8-9-2006

# Resilience and Resistance: Public Narratives from Post-Katrina New Orleans

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RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE:
PUBLIC NARRATIVES FROM POST-KATRINA NEW ORLEANS


A Thesis


Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of


Master of Science
in
Urban Studies


by

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B.A. University of California, Santa Cruz, 1999

August, 2006

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# Abstract

Narratives of resilience and resistance are applied by public editors in post-Katrina New Orleans in hopes of reordering the city's ruptured narrative. Using qualitative methods and grounded theory, the textual analysis of local newspaper editorials and letters to the editor, collected from the six month period between August 29, 2005 and February 28, 2006, have revealed categories of hope and struggle in acts of collective reaffirmation; of civility and leadership in expectations of personal transformation; and of self-reliance and civic engagement in acts of resistance. Discussion will focus on how editorialists work to create public narratives that will unite their audience and maintain social order during post-disaster reconstruction.

# Introduction

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast from Alabama to Louisiana. News media outlets immediately identified the storm as one of the worst natural disasters ever to hit the United States. In the week following the hurricane's landfall, ill-prepared disaster response at all levels of government exacerbated the already catastrophic situation. The results of poor disaster response before and after the storm were particularly felt in the "island city" of New Orleans, where levees designed to hold back a hurricane's storm surge failed, causing 80 percent of the city to fill with water, killing over 1000 people, and contributing to extreme levels of civil unrest. How does a city rebuild after such an event?

Eight months after the storm, talk of the hurricane, its aftermath, and the rebuilding continued to dominate conversations in places across New Orleans—bars, restaurants, and coffee shops. This was a public event. It happened to every person who lived in New Orleans at the moment of its unraveling and to those who claimed it as their hometown. It was an event that affected those who lost their homes and those who did not. It happened to those who were displaced and now search for a way home; to those who have returned and now look for normalcy; and, to those who have traveled here to contribute their vacation or work hours to help. It even happened to the tourists devoted to annually visiting the city. I seek to explore how the lives of those directly affected by the storm were woven together into a common story about recovery, reconstruction, and resilience.

Scholars of urban disasters have categorized the damage of destructive events according to measures of the scale of destruction, the magnitude of the human toll, and the source or cause of destruction (Vale and Campanella 2005:6). The impact of disaster depends on the combined effects of these measures. Lawrence J. Vale and Thomas J. Campanella have pointed out that, "The impact of urban destruction is not necessarily proportional to the scale of attack. Rather, impact is largely a function of the meaning a disaster holds for survivors" (2005:7). It is my intent to explore the role that editorial opinion plays in structuring the interpretations of the reconstruction process.

The following paper is a textual analysis of all Katrina-related editorials and letters to the editors published in four New Orleans newspapers between August 29, 2005 and February 28, 2006. I have analyzed these texts searching for themes of resilience and resistance. I wanted to

understand how public editorials honored certain representations of power and ignored others in the aftermath of Katrina. Whose perspectives were represented and how? Whose voices were silenced? Whose were heard? These published perspectives will be documentation for future news writers, researchers, and storytellers. Those who will write historical accounts of Hurricane Katrina may be inclined to hold up these editorials and letters to the editor as representative voices of New Orleans citizens, but these editorials represent particular perspectives that reach beyond the writers as individuals because their opinions are embedded in the political, economic, and ideological contexts from which they are written.

Editorial opinions have propagated a particular perspective of the post-Katrina environment. In general, editorialists and news commentators structure and reflect the way their readers understand social, political, economic and ideological relations. Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky have closely analyzed the messages that institutions of mass media transmit to their audience in *Manufacturing Consent* (2002), where they have asserted that:

> The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society (p. 1).

This research assumes editorialists and news commentators of local New Orleans newspapers to be participating in the project Herman and Chomsky have described. Letters to the editors are included to illustrate how pervasive "institutional structures of the larger society" are in post-Katrina discourse, and to show how some New Orleanians publicly engaged in the construction of narratives of resilience in order to actively participate in their city's reconstruction.

Narratives of resilience occupy a specific space in the study of disaster. Resilience is defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change. Urban resilience is a phenomenon that is more difficult to define. It encompasses a series of contested social, economic, political and ideological relations that must emerge, in some form, intact from the effects of drastic change. Narratives of urban resilience are "constructed collective voices" that arrange events of drastic urban change, in this case change resulting from disaster, and "expose a longing to render tragedy in uplifting terms" (Vale and Campanella 2005:15). In New Orleans, commentators embraced the opportunity to begin again on a clean slate without the social, political, and economic divisions that had loomed large

in the city prior to the storm.  What function does this allegiance to optimism and devotion to betterment serve?  According to Vale and Campanella, "the resilience of cities has depended on a progressive-oriented dominant narrative, one that views the devastation and rebuilding of cities as no more than an extreme version of capitalism's usual processes of 'creative destruction'" (2005:15).  If resilience is dependent upon dominant narratives, what becomes of oppositional narratives?  This paper explores how and when editorials differ according to who is "speaking," or writing, and who is assumed to be "listening," or reading.  In this study, I will reveal how narratives of resilience reinforce the dominant power of the status quo by promoting unity; and, how narratives of resistance represent silenced voices of disenfranchised communities and support oppositional representations of power by highlighting categories of difference.

# Methodology

In this analysis I focus on editorials and letters to the editors of major New Orleans newspapers—the *Times-Picayune*, the *Gambit Weekly*, the *New Orleans Tribune*, and the *Louisiana Weekly*—written in the six months after Hurricane Katrina. The data was collected from August 29, 2006 when the hurricane struck the Gulf Coast through February 28, 2006, when the city celebrated its first post-disaster Mardi Gras. Identifiable themes emerged from the public narratives during this period: the physical and psychic destruction of a majority of the New Orleans Metropolitan area, an intense period of political indecision and reconstruction unknowns, and the reaffirmation of a collective experience through citywide celebration of Mardi Gras. The disorder of the post-disaster environment required some sort of sense making. Editorialists had personal and economic reasons to continue writing despite difficult living and reporting conditions on the ground in New Orleans. I decided to research the role of newspaper editorials in the public narrative reconstruction of New Orleans immediately after Hurricane Katrina, while searching for themes of resilience and resistance in these narratives.

This research began with Chris Rose. Rose, a columnist for the *Times-Picayune*, went from pre-Katrina coverage of celebrity sighting and local political antics to becoming a self-described "war correspondent" in the post-Katrina environment (2006:155). He published a book of post-Katrina writings, *1Dead in the Attic* (2006), for which public readings and signings for the book were met with overwhelming success, often demanding extended event dates. Rose was a finalist in the commentary category for a Pulitzer Prize. His popularity illustrated the import of newspaper figures in a city like New Orleans in which the weathermen are better known than news anchors. Chris Rose had identified with a large segment of the post-disaster public of New Orleans, or so it was told in the press. Rose had made use of an "exotic" media perspective of the post-Katrina environment—the effect of the aftermath on the individual (see Rozario 2005:29). This approach led me to ask what type of sense and order he embeds into his public narratives of reconstruction. How did his representations of "The Thing," his term for the event of Katrina, perpetuate the myth of the individual as bearer of the work of rebuilding? Also, how did other commentators employ similar unifying methods?

In order to explore these questions, I began collecting more editorials and searching for the emergence of categories that would reveal how resilience was used in these public narratives. I wanted to understand the point at which my own interest in urban resilience intersected with the above questions about representations of power and the place of the individual. My reading of these articles suggested three themes: a call for the return to "normalcy," the reaffirmation of cityhood, and the expectations of change and demand for civic action. I noticed that writers were participating in a public dialogue about the future social, political, and economic organization of New Orleans, and wondered how these public disaster narratives worked to maintain control of a contested, ever-changing dialogue about reconstruction.

This work relies on grounded theory to carry out a qualitative analysis of public narratives of resilience and resistance. According to H. Russell Bernard, grounded theory is a "set of techniques for (1) identifying categories and concepts that emerge from the text, and (2) linking the concepts into substantive and formal theories" (2002:462). Bernard points out the importance of "memoing" in this technique, where the researcher keeps notes on coding, potential hypotheses, and new directions for research. I used this technique to engage the text multiple times. First, I searched for expressions of loss, shock, hope, denial, order or doubt that represented signs of resilience and resistance in these narratives. Then, I identified two overarching categories—unity and difference—that reflected the themes of resilience and resistance I had initially set out to understand. Taking a textual version of "field notes," I read through the texts again and extracted passages that signaled either unity or difference. Finally, I organized these editorial quotes into three thematic fields: cityhood, expectations of transformation, and resistance.

Coffey and Atkinson point out that the functions of narrative analysis include: the preservation of the narrative form in its entirety, rather than fragmented pieces of coded data; the illustration of how experience, social meaning and motives are ordered by social groups; and, the understanding of social actors and events as well as their cultural conventions and social norms (1996:54-80). In this research, my informants are the writers working to describe and order the "New Normal" (Rose 2006:17). Coffey and Atkinson have described the characteristics of narrative analysis here:

> Analysis is a cyclical process and a reflexive activity; the analytic process should be comprehensive and systematic but not rigid; data are segmented and divided into

meaningful units, but connection to the whole is maintained; and data are organized according to a system derived from the data themselves (1996:8).

This is the primary tool I used to interpret the data collected for this study. I had set out to understand the place of urban resilience and acts of resistance in a post-disaster situation. Determining that newspaper editorials and letters to the editors were a valuable way "in," I immersed myself in the data and relied on it to present some sort of pattern. Coffey and Atkinson warn, "The process of analysis should not be seen as a distinct stage of research; rather, it is a reflexive activity that should inform data collection, writing, further data collection, and so forth" (1996:6). It is this cyclical engagement with the text that steered my research into new arenas after each period of collection, analysis, writing, and follow-up research.

This process can also be seen when coding the data. Coding can be used in different ways, depending on the quantitative or qualitative approach of the researcher. For purposes of this research, I used coding to link similarities across texts, authors, and papers, while interpreting connections that were emerging. Borrowing from Wolcott, Coffey and Atkinson describe "interpretation" as "freewheeling, casual, unbounded, aesthetically satisfying, idealistic, generative and impassioned" (1996:9). In contrast, Coffey and Atkinson point out that Wolcott considers "analysis" to be more "cautious and controlled" (1996:9). Here, it is important to point out that the emergence of themes does not happen on some unconscious level. Bernard (2002) discusses the work of Virginia Hymes, whose consideration of the deliberate nature of "emergence" revealed that:

> This emergent analysis doesn't happen miraculously. It is … only through close work with many narratives by many narrators that you develop an understanding of the narrative devices that people use in a particular language and the many ways they use those little devices (p. 452).

It is my intent to decipher those "little devices" and connect them to larger frameworks employed in the telling of disaster narratives.

Deviating from traditional qualitative research in which data is derived "in the field, face-to-face with real people" (Rossman and Rallis 1998:8), I have created a field of texts using the data collected and the themes that emerged to illustrate how public narratives of resilience and resistance are forming *in* the texts. Rather than interacting "face-to-face" with my informants, I

have analyzed editorials and letters to the editor struggling to reach out to an audience of survivors in a meaningful way, while also representing the media institutions for which they work. These are the "real people" of this work. These editorial narratives are situated in "the everyday realities and meanings of social worlds and social actors" (Coffey and Atkinson 1996:5).

Stories of domination reflect and uphold the dominant power structures of a society. Stories of opposition give voice to silenced and disenfranchised groups (Goodson in Coffey and Atkinson 1996:78). In the public narratives of New Orleans, the dichotomy between dominant and oppositional voices gave tension to the discourse over how reconstruction should happen and which issues would be highlighted. Commentators participated in this dialogue by propagating the perspectives of their employers. Letter writers participated by publicly responding to and engaging with the articles or opinions proposed by the editors. It is then, for purposes of this research, important to highlight the place of the individual editorial writer in relation to the media institution for which he or she is writing. The *Times-Picayune*, New Orleans' oldest, most widely read newspaper and winner of two 2006 Pulitzer Prizes since the storm—one for distinguished breaking news coverage and another for meritorious public service—writes most directly to its majority white suburban demographic. The *Times-Picayune* pays Chris Rose to represent the dramatic perspective of the individual dealing with crisis, which he does from the position of a heroic renegade facing head-on the psychological disorder of the aftermath. The *Gambit Weekly*, published and edited by husband-wife team Clancy and Margo Dubos since the storm, represents upper-middle class values to predominantly white neighborhoods. Clancy Dubos has written most of the paper's post-Katrina political analysis, upholding ideals of vision and planning on the new clean slate of New Orleans. He has presented himself as a government watchdog revealing bureaucratic inefficiencies of individual, often local political decision-makers. The city's two African American newspapers, the *Louisiana Weekly* and the *New Orleans Tribune*, offer the perspective the black community of New Orleans and also Black America in general. The *Louisiana Weekly*, edited by Edmund W. Lewis, is a community paper often filled with nationally-syndicated columns written by members of the National Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA), an association of black publishers who encourage unified self-reliance in Black American communities and families. The *New Orleans Tribune* is published and edited by Beverly S. McKenna who turns her critique away from individual black

communities and towards the status quo of the white, dominant power structure responsible for generations of inhibiting the economic and political progress of African Americans. Every writer relies on progress-oriented narratives to make their points, argue their perspectives, and reach their audiences. As a note, in addition to individual writers, I have included in my data the articles written anonymously by the papers' editors. When available I have used authors' name, but when unavailable I have simply used the paper's name.

How certain voices were heard or silenced also had to do with post-Katrina accessibility of each paper. For instance, the *Times-Picayune* never lost touch with its audience after the storm, as it was only out of print from August 29, 2005 through August 31, 2005, and during that time an on-line version was available. The *Louisiana Weekly*, which did not begin local publishing until October 27, 2005, also accessed its audience via the Internet, mostly relying on articles written by NNPA columnists in other cities. The *Gambit Weekly*, housed in Mid-City, a New Orleans neighborhood that received heavy flooding shortly after Katrina hit, did not publish again until November 1, 2005. The *New Orleans Tribune* did not restart publication until February 2006, producing only one issue every two months thereafter. In order to help balance the data of dominant and oppositional point-of-views, I expanded the dates of inclusion for data from the *New Orleans Tribune* to include three issues published between February and June 2006. While this inclusion did not mean equal numbers of each paper were studied, it did give more representation to voices that would have otherwise gone unheard.

The following chapters present my version of how the relationship between dominant and oppositional voice work to create a narrative of resilience for the city of New Orleans. Chapter One presents a brief of history of New Orleans; considers the meaning of disaster in scholarly explorations; and situates resilience in the study of narrative. Chapter Two illustrates the variety of ways commentators constructed categories of unity and silence categories of difference, while Chapter Three explores how editors and those who write letter to them structure New Orleans' narrative of resilience using expectations of civility and heroism. In Chapter Four, I work to reveal the way editorialists draw fine, at times indecipherable, lines between the enemies of New Orleans' reconstruction and those individual citizens responsible for that reconstruction. Ultimately, public narratives are teaching tools for readers. They show readers how to construct their own narratives of resilience and resistance and define for the readers who to fight, what to fight over, and what or who to forget.

# Chapter One:  Weaving the Narrative

*"The city has no existence outside of the processes that produce, sustain, enhance, undermine, diminish, reshape, or destroy it"*  (Harvey 2005:33).

*"A city is hard to kill, in part because of its strategic geographic location, it concentrated, persisting stock of physical capital, and even more because of the memories, motives, and skills of its inhabitants"*  (Lynch in Vale and Campanella 2005:347).

Post-disaster American cities persistently survive to become powerful signifiers and symbols of the nation-state's constant renewal process and forward-moving progress.  This is not to say that it necessarily achieves continual renewal or progress but rather that the nation-state requires its cities to survive, no matter the circumstance, in order to constitute its own ability to dominate representation of power in its society.  Scholars have connected post-1800 nation-state building to the consistent rebuilding of disaster-stricken cities (Vale and Campanella 2005:354, n7).  Vale and Campanella have identified the relationship between leaders and citizens that produces resilient cities:  "Urban resilience is an interpretive framework proposed by local and national leaders and shaped and accepted by citizens in the wake of disaster" (2005:353).  The writings of columnists and letters to the editor represent citizens working to "shape and accept" the plans and actions of their political leaders at all levels of government.  In this way, a contest over who controls post-Katrina public (even historic) narratives is waged.  This connection illuminates the political and ideological undercurrents of urban resilience and brings attention to the importance of situating resilience as an interpretive framework employed to do the work of urban reconstruction in the name of dominating social, political and economic systems.  In this context, urban resilience must be understood as but *one* approach to many possible disaster interpretations.

*The Place of the City*

One must consider the social, economic, and political past of New Orleans to understand the context of post-Katrina public narratives.  According to Douglas Brinkley, "entrepreneurial delusion" defined the mind set of Sieur de Bienville, who established "La Novella Orleans" in 1718 and chose the city's location because of its proximity to the Mississippi River and Lake

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Pontchartrain and for the "sake of commerce" (2006:7). At approximately ten feet above sea level and chronically subject to flooding, the location of New Orleans was never ideal, but it was Bienville's deliberate choice. Port cities were powerful and wealthy sites because the mercantile system of the world relied on them to transport goods. Bienville was determined to situate a port along the Mississippi River that would allow easier access to the North American interior (Brinkley 2006:5). Over time technological advances in engineering progressed and allowed for various versions of natural and manmade levees to be built to hold back the constant threat of water (Lewis 2003:38). Never completely out of harms way and always at risk of danger, city inhabitants were forced to detest and embrace its place on the river.

The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 offered the United States an inexpensive way to protect its interior from unpredictable consequences of foreign French and Spanish ownership (Lewis 2002:39). Large numbers of American settlers were moving into New Orleans at such a fast pace that it soon became clear that merging of social, political, economic and, perhaps more importantly, ideological systems were at odds (Lewis 2003:43). The divisions between American newcomers and the French Creole inhabitants took physical form as Americans settled upriver to establish themselves in the Uptown neighborhood, while Creoles of African, French and Spanish ancestry maintained social and political control of the French Quarter, eventually expanding settlement northward toward Bayou St. John along the Esplanade Ridge (Lewis 2003:45). French Creoles were not pleased with becoming part of a republic, especially that of English origins, so they decidedly retreated into private social circles (Lewis 2003:44). There was also a significant African community in New Orleans. Due to New Orleans' place as a slave port and the labor shortages during its construction Peirce Lewis notes that, "by the end of the eighteenth century more than half the city's population was black" (2003:41). These residents tended to live either in close proximity to the white families who employed them, or in the *batturé*, or "backswamp," where water was not bound by levees (2003:51). Often below sea level, the residents of the backswamps were especially vulnerable to flooding and tended to be without financial means or political prowess to ensure protection from the surrounding rise of swamp waters.

Constantly shifting waterways caused New Orleans to be remapped again and again through its history. As a result, New Orleans was never a static, planned community. Bienville built the city center of today's New Orleans in the same gridiron pattern that had been used in

many European cities, which looked like a rectangular grid along the Mississippi River bank with a central open plaza in the southern center of the grid (Lewis 2003).  As the population increased, the city continued to grow outward from this grid along geographical and social boundaries.  Urban renewal projects in the late twentieth century affected New Orleans much the same way it did in other American cities, driving mega-highways through neighborhoods of people without the political voice or power to stop it.  In New Orleans, the I-10 interstate ran over Claiborne Avenue, a bustling black business center at the time, and through predominantly black neighborhoods, notably Central City and Tremé.  Local, state and federal government planning policies liberally employed "eminent domain" in urban renewal projects, which allowed private property to be given over to public ownership for projects heralded as opportunity to better the larger community.  The disenfranchised communities most affected by these planning strategies have continued to include such projects in their narratives of resistance, which in turn, has encouraged communal action against any project that could compromise their neighborhoods' political power.  In disaster situations such social, political and economic divisions are exposed.

*In the Face of Disaster*

Anthony Oliver-Smith and Susanna M. Hoffman have led the most recent effort to define the place of anthropology in disaster studies (1999, 2002).  According to these authors, "Disaster is seen as a process leading to an event that involves a combination of a potentially destructive agent from the natural or technological sphere and a population in a socially produced condition of vulnerability."  Central to this definition is the presence of two factors of disaster: the destructive agent and the condition of vulnerability.  The "destructive agent" includes any natural or manmade forces—from hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, droughts and earthquakes to bombing during acts of war—while the "condition of vulnerability" varies according to the way social, political, economic and ideological structures are organized (1999:4).  Oliver-Smith and Hoffman have situated disaster as a *process* that leads to a subsequent *event*, which means that the city of study is in progress from before the actual destructive agent strikes through the aftermath and recovery.

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Hurricane Katrina was the destructive agent that resulted in a particular event derived from social, economic and political vulnerabilities in New Orleans prior to the storm. These factors created the complex web of local, state and national governments, aid agencies and policies in which narratives of disaster were later situated after the storm. It was here, in the public narratives of post-Katrina New Orleans, that "Hurricane Katrina" came to embody the whole process of disaster rather than only a participating agent. For those studying the ways in which societies work, disasters can prove revealing in a number of ways:

> Disasters unmask the nature of a society's social structure, including the ties and resilience of kinship and other alliances. They instigate unity and the cohesion of social units as well as conflict along the lines of segmentary opposition. The distribution of power within a society reveals itself not only in the differential vulnerability of groups, but in the allocation of resources in reconstruction as well. Disasters provide a unique view of a society's capacities for resistance or resilience in the face of disruption (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2002:9).

Disaster revealed that these processes were also at work in New Orleans. Disaster narratives insisted that there was at once unity in the overall desire to rebuild New Orleans and division in the way the reconstruction should happen. This simultaneous assertion of resilience and demand for resistance illustrated the underlying power struggle at stake for those working to tell New Orleans' story in the aftermath.

Recent urban studies of disasters in American cities have stemmed academia's response to the 2001 World Trade Center attack in New York City (Schneider and Susser 2003; Vale and Campanella 2005). Concepts of the "wounded city" and the "resilient city" have been applied to modern cities that had been physically, economically or politically destroyed by natural disasters, warfare, economic devastation, or political upheaval (Vale and Campanella 2005; Schneider and Susser 2003). In *Wounded Cities: Destruction and Reconstruction in a Globalized World* editors Jane Schneider and Ida Susser seek to understand how "globalizing processes" relate to "urban wounds" and "urban recovery" (2003:4). Schneider and Susser insist that cities cannot be isolated from the intricate web of regional and national economic, political, and social relationships, nor can cities be analyzed outside "globalizing processes" that favor difficult-to-trace private capitalist endeavors and neo-liberal economic practices over the interests of disenfranchised communities (2003:2).

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According to Schneider and Susser, "Whatever the source of the affliction, wounded cities, like all cities, are dynamic entities, replete with the potential to recuperate loss and reconstruct anew for the future" (2003:1). This perspective recognizes two "contrasting and irreducible" perspectives: "On the one hand is the city as a body politic, capable of being collectively wounded and of responding as such; on the other hand, the city is a site where powerful external forces intersect, intensifying differences and conflicts among local groups" (Schneider and Susser 2003:1). These narratives attempt to define the collective wound that is in need of healing while struggling to deny the existence of external forces that divide local groups. Inherently involved in the process of healing, a "wounded city" is the tension between unity through identification with the collective and division through preservation of multiple communities of various values.

Schneider and Susser explore how globalization has contributed to the negative effects of "creative destruction," but also consider that in extreme acts of violence and war, "globalized processes, far from being the principal or obvious source of devastation, may actually present themselves as part of the solution, a path to the restoration of urban health." The authors note that American cities that have suffered from a decrease in financial investment, an increase in crime, and often look to "urban redevelopment schemes as their salvation" (2003:18). Disenfranchised communities are the most likely to be effected negatively by such development and to be the most vocally engaged in the processes which work to discount them. In New Orleans, black residents in particular are acutely aware that they are the population "most vulnerable to swings of political-economic intervention" and the narrative place from which they speak reflects this (Schneider and Susser 2003:19). New Orleans is comparable to Sawalha's Beirut (2003) and Bryan's Belfast (2003) whose "emphasis is on processes of reclamation following extraordinary violence" (Schneider and Susser 2003:17). Post-Katrina lawlessness and nationally televised struggle with criminal violence has required the same need to "project a new image of healthy restoration," while facing high-stake risks:

> Renewal may well worsen rather than ease these problems, both by provoking debates over whose history will be acknowledged, and whose erased, in the (presumably civil and harmonious) city of the future; and because reconstruction inevitably displaces people, and disrupts their security-enhancing social and political networks (Schneider and Susser 2003:17).

Despite this, public commentators, well aware of the weight of a watching world, often forge on with calls to change old problems in search of a utopian society. Vale and Campanella consider this progress-oriented march forward as a necessary characteristic in the building of a resilient city, "The notion of a resilient city is a societally and economically productive form of denial" (2005:340). Without blatant sinister desire, editorialists continue to propagate this form of denial.

## Ordering Narrative

The phenomenon of urban resilience as it relates to the consistent drive of nation-states and their wounded cities to rebuild despite financial and political restraints is explored in *The Resilient City*. Vale and Campanella identify three interrelated themes of urban resilience: "the narratives of resilience, the symbolic dimensions of disaster and reconstruction, and the politics of reconstruction" (2005:14). Narratives of resilience that were explored and compared include the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, the San Francisco earthquake and fires of 1906, and the aftermath of terrorist bombings in New York City 2001, and Oklahoma City 1995. These essays consider how disaster narratives from cities under reconstruction reflect the time and place in which the calamity happened. Rozario describes this intimate relationship between time, place, and narrative in reference to the September 11, 2001 World Trade Center attacks:

> We have already seen narratives of the attack become vehicles for articulating buried cultural anxieties and for expressing social agendas, for defining, contesting, and policing proper American values and behaviors … So too can these latter tales be read as allegories of our own time, as attempts to come to terms with the wider destructiveness of a world that is still governed by the capitalist logics of creative destruction but in which fewer people are sustained by expectations of unending material progress (2005:47).

Thus, the role of narrative in disaster is to *articulate*, or speak, that which has been uncovered in the destructive event. Recall an earlier passage written by Oliver-Smith and Hoffman, "Disasters unmask the nature of a society's social structure … [providing] at unique view of a society's capacity for resistance or resilience" (1999:9). This capacity for resistance or resilience depends upon disaster narratives' capacity to re-mask, re-cover, or re-form relations of power which had been laid bare in the disaster process.

Vale and Campanella have pointed out that, "To understand urban resilience is to understand the ways narratives are constructed to interpret the meaning of urban reconstruction" (2005:14). Resilience narratives are constructed quickly and rely on "opportunities for progressive reform" (2005:340). As narratives, or stories, resilience narratives have a certain structure, including a plot and a beginning, middle, and end. Rozario has considered Aristotle's concept of *peripeteia*, or "the turning point or reversal that moves a story forward," as a way to look at disaster narratives with a progressive thrust (Rozario 2005:33). The disaster by this measure is at the middle of the story, the turning point at which transformation becomes possible. The public narratives in this research also begin in the middle, at a point of transformation in New Orleans' history, and in the six months that followed, editorialists wrote as though they were personally responsible for supplying the narrative devices that would progress the city towards a proverbial happy ending.

It is here that New Orleans' commentators began to reconstruct its collective narrative of disaster. Rozario suggests the salience of Martin Heidegger's study of etymological linkages between the words *building*, *dwelling*, and *thinking* in the study of urban reconstruction. A building cannot exist prior to the imagining of that building. A process of *thinking* must precede the physical representation of the edifice to be built. Then, memories, symbols and social significance "fill" a *building* with the power of *dwelling* (2005:27). Thinking, or imagining, is what imbues narratives of resilience with strong yet fluid and flexible boundaries, allowing the process of ordering traumatic events (and understanding the survivor's place in them) to happen more quickly than the actual reconstruction of buildings and dwellings. Thus, the import of narrative reconstruction is revealed—without strong and flexible narratives, the foundation of the buildings would never hold.

# Chapter Two:  Recovering Cityhood

*"New Orleans is impossible.  It's low, in a place where it pays to be high.  It's ringed with waterways … You can look up and see just how vulnerable New Orleans is to the course of weather, of politics, of history … Once we joked about it.  We knew the vulnerability.  We weren't stupid; we were just reassured.  Those levees are strong, we knew, someone is looking after us.  And, anyway, New Orleans has been here a long time.  We believed 300 years of history was sufficient to engrave the city's permanence on the stone of America.  We'd weathered storms before and made it through"* (McNulty, *Gambit Weekly*, February 14, 2006).

What happens when permanence of place is in peril?  In this chapter I explore how commentators created "resilient" citizens with narratives that unite a collective civil core.  These writers and the newspapers they represent constructed the place of struggle and hope in the reconstruction of New Orleans.  Speaking with a collective "we" voice, writers often assumed a shared identity with fellow New Orleanians as though each reader must have desired the same end lest all of New Orleans "cease to exist" (*Times-Picayune*, September 15, 2005).  I call this assumption of shared identity "cityhood," which is a process that encourages citizens of an urban place to unite around a shared vision for their city.  This process highlights a particular essence of New Orleans city dwellers, or "New Orleans-ness."  Joel Kotkin, an editorialist for the *Wall Street Journal*, has written that, "Cities are more than physical or natural constructs; they are essentially the products of human will, faith and determination" (see *Times-Picayune*, September 8, 2005).  The editorialists who write narratives of resilience strive to construct, as the city does, this will, faith and determination on a citywide scale, but those who write do not always embrace the same vision.  So, opinion writers must define the terms under which they expect their assumed audiences to unite.  The following sections present how categories of struggle, hope, resilience, and faith work to engage individual readers in a single cause—the survival of New Orleans.

*The Meaning of Struggle*

In the aftermath of the storm, editors set about the task of understanding what had been lost.  Home for many New Orleanians was not limited to the physical house in which they resided but included a complex layering of family, community, food and collective experience.

Karin Hopkins writes to the *New Orleans Tribune* telling of her displaced family in Killeen, Texas:

> Where they remain, unhappily, today. They epitomize the population that is so often discussed now in these post-Katrina days. Native citizens with limited resources…forced to live in foreign environments where people find them to be "different"…people with soul and flavor…the ones who lived within walking distance of momma's house…where they would congregate to laugh, talk and eat…momma always had a pot of gumbo or jambalaya hot and steaming or some bread pudding, "pralines" or pecan pie…where sitting on the front stoop was free recreation…you get the picture (May-June 2006).

McKenna of the *New Orleans Tribune* made a deliberate choice to include this letter to the editor, and in doing so gave voice to the disaster narratives of New Orleans' displaced citizens. The tension here is between what was and what is. Community in New Orleans, patterned around its social geography, could not be recreated in another physical location. This particular family had an inclusive, communal life experience in New Orleans, where life in Texas marked them as outsiders in new, "foreign environments."

Ironically, pre-Katrina New Orleanians had once prided themselves as creators of a foreign environment that could differentiate outsiders from insiders. This reputation led Peirce Lewis to dub New Orleans an "island city," distinct from its surrounding state, country, and cultures (2003:9). In hopes of retaining New Orleans' distinctive New Orleans-ness, a *Times-Picayune* letter to the editor sought to remind planners and reconstruction power players that the architecture of New Orleans would need to remain intact for reasons outside of aesthetics. This concerned citizen explained that, "Although it's true we are concerned about how the future New Orleans will look, we are even more concerned about how it will feel. It will not feel like home unless it feels strangely foreign to everybody else" (*Times-Picayune*, September 15, 2005). Chris Rose cited this foreign sense of place as central to the difficulty New Orleanians have fitting in to the new, displace locations: "We're unusual, anachronistic and eccentric, often drunk and dirty. The longer you live here, the more unsuitable you become to live anywhere else—as so many of our people are discovering in far-flung cities and states" (*Times-Picayune*, November 22, 2005). Although he used humor to make the point, Rose illustrated how belonging to the New Orleans community was the only concept of home many long-time residents of the city could conceive.

If a deep-rooted sense of community made imagining life outside New Orleans impossible, it may have been more inconceivable to imagine the death of the city. "The music, which is the heart of the city, and the food, which is its soul, will always be here," writes Patricia G. Poupart in her letter to *Gambit Weekly's* editor, "It will never die" (November 8, 2005). Rose marveled at the level of commitment those not from had devoted to the rebuilding of New Orleans: "There's just something about New Orleans that way, I guess, even when it's beaten down like a wet three-legged dog. With mange and fleas. That's blind in one eye. And won't hunt" (*Times-Picayune*, November 13, 2005). Despite the state of the city insiders and outsiders continued to come back to New Orleans. In this case, Rose's message read: If they can commit, so should we.

Channeling the hopelessness of the situation to encourage collective action for government support, Rose wrote, "God help us. The most open, joyous, free-wheeling, celebratory city in the country is broken, hurting, down on its knees. Failing. Begging for help" (Rose, *Times-Picayune*, December 6, 2005). Rose longed for the things he had yet to understand about life in New Orleans pre-Katrina in his remembrance of Mardi Gras Indians, African American "tribes" who spend a year's worth of time and money to design and sew intricate costumes for performative display of power on the streets on Mardi Gras Day. Here, the columnist unified his audience by referencing an only-in-New Orleans cultural marker and by publicly displaying his own longing to recapture what had been lost, "I could have learned something about a people whose history is now but a sepia mist over back-of-town streets and neighborhoods that nobody's ever heard of and where nobody lives and nothing ever happens anymore; a freeze frame of life in the air, a story of what we once were" (2006:66).

One *Times-Picayune* editor also used pain to identify with a collective audience. This author made this comparison of post-Katrina New Orleans to New York City's September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center:

> People across the New Orleans area have come to know the panic that gripped lower Manhattan that awful Tuesday morning. Even those New Orleanians who weren't stuck in attics or on rooftops saw friends, neighbors and fellow citizens in desperate need. We felt a sudden, disorienting rootlessness. We learned that the power, transportation and communication networks that we use to organize our lives had somehow failed us utterly (September 11, 2005).

Two points stand out in this passage. First, this was a communal experience. The *Times-Picayune* article paints a community of New Orleanians who were each displaced, each affected, each shared rootlessness, and each lost faith in the networks that organized their lives. Second, the sudden "rootlessness" represented the rupture in the larger narrative of all New Orleans history. This is the moment that the place of New Orleans was "lost" and its recovery unimaginable. Identifying what was lost designed a space for the displaced to discover what would be needed to be recovered.

Commentators also searched for the right question with which to engage his or her reader. In the following passage, the *Times-Picayune* editor compares the old New Orleans with the new arena of questions New Orleanians are to face:

> True, the old New Orleans—the city that charmed every visitor with its matchless food and music, the city that shared its bounty with the rest of the nation—seems irretrievable at the moment. How do we get from a city awash in muck and debris back to our place as the jewel of the Mississippi River? How do we rebuild a city after three-fourths of it has been full of water for days on end? When our people are scattered across the nation (October 9, 2005)?

Though the survival of New Orleans was at stake, this passage presented a devastated city that may only have been lost "at the moment," delivering hope that the questions may be answered at some indeterminate point in the future. In fact, the questions often marked the starting point from which citizens began to reconstruct their ruptured narrative. On August 31, 2005, while the city of New Orleans was still filling with water, Rose too had many questions without answers.

> What about school? What about everyone's jobs? Did all our friends get out? Are there still trees on the streetcar line? What will our economy be like with no visitors? How many are dead? Do I have a roof? Have the looters found me yet? When can we go home?
>
> Like I said, it consumes you as you sit helplessly miles from home, unable to help anyone, unable to do anything (*Times-Picayune*, August 31, 2006).

The columnists illustrated how questions that consume those experiencing the pain, struggle, and loss of disaster are more important than actual answers. The act of asking engages the reader in the process of reconstruction in a meaningful way by giving them common questions to ask. When communication systems were down and the outside world had no clear idea of what was

happening on the ground in New Orleans, hundreds of thousands of evacuees watched or listened from afar as the city was consumed with water and they were helpless to stop it. Asking questions may have been the only way for New Orleanians to actively participate in the disaster.

Immediately after the disaster, editorialists showed readers that hope and survival had to do with the capacity to simply go through the motions of normalcy and to progress in a forward direction. Rose illustrated how he moved forwards towards normalcy, "Doing yard work and hitting the jungle gym on the day after. Pretending life goes on. Just trying to stay busy. Just trying not to think. Just trying not to fail, really. Gotta' keep moving" (Rose, *Times-Picayune* August 31, 2005). Commentators noted that returning to normal would require personal perseverance through often painful struggles. When Rhonda Nabonne's flooded home had been burglarized by looters twice since the storm, she pointedly expressed the frustrations and struggle involved with moving forward at all:

> I'm weary after weeks of working during the storm's frantic aftermath and worrying about the safety of displaced relatives. I'm angry at being barred from my home for weeks, and tired of waiting for insurance adjusters to call. I'm tired of waiting for a blue roof. I'm weary of hoping for something to make me whole.
>
> Whole. Home again. Will that ever happen? Can I restore my home? Will I be able to live there, knowing it's been violated?
>
> Yes, I am grateful to be alive and well. But I long to return to what had been a roof over my head for almost 30 years. I want to get mail at my own front door, wave at my neighbors across the street and sleep in my own bed.
>
> As hard as it is to do, though, I have to put my losses on the heap with everybody else's Katrina piles and move on. I have to hang in there and fight. Crying only casts a bigger shadow.
>
> The struggle is far from over. I won't let the looters dissolve my spirit. I've put my dukes up (*Times-Picayune*, January 20, 2006).

Nabonne's narrative illustrated the layered emotional effect of the aftermath on residents working to rebuild. In a sense, she sacrificed her own struggle with anger, exhaustion, rootlessness, gratitude, acceptance, sadness and resilience to reinforce a communal sense of hope in her readers. Nabonne structured resilience as a process that was dependant on an individual's

choice to engage in a fight against the death of the city and the death of the individual citizen as well.

This fight could not happen alone. For authors of public resilience narratives, unity, "fellowship," and communal engagement in the recovery was situated at the heart of the fight. Michelle Krupa, a columnist for the *Times-Picayune*, described the rebuilding effort as a metaphor of the communal spirit in marathon running:

> The rebuilding of New Orleans is not a sprint. It's a marathon.
>
> To begin, it is billed in terms so monumental that some say only the craziest would compete. You train for months. You put up with pre-dawn practice runs, blood-blistered toenails and dark moments of doubt about whether you can meet you goal. And for many—including me—reaching the finish line is only possible with the fellowship of other runners (February 4, 2006).

The extreme craziness of the struggle showed how participation in the struggle can only be engaged by a unified, yet almost unnatural group. Rose echoed this sentiment when he wrote that, "Everybody's got it, this thing, this affliction, this affinity for forgetfulness, absentmindedness, confusion, laughing at inappropriate circumstances, crying when the wrong song comes on the radio, behaving in odd and contrary ways" (*Times-Picayune*, November 6, 2005). These authors asserted that the communal disorientation of Katrina's aftermath demanded communal reorientation in tangible relationships with others going through the same "affliction." Krupa used the metaphor of a marathon and the imagery and symbolism of progress as a vehicle to make the rebuilding process less mysterious and more familiar for her readers.

Chris Rose also illustrated the benefits of a communal fight in his depiction of "The Elephant Men," a post-Katrina group of mostly men that congregated together on a porch in New Orleans' Uptown neighborhood while the city was being pumped of its waters and remained closed off from legal entry. Rose was a part of this group and described them as "multiple combinations of jobless, homeless, family-less and sometimes just plain listless," as well as "a civic life-support system" (Rose 2006:53). This group changed each night as passers-by stop in for a beer and conversation about all things related to the storm and its aftermath, the so-called "elephant in the room."

> We're a porch full of people who don't know who's playing in the World Series and don't know what movies opened this week and don't know how many died in Iraq today.
>
> We are consumed. We would probably bore you to tears. But it is good therapy and we laugh more than we cry, and that's a start, that's a good thing, that's a sign of winning this war, of getting this damn elephant out of our city—out of our sight (Rose 2006:55).

The all-consuming rupture in the narrative rhetorically asks where to go next, what to write next, and wonders what the future would hold. The communal experience of exchanging stories, tears and laughter confronted fears that the city could not be revived and acknowledged that this was a collective fight in a war whose purpose, beyond survival, had yet to be defined. The definition it seemed would come from the fight itself. It was as though this communal front was formed so that the group could become stronger and will themselves to move on and over the struggle. The communal goal was to hope enough to remove The Thing ("this damn elephant") from the present and force it into the past and beginning again.

### *"We Are Resilient!"*

For public representatives of post-Katrina New Orleans, the city's survival (and that of their newspapers) was contingent upon the return of citizens to New Orleans. The *Times-Picayune* reached out to its displaced readers, writing that"New Orleans can't possibly recover without New Orleanians … As the city begins filling up with people again, New Orleans will no longer seem like a lost world, and we will no longer seem like a lost people. We're counting the days" (September 16, 2005). The return of evacuees and displaced residents would give resilience a chance and breathe life into a city that had been mortally wounded.

Returning offered hope that New Orleanians could regain a piece of pre-Katrina life and would reaffirm their collective resilience. "Many of us cannot fathom a life outside of our border, out in that place we call Elsewhere," writes Rose,

> When you strip away all the craziness and bars and parades and music and architecture and all that hooey, really, the best thing about where we come from is us. But don't pity us. We're gonna make it. We're resilient. After all, we've been rooting for the Saints for 35 years. That's got to count for something (*Times-Picayune*, September 6, 2005).

Rose recognized that struggle and loss could not forever remain the focal points of recovery. Instead, he continuously sought reasons to give his audience hope:

> Amid the devastation, you have to look for hope. Forward progress of any kind. Even the smallest incidents of routine and normalcy become reassuring. For instance, I was driving down Prytania and at the corner of Felicity, the light turned red … Out of nowhere, in total desolation, there was a working stoplight … And the funny thing is, I stopped (*Times-Picayune*, September 17, 2005).

Here, Rose situated small markers of normalcy in a "New Normal," a term he coined during the aftermath to reflect the awkward space old signs of normalcy occupied in disaster-stricken New Orleans. Rose, via his definition of the New Normal, publicly acknowledged that life in New Orleans after the storm was not the same as before the storm and recognized that the old New Orleans may never be fully accessible. The New Normal represented resilience and normalcy as processes that were being defined and definitions subject to change.

Other writers of public narratives often contrasted the old with the new in effort to give their readers the words with which to envision the future. Signs of hope offered a narrative imagine of a rebuilt New Orleans and provided readers with the words to describe their new reality. The importance of this act cannot be overstated. Without an old normal in place, the narrative development of a New Normal would be without a foundation on which to build. The *Times-Picayune* wrote, "The sights and sounds that make the New Orleans area beautiful, that make it home, are likely to be in short supply for the immediate future" (September 16, 2005). This recognition that a new reality dominates the post-Katrina landscape showed people how to search for hope in the simplest acts of normalcy.

> We also have a new appreciation for mundane things we never stopped to think about before…sound of chainsaws (in St. Tammany Parish)…hum of traffic (in Covington and Slidell)…ring of school bells (in St. John the Baptist parish)…signal the return of people and the start of recovery.
>
> Forget about throwing us something, the return of electricity is thrill enough.

Then there is the "wonder of ice…a hot shower…anything that hasn't come out of a can or pouch." This editor saw a future in which the New Normal would simply become normal and natural again: "Someday we'll be able to take things for granted again, and that will be the

sweetest moment of all" (*Times-Picayune*, September 16, 2005). This desire to again take things for granted was presented in a number of public narratives. It was as though commentators longed for a time when normalcy would not require conscious thought, would not be moving or in progress, and would simply be known rather than chased. This type of writing represented editors trying to reconnect to his or her audience by including in the New Normal comforting traces of the old normal.

Rose offered the stories of New Orleanians actively engaged in being New Orleanian to show his audience the essential resilience of their fellow citizens:

> In a strange way, life just goes on for the remaining. In the dark and fetid Winn-Dixie on Tchoupitoulas, and old woman I passed in the pet food aisle was wearing a house frock and puffy slippers and she just looked at me as she pushed her cart by and said: "How you doin', baby?" … Like it's just another afternoon making groceries (Rose, *Times-Picayune*, September 8, 2005).

Narrators such as Rose presented these people not only as signifiers of the old normal but also as representatives of the natural resilience of New Orleanians, who dealt with disaster by pushing through hardship and struggle. This reality was on display in another unlikely place, the reopening of a strip club on Bourbon Street: "Gaudiness, flesh, neon and bad recorded music have returned to one small outpost on the Boulevard of Broken Dreams, and if that's not one small step towards normalcy – at least as that term is defined in the Big Uneasy – then I don't know what is" (Rose, *Times-Picayune*, September 27, 2005).

Despite signs of hope, editorialists had to account for the fact that signs of hope were only signs and could not promise specific positive outcomes. In his account of a woman whose husband committed suicide upon return to New Orleans, Rose provided readers an example of someone whose capacity to hope was stronger than doubt. Rose wrote, "She told her friends this weekend that she still has hope. I don't know what flavor of hope that she's got, or how she got it, but if she's got a taste of it in her mouth, then the rest of us can take a little spoonful and try to make it through another day, another week, another lifetimes. It's the least we can do" (*Times-Picayune*, December 6, 2005). In this article, communal resilience depended on the readers' capacity for hope. In order to account for moments of doubt, commentators used these individuals' stories to show readers that hope was not without pain and doubt and that resilience required perseverance.

*Gotta' have Faith*

The spirit of New Orleans is something sacred in these narratives. Patricia G. Poupart's letter to the editor reflected this, "I have always been proud of my city and believe that its spirit continues to exist in the hearts of all true New Orleanians" (*Gambit Weekly*, November 8, 2005). This woman makes the boundaries of spirit clear; it belongs only to "true New Orleanians." Additionally, it was that same "true" New Orleanian whose loyalty would ensure the future recovery of the city. Ian McNulty distinguished the border between insider and outsider as simply someone who can recognize the feeling the city of New Orleans offers its citizens. "If you come to New Orleans and identify with the city—if you can see through the trough-loafing of the corrupt, through the degradations and clichés—if you can see through all this and love New Orleans, then you feel its magic" (*Gambit Weekly*, February 14, 2006). Referring to something intangible such as the spirit of a place or faith in a place's capacity to rebuild, columnists created room for unity despite differences (providing the reader could "feel" that spirit or faith).

Public narrators reached out to readers during holidays by focusing on the value of community and recognizing that blessings infused the holiday event with sacred meaning. On Thanksgiving the *Times-Picayune* editor wrote, "We're thankful, in short, to be from a place that is worth missing and mourning. But most of all, we're thankful to be from a place that is worth rebuilding" (November 24, 2005). The same newspaper published this on Christmas, "in the midst of our troubles, we have not forgotten to care for those in need. We have endured and survived, and we can draw inspiration and confidence from our own inner strength, as individuals and as a community. That's a gift that wind and water can't destroy" (*Times-Picayune*, December 25, 2005). Again, authors identify the fortitude of individual families and communities as the connecting force of society, and by extension, the necessary ingredient to a recovered, renewed, and rebuilt city.

To ensure the participation of individuals, families and communities in the recovery effort, some authors invoked the spirit of the New Orleans Saints football team. On September 5, 2005, only one week since Hurricane Katrina had struck the city, the *Times-Picayune* asserted

that New Orleanians were "in desperate need of something to hold onto. Something to ease their broken hearts and nourish their spirits." This editorial continued,

> This metro area has suffered the worst natural catastrophe in the nation's history. People who were helpless to get out of the way of the storm died in our beloved Superdome. The Dome is wrecked, and it is a place known for misery right now. But it can be refurbished. Its rebuilding can be a hopeful sign to the hundreds of thousands of residents who have been scattered across the region by Hurricane Katrina—people who have lost not only loved ones and homes, but their entire community. The Saints have been a source of that sense of community since the day they first walked on the field. They bring us together in a way nothing else does … Before Katrina, Saints fans wanted their team to stay. Now they need it to stay.

This author wanted to re-cover the collective trauma that had occurred at the Superdome in hopes of restoring displaced communities and unifying citizens across social, political and ideological boundaries. The symbolic return of the city's football team and reconstruction of its stadium offered hope of recovery to the entire community. Alex Pagnutti, in his letter to the editor of the *Times-Picayune*, agrees, "For the city to be truly whole, it needs the Saints" (September 15, 2005). New Orleans Saints owner, Tom Benson, and National Football League Commissioner, Paul Taliabue, would later respond to these demands for commitment to New Orleans. In January 2006, Benson and Taliabue unveiled plans to host a number of special events in the city and a promise that the New Orleans Saints would play all 2006 home games in the Superdome. Public narratives delved deeper into understanding the real meaning of the announcement:

> These plans bespeak an impressive commitment to greater New Orleans' recovery. The Saints games and special events will provide an economic boost to a city much in need of one, but there also are tremendous intangible benefits in having this sort of showcase. New Orleans will be able to show a huge audience that is alive and well and eager to host the big events we're known for.
>
> Mr. Benson and Mr. Tagliabue have given this community a great opportunity. Now, it's up to us to make something out of it. Fans need to fill every seat for every game at the Superdome. We need to remind the world that our food, our music and our culture is unmatched—and that our spirit is unquenchable (*Times-Picayune*, January 13, 2006).

Benson and Talibue had offered New Orleanians more than prosperity and media attention, they had given the residents of New Orleans a blueprint of engagement by which to actively

participate in the reconstruction. The plans offered community members an opportunity to be involved (and to act within) a space that signified New Orleans' recovery to the world. This ability to participate was a way to conquer doubts that hope was futile, fear that community was irreparable, and concern that struggle was too difficult to conquer. McNulty summarized the intangible spirit of New Orleans when he wrote, "And here we are. We are impossible in the eyes of modern America. We are a series of calculations that don't add up, an insurance risk not worth the premium. New Orleans' magic can show us why our home is worth the fight even still. New Orleans' defiance can show us how to do it" (McNulty, *Gambit Weekly*, February 14, 2006).

# Chapter Three:  Expectations of Transformation

While narrators worked to define the "blurry edges" of the New Normal through symbolic remembrance and superorganic reaffirmations, they also began looking for some "silver lining" amid the destruction.  Teased out along narrative boundaries best described by one editorial's title, "Da winnaz and da loozas" (Dubos, *Gambit Weekly*, November 29, 2005), editors inscribed categories of difference onto their disaster narratives.  Some of their stories told of individual heroism and civil bravery, while other stories described acts of shamefulness.  Authors embraced opportunity and renewal, expecting a clean societal slate after the hurricane.  Also, editorialist and avid letter writers appointed themselves watchdogs for what they seemed to consider the last visage of hope—the civil core of New Orleans.  This "civil core" represents the moral structure of a society.  In New Orleans, editors wrote the concept of a civil core into their stories as if they were teaching their readers what was good and what was bad in the altered landscape of the New Normal.  The following chapter traces the parameters of the civil core as defined by the editorialists of New Orleans' local newspapers.

## *Demanding Civility*

The severity of the storm led most editorialists to expect that the shift they saw in the physical environment of New Orleans would be reflected in the major changes to the social, political, and economic environments.  Often, authors of editorials were unforgiving of missteps by New Orleans' citizens.  It was with the seemingly small infraction of littering that Rose became undone at a fellow New Orleanian yelling, "We've got to change.  We can't go back to the way we were and the way we were was people just throwing crap in the streets like it doesn't matter.  We need to do better.  We need to change.  IT MATTERS" (Rose 2006:120).  Chris Rose's candid verbal portraits of the post-Katrina landscape often centered on improving quality of life issues in the New Normal.  These lessons demanded a certain level of civility and, in doing so, unveiled a moral core of the rebuilding effort.  "There is no lesson here.  No moral.  Other than we have to erase all the bad things we used to do around here—big and small—if we

want to survive.  We need to be civil.  We need to be clean.  We need to change.  We need to respect ourselves and our city" (Rose 2006:120).  For Rose, the disaster had shifted the playing field of civility and all were expected to rise to the occasion.

Other newspaper representatives articulated this line between bestiality and civility by articulating who had and who had not risen to the occasion.  The *Times-Picayune* editorial, "Katrina's reign and chaos not welcome," depicts a post-disaster city in which "chaos flourished," while some New Orleans police, fire and harbor police personnel joined the "crazed mob."  Written on August 31, 2005, this narrative drew one of the first visible defining lines of civility in post-Katrina New Orleans, "The level of shamelessness and lawlessness was almost incomprehensible."  No city applauds chaos on the streets, especially when "those swore to protect and serve" and keep order join in, but a disaster-stricken city has a lower threshold for chaos than a political protest in, for example, an otherwise calm Seattle or Washington D. C.  This is why these stories were particularly "inconceivable" and "unforgivable."  The lines of civility were made clear: order, lawfulness and duty were to be rewarded; chaos and lawlessness were to be shamed.

This story of post-Katrina chaos also illustrated how the rebuilding process itself was the moral dividing line between good and evil. "In the face of such heartache and despair, it is a despicable act for law enforcement officers to turn into common hoodlums" (*Times-Picayune*, August 31, 2005).  The presence of "heartache and despair" in the devastated city added further shame to the officers' alleged acts.   Here, the *Times-Picayune* editor explained how damaging the officers' infractions were to the struggling city's fight for survival, "This community has months of back-breaking work ahead to clean up and rebuild.  Residents must be able to trust that they can return to their mangled homes in safety, and they must be able to trust the officers who were sworn to protect them" (August 31, 2005).  The future of recovery and the success of rebuilding rested on the ability of residents to trust those in power, and ultimately on their capacity to trust one another.

Within the months following the storm, a great debate arose over the placement of temporary housing trailers granted to homeowners as they rebuilt their damaged houses.  The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was responsible for setting up these trailers for qualifying residents, but the city of New Orleans was to make final decisions as to where "FEMA trailers" would be placed.  Some citizens expressed serious concerns that these trailer

sites would contain concentrated numbers of low-income residents that would attract criminal activity, compromising the safety of nearby residents. Editorialists dubbed this fear the "Not In My Backyard (or, NIMBY) syndrome," and the debate reflected the delicate social balance between groups of various class and racial backgrounds. For instance, Dubos of the *Gambit Weekly* saw this tension as a sign that, "long-simmering issues of race and class are boiling" (January 10, 2006). Rose of the *Times-Picayune*, condemned NIMBY sentiments as intolerable, in light of the post-Katrina devastation and in expectation of a unified communal spirit:

> The race issue is going to haunt our rebuilding process for years; that is a lamentable given … And it begins with trying to fathom how 49 states just opened their doors, their communities and their hearts to our evacuees but now that we are trying to piece things back together her, AT HOME, we do not offer the same hospitality to our own.
>
> The shame of this is unspeakable, the FEMA trailer thing and its concomitant cry of Not in My Neighborhood … There is good reason to dread the great inconvenience that trailer parks bring, but here's the Big Picture on that: Inconvenience is going to be our way of life around here for an appreciable period of time (December 30, 2005).

Editorialists who championed unity denounced citizens who wished to exclude only certain residents because these citizens stood in the way of the united front they had been working to represent. The storm had already exposed too many social inequalities to a national, mass media consuming audience. These public narratives decidedly placed sentiments of exclusion outside of the preserving civil core that authors were constructing and deemed shameful any narrative act that was not inclusive of *all* pre-Katrina New Orleans citizens.

Dubos disregarded the dissenting NIMBY voices by focusing instead on maintaining a strong resilience narratives built on progress-oriented civic values: "In many areas of town, there are signs that the city is coming back to life. Getting more workers and residents back home would go a long way to building on that momentum. It will not be easy, but recovery never is" (*Gambit Weekly*, January 10, 2006). Dubos' purpose seems most interested in continuing the march of progress in reconstruction rather than fighting to resolve social divisions lay bare over trailer park placement. This perspective champions those citizens that will be working hard to overcome the difficult reconstruction challenges and contributing to the health of the city.

*Counting on a Clean Slate in the New New Orleans*

Many writers of public narratives in New Orleans newspapers looked for new opportunities in the New Normal. "Now is the opportunity for great changes to take place in the development of a better urban environment for our city," wrote Wayne Troyer, architect at Tulane University, and Teresa Cole, chairwoman of the Newcomb College Art Department. They ended their letter to show the gravity of what was at stake, "This is either going to be an amazing opportunity to create a new model for a diverse, modern and socially conscious city or New Orleans will cease to exist" (*Times-Picayune*, September 15, 2005). For these writers, there are only two viable endings to this narrative: well-planned survival or death.

Edmund W. Lewis, editor of the *Louisiana Weekly*, also saw Katrina as an opportunity only his voice sought to represent black New Orleanians. On November 28, 2005 he wrote, "As destructive as it was, Hurricane Katrina performed an invaluable service to the citizenry of New Orleans by exposing blatant discrimination, glaring ineptitude and shoddy decision-making skills among local, state and federal elected officials." This perspective reflected the post-storm expectation in the African American community that Americans finally "got it." Reading post-Katrina narratives, it was clear that this initial moment of communal clarity felt like a shifting tide for the entire Black American community. President George W. Bush bolstered this expectation in his first post-Katrina speech on September 15, 2005 from New Orleans' Jackson Square where he publicly recognized,

> That poverty has roots in a history of racial discrimination, which cut off generations from the opportunity of America. We have a duty to confront this poverty with bold action.

> So let us restore all that we have cherished from yesterday, and let us rise above the legacy of inequality. When the streets are rebuilt, there should be many new businesses, including minority-owned businesses, along those streets. When the houses are rebuilt, more families should own, not rent, those houses (CNN.com, transcripts).

The black community took these words to mean a monumental paradigm shift at the federal level was within reach. George E. Curry, a NNPA columnist for the *Louisiana Weekly*, articulated this sense of opportunity when he wrote, "If the city can be revived in a way that leaves no racial group isolated from important resources and services, Hurricane Katrina could be a blessing in

disguise" (January 30, 2006).  Rozario identified the presence of blessings in disaster narratives as an American phenomenon in which a powerful form of denial (2005:34).  Vale and Campanella explain the concept of "denial" as integral to resilience:  "The notion of a resilient city is a societally and economically productive form of denial" (Vale and Campanella 2005:340).  Curry does not employ denial directly, but he does express a willingness to participate in the denial needed to produce resilience if it means that the black community will enjoy the same "resources and services" its white counterparts normally receive.  In the same January 30, 2005 article, Curry emphasizes the potential for change that has been revealed in the disaster, "It's an opportunity for Blacks and Whites to come together and determine what will be best for the city.  But they can't do that by ignoring the elephant in the room—race."

Within weeks of the storm, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin assembled the Bring New Orleans Back Commission (BNOB), a committee of 17 New Orleans professionals intentionally composed of eight African Americans, eight Caucasians, and one Hispanic.  In efforts keep issues of race in the conversation, black editors resisted every aspect of the committee-building process and the committee's subsequent reports.  Despite skin color of members, Lewis accused Nagin's assembly of committee members of not having "ensured that the Bring New Orleans Back Commission's membership reflected the racial makeup of the city and that predominantly black communities in the city were given the same consideration and assistance as white ones" (*Louisiana Weekly*, January 23, 2006).  Once a plan was prepared, it was presented to an already distrusting, unsatisfied public.

> The 'Bring New Orleans Back Commission' recently unveiled a plan that was not only an affront to Katrina victims, but smacked of the exclusion, division and social engineering practices reminiscent of an earlier, uglier time in this nation's history.
>
> The Commission's plan amounts to a massive, red-lining scheme wrapped around a giant land grab for potential real estate developers.  Moreover, it has once again called into question the ability of local leadership to demonstrate any ability to unify the community to marshal the necessary support and resources of the federal government to rebuild in the city in earnest. (Morial, *Louisiana Weekly*, February 6, 2006).

Remembering a sordid history of redlining practices and "urban renewal" projects that disenfranchised the black community, self-appointed representatives of New Orleans' oppositional voice warned of that losing more land threatened to "shake the foundation of the

basic rights to property and freedom of choice we as American's hold dear" (*Louisiana Weekly*, January 23, 2006). In a similar perspective, one letter to the *Gambit Weekly* lambasted the newspaper's support of the plan:

> Gambit's defense of the BNOB Commission smacks of someone who doesn't have a home threatened by it and is so ignorant of the sting and cold chills the plan is bringing to low-income homeowners, particularly those African-American homeowners in the Lower Ninth Ward.
>
> This plan is transparently racist and classist, asking neighborhoods that were predominantly African-American working class … to be judged by the same merits as, say, Lakeview, where residents are better insured and more likely to rebuild (January 31, 2006).

This author called upon civil rights groups to carefully review the plan in order "to not only defend the rights of homeowners, but also to defend the right to return of African Americans whose ancestors built this city with their blood and sweat."

Editors at the *Gambit Weekly* were relieved any plan had been assembled. On January 27, 2006, Dubos, committed to "vision" and planning processes, stated, "Now that a vision and planning document is on the table, everyone also should exhale and commit to a process rooted in civil discourse." Dubos' definition of "everyone" did not include the voices of resistance who did not see opportunity but opportunism as the prevailing motive for a "smaller footprint." Vale and Campanella have addressed the dangers of opportunism in their 12 axioms of resilience, "There is a fine line between capitalizing on an unexpected traumatic disruption to the fabric of a city as an opportunity to pursue some much-needed upgrading of infrastructure and facilities and the more dubious practice of using devastation as a cover for more opportunistic agenda yielding less obvious public benefits" (Vale and Campanella 2005:348). Resistant editors in New Orleans were aware of this potential for abuse of power and often filtered new "plans" and "opportunity" with a skeptical eye.

Dubos pleaded for a more "rational" look at the Bring New Orleans Back Commission's land-use plan, "If we want real reform—and real hurricane protection—we need to take a clear-headed, unemotional look at the facts … and the big picture" (*Gambit Weekly*, February 28, 2005). It was the "big picture" that upset Ron Walters, NNPA columnist for the *Louisiana Weekly*:

[Black communities] had already faced the storm of over two decades of conservative neglect of their condition, damaged by the withdrawal of poverty programs, job training programs, welfare programs, housing programs and endured punitive criminal policy that has locked up their families. Now there was Katrina and more punishment by their government (September 12, 2005).

Dubos' call for a more rational, less "emotional" reaction to the BNOB plan dismissed those offended by the plan as uncontrollable and irrational, even though their critique of the plan was squarely situated in a long line of policies that had ignored the needs of African Americans. For people who have been consistently left out of decision-making processes, giving up land for the "good of the greater community" translated into giving up land to the detriment of all black communities.

Given the intensity of the disaster situation in New Orleans, the *Louisiana Weekly* and the *New Orleans Tribune* demanded change that would reflect the needs of their audience. The editors and columnists of these newspapers did not share the same means to the end, but they did want their audiences to reach for the same ends—political and economic power in America. Ron Walters, a NNPA columnist for the *Louisiana Weekly*, proposed this "end" be considered in the planning process:

In the reconstruction, more than the city of New Orleans should be reconstructed. The safety-net for the poor should be reconstructed, the concept of 'Homeland Security' should be reconstructed to make allowances for race and class in the administration of disasters faced in this country. And the concept of the responsibility should also be reconstructed not just to apply to individuals, but to the federal government (September 12, 2005).

Beverly McKenna, publisher and editor of the *New Orleans Tribune*, did not have faith that this full-scale systemic reconstruction was possible. Instead, forgoing "planning" and "vision" practices of a capitalist system, she demanded resistance rooted in the collective strength of New Orleans' black community:

I hope Black New Orleanians come together with such strength and force, bending only for a moment and just enough that we might put the sky on our collective shoulders then stand up straight and tall and so that it and we fight to resume our place in this city. And still, we must do more than hope. We must make it happen (April-May 2006).

For McKenna, the survival of New Orleans had little to do with progress-oriented narratives touting opportunities for renewals and clean slates.  McKenna valued collective action and self-reliance over hope and vision.  McKenna did not expect her black audience to take hold of newly available opportunities, but rather she expected them "resume" the opportunities already rightfully theirs.

Although post-disaster cities often set their sights on elaborate plans of renewal, unless there was significant change in leadership, most cities continued to make decisions using the same "old" processes (Vale and Campanella 2005).  In the case of New Orleans, Rose explains, "If there is anything this city is not, it's a planned community.  There are only two things people around here plan for in an entire year and that is what costume they're going to wear on Mardi Gras and on which  Friday they're taking off work to go to Jazzfest.  The rest just happens" (*Times-Picayune*, October 21, 2005).  Rose, like McKenna, pointed out that vision and planning processes had not been part of New Orleans' past, and leaders and planners could not suddenly superimpose structure onto the city social, political, economic, and ideological spheres.  This perspective concerned editors of the *Gambit Weekly* and, to a lesser extent, the *Times-Picayune*, who valued bureaucratic planning processes at the expense of disenfranchised communities.


*Nagin for President?*


Commentators emphasized the need for "strong" leadership in building a bigger and better New Orleans, but existing local and state leadership came under fire for lacking media set standards for "strong" leaders, such as the capacity to rhetorically unite citizens, to make "tough decisions" quickly, to allocate resources efficiently, and to exude confidence and emotional control while in the public eye.  Media representations insisted post-Katrina New Orleans lacked the necessary political heroes needed in a disaster situation.  It was as though editorial authors carved out a space for some imaginary leader to fill, generously listing all the qualifications and characteristics he or she would need to possess to occupy the position, but they never really expected or desired the success of this mythical leader.

Immediately after the storm, Mayor Nagin was the voice of frustrated New Orleanians scattered across the country when he blasted federal officials for slow rescue and recovery response with a concise, "Get off your asses and do something, and let's fix the biggest goddamn

crisis in the history of this country" (CNN.com, transcript).  At this moment, editorialists seized the opportunity to speak for their displaced and frustrated audience, "We applaud the mayor for giving voice to an entire city's frustration.  How could the most powerful and technologically advanced nation in the history of the world have responded so feebly to this crisis" (*Times-Picayune*, September 3, 2005)?  For media writers, Nagin's demand for federal assistance along with his raw and honest appraisal of what was "really" happening on the ground in New Orleans filled the heroic expectations of American disaster situations—a strong voice that could stand up to federal bureaucracy and inefficiency and a voice that could harness enough power to incite action from state and federal officials.  Despite authors' desires to present the ultimate leader to their disaster-stricken audience, the need for dramatic tension in their disaster narratives did not have space for Nagin to succeed.

As months passed in the post-Katrina climate, media portrayals of Nagin's off-the-cuff rhetoric concluded that this individual leader was the hero media writers desired.  The delay in federal action on the ground in New Orleans immediately after the storm had opened up a space for Nagin to become the local hero New York Mayor Rudolf Guliani had become after September 11, 2001.  When Nagin no longer be fit as an identifiable media hero, editorialist took control of the narrative by honing in on what current leaders lacked in order to publicly display their definition of a "strong" leader:

> The most important attribute the next mayor of New Orleans needs is not political.  What our mayor needs more than anything else is the ability to deal with stress.  Big-time stress.  We're talking levee-breaking, Wal-Mart-looting, Canal Street-burning stress.  We need a leader with the kind of psychological stature to look Godzilla in the eye as he stomps through our city and say:  You're Toast, pal.  Phasers on (Rose, March 10, 2006)!

The high expectations placed upon local leadership and low expectations of what that leadership could actually deliver converged on January 17, 2006, Martin Luther King Day, when a speech made by Nagin to commemorate the day made national headline.  Channeling the voice of Dr. King, Nagin addressed his black constituents during the speech:

> The thing we need to focus on as a community, black folks I'm talking to, is ourselves.  We're not taking care of ourselves.  We're not taking care of our women.  And we're not taking care of our children.

We ask black people: it's time. It's time for us to come together. It's time for us to rebuild a New Orleans, the one that should be a chocolate New Orleans. And I don't care what people are saying Uptown or wherever they are. This city will be chocolate at the end of the day (nola.com, transcript).

Immediately, a maelstrom of criticism flooded public narratives of local papers. Dubos characterized Nagin as "at best a *poseur* and a charlatan, at worst a liar and a phony" for his "betrayal" of the white community in New Orleans (*Gambit Weekly*, January 24, 2006). Gil Blanchard wrote into the *Gambit Weekly* and ranked Nagin's comments as "Racism at its worst. It tells the white people (the vanilla) of the state to stay out" (January 24, 2006)! Angry and seemingly embarrassed, Jeanette Sanders took Nagin's words as a deliberate racially-charged division: "The whole world watched after Katrina and were shocked that a city in the United States of America had such poverty. We looked like a Third World country. And this is what Nagin is proud of!? He should be hanging his head and looking for ways to rebuild, bring back commerce and improve the City of New Orleans. Instead he has focused on race" (*Gambit Weekly*, January 24, 2006).

Black commentators were also shocked and "outraged" that such divisive comments could be uttered by local leaders, especially during a time of recovery and reconstruction:

What the mayor can't seem to wrap his mind around is the fact that Black New Orleanians don't need a mayor that struts and signifies and plays the dozens; we need results. We don't need elected officials that tell their audiences what they want to hear; we need public servants that find creative, visionary strategies for resurrecting a better, safer New Orleans (Lewis, *Louisiana Weekly,* January 23, 2006).

Lewis accused Nagin for making a grab for media attention and for attempting to gain more African-American votes in the April 2006 mayoral elections. This accusation was ironic, considering how negative most media depictions were of the post-MLK mayor. Lewis championed "visionary strategies," much like Dubos had done, which illustrates his desire for an individual leader who could uphold the scepter of well-planned order and structure. These public narrators were engaged and tried to take control of a reconstruction narrative that they portrayed as out of control in the hands of politicians.

The national audience also participated in the ridicule of the mayor. One letter to the editor read, "Nagin's stupid behavior and comments make me question my desire to once again

visit one of my favorite cities, and thereby help in its recovery" (*Gambit Weekly*, January 24, 2006).  Convention organizers reported that immediately after the mayor's speech they received a high number of cancellations, while local audiences feared the reaction and repercussions of the nation, "The nation looks at us and laughs and wonders why any aid should be given to revive the city of New Orleans" (*Gambit Weekly*, January 24, 2006).  These critiques and complaints fast became incentive to oust the mayor from his position of power and editorialists took the opportunity to call for political actions of their choosing.  Dubos called to "us, the voters, to rid ourselves of him.  Let us pledge our lives and our fortunes to doing so" (*Gambit Weekly*, January 24, 2006).

Those who had taken offense to the mayor's speech planned his removal from office and citizens designed derogatory t-shirts to express their discontent, some New Orleans letter writers resisted the status quo that media outlets were propagating and proposed an alternative response:

> It always fascinates me that white folks who take power and investiture (of office) for granted don't understand what it means to black folks to finally have enough critical mass of population to put some of our own people in office.  It has taken the advent of the "chocolate city" syndrome to get some African-American big-city mayors.  Maybe we need some "chocolate" states to get some governors and U. S. senators (*Gambit Weekly*, January 24, 2006).

Commentators who were not unnerved by Nagin's call for a "chocolate city" understood that the mayor's words were intended for displaced and returned residents who interpreted the BNOB Commission's land-use plan and media play of a smaller New Orleans "footprint" as deliberate attempts to silence their political voices and sideline their participation in the decision-making process.  Jean-Marc Duplantier responded to the public outcry in the *Times-Picayune*, where he explained: "Taken out of context, Mayor Ray Nagin's remark seems to be a divisive attack on white New Orleans.  But it is not.  Mayor Nagin's comments were a direct response to the poisonous, widely held opinion that Katrina was a blessing in disguise because it cleansed the city of its black underclass."  Duplantier had looked "forward to the day when I can return from my vanilla exile to the chocolate city that I know and love" (*Times-Picayune*, January 18, 2006).

McKenna of the *New Orleans Tribune* used the chocolate city "brouhaha" as the first commentary in the paper's Post-Katrina Edition, titling the article "New Orleans, LA: Chocolate City or Plantation" (February-March 2006)?  The newspaper's cover displayed in large font three

public comments that had been made in the recent month by prominent national, state, and local white leaders. First, Representative Richard Baker (R-Louisiana) had said, "We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did." Then there was the comment made by Barbara Bush at the Houston Astrodome shortly after evacuees had arrived, "What I'm hearing which is sort of scary is they want to stay in Houston. And so many of the people in the Arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this, this (she chuckles slightly) is working very well for them." And finally, Jimmy Reiss, Chairman of the Regional Transit Authority out of New Orleans, had told the *Wall Street Journal*,

> The new city must be something very different with better services and fewer poor people. Those who want to see this city rebuilt want to see it done in a completely different way: demographically, geographically and politically. I'm not just speaking for myself here. The way we've been living is not going to happen again, or we're out.

McKenna interpreted the "chocolate city fallout" as "a contrivance with sinister motives," and questioned the double-standard expectations placed on Nagin while prominent white leaders had made equally racist comments without a public response, let alone outrage. McKenna stated, "We, too, are upset about all the controversy surrounding the mayor's recent chocolate city remarks, but not for the same reasons others are." For the *Tribune*, the controversy around the mayor's speech *was* the spectacle not the comments themselves. This controversy was wrapped up in a history of interpretation used by Black Americans to understand their own disenfranchised communities. For McKenna, the outcry was designed by New Orleans' white elite that hoped to:

> Reclaim the city and to unravel policies central to modern struggle for racial equality. The power plays were put into motion long before Katrina hit—plays like gentrification, merit selection of judges, reform of the way city hall awards professional services contracts, takeover of the public schools, the lifting of the police residency requirement, naked land grabs and on and on (February-March 2006).

Other black writers took a different approach to the racial divisiveness rising up in the Chocolate City controversy. James Clingman, an NNPA columnist for the *Louisiana Weekly*, asserted long before the Chocolate City comments were made that "this ain't about White folks; it's about us. This is about our preparation, our accountability, our resolve, and our future" (September 12, 2005). But still others simply did not trust Nagin's intentions, believing instead that Nagin was

trying to betray the black community while pandering to the desires of the white elite in Uptown neighborhoods: "Isn't is interesting to hear the mayor advise black New Orleans residents to ignore 'what people are saying Uptown' when it is crystal clear that the 'Uptown rulers' have been calling the shots at City Hall despite the city's 25+ years of black mayoral 'leadership'" (Lewis, *Louisiana Weekly*, January 23, 2006)?

Media portrayals depicted Nagin as a meddler tampering with the civil core of New Orleans. Regardless of the message or narrative stance, editorialists expected resistance from their readership. They wanted their audiences to act in the ways they had prescribed in their articles. The fact that so many citizens engaged the issue with their own letters and cries of outrage may mislead researchers to forget that it is the editors who decide which issues to highlight in their publications. For those who took offense, Nagin's comments disrupted their construction of resilience narratives that would ultimately maintain the dominance of particular representations of power. For those who supported Nagin and fought for his right to publicly address his black constituents, the speech represented a public moment of truth that constituted their efforts to construct an oppositional alternative voice and ensured a place in the reconstruction narrative of New Orleans. All commentators expected their response and their audiences' engagement to matter, either by removing Nagin from office by ensuring his leadership and the political power of the black community his position represented would continue.

In this chapter I have explored the social and political struggle for power represented and reflected in the editorials that comprise this research. I assert that these editorials and those who write them both reflect and construct the struggle to carve out a livable space in the disaster environment. I recognize that these are voices embedded in political and economic practices that keep their papers open for business. Thus, these authors do not represent individual desires and considerations; they represent media expectations *for* individual desires and considerations. Mass media benefit from knowing what its audiences desires, so those who control media outlets and the socialized editors who work for them, have a vested interest in propagating what those desires shall be. In this light, individual leaders such as Nagin were never meant to succeed as leaders; for the media, leaders must be the focus of collective discontent so that the dominant practices it represents can continue unhindered.

# Chapter Four:  Resisting Irrelevance

*"Regardless of whether the current administration decides to fight for the rights of people of color who are living in exile or not, we're coming back with the full armor of God.  And like the late great W.E.B. DuBois wrote of the fiery determination of black WWII soldiers returning to the United States after the war:*

*'We return.*
*We return from fighting.*
*We return fighting'"*

(*Louisiana Weekly*, December 26, 2005).

Resistance in resilience narratives manifested in multiple forms.  In post-Katrina public disaster narratives, there was resistance against government administrations, against aid agencies, and against insurance companies.  The form of resistance of highest import to this research was the resistant voice of editorialists who identified with their readers by use of the collective pronoun, "we."  This form of resistance instructed readers on which government officials or fellow citizens were to be applauded for their post-Katrina civility and heroism or denounced for their shameful acts of weakness.  Many media writers expressed anger and demanded government accountability for the failure of levees that the Army Corps of Engineers had been responsible for maintaining.  This anger also took on multiple forms.  One was manifest in complete distrust of government.  Some commentators doubted the government's commitment to help the "poorest" communities affected by the flood waters, and called for self-reliance on individuals united as communities.  Other writers used anger to demand that local government and fellow citizens work together to "clean up" Louisiana's corrupt image.  In the form of the media's choosing, resistance occupied a prominent place in the public narratives of resilience, as it clearly showed readers how to identify the enemies of the city's reconstruction.

*Enraged and Engaged*

When New Orleans flooded on the night of August 29, 2005, the aftermath was a highly visible international event.  Immediately, the attention was used to the advantage of nationally recognized news reporters, notably Anderson Cooper of CNN news network and Brian Williams

of NBC news, to get help into the city—fast.  Once the immediate crisis of rescue and recovery had passed, "deserving" New Orleanians wanted to know who was responsible for the levees' failures and what the underlying causes were for the delayed rescue efforts.  As the Bush administration dismissed the "blame game" as inappropriate at such a devastating time, editorialists in New Orleans grew angry.  The *Gambit Weekly* published this response, "Legitimate concerns shouldn't be dismissed as a 'blame game.'  Those of us who are living in Katrina's aftermath are growing weary of that phrase. An independent assessment of what went wrong is vital, not only to our future but to the future of the entire country" (January 10, 2006). The *Times-Picayune* pressed, "This nation eventually needs to figure out why the response was sluggish and disjointed and how to make sure that future disasters aren't met with the same inadequate response" (September 17, 2005).

Five days after the storm, accountability was the name of the game New Orleans editorialist sought to define.  On September 3, 2005, George E. Curry, an NNPA columnist, wrote in the *Louisiana Weekly*:

> I am angry.  I am angry at the mayor of New Orleans.  I am angry at the governor of Louisiana.  I am angry at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).  I am angry at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), now part of the Department of Homeland Security.  I am angry at George W. Bush.  I am angry because they were warned last November that New Orleans was one of the "Disasters Waiting to Happen"—and did nothing about it.  Consequently, hundreds, if not thousands, of people are dead.  Needlessly.

Curry illustrates his devotion to keeping the story of those left behind in the reconstruction dialogue.  Editorial writers focused their readers' attention on how the "real disaster" was preventable and manmade.  The *Gambit Weekly* expressed this sentiment in writing, "That sadness soon turns to rage every time I remember that this was not a natural disaster but a governmental one and totally preventable" (November 15, 2005).  The *Times-Picayune* pointed to the misleading sense of security that New Orleanians had enjoyed prior to the storm, while also faulting human error for the extent of the disaster:

> Rebuilding greater New Orleans and its levees will be expensive, but this region is vital to the economy and culture of this nation.  Besides, Katrina wasn't just a natural disaster; the federal government is also partly culpable.  The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers led us

to believe we were safer than we were.  Now we're left to beg for help to rebuild what should have never have been lost (*Times-Picayune*, January 11, 2006).

Tommy Ates, guest columnist for the *Louisiana Weekly*, described government failings that extended beyond the immediate aftermath of the storm; "For Katrina evacuees, the nightmare has shifted from the hurricane's aftermath to the government's neglect" (December 12, 2005).  Ates continued, highlighting that four months had passed since "the worst catastrophe in this country" and "our government has hardly moved to take care of its own."  Editorial anger grew more intense as few governmental actions or decisions were made publicly available, leaving media outlets to create their own stories.

In resistance to real and imagined acts of federal forgetting, editors were devoted to keep Katrina in the foreground of New Orleans' public narratives:  **"**We need to make visible the frustration, anger, and sense of abandonment that has immobilized New Orleans" (*Louisiana Weekly*, February 13, 2006).  Commentators sought a commitment to self-reliance.  Edmund Lewis stated simply, "When it comes to protecting ourselves against storm surges, levee breaks, looters, boneheaded civil engineers, criminally minded cops and unimaginative elected officials, all we got is us" (November 28, 2005).  The *Gambit Weekly* applauded New Orleanians who had progressed in rebuilding homes "without official guidance or approval" (November 1, 2005).  Papers like the *Gambit* boasted that these dedicated citizens understood the real purpose of the rebuilding event, "as local and state politicians fumble around trying to fit the new reality into the old mold" (December 27, 2005); and, "As much as they can, New Orleanians are pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps because they know in their hearts that our city must and shall be rebuilt," wrote commentator (*Gambit Weekly,* November 1, 2005).  Editors proposed self-reliance as an act of resistance in which New Orleanians could actively participate and collectively display their power over a seemingly powerless situation.  Without government messaging readily available, newspapers asserted that, "We in New Orleans have to make it happen ourselves" (*Gambit Weekly*, November 8, 2005).

Columnists for the *Louisiana Weekly* attributed government failings to systemic categories of difference that disregarded people of color.  James Clingman considered this an opportunity to incite civic action in the black community against the dominant power structure:

Yes, our eyes have been opened to several realities since the hurricanes hit the Gulf Coast, most of which we knew all along but were afraid or ashamed to admit, but this is ridiculous. Now we must face our deepest fears; Black and poor people must look at this country in a different light now; and we must respond, because we cannot like what we see. We cannot turn deaf ears to what is being screamed at us: "You don't count" (*Louisiana Weekly*, January 2, 2005)!

Ron Walters of the *Louisiana Weekly* included a critique of mass media in his version of the post-Katrina public narrative:

One of the ironies of Katrina is that the evacuation has made poverty and the human pain virtually invisible. We have become victims of a television age in which images dominate content. Television shows pictures of empty houses and then cuts away to images of displaced people living well-fed and comfortable in Houston. But seldom does the public see the victim on the foundation slab waiting for the mythical FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Administration] trailer. They don't see the fear of single mothers contemplating what will happen when the FEMA rent runs out and her children have no food or shelter (September 12, 2005).

Clingman and Walters worked to uncover the underlying causes responsible for the damage Hurricane Katrina had unleashed on the black communities of New Orleans in Katrina's aftermath. Each of these writers is a columnist for the NNPA and neither of them reside in New Orleans. These facts do not devalue these authors' fights to maintain an active oppositional voice in the New Orleans' reconstruction, but they do reveal the way these writers infused their already constructed, pre-storm narratives of resistance with more validity by including the stories of difference from New Orleans.

Editorialists urged the public of New Orleans to participate in the cause of levee protection. Levees of the past had failed and editors needed to know, for the sake of their businesses, that rebuilt levees could withstand Category 5 hurricanes rather than rebuild the Category 3 strength levees of the past. On September 30, 2005, the *Times-Picayune* noted that, "New Orleanians who lost loved ones, homes, workplaces, schools, places of worship and their peace of mind to Katrina's waters need to feel safe again if they are to come back to rebuild this place. The levee system of the past isn't going to give them that comfort level." Editors were invested in the future of New Orleans, so they used the metaphor of a failed levee system—if the levees could be rebuilt stronger than so could the whole of New Orleans. The *Times-Picayune* warned that, "if we fail to build that system better, all other efforts being poured into rebuilding

New Orleans could very well be washed away by another Katrina" (September 30, 2005).  For a owners and editors of long-standing institutions like the *Times-Picayune*, keeping business operations and financial investments in New Orleans required strong levees that would ensure the waters surrounding the city were kept out.

While levee protection was an issue discussed most often in the *Times-Picayune* and the *Gambit Weekly*, the *Louisiana Weekly* and the *New Orleans Tribune* urged readers to participate in the fight over voting rights.  Prior to Hurricane Katrina, local elections (including mayoral races) in New Orleans had been scheduled to occur in November.  The high number of displaced residents after the storm caused voting officials to consider postponing the November elections.  A disproportionate number of the displaced were African Americans, so the question of when to hold elections became a question over who would be able to vote.  Dubos had called for a "quick resolution" to the question of when New Orleans' elections would take place, stating, "So now New Orleanians have been plunged even further into a state of limbo—waiting for insurance adjusters, waiting for levee reconstruction, waiting for contractors, waiting for power and phone service, and waiting for the chance to change or keep our city's leadership" (*Gambit Weekly*, December 20, 2005).  Robert N. Taylor, writing for the *Louisiana Weekly*, perceived a "quick resolution" as part of a larger "open conspiracy involving the government and powerful economic forces that have decided to permanently 'clear' at least half the black population from the city.  Black voting power will not only be undermined in New Orleans but throughout the nation" (January 9, 2005).  One voice is focused on the act of voting, while the other is speaking of the repercussions on all of Black America.  The *Gambit Weekly* disregarded the perceived threat proposed by black authors.  Instead, Dubos considered a delay in elections a breach of democratic principles.  Here he wrote, "Pardon the pun, but the argument that many voters might not be able to participate just doesn't hold water," citing that "in a democracy, nothing is more fundamental than people voting.  Delaying indefinitely the New Orleans elections thus sends the worst possible signal about the state of affairs in Louisiana—and the state of our leadership" (Dubos, *Gambit Weekly*, December 20, 2005).

As U. S. Congress debated over how much money to allocate to rebuilding the Gulf Coast, some editorialists demanded an overhaul of Louisiana's notorious national image of political corruption and fiscal irresponsibility.  This issue in particular made clear that editorialists were not necessarily speaking to or even for New Orleanians; they were writing to

an outside audience. Editorialists, conscious of the scrutiny of a watching nation, wanted their New Orleans audience to know that there was no longer room for the "luxuries" of the past that allowed for political corruptions to be swept under the rug. The *Gambit Weekly* wanted the nation to know that, "People have no tolerance for the same old political paradigm, and that's the best antidote to generations of public corruption and official incompetence" (December 27, 2005). "Every word, every image that comes out of the state is vitally important," wrote Stephanie Grace in her commentary in the *Times-Picayune* (October 13, 2005). Grace admitted that giving up the old image meant a compromise, as "one of Old Louisiana's most endearing charms was that it didn't care what anyone else thought," and "those who mattered knew the truth." But , according to Grace, the New Normal called for a new dynamic, and "Whether the New Louisiana sinks or swims may turn largely on what outsiders think of us now." Grace called upon her readers to clean up this image, which she considered to be weighing too heavily on the already overburdened shoulders of Louisiana's state and local leaders. Grace expected Louisiana senators David Vitter and Mary Landrieu to "prioritize projects," and Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, Jefferson Parish president Aaron Broussard, and "everyone else with a platform [to] be at once calm and impatient, visionary and realistic and above all, focused and professional." Ultimately, according to Grace, "it all matters, every utterance, every picture, every day. There may come a time when Louisiana once again revels in its difference, and feels free to reject everyone else's opinions," and "Right now, we don't have that luxury" (October 13, 2005).

Post-Katrina newspaper editors were compelled to explain New Orleans' situation to the outside world, hoping to wipe clean the slate of Louisiana's corrupt politicians by clearly segregating the heroic narratives from the shameful ones. Here, the *Times-Picayune* admitted the faults of Louisiana's past in order to offer a present that held more validity.

> Yes, some past and current public officials in the metro area and elsewhere in Louisiana have give plum contracts to friends and political allies. Yes, one former governor is in jail, and the past three insurance commissioners have done time as well. If Hurricane Katrina breaks the back of the so-called Louisiana way, it will have done our state one service amid all the misery and heartbreak.

> People outside Louisiana should also know that there are voices—and institutions— demanding accountability from those who misuse their positions and misspend public money (October 8, 2005).

Another *Times-Picayune* editorial invoked "shame" as a boundary of civility that would not tolerate corruption: "With the huge flow of government money coming in, transparency and accountability will be crucial. Louisiana politicians have a reputation, often deserved, for putting political connections ahead of public needs … so wasting even a dime of public money would be shameful" (September 18, 2005).

While editorialists were careful to message Louisiana's new image to the national press, they also employed the powerful rhetorical tool of the "community" to call their local communities to action. It was, as shown above, the call to a more cohesive and efficient government. The *Gambit Weekly* assumed the voice of New Orleans' public, writing, "Post-Katrina, the public demands more—and less—from government. More efficiency and professionalism, less bureaucracy and fiefdom-building" (December 27, 2005). Contrasting inadequate leadership with community, the writing editor of this *Times-Picayune* article held the community up as the source of resilience: "These are the most trying times any community could face. And yet we are still a community—far-flung and battered, but a community of people who have shown great strength and resilience. We need the same selflessness and dedication from our leaders, and we need it now" (December 31, 2005). The moral superiority of community over government provided editors with a way to unite their readership against local leaders. Hard work and communal spirit is valued over "fiefdom building" and "inept and inefficient" leadership.

*Deserving Americans*

On September 4, 2005, the *Times-Picayune* addressed President George W. Bush. "We're angry, Mr. President, and we'll be angry long after our beloved city and surrounding parishes have been pumped dry. Our people deserved rescuing. Many who could have been were not. That's to the government's shame." Because of this anger, editors struggled to express the need for government support. The following public narratives rely on active engagement of public dialogue with President Bush and U. S. Congress in order to maintain local control while receiving federal support. Some editorial authors worked to prove to the nation that Louisianans were "deserving Americans."

On September 2, 2005, the *Times-Picayune* denounced U. S. House Speaker Dennis Hastert's post-Katrina observations, which they reprinted for their audience to see: "It looks like a lot of that place could be bulldozed." This editor interpreted the statement to say that it made no sense to rebuild a city below sea-level. The paper editor's public frustration was compounded by another referenced article in the *Republican-American* newspaper article entitled "Is New Orleans worth it?" The *Times-Picayune* response was asserted in the title on that day, "Yes, we are worth it!" In this title, the author addressed a national audience, but at this moment after the storm the editor worked to create a narrative audience of survivors: "Even as people from New Orleans desperately search for their family members and rescue workers patrol the region in boats, hack through roofs and try to pluck survivors out, some people in other parts of the country have begun to blame us, the victims. Our crime? Choosing to live in New Orleans." Dismissing representations of New Orleans as "a drain on federal coffers," and concerned that some "might get the impression that New Orleans has never contributed to the economic vitality of this country," this editorialist demanded that "they ought to show compassion and respect for those of us down here who will be struggling for quite some time to piece together our lives" (*Times-Picayune*, September 2, 2005).

Editors were committed to proving that the city of New Orleans was a quintessential American city, deserving of compassion, but they were also committed to displaying the city as an economically viable contributor to the nation's wealth. The *Gambit Weekly* wanted its audience to see federal aid not as a "free hand-out" but rather as a "long-term investment that pays dividends for decades in oil and gas alone, and if Louisiana got its fair share of oil and gas revenue, it would be able to pay for its own recovery" (December 13, 2005). One *Gambit Weekly* reader echoed this sentiment in a letter to the editor, "We bring incalculable resources to the rest of America—its second largest port, so much of its oil and gas, sugar and salt production, its seafood and its most unique culture" (November 1, 2005). For the *Times-Picayune*, within days of the destructive hurricane strike, it was the federal government to which they wrote: "We, who are from New Orleans, are no less American than those who live on the Great Plains or along the Atlantic Seaboard. We're no less important than those from the Pacific Northwest or Appalachia. Our people deserved to be rescued. No expense should have been spared. No excuses should have been voiced" (September 4, 2005). In these public narratives of resistance, editors addressed a national audience of congressmen and women, national media editors, and

government leaders on behalf of the public of New Orleans. In this way, editorial decisions about who or what to fight were made public, showing New Orleanians the way to argue for the future of New Orleans.

The event of President Bush's first official speech in New Orleans since the storm enabled editorialists to show the New Orleans public how to address and resist the leader of the United States. Bush's speech provided a unique perspective on the way post-Katrina public narratives "shaped" the "proposals" of government officials. Vale and Campanella, in defining the parameters of a "resilient city," point out that resilient cities require narratives of resilience "to enhance or restore the legitimacy of whatever government was in power at the time the disaster occurred" (2005:339). Editorialists seemed acutely aware of this as they began to employ the narrative technique of letter writing to address the president, modeling for their audience how to actively participate in reconstruction by engaging leading individuals. Prior to his September 15, 2005 speech, the *Times-Picayune* began its series of public letters:

> Dear Mr. President, Welcome to our wounded city … You will see that the obituaries for the Crescent City were premature. You detect a pulse, albeit a faint one. New Orleanians, who are know for resilience and love of their hometown, are clamoring to return and rebuild.
>
> This is only the beginning of what must become a gargantuan and sustained effort by you and your administration. A vast stretch of our homeland, your homeland, has been wrecked, submerged, washed away, contaminated, gutted. A huge diaspora of Americans has been scattered across the land. New Orleans, a crown jewel among American cities, is deeply stricken.
>
> New Orleanians also deserve to know that our federal government has made an all-out effort to ensure that a disaster like Katrina cannot happen again. Such an effort should include concrete and dirt, creative thinking, and a commitment that will last for years.
>
> The New Orleans that we and the nation deserve will be protected by thriving marshlands, walled off for floods, rebuild even for its poorest citizens. It will be endowed with the schools, roads and new infrastructure that will allow it once again to be a viable urban center, a vital port, a cultural treasure to America and the world (September 12, 2005).

During his speech from Jackson Square in New Orleans on September 15, 2005, President Bush seemed to respond to such letters with these promises: "We will do what it takes. We will stay as long as it takes to help citizens rebuild their communities and their lives. And all

who question the future of the Crescent City need to know: There is no way to imagine America without New Orleans, and this great city will rise again" (CNN.com, transcript). Some citizens wrote their own letters to the President, publishing them through the local newspaper. Intending to hold Bush accountable for his "promises," Charles J. Toth of Luling, Louisiana was precise in his public address: "We citizens of the United States ask the White House and Congress to fulfill the promises made on Sept. 15, 2005, by President George W. Bush, in a nationally televised broadcast from historic Jackson Square in New Orleans" (*Gambit Weekly*, February 14, 2006). For Toth, his request was beyond personal desires of an individual but rather stood as a whole of American people in the face of adversity, "These are promises to be fulfilled not only by the president, but also by the nation as a whole if it is to live up to America's historical commitment to all citizens" (*Gambit Weekly*, February 14, 2006). In his letter, Toth placed the federal government in the position of antagonist, and "we citizens of the United States" fulfill the place of protagonist, fighting as a collective community with common interests.

Shortly after the storm, the *Times-Picayune* warned the president that its editors would be closely watching the actions and decisions made by the Bush administration. Again, in letter form, the editor wrote: "Dear Mr. President, we sincerely hope you fulfill your promise to make our beloved communities work right once again. When you do, we will be the first to applaud … Please forgive us if we wait to see proof of your promise before believing you. But we have good reason for our skepticism" (September 4, 2005). Skepticism ran through all public addresses to the federal government, and editors returned often to the promises made at Jackson Square in their narratives. On January 31, 2006, the *Gambit Weekly* wrote,

> Ignoring the problem and blaming their own lack of concern on Louisiana belies what the president told our community and the nation in September, when he stood in Jackson Square and said, 'We will do what it takes, we will stay as long as it takes, to help citizens rebuild their communities and lives.' If the president meant what he said, it's time to put up or shut up.

Despite the skepticism, the editor of the *Times-Picayune* considered Bush's promises "heartening and reassuring" (September 18, 2005). While recognizing rebuilding efforts would be long and expensive, the simple act of publicly supporting New Orleans eased some tensions over being heard and being understood. For the *Times-Picayune*, the president's assurances were to be taken as a hopeful sign, "It's now possible to see past the destruction to a brighter future for

the metro area. And the president's public commitment of federal funds helps lighten the heavy burden now facing many Hurricane Katrina's many victims" (September 18, 2005). Nine visits and four months later, editors of the *Gambit Weekly* and the *Times-Picayune* were beginning to publicly worry. Congress had yet to secure the funds necessary to "do what it takes" to rebuild New Orleans, and the heartening reassurances of the president's first speech at Jackson Square had lost their steam in a narrative of resilience that required an "ability to recover or adjust easily to misfortune or change" (see p. 2). The *Times-Picayune* publicly addressed the president in another letter. This time, the editorial writer spoke about struggling New Orleanians instead of speaking for them, "They worry that the White House isn't committed to protecting the region from the fiercest hurricanes. They worry about whether their neighborhoods will be safe in the long run. They worry about whether they—and their neighbors—can afford to rebuild" (January 11, 2006). Lewis at the *Louisiana Weekly* seemed unsurprised at government inaction:

> Those evacuees, some poor, but mainly middle-class and black, trusted the federal government would live up to its promise of repairing the levees (to Category 5 levels) and getting the infrastructure (lights, gas, and roads) back online. It is almost 4 months since the storm; the tragic stories have been off the news media's radar, and (unlike media's polished assurances), no Hollywood ending (December 12, 2005).

For Lewis, government efficiencies and media ignorance had always been present in his oppositional narrative. On November 28, 2005, Lewis compared the aid doled out to foreign countries for reconstruction, especially in Iraq after the U. S. invasion of 2003, to the lack of aid coming into New Orleans, "If the U.S. can shell out unimaginable amounts of money to build and rebuild the infrastructure of nations all over the planet, why does the federal government continue to treat the people of Louisiana like red-headed stepchildren?" For this editor, there was little room for hope on the proverbial clean slate: "Just the same old story of the politics as usual served Southern-style: money is power, power is money, and without either you have none; and therefore no response when it is matters" (*Louisiana Weekly*, December 12, 2005). Lewis wanted his audience (and fellow columnists with the NNPA) to know that lack of action by the government meant only that resistance all black New Orleanians would be imminent. On December 26, 2005, Lewis insisted that "Black New Orleans" would return, "Slowly but surely, signs are emerging that Black New Orleans is coming back geographically, culturally, politically and economically. After seeing how plans are being made with little regard for people of color,

the sleeping giant that is Black New Orleans is waking up and preparing to reclaim its place in the Crescent City."

## *Messaging Mardi Gras*

For many editorialists, Mardi Gras 2006 represented a culmination of all they had fought to create over the last six months since Hurricane Katrina. This event was an opportunity to remember the city and people that had passed; to reaffirm the collective need to celebrate what was still right with the city; to send a message to the world that proved the city's resilience; to resist the death of New Orleans and the possibility of a failed rebuilding; and, to maintain control the narrative being told about that rebuilding.

The intangible "spirit" of New Orleans discussed in Chapter Two had often been expressed in its events—Mardi Gras, Saint Joseph's Day, Halloween, Saint Patrick's Day and any other event that required a costume or warranted a parade—and in these events there was a built in opportunity to address a community of revealers. Mardi Gras 2006 would be displayed as an insider celebration amongst New Orleanians that would require a space for the media to mediate its meanings and messages to a national and international audience. By the time Mardi Gras arrived in February 2006, the wounded city's editorialists had been struggling to define New Orleans' economically, politically, and socially correct place in America to a national audience. The *Gambit Weekly* prepared its local audience for more national audience misconceptions about Mardi Gras:

> If ever there has been a time that New Orleanians have lived with the notion that the rest of the nation—the world, even—doesn't quite 'get' our city, it has been the past five months. In the national media, we have alternately been portrayed as noble savages, looters, murderers, rapists, yahoos, racists, mourners, beggars, sinners and saints. We don't have our priorities in order. We demand a government handout. We don't know what we're doing … National and international media … don't understand the complexities of such a unique American city (February 14, 2006).

For the *Gambit Weekly*, there is something elusive that outsiders fail to "get" about New Orleans, especially as it is presented through the public eye. In 2006, New Orleans commentators wanted to set the record straight and get the rest of the nation to understand that Mardi Gras had to

happen, "Because it matters.  It is how we heal, how we deal with whatever life throws at us" (*Gambit Weekly*, January 17, 2006).

In remembrance, Michael Tisserand, pre-Katrina editor of *Gambit Weekly*, hoped the coming Mardi Gras celebration would bring a resistant voice to the "silence of a nation that seems to have resigned itself to what is happening inside one of its greatest cities" (*Gambit Weekly*, January 24, 2006).   Tisserand was concerned that New Orleans' plight to rebuild had already fallen out of public attention, and he was eager to remind his dispersed New Orleanian readers how far they had come and the extra mile they would need to take the 2006 Mardi Gras celebration:

> This year, Mardi Gras falls on Feb. 28—nearly six months to the day that floodwaters poured into our New Orleans.  The following week, a hot, watery hell was endured by our neighbors, our friends, our families.  Some of us walked through that hell ourselves.  Some of us didn't survive … It's time to honor the dead and celebrate the living.  It's time to throw a Mardi Gras like nothing ever seen before.  Let's go national.  Let's make it a day that will be anything but silent (*Gambit Weekly*, January 24, 2006).

Tisserand, like others, wanted the world to "get it," to understand why celebration was necessary when the task of rebuilding was still in progress.  Rose also considered Mardi Gras to be a defining moment in New Orleans New Normal, "The social and celebratory nature of this event defines this city, and this is no time to lose definition.  The edges are too blurry already" (*Times-Picayune*, December 13, 2005).  Ultimately, public narratives expressed the need for celebration because the task of rebuilding was still in progress.  As the *Gambit Weekly* commentator expressed, "Now more than ever, we need to show the world that we are healing, and that we will not let tragedy take our soul, destroy our culture, or break our spirit" (January 27, 2006).  Rose admitted the double-messaging that Mardi Gras 2006 would transmit to the national audience:

> On the one hand, it is vital to our very survival that the world outside of here understand just how profoundly and completely destroyed this city is right now.  …We're leaking.  And we could very well breach in the coming year or two.  On the other hand, we need to send a message that we are still New Orleans.  We are the soul of America.  We embody the triumph of the human spirit.  Hell, we ARE Mardi Gras (*Times-Picayune*, December 13, 2005).

This embodiment of the spirit of New Orleans and the celebration of Mardi Gras which expressed that spirit was what these writers wanted the national audience to "get" and New Orleans citizens to express during their celebratory rituals. The embodiment of Mardi Gras was expected to reach beyond individual participants, and going forth with event marked "an affirmation of our collective faith that life here will go on, that we will endure as a people, because we believe that life here has a deep and lasting significance, even if too few of our fellow Americans comprehend" (*Gambit Weekly*, January 27, 2006). With this "affirmation of life," another level of rebuilding was presented as a feasible accomplishment for New Orleanians. "Mardi Gras is about our city's soul, and our cultural and spiritual revival as a community" wrote the commentator for the *Gambit Weekly*, "Mardi Gras always unites us, and this year it can bring us together like never before—even those who may celebrate it in far-away places" (January 27, 2006).

Embodiment of Mardi Gras represented a great responsibility for all New Orleanians, "Now more than ever, the burden of creating a safe, efficient and clean Mardi Gras is a shared one" (*Gambit Weekly*, February 21, 2006). This year's Mardi Gras, according to the *Gambit Weekly*, was "being held in the shadow of a grim reality," could not be frivolous but had to be celebrated as a sacred event, filled with meaning derived from the last six months. Once the event was inscribed with meaning by framing it as an event that was part of the recovery, it would become a celebratory event that fit into the narrative of resilience editors were invested in propagating. For the *Gambit Weekly*, Mardi Gras was about the economy and the social sanctity of a wounded city; "It's not just an attempt to bolster our spirits; it's a way to bolster our flagging economy. And if we don't get it right this year, we'll not only run the risk of losing future visitors but we'll also run the risk of losing our own displaced citizens. This year's Mardi Gras *has* to be safe. There is no other option" (February 21, 2006). Rebuilding, repopulation and rejuvenation required the civility of New Orleanians to "maintain the balance between fun and foolishness. There's too much at stake" (*Gambit Weekly*, February 21, 2006).

Speaking to for those New Orleans' citizens who were still displaced six month after the storm, editors at African American newspapers wanted to be sure the Mardi Gras message highlighted the pain of rebuilding. Lance Hill, a guest columnist for the *Louisiana Weekly*, proposed:

We need to surface the pain, suffering, and frustration of Katrina victims for the public to see. What do we want the world to see on Mardi Gras day? Happy, well-fed people having a good time? Fine. But we also should let them see a united mass movement of tens of thousands of determined people from all walks of life who believe the federal government has forsaken them. We can do both (February 13, 2006).

This author's proposal tries to mend the gap between the struggling displaced citizens and the celebrating citizens already returned. Some displaced African American New Oleanians were already convinced of being strategically "kept out" of the city by "the residents of the French Quarter and Uptown who will enjoy a very exclusive celebration this year." This was the perspective of Theron Ferry who had written to the *Times-Picayune* to express her perspective that any celebration of Mardi Gras was inappropriate. For Ferry, assuming control of the voices of the thousands of New Orleans' residents who were scattered across the country,

Going ahead with Mardi Gras seems like a slap in the face.

The national media will show the police clearing Bourbon Street of the inebriated at midnight, and the country will assume that all is well in the Big Easy or, worse, that New Orleans will let nothing get in the way of frivolity.

Elections will be postponed and we will fiddle while Rome burns. All the while hundreds of thousands of suffering New Orleanians will watch from afar wondering if life will ever again be normal for them (*Times-Picayune*, December 9, 2005).

Ferry's position that celebrating Mardi Gras without the presence of many New Orleanians exhibited a disregard for the displaced signifies, for her, a level of forgetting that has overcome the nation and the returned residents of New Orleans. In her perspective, any effort not devoted to attending "the fundamental needs of our city," suggests that priorities of local leaders "are seriously flawed, if not outright childish and irresponsible" (*Times-Picayune*, November 12, 2005).

Regardless of the protests, most public narratives written by columnists and editors in the *Times-Picayune* and the *Gambit Weekly* agreed, "The Mardi Gras thing. It's not on the table. It's not a point of negotiation or a bargaining chip. We're going to have it and that's that. End of discussion" (Rose, *Times-Picayune*, December 13, 2005). Rather than cancel the event, public narratives of dominating media institutions chose to interpret the event of Katrina *through* Mardi Gras.

There will be Mardi Gras Indians struggling to maintain their culture. There will be re-routed parades, smaller krewes, curious visitors, hopeful investors, homeless parade-goers, evicted hotel dwellers, returning citizens, activist groups, awestruck relief workers and contractors, film crews of all stripes, moist-eyed historians, fundraising efforts…the list goes on and on. Surely, we can all move past the obvious and tell the fascinating stories that will come from the most anticipated Carnival season in recent memory.

In this passage, the old normal and New Normal are wrapped into a single narrative of resilience and resistance. The mixture of displaced parade-goers and hotel dwellers with relief workers and historians represented resilience, the return of the unifying spirit of New Orleans pre- and post-Katrina. The editorial author of the above passage resisted the possibility of negative media attention and demanded "that the national media treat post-Katrina Mardi Gras unlike any other Mardi Gras. Because it IS unlike any other Mardi Gras. Covering Mardi Gras provides the media with the same opportunity that Katrina provides New Orleans: the opportunity for reinvention" (*Gambit Weekly*, February 14, 2006). If Hurricane Katrina marked the turning point for these narratives of resilience, then Mardi Gras marked a step towards resolution of the narratives of rebuilding—a "declaration of faith in ourselves, our culture and our spirit" (*Gambit Weekly*, January 27, 2006).

# Chapter Five: Towards Anthropology of Disaster

*"Among the cacophony of place, event, and topic, a certain order generally emerges. For those suspended between havoc and wholeness, by and large a process ensues. Its steps are many and complex, yet they are almost as predictable as crawling, standing, and walking"*
(Hoffman 1999a:134).

Hoffman and Oliver-Smith (2002:9) have written that disasters reveal the bare bones of society and have the capacity to test the strength of societies' social, economic, political, and ideological organizations. In effort to reorder the social differences that had been revealed in the disaster, I believe New Orleans commentators, along with some letter writing correspondents, had to re-cover exposed categories of difference with a unifying narrative of resilience. As Herman and Chomsky (2002) have asserted:

> The elite domination of the media and marginalization of dissidents that results from the operation of these filters occurs so naturally that media news people, frequently operating with complete integrity and goodwill, are able to convince themselves that they choose and interpret the news 'objectively' and on the basis of professional news values (p. 2).

This research is composed of analysis that presents a portrait of post-Katrina New Orleans as told by public narrators from the city. These writers are storytellers of an event that happened in a specific time and place and required certain narrative ordering. The editorialists of New Orleans' media institutions took control of an opportunity to control the narrative ordering process. This research offers a way for researchers to view editorials from post-Katrina New Orleans and considers how editorialists in a post-disaster environment can both reflect and cause changes of social, economical, political and ideological consequence. The narrative texts of editors are written from perspectives not discussed (nor, at times, recognized) by those who create them. The editorialists of this study are (perhaps unwittingly) perpetuating a particular myth, or "illusion of order" (Rozorio 2005:30), that sustains dominant representations of power and undermined oppositional representations of power. It should be noted that Hurricane Katrina and its social, political and economic aftermath marked an unusual situation that cannot be fixed

or concluded, and represents a series of changes that will be reordered in an infinite number of ways as the history of New Orleans (and even the United States) continues to be told.

The editorialists of New Orleans newspapers used public narratives of resilience and resistance as representations of power that portray social order as a matter of individual choice, thereby placing the responsibility of reconstruction in the hands of communities and out of the hands of economic, political and ideological institutions. In other words, these editorialists need social order to survive as profitable publications. Therefore, calling upon their readership to be resilient and resist against a common enemy is an attempt to create a community of actors that will speak for the causes that matter most to the newspapers and the institutions they represent. That cause is the survival, not of individuals, but of the infrastructural institutions that bind them.

In the face of disaster, dominant institutions champion a return of social order to maintain legitimacy in the capitalist system (i.e., to prove that they are still able to create capital, or make money to reinvest in new technologies) (Wolf 1982:10). Mass media outlets, especially those that control local newspaper interests, act as agents of dominant institutions because they rely on social order to retain their own value in the capitalist mode of "creative destruction," a process in which businesses have the capacity to replace the old with the new, and to remain viable as a valuable information source. Understanding how dominant representations of power define "social order" may help explain the importance of narratives of resilience and resistance in post-Katrina New Orleans. The above logic is borrowed from Eric Wolf, who explored this question in *Europe and the People Without History* when he described sociology as a field that "stemmed from an attempt to counteract social disorder by creating a theory of social order" (1982:11). For Wolf, sociological theory locates order in the "quality and quantity of social relations" composed of individuals interacting with other individuals; and, separates the cause of disorder from economic, political, or ideological contexts. Moreover, this approach implies two types of society:

> One in which social order is maximized because social relations are densely knit and suffused with value consensus; and another in which social disorder predominates over order because social relations are atomized and deranged by dissensus over values (1982:11)

Public narratives from New Orleans employed this dualistic perspective of social relations in order to place the responsibility of reconstruction on the shoulders of individual actors and to remove responsibility from economic, political, and ideological institutions.

Chapter Two of this work shows how unity and "communality" were emphasized in the narratives, while past social divisions were deemed momentarily irrelevant to the immediate crisis. Disaster victims responded with "individuation" or an "emotionally dazed" state during and immediately after the event, individuals also quickly turned to the concerns of communal well-being (Hoffman 1999a:138; Wallace 2003:149). Considering the effects of "trauma" on small communities, Kai Erikson defines "collective trauma" as "a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality." This sort of trauma "works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it," and results in "a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support" (1994:233). New Orleanians underwent collective trauma after Hurricane Katrina, while editorialists worked to redefine that trauma as something that could unify all citizens against a common enemy. Hoffman paraphrases Marris (1974:98-104) to say that "conflict is a powerful organizing principle of behavior, simplifying and clarifying immediate purposes" (1999a:145). On a citywide scale, distinguishing the line between insider and outsider maintained a narrative community of speakers who could continue to unite over what had been lost, common enemies, and shared unanswerable questions. Even as they publicly disputed differences between social communities within the city, they continued to rely on cityhood to hold together the damaged communal fabric and worked together to protect the civil core of the city while reconstruction strategies were decided.

A city's destruction has significant impact on the way its ruptured narrative is reconstructed. The analyzed narratives of this work made regular returns to affirming New Orleans as a viable, relevant American city, deserving of federal funding and contributing to America's wealth. How these affirmations of American-ness were spoken varied according to who was assumed to belong to the editors' audience. The first audience was reflexive and spoke inward. These phrases were spoken inward, written as remembrance and reaffirmation of the "old" New Orleans or as a call to collective engagement of civic betterment for the sake of New Orleans' future. Here, writers searched for signs of hope, a definable future and faith in one another.

There was also the audience of New Orleanians signified by the use of the pronoun, "we." This is the audience with which writers communicate with their readers as a whole, single collective. Often this collective was motivated to unite by some outside factor marked by an ambiguous "they." This audience shifted depending on who "they" signified. Most often "they" included local, state and national political figures or institutions, the media and disaster aid organizations. Less often but just as significant, "they" indicated whole groups of interlopers such as white people, business interests (as opposed to community interests), and dominant economic and political powers of the state or nation-state. Ultimately, "disaster victims inevitably seize upon a particular faction they come to deem the enemy. The perceived foe is generally whatever agency brings or embodies, and consequently controls, restricts, or denies, restitution" (Hoffman 1999a:144). Chapter Three explores the way these various voices and symbols worked to create identifiable, yet shifting enemies (any one not committed to the restoration and reconstruction of New Orleans) and heroes (any one committed to maintaining the integrity of the New Orleans community). These flexible categories of difference allowed for narrative control over the constantly changing reconstruction situation. "We," the editor and the audience, occupied the position of hero; "they," the politicians and institutions they represent, occupied the position of enemy.

In Chapter Four of this paper, narratives of resistance can be seen as one way that disaster victims actively engage politicians, newspapers, naysayers and fellow citizens. Disasters are a window into the way humans act, resist and fight for the right to organize their own lives on their own terms. Despite "globalized processes" and politically constructed narratives of resilience, New Orleanians made choices over their lives, constantly working to keep oppositional voices in dialogue with dominant ones. Hoffman (1999b:311) describes the part of disaster in setting the stage for particular kinds of social changes and struggles to occur:

> Disasters set a critical stage, both bringing out and igniting arenas of contestation within society. They are great motivators of social action, and social action motivates change. People do not sink into inertia in calamitous situations. They react. New groups and leaders emerge. As disasters cause numerous difficulties, they require departure, adjustment, and answers. They throw into stark light inequalities, struggles over power, the social as well as the physical matters that imperil and increase dissatisfaction. They raise questions of a metaphysical nature. They frequently accelerate processes of change already underway.

On the other hand, in response to challenges and contestation, disasters also often promote cultural preservation and resistance to change. In particular when issues of redistribution of goods or power arise, the forces behind the status quo revive. All in all, disasters present extraordinary examples of the fluid quality of culture, the invention and reinvention of cultural goods, the areas of harmony, disjuncture, inconsistency, and coherence.

This passage presents the way humans fight and act to promote change while also resisting and preserving that which is sacred. Hoffman's "fluid quality of culture" allows for narrative adaptation to changed environments that result from a disaster situation. Similarly, the narratives of resilience from New Orleans required certain flexibility in order to adapt to the constantly changing social, political, and economic landscape over the six month span following the storm. This supports the salience of the study of narratives in disaster situations, as they reflect the changing issues, concerns, questions and answers sought and found by narrative speakers. Hoffman has shown that the continuance of culture and the city that preserves it has to do with the ability of the narratives to make sense of the disordered post-disaster situation. "Part of what drives a culture is not that new experiences do not enter, but that the lexicon in which to place new information captures it and transforms the new into the known" (Hoffman 1999b:320). Editorialists' struggle to write the story of the New Normal acted to transform the disaster process into a tangible, perhaps stoppable, narrative thing.

In a "wounded city," the world to be remade is one that has been destructed and disordered, demanding the reconstruction and reordering of the "heart's desire." Vale and Campanella point out, "Whatever our politics, we rebuild cities to reassure ourselves about the future" (2005:344). Denial of the full impact of devastation provides a psychological and societal space for reconstructing what was destroyed while envisioning the future. Robert Park has related human desires to the construction (or reconstruction) of city environments.

The city and the urban environment represent man's most consistent and, on the whole, his most successful attempt to remake the world he lives in more after his heart's desire. But if the city is the world that man created, it is the world in which he is henceforth condemned to live. Thus, indirectly, and without any clear sense of the nature of his task, in making the city man has remade himself (Harvey 2003:35).

It is a city's transformative-ness that gives it survivability—the ability to remain flexible to changing times, demographics, economics, technologies and disasters. As long as city networks

can continue to connect people, goods, and services, the city itself can survive. The writers of these public narratives from post-Katrina New Orleans worked to explain the validity of rebuilding New Orleans, while reorganizing their disenfranchised city through the building of disaster narratives. Their plight laid claim to the fact of resilience, while negotiating the parameters of a resilient future. Resisting meant shaping the proposals and recommendations by government officials in order to remain in the rebuilding dialogue, thereby asserting their participation in the disaster narratives that would make up New Orleans' future history, and in doing so secure the powerful position of the citizens they claim to represent. Like "disaster symbolism," disaster narratives enable "the conservation of a sociocultural world, and also its transformation" (Hoffman 2002:114).

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# Vita

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