," in the event that segregation was ruled legal. The suit did not
succeed in desegregating the schools, and it was not until *Brown vs. the Board of
Education* in 1954 that the Supreme Court overturned *Plessy vs. Ferguson* and made
segregation illegal.[10] In spite of the ruling, the New Orleans public school system made
very little progress towards the desegregation of public schools, and in 1956 Judge Skelly
Wright ruled in the *Bush vs. Orleans Parish School Board* that the Louisiana segregation
rules were invalid. Judge Wright's ruling encouraged public school officials to put
together a plan for integration, but the New Orleans Parish Board still failed to make any

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[7] Henig, et al, 11.
[8] Alan Wieder, The New Orleans School Crisis of 1960: Causes and Consequences, (*Phylon*, Vol. 48, No.2 (2nd Qtr., 1987)), 122-131.
[9] Wieder, 124.
[10] Wieder, 124.

progress towards desegregation until Judge Wright officially ordered the schools to desegregate in the fall of 1960.[11]

The first two schools to integrate were McDonough 19 and Franz, both elementary schools in Orleans parish. On November 1, 1960, violence erupted all over the city as five black girls attended their first day of school in a desegregated school. As U.S. Marshals escorted these well-dressed girls into their new school, the children were greeted with an awful sight. As Peirce Lewis describes it, "a group of white women stood in conspicuous locations, shrieking obscenities at the children, while a mob of admirers egged them on with cries of encouragement."[12] This scene is indicative of the bitter aversion and violent controversy that was to follow the desegregation of New Orleans' public schools. Unwilling to send their children to the integrated Orleans parish public schools, many white parents began moving their families to Jefferson Parish. Nearly all white at the time, Jefferson Parish offered a new suburban environment in which these parents felt there was no risk of blacks attending their schools. As a result of this white flight, the demographics of Orleans parish shifted dramatically, and the population changed from a 2:1 white majority in 1950 to a 3:1 black majority in 2000.[13] Even though white flight out of the New Orleans slowed in the 1980's, the population of the district became overwhelmingly African-American because very few whites were returning to Orleans Parish. The public schools suffered immensely as a result of these population shifts because the majority of middle and upper class families of all ethnicities had left the city between 1960 and 1980, taking the tax base to support the schools with

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[11] Wieder, 125.
[12] Peirce Lewis, *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: The Center for American Places, 2003), 126.
[13] Lewis, 127.

them into the suburbs. The New Orleans public schools continued to worsen as the level of segregation and the concentration of poverty increased in the district. This historical overview demonstrates that the problems of race and segregation revealed in media coverage of Hurricane Katrina are not new; the people of New Orleans have a long, stubbornly-maintained tradition of racial segregation, especially in their system of public education. Katrina brought to national attention a pattern of segregation in urban school districts that exists in many cities across the nation, and reinforced the need for change in the structure of public education and the organization of cities in order to avoid the level of social and economic decay that plagued New Orleans before Katrina.

The legacy of segregation in New Orleans' public schools is directly reflected in student test scores. The state of Louisiana requires all tenth and eleventh grade students to take and pass graduation exit exams as a measure of academic success and failure in the schools. A student must retake the test until he or she earns a passing score, and must earn passing scores in all sections before he or she can receive a high school diploma. Test data from the 1990s revealed that the black students in New Orleans scored considerably lower than the white students on all three of the required exams (math, language arts and writing comprehension). This is not too surprising because black students from urban public schools traditionally score lower than white students on these exit exams. The more significant fact is that the scores of black students in Orleans Parish were also lower than the average scores for black students across the state of Louisiana.[14] This trend of poor performance on standardized tests is only one of the factors considered in a 1999 report that ranked the New Orleans public schools last among the sixty-seven

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[14] Carl Bankston and Stephen Caldas, *A Troubled Dream: The Promise and Failure of School Desegregation in Louisiana* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002), 73-74.

school districts in Louisiana.[15] New Orleans recognized the need for change, but did not actively address the societal problems plaguing urban education such as poverty, racial segregation and the dissolution of a stable home environment. Instead, the Board of Education hired former Marine Corps officer Alphonse Davis (who served until June 2002) to head the schools.[16] Davis had no background in education, but the Board believed that his strong military experience would enable Davis to rigorously challenge and change the failing system. As the school system rebuilds in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, it must, now more than ever, seek the counsel and leadership of those with the experience and expertise to change the failing system of education. Strong, effective leadership is crucial to any school's success, and New Orleans must seek such leadership for its public school system in order to inspire significant improvement in academic achievement.

As one would expect, Davis's tenure did not spur the New Orleans schools to success. The state of the schools became increasingly abysmal, as the most recent Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) testing has unequivocally established. In the New Orleans district, 63 percent of fourth graders failed the math portion and 44 percent failed the English portion, compared to 35 percent and 21 percent failure in these subjects statewide. The results for eighth graders were even more dismal: 70 percent of Orleans Parish eighth graders failed the math section and 45 percent failed English. Statewide, the failure rate was 40 percent for math and 21 percent for English. New Orleans' students are not only failing the exit exams, they are failing them at a much

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[15] Bankston and Caldas, 75. See attached chart for a more detailed analysis of the Graduation Exit Exams.
[16] "Amato named superintendent of New Orleans schools," *The Louisiana Weekly* (February 10, 2003), http://www.louisianaweekly.com/weekly/news/articlegate.pl?20030210k (accessed April 2, 2006).

greater percentage than students from other areas of Louisiana. The fact that twice as many eighth grade students failed the math exam in New Orleans' public schools than in the rest of the state indicates that the differences in the quality of education in New Orleans is significantly inferior to that of other, equally poor, areas of Louisiana. Results from the LEAP tests also revealed that five schools in the Orleans Parish had more than 90 percent failure rates.[17] In 1999 results from the LEAP exams revealed that fifty of the fifty-seven lowest performing schools in all of Louisiana were in Orleans Parish.[18] At that time, the New Orleans district numbers a few over one hundred schools, meaning that half of its schools were ranked the worst schools in the state. New Orleans' public schools proved themselves to be unsuccessful at all grade levels, and in need of drastic and immediate intervention.

Unfortunately, the problems destroying New Orleans' schools are much more than failing test scores. The New Orleans public school system is rife with corruption and has been forced to make huge concessions to an entrenched teachers' union. Between 2004 and 2006, twenty-four school officials were indicted on federal charges, such as racketeering and embezzlement, and by the spring of 2006, fifteen had already pled guilty. Federal investigators also discovered enormous financial malfeasance in the district when the school system could not account for the expenditure of seventy one million dollars. After an extensive audit, most of the money was found, and the situation blamed on faulty record keeping. The audit also revealed a system riddled with payroll errors; paychecks were often late and inaccurate, and many teachers were being paid for excessive overtime hours for up to fifty weeks of the year. The most striking discovery of

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[17] Bankston and Caldas, 75.
[18] See figure 2 for more data on the failing schools of New Orleans Parish in comparison to the statewide statistics.

the audit was that the New Orleans school district has had an employee on paid leave for thirty years.[19] The financial problems plaguing New Orleans' schools not only affected classroom resources and payroll, but it also provided an impetus for the district's teachers to organize into powerful unions. Due to the powerful presence of the teachers' union, teachers in New Orleans were a huge influence on school policy and hiring practices. While teacher involvement is necessary for a successful school, the New Orleans union was notorious for "coddling incompetent teachers and stifling moves toward a more innovative curriculum."[20] The union was so powerful that schools could not hire non-union teachers, had difficulty firing unionized, but incompetent teachers, and were forced to give union teachers tenure after only three years in the system. As a result, New Orleans' schools were burdened with many unqualified, unsuccessful teachers who are protected under tenure and union policies. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the new charter schools, free from union requirements, gave teachers from the New Orleans public school system tests in grammar and math as a prerequisite for hiring, and 50 of the 250 teachers tested failed the test.[21] The import of this statistic is that one-fifth of these teachers, all of whom were working in the public schools prior to the hurricane, could not pass rudimentary math and grammar exams, which immediately challenges their qualifications to educate students about these subjects. The teachers' union in New Orleans was able to gain so much control as the result of poor working conditions in the system, and once entrenched, the union itself contributed to the decline of the district's public schools.

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[19] "New Orleans Troubled Schools Get Overhauled," (www.abcnews.com/US/wireStory?id=1687129), 1-4.
[20] Steve Ritea, "N.O. teachers union loses its force in storm's wake," (*The Times-Picayune*, 5 March 2006).
[21] Ibid.

The reasons behind the failure and the horrible conditions of the Orleans Parish schools are complex and numerous. The failure cannot be traced to one or two factors, but to the unique combination of problems facing urban schools in general and New Orleans in particular. One of the most easily identified and greatest contributors to the problems in New Orleans is the instability of the district's financial situation. There is both a lack of funding and an appalling mismanagement of available funds in the city, and now that these problems have been recognized and most of the old infrastructure of New Orleans has been destroyed, it is possible that the city can rebuild its system with wisdom and integrity. The financial problems of New Orleans' schools are directly linked to its less qualified personnel and lack of resources, both of which education experts believe lead to a lower level of educational success. In addition to financial considerations, many scholars agree that white (and middle-class black) flight from the district has only exacerbated the problems. Along with white flight, the segregated schools of New Orleans are attributed to the movement of the white families still in Orleans Parish to non-public schools, primarily parochial schools.[22] The district is not only high-poverty, but it is also high-crime; few highly qualified, experienced teachers are willing to work in such an environment, and even fewer middle-class families are willing to live in such an area.

In New Orleans the segregation of the schools is based on socio-economic status more than on race, but the unfortunate fact is that in the United States, race and poverty are closely linked. Some scholars argue that the struggle for minorities to obtain access to equitable education in New Orleans has left many people within the African-American community disheartened by and mistrustful of public education. The expression of these

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[22] Lewis, 99-100

feelings has frequently been classified as a lack of educational ambition within the black community of New Orleans because the people know their schools are so terrible that completing one's education in them is not likely to aid one in his or her future.[23] As this situation remained in place for decades, there are now generations of blacks who, deprived of a good education, have little faith in the public schools of New Orleans. These conditions also perpetuated poor public education in New Orleans as the bad schools were keeping middle and upper class families from moving to New Orleans, which left the school system without access to sources of funding within the community, and the school system had no way to improve.[24] New Orleans public education before Hurricane Katrina struggled with large problems including unqualified teachers, irresponsible financial practices, segregation, and increasing amounts of failing students. The situation was dire, and New Orleans needed an intervention to salvage its public school system.

Interventions: Louisiana and Katrina

In 2005, the well-known and long-standing problems in New Orleans' public schools, coupled with the performance requirements of the federal government's No Child Left Behind legislation, led the Louisiana State Board of Education to take drastic action. After the test results for the 2004-2005 school year were released, sixty-eight schools in the district were labeled as failing and almost ninety percent of the schools were labeled underperforming.[25] In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina swept into New Orleans, and with the failure of the levees in crucial areas, much of the city, including

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[23] Lewis, 129.
[24] Lewis, 129-131.
[25] April Capochino, "Who has the authority to determine the future of New Orleans Public Schools?" (*New Orleans City Business*, 21 November 2005), sec. News.

many of its public schools, was heavily damaged or destroyed. The Board of Education

voted to make a decisive and unprecedented intervention into the New Orleans district,

and along with political leaders such as Louisiana's Governor Kathleen Blanco, urged the

Louisiana State Legislature to pass legislation seizing control of failing and

underperforming schools in the district. In November 2005, the legislature passed a bill

allowing the state to wrest control of 102 of the system's 117 schools from district

governance.[26] Under the provisions of the seizure, the failing and underperforming

schools will be placed in a state-run "recovery district" until 2010 when the status of the

schools will be reevaluated.[27] Until that time, schools in the recovery district will be run

either by the state or by independent foundations, universities, and non-profit educational

organizations as charter schools. The organizations running these recovery district

schools will report to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), not the

district school board. The BESE is actively seeking proposals from nonprofits and other

organizations to run the schools under its control, and because the Board controls all but a

handful of the schools in the New Orleans public school district, the changes

implemented in recovery schools have the potential to radically alter the state of

education in New Orleans. Several of the nonprofit organizations running recovery

district schools are also opening additional campuses in the area, and as a result, the state

has not needed to reopen any of the recovery districts schools under its governance.[28] The

Department of Education is seeking "high quality, nonprofit providers with a proven

track record of improving educational achievement" to run the recovery schools, but

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[26] Kevin McGill, "Final approval granted for state takeover of New Orleans schools," (*The Associated Press State and Local Wire*, 22 November 2005), sec. State and Regional.
[27] Steve Ritea, "LA won't run N.O. schools by itself; BESE to start taking nonprofits' proposals," (*The Times-Picayune*, 3 January 2006), sec. Metro.
[28] Ibid.

these providers are not required to be charter school organizations.[29] The Bring Back

New Orleans Commission, organized after Hurricane Katrina to consider the best way to

rebuild the city, advocates in its report on education the benefits of "fundamentally

changing the way the city's public schools are run in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina,

including giving principals more control and parents a choice between district and charter

schools organized into "clusters" of eight to fourteen schools."[30] Bring Back New

Orleans Commission Education Committee Chairman and Tulane University President

Scott Cowen has said that "charters are part of the long-term solution, but are not the

exclusive long-term solution," but at this point in the rebuilding, charter schools have

become the dominant form of public education in New Orleans.[31] His claim is also

somewhat misleading, as the recommendations of the Commission are all qualities found

charter schools. Charter schools may not be the only option New Orleans is considering,

but as Cecil Picard, State Superintendent of Education, has stated, "after Katrina,

chartering schools turned out to be the most expedient and quickest way to jump start the

system because federal dollars were immediately available for them," and with a

projected deficit of $111 million by June and an estimated $1 billion in losses, New

Orleans desperately needs those federal dollars in order to run its public schools.[32] New

Orleans has made a definite shift towards charter schools in its plan for rebuilding the

city's schools; what remains to be seen is if and how this shift will impact the quality of

public education in New Orleans.

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[29] April Capochino, "LA Dept. of Education looks for 'best of best' to run New Orleans recovery schools," (*New Orleans CityBusiness*,31 January 2006), sec. News.
[30] Joe Gyan, "School operation changes proposed," (*(Baton Rouge) Advocate*, 18 January 2006), sec. A.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Sharon Cohen, "New Orleans' troubled schools get overhaul" (*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 4 March 2006).

After Hurricane Katrina, the population of New Orleans declined dramatically—an effect that has been beneficial for a school system in transition. As the New Orleans system moves to a new model for public education, it will be able to begin with a much smaller system, and many people in education are optimistic that the new model will be much more successful as a result of the smaller number of students and schools involved in the piloting process. Hurricane Katrina has offered New Orleans not only a clean slate from which it can restructure and repair its failing school system; it has also brought the necessary attention and scrutiny to the situation in order to begin the process of effecting change. The underperformance and failure of most New Orleans district schools was not a secret prior to the hurricane, but little was being done to correct the problems. The combination of drastic state intervention and the destruction of Katrina has forced the public school system out of complacency and into change. At present, the form of that change has been a shift to a majority charter school district. With all eyes on New Orleans, the city faces not only the awesome responsibility of rebuilding its schools, but also the pressure of being a testing ground for educational innovations that could revolutionize all of America's public schools.

Possibilities for New Orleans' Schools

Now that the need for drastic reform in New Orleans' schools has been recognized, one of the possibilities at the forefront of the reform movement is the idea of charter schools. Though not the only possibility, the majority of the schools now operating in New Orleans are running on a charter model. The preponderance and concentration of charter schools in New Orleans necessitates investigation. In addition to the issues surrounding the organization of success of the schools, it is important to

consider how and if charters, as a form of public education, will avoid the problems that devastated New Orleans' public schools prior to Hurricane Katrina.

Charter Schools: Problematic Potential

In the most basic terms, charter schools are public schools that exchange the opportunity to become more autonomous for the requirement that they become more accountable. A charter school submits a plan of action, educational philosophy and organizational structure to an authorizing agency, and if approved is licensed to operate and to receive public funds for a pre-determined period. If the school fails to meet its academic goals, its charter can be revoked and the school closed. In exchange for this increased level of accountability, a charter school is able to create its own style and plan of education, and has much more flexibility than other public schools to implement innovative practices. Like regular public schools, charters receive public funds based on enrollment, but unlike regular public schools, charters can decide how to appropriate the funds and all students choose to enroll there, regardless of the location of their homes.[33] What is unique about charter schools is their accountability to elected officials, authorization boards, the parents of students who choose to attend the school, the teachers who choose to work at the school and the private or community donors who help finance the school. When the model functions correctly, all of these groups monitor the charter school and the achievement of its students and hold the school accountable when students do not learn. The scrutiny of accountability is necessary for improvement in a district like New Orleans, which is notorious for the low performance of its students. Whether charter schools become a large and lasting feature of public schooling in New Orleans or not, the

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[33] Paul Hill, Robin Lake and Mary Beth Celio, *Charter Schools and Accountability in Public Education* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2002), 4.

accountability facet of their function must be incorporated into the plan to revitalize public education in New Orleans. The New Orleans public school district is a glaring example of what can happen in a district that does not hold its schools accountable for student failure.

It seems obvious that New Orleans should adopt a model of education that requires more accountability of the part of its schools, but an accountability model is not unsusceptible to potential pitfalls. For charter schools to be accountable, the authorizing agency must uphold its responsibility to monitor the schools. Hill, Lake and Celio offer statistical evidence from their extensive study of charter schools that demonstrates that "many government agencies have not clarified their expectations of and oversight processes regarding charter schools," leaving the schools without any actual accountability.[34] The destruction of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina expedited the usually slow introduction of new approaches in public education, and the authorizing agency, in this case the Louisiana Board of Education, now faces additional responsibilities. As the authorizer, the Board must monitor the new charter schools it authorizes and is responsible for holding the schools accountable to their charters and for student achievement. If the Louisiana Board of Education does not enumerate and enforce clear expectations and monitoring processes, and does not devote staff to these tasks, the charter schools of New Orleans will likely have no more accountability than the district schools had prior to Hurricane Katrina. Without accountability, the charter school will not be a good option for New Orleans, and the improvement so desperately needed in the district's schools will not occur. Another potential pitfall for charters is that most authorizers have demonstrated a reluctance to close those schools that fail to succeed,

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[34] Hill, Lake and Celio, 3.

though they have the power to do so, because the regular schools are not performing well either, and authorizers fear that revoking the charters of poor-performing charter schools while doing nothing to correct the problems at poor-performing regular public schools would draw public animosity. Studies of charter schools have shown that "nationwide, only four charter schools have been closed by their authorizers for poor academic performance;" if the Louisiana Board of Education is not willing to close failing charter schools, these schools will have no motivation to improve and public education in New Orleans will continue to be a blight on the city.[35] This is not a problem unique to New Orleans, as other studies have found that "no government agencies were prepared to oversee [charters]" and most have "little organizational capacity to develop the new expertise they need," but in New Orleans the problem may be especially grave because the Louisiana government has had little time to prepare for huge growth in the number of charter schools.[36] Experts in education also allege that "government agencies are lagging behind schools in understanding what must be done if charter schools are to contribute to public education," and without this understanding it is entirely possible that charters will only be another form of failing public education in New Orleans.[37] Louisiana has the unprecedented opportunity to improve the schools of New Orleans, but the weight of responsibility required to ensure the success of charter schools is no small consideration. If the charters in New Orleans are held truly accountable to the State Board of Education, the schools will likely improve and New Orleans' schools will be on track to become a model of urban education for all of the United States; if not, the schools will remain poor and continue to be just another example of the failure of urban public education.

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[35] Hill, Lake and Celio, 43-44.
[36] Hill, Lake and Celio, 48-49.
[37] Hill, Lake and Celio, 61.

The potential for charter schools to rectify many of the educational problems in New Orleans appears to be great, but for all the apparent benefits of these schools, the charter school model has many critics. The efficacy of this model of education has yet to be unequivocally demonstrated, and while there are many districts in which charter schools have been phenomenally successful, there are hundreds of underperforming charters in operation across the United States.[38] As Cookson and Berger found in their study of charter schools, "the research is mixed. Where some researchers see charter schools as highly innovative, others see them as quite predicable. Where some researchers believe that there is strong evidence that charter school students out-perform similar students from regular public schools, others see mixed results at best."[39] A study from the National School Boards Association found little evidence to support charter school proponents' claims that a charter model of public education raises student achievement, encourages innovation or strengthens the schools' accountability, while another study of 171 charter schools nationwide discovered that charter school students have lower absolute passing rates on standardized tests in all four core subjects than their regular public school counterparts.[40] The vast majority of charter schools in states with a large number of the schools, such as Minnesota, Arizona, Texas, California, Michigan and Georgia, have not fulfilled their promises of improving public education. There are exceptions to this general trend, with a handful of outstanding charter schools receiving deserved acclaim for their success in improving academic achievement, but statistically,

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[38] For a case study of six successful charter schools in the Washington, D.C. area, see Kevin Chavous, *Serving Our Children: Charter Schools and the Reform of American Public Education* (Sterling, VA: Capital Books Inc., 2004).

[39] Peter Cookson and Kristina Berger, *Expect Miracles: Charter Schools and the Politics of Hope and Despair* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Westview Press, 2002), 99.

[40] Cookson and Berger, 101.

charter schools have not been successful, in spite of all of the potential of the model. The failure of many of these schools may be traced to some of the previously discussed problems, such as a failure of the authorizing agency to hold the schools truly accountable, but the conclusion of all the existing studies is that success in a charter school is the exception, not the rule. Unless the Louisiana State Board of Education and the charter schools themselves have discovered the way to alleviate or avoid these problems, it appears that New Orleans is pinning all of its hopes on an unproven system, using unprepared authorizers.

In addition to concerns about the charter schools' ability to deliver on their promises of efficacy, research has also found that most charters fail to deliver on their other promised advantages as well. Proponents of charters argue that the charter school model encourages innovation in educational practice, allows flexibility in hiring and spending decisions and can eliminate the problem of concentrated poverty found in many urban schools. While these advantages are possible under a charter school method, data from various studies on charter schools does not indicate significant improvement of charter schools over regular public schools on these measures. Hill, Lake and Celio concluded that "charter schools are expected to innovate but, at the same time, media coverage and political focus on high-stakes standardized tests create pressure for conservative, proven approaches" and that charter schools, in spite of claims of inclusiveness, often "exclude the hard-to-teach and create enclaves of privilege."[41] These conclusions do not bode well for charter schools in New Orleans. Conservative approaches and economic segregation were major contributors to the failing state of New Orleans' schools prior to Katrina, and if charters cannot correct these problems, it is

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[41] Hill, Lake and Celio, 14, 10.

likely that the post-Katrina school system will be different only in its form, and not in its substance. As for teachers, charters do have more flexibility in hiring than regular public schools, but researchers have found that "charter schools teachers are less likely to be certified, to have adequate training in math, [or] to have five or more years of experience."[42] Education experts argue that teacher experience alone explains forty percent of increases in student achievement, so these findings are troubling.[43] New Orleans district schools prior to Katrina employed poor educators, and the negative results of that decision have already been discussed; as the charter schools begin to staff their new schools, it is imperative that they hire only qualified, experienced teachers, or this component of the pre-Katrina schools' failure will continue to undermine the public schools of New Orleans.

Conclusion

Charter schools may be part of the solution for the educational problems not only of New Orleans, but of all public school systems in the United States. Hurricane Katrina has provided an opportunity to test the practicality and efficacy of the charter school movement, and if it proves successful in New Orleans, the model could be exported to other urban areas in the United States. Unfortunately, one cannot know if a charter school model will correct the problems in New Orleans' schools at this point. Charters have the potential to correct many of the problems that plagued New Orleans' schools before Hurricane Katrina, but it is wise to remember that "charter schools are no silver bullets," and that for this model to successfully improve student achievement, all parties must not

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[42] Katrina Bulkley and Priscilla Wohlstetter. *Taking Account of Charter Schools: What's Happened and What's Next?*. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004), 29.

[43] Ronald Corwin and E. Joseph Schneider, *The School Choice Hoax: Fixing America's Public Schools* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishing, 2005), 192.

only fulfill their respective responsibilities, but must also be realistic about the time and effort required to rebuild the public school system in New Orleans.[44] As New Orleans attempts to revitalize its public school system, it must consider what other changes must be made in order to ensure the success of the schools. The problems of public education may be so systemic and so interlinked with other societal ills that schools in New Orleans cannot be fixed until problems like those of race, socio-economic disparity and integrated, affordable housing are addressed. New Orleans has an incredible opportunity in the aftermath of Katrina to address these issues and to correct the problems that plagued the city, but like the issues surrounding charter schools, it is a case of problematic potential. If the city can maximize the potential of this opportunity while avoiding the pitfalls, it can mitigate the destruction of Katrina by using the disaster as a springboard to lasting educational and social change. Both potential and problems face New Orleans, and only time will reveal which one will guide the reconstruction of New Orleans and its public schools.

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[44] Cookson and Berger, 116.

Appendix

Figure One

Average Percent Correct on Tenth-Grade Components of 1990, 1994, and 1999 Louisiana Graduation Exit Examinations: Orleans Parish and Louisiana

		Math	Language Arts	Written Composition
1990 Orleans				
	Blacks (4,504)	52.30%	57.50%	69.40%
	Whites (301)	75%	76.30%	83.20%
Louisiana				
	Blacks (19,056)	57.20%	61%	73.30%
	Whites (25,035)	69.70%	72.20%	83.70%
1994 Orleans				
	Blacks (6,347)	48.60%	62.10%	64.90%
	Whites (282)	80.80%	86.20%	84.10%
Louisiana				
	Blacks (21,211)	54.70%	67.20%	69.90%
	Whites (21,640)	71.40%	80.40%	81.10%
1999 Orleans				
	Blacks (7,100)	45.20%	66%	74.60%
	Whites (253)	76.50%	86.50%	87.40%
Louisiana				
	Blacks (26,966)	50.90%	69.40%	76.40%
	Whites (28,493)	67.40%	81.70%	84.40%

Bankston, Carl and Stephen Caldas. *A Troubled Dream: The Promise and Failure of School Desegregation in Louisiana.* Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002. p. 73.

Figure Two

Performance Categories of Schools in Orleans and Surrounding Districts					
	School of Academic Distinction	School of Academic Excellence	Academically Above Average	Academically Below Average	Academically Unacceptable
Schools in Orleans	None	6 (5.8%)	6 (5.8%)	41 (39.8%)	50 (48.5%)
Average Percent Minority	0%	58%	88%	98%	99%
Minimum	0%	31%	76%	89%	91%
Maximum	0%	89%	100%	100%	100%
Average Pecent Poor	0%	36%	63%	86%	85%
Minimum	0%	25%	36%	72%	61%
Maximum	0%	49%	88%	94%	98%
Schools in Surrounding Districts	3 (2.3%)	19 (15%)	59 (46.1%)	47 (36.7%)	None
Average Percent Minority	5.00%	17%	32%	66%	0%
Minimum	4.00%	6%	0%	14%	0%
Maximum	9.00%	31%	96%	97%	0%
Average Percent Poor	8.00%	25%	55%	93%	0%
Minimum	7.00%	6%	22%	54%	0%
Maximum	10.00%	40%	97%	97%	0%

Bankston, Carl and Stephen Caldas. *A Troubled Dream: The Promise and Failure of School Desegregation in Louisiana.* Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002. p. 76

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