IF THIS THING HAD NEVER HAPPENED: MOVING ON FROM HURRICANE

KATRINA

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

If This Thing Never Happened: Moving on From Hurricane Katrina

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It has been suggested that understanding Hurricane Katrina and the federal levee failures requires a paradigm shift within sociology. Disaster and risk, race, class and inequality, urban sociology, and the sociology of trust, to name but a few areas within the discipline have all been recast since Katrina. The people who experienced Katrina also experienced a paradigm shift of sorts. The trauma and suffering Katrina inflicted upon residents of New Orleans has resulted for many in a change in expectations about the future, a change in the ways they interact with others, a change in their cultural practices, a change in the way they think about the world. My dissertation focuses on evacuees who decided to return to the Lower Ninth Ward in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. In the five years since Katrina evacuees have been forced to make life altering decisions, strategize about the future, negotiate the past, and deal with confusion and uncertainty. The major question this study addresses is how do people move on from major collective events. In particular I am interested in the cultural and cognitive tools people use to form long term strategies of action after major acts of social disruption. In examining how people have moved on from Hurricane Katrina, I provide a detailed analysis of how culture both
enables and constrains. I also focus on the lived experience of suffering, including what people do with suffering and what suffering does to people.
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Chapter One: “What Do They Think Happened Here?”

Getting Dirty

Darren was pointing at a couple of places on Greg’s roof that worried him. The roof on the old blue double shotgun was bending and sinking in various spots. If you looked at it from the side, it resembled a giant, broken accordion. The remnants of the blue tarp, like those that once dotted the rest of New Orleans in 2005, still peeked out here and there. Darren was saying something about the back wall not supporting the roof. Anyone could see that a good portion of the wall was simply gone, washed away in a torrent of water nearly six years ago. Tongue and groove boards, probably over a hundred years old jutted this way and that way, splintering into an opening the size of a refrigerator. Next to the tongue and groove should have been the rest of three or four fourteen foot barge boards--wood taken from barges that sailed down the Mississippi that were used to build homes in the late nineteenth century--but they too were gone. But smiling and shaking my head in affirmation, I had no idea what this had to do with the roof.

I knew, in what was part a mental exercise for him and part learning experience for me, Darren would tell me several more times how and in what steps we were going to fix the roof. Throwing his hands up, frustrated because neither the homeowner nor the non-profit wants us to fix the wall, he turned to me and said it’s got to be done. Smiling, trying to egg him on, I said, yeah, we can’t have anyone fall off of the roof, that’d be bad for business. “We gonna have five or six people up there. If something happens, I can only save three or four, maybe”, Darren quickly replied. If anyone else had said it, I would have laughed. The thing is Darren really meant it.
Darren “Dirty” McKinney grew up in the Lower Ninth Ward. He was pretty much raised on the streets until he was taken in by a family in the neighborhood. Everyone acknowledged that Darren had a rough childhood, rougher than most. Sitting next to him, handing him tools or learning how to “fix” a wall or floor or roof, I often found myself wondering how bad it must of have been to stand out among all the others in this neighborhood, a neighborhood that the esteemed African-American historian Kent Germany has called the most marginalized place in the country.

Dirty learned to work on cars, build porches, fix lawnmowers, and fiddle with about anything by the time he was twelve. One morning over bacon and donuts he told me rather matter-of-factly that he learned how to fix things by watching other people. He looked at me as if to say, I don’t know who you were hanging out with when you were young, but that’s what I did and you should have too.

Everyone in the Lower Ninth Ward knew Darren. Whenever I was with him people would laugh and tell me to be careful and not let him work me too hard. Before Hurricane Katrina and the federal levee failures Darren was more or less the unofficial handy man of the Lower Ninth Ward. Despite losing his home and most of his friends, “some dead, some left, don’t much matter—they ain’t here no more and we is”, he hadn’t missed a beat. Driving to work sites in the morning people would wave us over and ask him if he could cut their grass, fix the brakes on their mom’s car, help frame a wall, work on their roof, put in the kitchen sink; “Hey”, they would say, “when you coming over?” One day, after taking rotten studs off of a roof, I stepped over to the other side of the house to ask him for a different hammer and found him laying in the middle of the road, underneath a car, trying to fix a flat. If you worked with Darren long enough you soon found yourself
trimming someone’s hedges with a hand saw, or crawling under a stranger’s house to see why their sewage was leaking, or sprawled out under a house on your stomach with a jackhammer trying to remove part of the home’s foundation. Somehow it seemed right.

One night, on my way home after a terribly long and hot day working on wiring in an attic of a house that should have been torn down years earlier, an elderly man stopped me on my bike and asked if I could help carry a few bags of concrete mix from his truck to his living room. Despite that we were probably the only people around for three or four blocks, he was worried someone would steal them. A “few” bags turned out to be fifty fifty pound bags. I took my time unloading and carefully stacking all fifty bags. When I finished the old man put his hand on my shoulder and told me to thank Darren.

Most mornings Darren would drive to the volunteer house of the non-profit, with his tires sliding in the loose gravel, he would back up into a partially vacant lot and attach his trailer. He expected whoever had been assigned to his crew to have already piled up the day’s supplies outside of the toolshed. He would look over everything, shouting instructions at volunteers who were barely awake and then have them load everything into the trailer. He might take a few minutes to go inside the volunteer house to see what was for breakfast or tease the person on house duty or inquire about an order for a part for a tool, but not for long. While other crews looked for a stray hammer or stood around coming to terms with the morning, Darren was back in the truck, tires catching loose gravel, off to the work site.

Darren kept himself busy in part because it kept him from thinking about what had happened to his community. Part pragmatist, part optimist, he shrugged off suggestions that the failure to rebuild the Lower Ninth Ward has something to do with race--the
community was over 90% black pre-Katrina—or politics or indifference. When asked why he thought there were still houses that had not been gutted or why the city wouldn’t pick up the tires and debris we collected from yards and parks, he would just say “it is what it is”. While others felt that those who left and have not returned had abandoned the community Darren would just tell people “that’s on them”.

I worked with Darren off and on for over a year, helping to rebuild houses in the Lower Ninth Ward. Some days I would work with someone else or another crew, some days I was asked to go to a city or neighborhood meeting on behalf of the non-profit, after awhile I was allowed to jump from crew to crew--to which ever one was doing the most interesting work, but it was those days with Darren that I looked forward to the most. Darren put everything he had, everyday, into rebuilding the Lower Ninth--no job was too small or too unimportant. And if you were working with him he expected you to do so as well.

Darren, however, was not that different from other people in the Lower Ninth Ward. Others started community centers, non-profits, they quit jobs to dedicate their lives to urban gardens or farmer’s markets or coordinating volunteers. Some of them had powerpoint presentations on ways to save the nearby bayou or designs for development or blueprints for businesses and tourist attractions. They attended dozens of meetings every week. They had the Mayor on speed dial. They had photos on their wall of them with Brad Pitt and Danny Glover and Jimmy Carter. They had recommitted themselves to the community in a way that seemed to outsiders at once encouraging and yet simultaneously excessive.
Darren was going to rebuild every house in the Lower Ninth ward if he had to. One day at Greg’s house, after he explained a couple of times which floor joists he wanted raised and where to place the jacks, he left to frame another house several blocks over. He stopped by once or twice to check in on us and in his own special way help us out. He would often say, “look you doing it right and all, but let me show you a better way how to do it”. Darren moved a jack over several feet and showed me an easier way to cut out the joist. Under the house, which like many of the shotguns and Greek revivals in New Orleans sat on brick columns and thus a few feet off of the ground, while I waited for someone to bring a sawzaw or just rest, when I wasn’t looking at the detritus that had washed up under the house during the flood-animal bones, bottles and cans, shoes, dishes, etc. I wondered what made Darren do this all day, every day, usually seven days a week. When most of the volunteers were ready to grab a beer or simply a shower, Darren was loading up a lawn mower to cut a vacant lot or looking for a tool to go fix something somewhere that he happened to notice that day driving around the neighborhood. On weekends when I was on my way to do an interview or check in with someone, Darren would be under a house or on top of a roof. I spent many Saturdays stopping to see what he was up to, only to end up first handing him a tool and eventually under the house or on top of the roof with him.

At the end of that particular day at Greg’s he drove his truck up, tires screeching to a halt and sliding in the loose gravel in the street. I could hear him slam his door and I knew he was upset. Yelling to me even before he got out of the truck, I worked my way out from under the house so I could hear him. As I brushed off my pants and shoes, removing layer after layer of dirt, dust, and who knows what kind of toxic sediment, he
told me that they, meaning the non-profit, didn’t want us to work on the house any more. He was visibly shaken. He was upset because he had told the homeowner he could finish the roof and porch at least and perhaps partially reframe a few rooms before Christmas. That way the homeowner could keep squatting in the house without the fear of the house falling down or the nuisance of being rained on anymore. We could both imagine Greg sitting on the floor of his house, the humidity just pushing the cold into his bones, huddled around a small propane heater, waiting for the sun to come up or for the rain in his living room to stop. Darren told me how this was his neighborhood and he would do what he wanted. He eventually stomped away and then turned back and said “I’ll rebuild every house Katrina knocked down. I’ll work weekends, everyday. You know, you know when I get my mind on something how it goes.”

**Suffering and Ontological Security**

In the nineties, Kai Erikson (1994), compiling experiences from his twenty years of observing disasters, noted that some communities never fully recover from the event. In these communities the social disruption goes from an “acute shock” to a “chronic condition”; the trauma becomes a constellation of life experiences and a persisting condition (italics in the original, 1994: 229). Other scholars have likewise noted a change in the temporal affects of disasters (Perrow, 1999). Disasters have become in Erikson’s term “unbounded”; they seem to have no beginning or end. People no longer experience disasters, they live with them.

As Wuthnow wrote, we live in a culture of peril (2010). While the question of the twentieth century was largely how to avoid peril, the question of the twenty-first may
well be how do we live with it. For it no longer seems a question of if something catastrophic may happen, but rather when. Either because of an increase in the magnitude or number of disasters or because more of us are simply affected by them, major disasters are quickly becoming a constant facet of life. In the last decade of the twentieth century, European social theorists noted that we had entered a new age of collective risks that seem to threaten our ontological security (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990). The consequences of this epoch, which we witnessed in the most recent financial collapse, and the tsunami and nuclear leak in Japan, are that risks and threats cross boundaries that were previously durable. These modern disasters have the ability to cross generations, creating irreversible conditions that continue to alter society long into the future; they are no longer localized, but have the ability to affect those far removed from the immediate geography; and they seem to be omnipresent.

The result of this omnipresence of disaster and crises, and in particular the combination of both acute and chronic stress, along with a drastic curtailment of the welfare society, has necessitated a better understanding within sociology of suffering. While the analysis of suffering has enjoyed a recent surge within the social sciences, the contribution from sociology has not been forthcoming.

To be sure much current work in sociology touches on suffering. In the paradigm of social control, for instance, Wacquant’s (2008, 2009) insightful documentation of various neoliberal marginalizing practices that have resulted in “punishing the poor”, recent work on banishment (Beckett and Herbert, 2009), and Rios’ (2010) work on hypercriminalization, all provide critiques of the various policies that have created conditions of suffering. Likewise, work in poverty (Sherman, 2009; Wilson, 2009), in
urban sociology (Venkatesh, 2000), and disaster (Klinenberg, 1976, 1994; Erikson, 1995; Fothergill, 2004) vividly illustrates the lives of those who suffer. In most efforts, however, suffering remains marginal, playing second fiddle to other more substantive areas (for rare exceptions see Bourdieu, 1999; Auyero and Swistun, 2009a).

Katrina, unfortunately, put suffering front and center for academics, as well as most of the nation. And yet for people unfamiliar with the city or the region’s history of social marginalization and racial domination the suffering it revealed was difficult to understand or even contemplate. As FEMA’s director, Michael Brown, said on national television, “I think the American people understand how fascinating and unusual this is--is that we’re seeing people that we didn’t know exist[ed]”. Katrina is usually treated as a unique event, separate from the everyday marginalizing practices that simultaneously mar and are reflected in New Orleans’ landscape, practices that helped facilitate its damage and set the stage for disparate recovery efforts. But just as in the aftermath of the 1970 Peruvian earthquake where the folk saying, “first the earthquake, then the disaster”, emerged to explain, in part, that the suffering inherent to the disaster was itself preceded by and a product of other processes (Oliver-Smith, 1999), many residents of New Orleans saw the failures the rest of the world associated with the response to the Hurricane as part of a larger set of policies. As a resident of the Lower Ninth Ward remarked after being asked about the aftermath of Katrina immediately after the BP oil spill and an explosion at a nearby petro-chemical plant that covered the neighborhood with toxic pollution, “that ain’t nothing, we us to it”.

Suffering, especially prolonged suffering as with what residents in the Lower Ninth Ward have experienced since 2005 has represented a serious blow to their ontological
security. In the words of an elderly man on why so few people attended a Christmas party thrown at a neighbor’s house, “they still waiting for the world to get right.” Ontological security represents a sense of confidence in understanding the world; it the comfort that one has with the constancy and continuity of their physical, social, and cognitive worlds (Giddens, 1984, 1990; Dupuis and Thorns, 1998); it is both a getting right with the world and the world getting right with us. Giddens (1976) has noted that ontological work is an everyday accomplishment. It tends, however, to be taken-for-granted. The day-to-day repairs needed to restore one’s ontological security are usually small and routinized. It is only after a major disruption that we begin to question our ontological security; only then when the fundamental bases for our ontological security are dislocated do we look to relearn and re-establish routines. Two of the most significant sources of our ontological security are our homes and our communities.

As Saunders and Williams’ (1988) claimed, home and the meaning that we give home reflects the larger society. If that meaning, or worse, the actual home, is in flux, then society comes to lose its meaning. Homes are inherently tied to feelings of security (Merdjanoff, 2013). Homes have also historically offered the best possibility to regain a sense of security in the aftermath of disruption (Dupuis and Thorns, 1998). Hence both the physical home and the metaphorical or symbolic home—one’s community—represents the key to recovering one’s ontological security.

Disasters and the disruption they bring represent one of the greatest threats to ontological security. Everyday routines, interactions, and identities are interrupted. As Giddens (2001) noted, ontological security is rooted in trust. In the aftermath of Katrina and the federal levee failures, under the aegis of a neoliberal recovery, residents lost faith
not only in their government, but as the disruption continued they likewise lost faith in family members and neighbors, who at worst defrauded them, or, more understandably did not return to help rebuild homes and communities. Disasters are in many ways socially constructed and thus they have a way of making us question their construction and likewise the construction of other aspects of society. Not only have the structures of society been shaken, people begin to doubt their choices and understanding of both the ways things are and the ways they should be. With New Orleans we continue to see different groups construct Katrina in ways that compliment their worldview. For others, however, returning to one’s original worldview became difficult.

In the aftermath of disruption—in particular ongoing disruption—the ability to attain security becomes atrophied. In their study of ontological security in post-Katrina New Orleans, Hawkins and Maurer (2011) found that the severing of cultural and cognitive links by Katrina exponentially expanded the original disaster. The ambiguous loss (Boss, 2006) suffered by New Orleanians in the long term aftermath—as agency after agency and each level of government failed them—increased their inability to come to terms with those things they originally lost—their homes and community. Policies put in place in the aftermath of Katrina, what I call “secondary violences”, meant to putatively punish those who were already marginalized, delayed their return and the return of their community, furthered their physical and psychological displacement and ultimately resulted in the loss of their ontological security. Restoring one’s ontological security thus became a coping strategy against uncertainty, chaos, and suffering.

In their work on “environmental suffering”, Auyero and Swistun (2007, 2009a,b) highlighted particular cultural aspects, including toxic uncertainty and confusion, that
marked communities that are constantly under the threat of disaster. They importantly pointed out that while not everyone in the community understands risk or suffers in the same way, the reactions to trouble nonetheless constituted “a repertoire of subjective, but not individual, schemes of perception, appreciation, and action” (2009a: 141). The history of suffering in the community produced particular frames with which people made sense of and reacted to trouble. Much like in the Lower Ninth Ward, in the community Auyero and Swistun studied, suffering became part of the larger culture. It came to be a dominant way of seeing and understanding the world.

Moving on from suffering thus represents an attempt to restore one’s ontological security. This too is cultural. As Karen Cerulo (1984) demonstrated in her study of musical compositions, nations experiencing intense social disruption undergo radical changes in their cultural formations. Likewise, as Eyerman (2001) showed in his study of cultural trauma on the meaning of slavery, large disruptions have cultural reverberations, they often change our identity and the way we understand ourselves. We use culture to make sense of disruption and thus disasters can best be understood in cultural terms.

**A Theory of Moving On**

I conceptualize moving on as a cultural and cognitive phenomenon. In other words it relies on particular aspects of human cognition, but is re-enforced by cultural practices. It is this interaction that is key to understanding why we are able to move on from major collective events. Despite the prevalence of moving on it is a phenomenon we know little about. We either take for granted that people do move on or we assume that each of us does so in our own way. I argue that moving on is a socially patterned phenomenon and
that in order to understand it we need to examine the relationship between the culturally specific cognitive tools that we carry around with us and the environments that trigger those tools.

In this sense then, moving on is both a deliberate and automatic process. We tend to ignore the process, but we also take intentional steps to facilitate it. We strategize and make decisions, such as joining a 12-step program or seeing a psychologist, but we also ‘let time heal all wounds’ and ‘forgive and forget’. To get at this particular phenomenon I locate moving on as form of culture-in-action.

As DiMaggio (1997) and Cerulo (2010) have noted, psychologists, and now sociologists, make a distinction between automatic and deliberative cognition, what is often called a dual process model of cognition (Vaisey, 2009). Automatic cognition is more or less the default mode. We use the automatic mode for most of our everyday decisions. It is rapid, unintentional, and effortless. We use the deliberate mode when we are motivated to override the automatic mode or when our attention is drawn to something. Behavioral psychologists, and more recently economists, have noted how we often we use cognitive heuristics, a form of automatic cognition, to make decisions. Much of this research demonstrates that while we believe we might be making a deliberate decision, our brain decided long before we even began to weigh our options. While these mechanisms are crucial to understanding why we make certain decisions or act in certain ways, studies that demonstrate the existence of these mechanisms and others often fail to consider the social contexts in which they occur or the cultural practices that reinforce them. As Heimer (1988) noted, the examples offered by those

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1 While psychologists have used the concept of the “dual process model” of cognition for quite some time, Vaisey article in the *American Journal of Sociology* is one of the first widely disseminated pieces, at least among sociologists, to describe it in detail with empirical research.
who study cognitive heuristics might not actually depict or describe what people do and are usually inadequate for explaining major decisions.

Focusing exclusively on deliberate cognition, however, even for important decisions, seems to be problematic. Hong et al. (2000), for instance, recently demonstrated how some individuals have a need for closure when it comes to making important decisions and thus “stick” and “freeze” on the most accessible cognitive alternative. Baron and Hershey (1988) and others have similarly found an outcome bias when subjects discuss important decisions. While their subjects believe they are evaluating the decisions of others and the quality of the thinking that went into the decision, they are in fact making snap judgments about the outcome of those decisions (see also Sunstein, 2009). Likewise, Dias-Ferreira et al. (2009) found that physiological conditions, such as chronic stress, lead to biases in behavioral strategies favoring automatic over deliberate cognition. These instinctive decisions, made using automatic cognition, repeated over and over bias the neural mechanisms used to make value-based decisions.

Some cognitive psychologists now suggest that a rigid understanding of the dual process model is too simplified to actually explain how the brain makes decisions and that for complex decisions the boundaries between different cognitive systems seem blurred (see Dayan, 2009; Levine et al., 2009). It seems clear that to understand how we make decisions, even important decisions, we need to focus on both automatic and deliberate cognition.

As Wuthnow (2010: 19) has noted, the “cultural response to peril…consists fundamentally of problem solving.” For people in the Lower Ninth Ward there was no shortage of problems to be solved. Yet people often choose different paths to solving
their problems. In solving their problems, whether it be funding issues, family trouble, or being homeless, they also created meaning; they restored their ontological security.

For some this has meant carving the world up into manageable pieces, what cognitive psychologists call chunking. These residents proceeded with rebuilding or putting their lives back in order in a serial fashion, solving one problem at a time. For others, however, order had been created by connecting, immersing, or blending. Likewise, some residents have isolated themselves from the community while others have plunged into it. For some, their strategies were deliberate. They observed someone else who had been successful in connecting or immersing and choose to follow suit. Many had no idea why they were doing what they were doing. They were not aware of doing anything at all.

That we structure the social world in automatic and deliberate ways should not be surprising. Social scientists largely support the idea that we organize large and disparate pieces of information into coherent cognitive models. This is the cognitive base for things like stereotyping. Often this takes place in the form of snap judgments or we have beliefs that we rarely examine. Much like the survivors in the Lower Ninth Ward we do things for reasons we know not why. At other times, however, we are keenly interested in the hows and whys of how our social world is structured. Moving on then is a form of social structuring. It involves people taking the world and making sense of it so that they act with constancy and consistency.

Ultimately, moving on depends on the realization that culture is fluid. It changes over time to meet new needs or circumstances. Sometimes the changes are barely noticeable, while at other times they happen in such a short period of time or are so drastic, for them to go unnoticed would be impossible. Disasters and other instances of
social disruption both accelerate changes already under way and create opportunities for new changes to begin to take place. But disasters can also cause people to clutch at cultural traditions and resist change. It depends on culture, but at the same time the very culture is changing. How people made sense of Katrina therefore affected how they choose to move on. And since the disruption from Katrina is ongoing how people interpret Katrina and therefore choose to move on can change.

For most people moving on is a highly subjective phenomenon. What appears irrational to an outside observer may simply be getting on with one’s life the best a person knows how. I don’t make any judgments in this book about which strategies are more or less successful for moving on. One person’s strategy can easily become another’s folly. I do, however, believe that the residents of the Lower Ninth Ward have a lot to teach us. They endured one of the largest instances of social disruption (and continue to do so) that modern society has witnessed. In their plans and strategies and various coping mechanisms there is insight into what we might do in the next catastrophe. Certainly as you read these pages you should put yourself in the Lower Ninth Ward and ask yourself, ‘what would I do’?

What This Book Is (And Is Not) About

This book is not about Hurricane Katrina. In some ways it could be said to be about the sociology of Katrina. Others have written about the sociology of Katrina, but often this has taken the form of the effects of Katrina. Few writing in this vein have demonstrated what Hurricane Katrina and the federal levee failures taught us, what we might call the lessons of Katrina. For me, this is what the aim of a sociology of Katrina should be. In
this sense then, this book is about what Katrina has taught us about our society and more importantly what it has to teach us about living with social disruption and suffering and how we move on from both.

It is therefore not about what happened during or immediately after Katrina, but rather about what happened long after people stopped watching the television or reading about it in newspapers or magazines; it’s about what is still happening there five, six, seven years later. Most people reading this will be surprised to learn that parts of New Orleans have not recovered from Hurricane Katrina. You can still watch the Saints play in the Superdome, beg for beads at Mardi Gras, or listen to jazz on Frenchmen St. For folks living Uptown or visiting the French Quarter Katrina seems years away. In reality it is about three miles from parade routes and po-boys. A short bike ride or drive up St. Claude will reveal houses that still need to be gutted, houses still boarded up with the owner’s possessions sitting peacefully inside, houses that list dangerously, defying gravity and time, houses that are more splinters than structure.

This is a book about moving on from acute and chronic social disruption, but it is also about what marginalized communities, and perhaps many of us—even those of us who don’t live in such communities, have to fear about the near future. And in that sense the story of Hurricane Katrina and the Lower Ninth Ward is a backdrop, the setting for an extremely important lesson about social disruption and ontological security. Many people from other parts of New Orleans and elsewhere have naturalized the current state of the Lower Ninth Ward. They believe the neighborhood is in disarray and unable to recover because of the people who live there. Failing to see the political, structural, and cultural causes for the failure to rebuild the community, they blame the victims. While
acknowledging the level of destruction they nonetheless see laziness or a “welfare mentality” as the root cause of the condition of these neighborhoods. They want to know what happened to the money donated to the Lower Ninth Ward. As one All-State insurance agent told while me on a tour of the Lower Ninth, “this is completely shocking, do you know how many claims I personally signed for this neighborhood?”; the idea most have is that residents wasted the money on frivolous luxuries or simply defrauded institutions. A bartender in the Quarter told me that rebuilding the neighborhood was a waste of time as *those* people would just allow it to deteriorate again. The disaster for the insurance agent, the bartender, and countless others was simply the result of natural forces, the social played little or no part in the suffering of the Lower Ninth Ward.

Likewise, the response is naturalized. In a thinly veiled racist explanation, people are not doing better because “they are use to living like this” or “because they don’t know how to make things better”. Several community members blamed the lack of local help on pre-Katrina attitudes towards residents of the Lower Ninth. Upon seeing a bus of high school students from New Jersey arrive at a volunteer center, a resident sitting next to me exclaimed, “Look around, those kids coming to help, coming in on a, buses from Maine, New York, they ain’t coming from Uptown. It’s embarrassing. You know how others think about you when they ain’t here. Those kids are here because they don’t have no opinion about us.” For some people then, Katrina was less a turning point and more of a continuation of past policies and social expectations. As on community leader told me:

I just prayed that no one else got it. When I was on the roof, I just prayed. I knew if any place else in the city got it, was like this, then we was gone. Ain’t no one going to help us out when, if people Uptown, white, middle-class people need help. We going [to] be forgotten. People just going to say “that’s the Ninth Ward, what you expect.” But if it was just us, then people would feel sorry, they’d help. Look what’s happened. Just like I knew, we been forgotten. People in this city
forgot about us a long time ago. Ain’t nothing changed, nothing about that changed.

I call this the *naturalization of disaster* and it is partly the reason for the broad weakening of social support for victims of disasters. People who study disasters have long emphasized that they facilitate social change. And while there has been a good deal of experimentation with housing systems, roads and other infrastructure, farming and food production, education, the criminal justice system, civic participation, etc., it appears, as Henry explains “[c]ontinuity seems more likely to be the order of the day: continuity in risk exposure, in inequality, in residential patterns, in ideological frames...this is not unexpected in the context of US society.” (2011: 237).

This naturalization is, as Naomi Klein points out, part of the neoliberal ideology that supports disaster capitalism, but it is also much worse. Seemingly, at best the naturalization of disaster ends in preserving pre-disaster levels of inequality, but at its worst it ends in social abandonment for communities like the Lower Ninth. Before, but especially after a major social disruption like Katrina, these places are seen by others as failures, as a failed urban experiment. The decision whether to preserve them becomes something resembling a cost-benefit analysis. People who study disasters have long pointed to the different level of exposure to risk that poor people endure. Scholars in this field, called social vulnerability studies, have demonstrated that this was true in New Orleans. While the national media, and people in certain areas of New Orleans, described the suffering as widespread or as colorblind, it was not. More so, however, it has been repeatedly shown that recovery itself has been a drastically different experience depending on where you lived in the City (Logan, 2007). Poor communities and communities of color have been less resilient. People look at pre-disaster levels of
disorder and chaos and use it as an explanation for why more progress has not been achieved since the disaster or they use it as a justification to not help communities in distress. This is the naturalization of disaster.

It is not difficult then to posit why some people have been unable to move on from Katrina. But many others have been successful in moving on. Some left New Orleans to do so, some, however, stayed in the Lower Ninth and have gone from trouble makers to community leaders, from, in the words of one resident, a “thug or gangster-hoodlum to a means for social change”. People with little understanding of business have become entrepreneurs in the community. People with few organizational skills have non-profits that have received millions of dollars in donations and over 50,000 volunteers in just a few years. People changed careers, left bad relationships, became homeowners, they used Katrina as a catalyst for something positive. This book then is in part an analysis of the dialectic of change and continuity in the aftermath of social disruption. Why do some people move on after disaster while others do not? How do patterns of moving on differ?

In answering these questions I seek to move past structure versus culture arguments that have long plagued analyses of marginalized populations. Any assertion that culture might be responsible for trapping someone in poverty or for keeping a neighborhood or community down has long been associated with conservative politics. Bring cognition into the equation and you are simply asking for trouble. In recent years, however, some sociologists have begun to realize that culture and cognition do matter in discussions about marginalization. Here worldviews, routines, scripts, schemas, and domains matter as much as redlining, subprime mortgages, environmental racism, and crime. Thus this
book is also an attempt to outline a third position towards understanding the lived experience of social marginalization.

The cognitive effects of living in perilous times and places has received little attention from sociologists (Wuthnow, 2010). Disaster studies, the area of study most likely to look at long-term socio-cognitive effects, typically focus on the immediate occurrence and aftermath of the event. As such we don’t know what disasters do to people or what people do with disasters. The literature on disasters assumes that communities react in similar ways, with either pro-social or anti-social attitudes dominating, or that people by and large maintain the same identity; disasters don’t change people. I am really interested in these questions of institutional and cultural enabling and constraining and how you put individuals and groups in contexts that open and close possibilities for them – not only possibilities for action but also possibilities for construction of identities that are more or less resilient, multidimensional, that provide people with images of possible futures and possible selves, where they can be more or less empowered and able to shape their lives. Hence, this work looks at the cognitive tools that people use to create order out of disorder and to maintain ties or cut loose from their community.

This book is also in part about setting things straight. Katrina was in many ways simply a catalyst for something that had been years in the making. The Lower Ninth Ward and places like it have been socially abandoned for decades. Even before Katrina, houses there were boarded up and subsequently torn down to prevent drug dealers and squatters from using them. Businesses had long ago left, a product of White flight in the seventies and a declining economy that hit all of New Orleans in the eighties. In the
eighties gangs also took a toll on the community. For a time in the 1980s and again in the
1990s the community was one of the most violent in the US. And in truth the failure of
the levees and the flooding of the neighborhood was only part of what has become or at
least what seems like a series of disasters.

One morning, after I had been in the Lower Ninth for a few months, I sat on the
cement floor at Mr. George’s house taking apart old electrical outlets. The height of the
flood water, even in houses five to six feet off of the ground, made it too risky to reuse
the wires, but the rest of the boxes were salvageable. I had been taught the previous day
to snip the wires close to the box, open it up, pull the old wires out and put it back
together. We had been working on Mr. George’s house off and on for quite some time.
Whenever he had materials we would go over and work, but mostly we waited, either for
him to come with materials or with him, just looking over the work we had done and
what remained to do. Mr. George lived a few houses down the street above a makeshift
shop where he cut hair when residents could scrounge up enough money to pay him or
bring something over to barter with him for a trim. On this morning he came in and sat
across from the steps that led to the house. He watched me for awhile and when I came to
a stopping point he asked how the research was going. I spoke for a few minutes and then
finally looked up at Mr. George. Looking pensive, he asked, “What do people think
happened here?”

Mr. George proceeded to tell me his Katrina story, where he was when the water
started to flow, how he managed to get back to his house and get his wife to safety, the
days they spent in the Superdome and then Houston. The details were similar to the
stories others told me and have been told in countless volumes and on television, the ones
that are relived every year by the national media on August 29th. His story wasn’t
different, but his tone and sense of purpose were. He wanted to communicate how from
the minute of the flood until today--when he and I were speaking, he had simply been let
down, disappointed, even shocked by the response. Not only was it inadequate, it was
often inhuman, uncivil. In the middle of telling me how bodies were placed in sheets and
tied to telephone polls for weeks or how afterwards local churches rationed out donated
supplies based on membership in the church, he paused and told me a story of returning
from Vietnam and having his wallet stolen. He had just stepped off of a train when
someone approached him and demanded his money. He obliged and then went directly to
a cop, because in his words “that’s what you’re suppose to do”. The cop looked at him
blankly and told him to get lost. George, wearing his uniform, told him he didn’t have
money to get a taxi or bus, there was no way for him to get home. He expected the officer
to give him a lift. Instead the cop threatened to arrest him. He said he remembered being
so disappointed and confused. He had just returned from seeing friends killed, from
disorder and chaos, from doing his part, being a good person, and this was happening. He
told me, with tears welling up in his eyes, that the cop just assumed he was “some--you
know, some…, that I had probably stolen that uniform, that I was nobody, worthless.”
Mr. George paused and looked out at what was left of his block, nearly five and half years after
the flooding, and said, “that’s how I felt everyday since Katrina.”

Mr. George wanted to know what people thought happened there. Everywhere in the
Lower Ninth people wanted to make sure that I told their story. They were critical of how
“our people” had been portrayed in the national media and of reporters who had come
down and taken their stories only to write about them as ignorant or crazy for returning to
“this place”. I told Mr. George I wanted to tell his story because I worry that in time others, those who live in California, Boston, or New York will have similar “Katrina stories”. If my words about social disruption fail to effect how you think about disasters, it is my hope that those of Mr. George and the other residents of the Lower Ninth Ward will. This book after all is about their experience with one of the worst instances of social disruption in US history.

**Why Katrina, Why the Lower Ninth Ward?**

While others have focused on places where acute problems become chronic stressors (Beamish, 2001; Davis, 2007; Pellow, 2002; Sze, 2007), the experiences of the residents who live there (Bullard in Lerner, 2005: x), or the cultures that facilitate their survival (Hofrichter, 2000), the trouble is typically a one-off or of a particular kind (for rare exceptions see Auyero and Swistun, 2009a, Parenti, 2011). As Laska and Morrow (2006) have noted, vulnerability is not equally spread out, but rather tends to be clustered in particular places. In these places trouble is a “characteristic rather than accidental” feature of the environment (Hewitt, 1983: 25). Taken-for-granted social arrangements “encourage and excuse the deterioration of the environment and human health” (Hofrichter, 2000:1). Risk and the threat of disaster is constant; there is a clustering of trouble. Moreover the threats come from multiple sources, both natural and technological. Additionally, these places have a history of trouble with residents’ experiences being punctuated by major, large scale disasters. I call these types of places “geographies of trouble”. These geographies have particular characteristics and produce a unique set of experiences for people who live there. But they also have a lot to teach us about how people in general understand and deal with trouble.
In these geographies, the social, ecological, and cognitive consequences of trouble are not immediately identifiable. The consequences of trouble tend to have both immediate and long-term ramifications for other possible threats. Also, the consequences of trouble are typically not attributable to a single cause. Troubles are caused by and prolong myriad social problems and like those problems are themselves chained (Fine, 2006). Cause and effect are blurred and mitigating the cause of one trouble often results in an increase risk in another.

These places are often bounded. Calame and Charlesworth’s work on physically partitioned cities is a good example of a geography of trouble (2009). In their work on what they call the “urban contract” they show that while cities have historically been comprised of walls, these walls have come to represent a form of violence where discrimination and strife are used to separate religious or ethnic groups; think Belfast or Jerusalem. But also think about partitions other than walls, such as railroad tracks, rivers, industrialized areas, militarized zones, or other reasons for separation; think the Green Zone in Iraq, gated communities, Tornado Alley or the San Andreas fault, or on a more micro-scale, perhaps back alleys or side streets in the city. Other areas, however, are less physically defined or are perhaps defined in a local vernacular. In his work on the “catastrophic convergence”, Christopher Parenti (2011) looked at areas where environmental change met poverty, violence and military conflict. These “tropics of chaos” are often grey areas where the pastoral control of one tribe overlap that of another or where different groups claim access to a shared resource. The physical boundary making belies the cognitive boundaries of how we think about those kinds of places.
At their worst these are places where you expect some form of trouble to constantly affect the people who live there; think the Bermuda Triangle over land or Murphy’s Law as modus operandi. While the form of the trouble might change from a natural disaster to massive unemployment to a toxic event, trouble becomes something that can be counted on. It permeates the warp and the woof of the community. New Orleans and the surrounding area is such a geography.

I grew up in this geography. Although I had never lived in New Orleans for any long period of time before moving to the Ninth to do the research for this book, I was born there and growing up outside of the city, I always thought of it as home. I had spent part of the summer of 2005 in and out of the City doing research on the antebellum homes that dot the landscape from New Orleans to Baton Rouge along a stretch of land that is called River Road, not to far from where I grew up in St. Charles Parish. The brief time I spent there right before Katrina reminded me of the uniqueness of the place. The people you meet there, the food you eat, the way people speak, the easy pace of life, the River, folks from New Orleans know that life there is well worth the trouble. We can balance the poverty with second lines and the Mardi Gras Indians. It’s the Murder Capital of the US, but also the place where jazz was born. We’ll give you Bourbon Street, but raise you Charters, Elysian Fields, or Magazine. As a life time resident of the Lower Ninth explained, “it’s a hard place to quit”.

Katrina hit New Orleans on my birthday. Though I was miles away on campus waiting for the new semester to begin in New Jersey, I assuaged any concerns by remembering previous close calls that the city survived. Even after seeing the damage a few months later when I returned for a family wedding, I wasn’t surprised by what I saw.
I continued with my project on antebellum homes and left Katrina to others. Over dinner in San Francisco in 2008 with Rob Shields and Phil Steinberg, who edited one of the first volumes on Hurricane Katrina—to which I contributed a chapter, the editor at University of Georgia Press said that they were surprised that while they had received a lot of early proposals on Katrina, it seemed that no one was writing on the long term affects of the aftermath. I, like most, assumed that whatever was sociologically interesting about Katrina had long ago transpired. Then one day someone sent me a five minute clip of the Lower Ninth Ward and asked if I knew where this was in the city. I assumed the clip was made in 2005 or perhaps 2006. The date at the bottom of the tape was 8/29/2008. I didn’t understand what I was seeing. I thought it was a hoax until online queries returned similar footage of the Lower Ninth. In addition to being confused I was angry. I wanted to know why this was happening; how were residents responding; and naively enough, because it was home, why was nothing being done? So I decided to move to New Orleans and find some answers. The following chapters describe what I found.

**Overview of the book**

In Chapter 2 I briefly explore the history of the Lower Ninth Ward. The plight of the Lower Ninth Ward mirrored that of many inner cities. In the 1970s it experienced rapid white flight, then came poverty, drugs and gangs, and it was the murder capital of the US (or as the historian Ken Germany has said the social marginalization capital) for most of the time from 1980-2000. But it also experienced unique trouble. It is part of what environmentalists call “Cancer Alley” and it has regularly been the victim of hurricanes, flooding, toxic dumping, and petro-chemical pollution. And yet on August 28, 2010 it was still home for close to 20,000 people. As the story of Hurricane Katrina has been told
by others, I give a cursory explanation of how Katrina affected the Lower Ninth Ward. Here I supplement my interviews with demographic data. In this chapter I describe what I call “secondary violences”. These violences have perpetuated the marginalization of this community and greatly inhibited the recovery process. These violences are part of a neoliberal project that has been described elsewhere as disaster capitalism (Klein, 2009).

The corollary to disaster capitalism, however, is social abandonment. The residents of the Lower Ninth argue that their neighborhood should be rebuilt along a sophisticated contractarian narrative. They see the failure of various government agencies to restore their community as a social failure. Much of this narrative of place is told through the lens of what I call “social contrarianism”. Residents of the Lower Ninth want to live here, in part, because they were originally told they could not return. The rebuilt their homes in patterns to deter developers. This contrarianism causes them to see a bucolic community whereas others see a ghetto. It greatly effects how they understand risk. This chapter serves as the empirical and conceptual background for most of the story. The cultural and cognitive response to social disruption cannot be understood without the suffering and trauma visited upon the Lower Ninth Ward in particular and black communities in general. Inherent to this chapter is the argument that the secondary violences and social abandonment that have marked the Lower Ninth since Katrina will become the norm in future disasters.

Chapter 3 begins the analysis of the cultural and cognitive response to Katrina and living with social disruption. In this chapter I focus on the relationship between residents and community. Disaster studies present two narratives of what happens to communities in the aftermath of disruption. Some studies show that communities become “corrosive”;
the disaster acts a centrifugal force that pushes those most affected to the margins of society. Other studies, however, demonstrate that disasters bring out the best in people; disasters act as centripetal force bringing the community together. For the Lower Ninth Ward Katrina did both. This chapter looks at both instances. In the first instance I look at instances where Katrina and the levee failures pushed people together. That is, people who made sense of Katrina by becoming part of the community or by seeing the value of a particular community. The second instance represents those that could only move on by pulling themselves apart from the community. Here I identify six trends or strategies that residents used or found themselves resorting to in order to make sense of Katrina. This push and pull toward/away community resembles the fight or flight tendency we all have when confronted with peril.

In chapter 4 I look at individual strategies for dealing with the disaster. In the aftermath of disaster people tend to carve out manageable pieces of action in a process known as chunking. To make sense of a chaotic and uncertain world, we create islands of meaning for ourselves. To be sure many people have done this in the Lower Ninth Ward. Homes were gutted room by room, houses rebuilt in a piecemeal fashion. People found comfort in these small tasks; many residents spoke in a ‘to-do-list’ manner when explaining the last five years. There were others, however, who while appearing to be chunking were engaged in connecting. This process was less about making sense of Katrina or finding purpose than perpetuating the moving on process. This manifested in homeowners finding additional projects for volunteers to work on or in some cases taking various means to delay the rebuilding process. Connectors would attend meetings for a few months, take on small projects, then disappear for a month. They would often
connect seemingly disparate events to Katrina to perpetuate the affects of the storm.
Unlike the next group, however, they had other commitments to the outside world. They only seemed to be engaged in this process in the space of the Lower Ninth Ward. There were, however, residents who rather than engage in chunking or connecting choose immersion. Immersion is a narrow focus on a particular environment. Rebuilding homes, attending meetings, talking with neighbors about secondary violences became their life. Many of these people, whom I call “immersionists” have developed large “risk projects”. These projects are typically beyond the capability of any single individual. The purpose, however, is not to complete the project, but to create ontological security for themselves and in some cases for the community itself. The immersed rarely leave the space of the community. Finally, some residents engaged in blending. These residents saw the problems of pre-Katrina and post-Katrina life as having a significant overlap. To move on from Katrina therefore required addressing pre-Katrina problems. This chapter explores these four different responses to disaster (chunking, connecting, immersing, blending).

Finally, in Chapter 5 I finish conceptualizing what it means to move on. I reflect on the process of moving on in the Lower Ninth Ward and show how social policy failed to consider different strategies of moving on. I also spend some time looking to the future. Here, unfortunately moving on from major instances of collective disruption seems to be increasing. In 2005 for the first time the number of environmental refugees outnumbered the number of war and political refugees. The policy mechanisms to deal with environmental disruption, and the subsequent refugees created by such disasters, as the world witnessed during Katrina, is primarily military. In an era of climate change and extreme climate events we will need social policies that help victims of environmental
disruption move on, and as this book will demonstrate we need policy that takes advantage of how people make sense of social disruption.
Chapter Two: A Brief History of Trouble

1. Hurricane Katrina

By now the physical destruction of Hurricane Katrina has been well told (for popular accounts see Horne, 2006; South End Press Collective, 2007; Baum, 2009; Cooper and Block, 2006; Southern, 2007). Over 180,000 housing units were damaged or destroyed. In some areas, like the Lower Ninth ward in New Orleans the EPA declared 100% of homes uninhabitable. The monetary cost is likely to top two hundred billion dollars The human toll from Katrina was also significant. Over 1800 people died making it one of the deadliest hurricanes in US history and this total does not take into account the thousands of people who have prematurely died from the fall out of Katrina. Close to 400,000 people were evacuated and over a million people were displaced. The Katrina diaspora was the largest and most diffuse from any previous US disaster, likely affecting families and communities for years (Weisler, Barbee, and Townsend 2006; Brunsma, Overfelt, and Picou 2007; Laska and Morrow, 2006).

There is also a vast amount of work on the social vulnerability Katrina either contributed to or created (see, Laska and Morrow, 2006; Johnson, 2008; Bullard and Wright, 2009). Social vulnerability studies consider the impacts of disaster from structural inequality and access to resources (Wisner and Blaikie, 2004; Morrow, 1999; Finch, Emrich, Cutter, 2010). Disasters typically exacerbate pre-existing inequalities among social categories of race, class, and gender (Barnshaw 2005; Barnshaw and Trainor 2007; Fothergill, 2004, Tobin-Gurley, Peek, Loomis, 2010). The pre-Katrina poverty level of New Orleans was almost twice the national average and the number of

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2 The mortality rate doubled for the first few years after Katrina, while the suicide rate more than tripled. Residents I spoke with in 2011 were alarmed that the obituary pages had more than doubled since Katrina despite a shrinking population.
female-headed households with children was more than double the national average. Many residents simply didn’t have the money or social networks to leave New Orleans (Laska and Morrow, 2006). Age also mattered. Logan (2007) noted that as in other disasters age rather than race was the greatest single predictor of dying (see also Klinenberg, 2005). More distressful for purposes of evacuation, one in five households lacked access to a car. While social vulnerability shaped evacuation decisions (Fussell, 2005), it also has shaped recovery.

Demographic analyses from post-Katrina New Orleans revealed that the rate of return for Whites has largely outpaced that of Blacks, 65% to 24% respectively. Rents rose 60% in some parts of the city (Bullard and Wright, 2009). Making it even more difficult to return, the majority of public housing in the city was destroyed immediately following the Hurricane, regardless of the impact of Katrina. The result has been that homelessness has doubled in New Orleans since Katrina (Bullard and Wright, 2009).

Inequalities can also be seen in the repopulation statistics. Poorer neighborhoods like the Lower Ninth Ward have only seen about 25% of its pre-Katrina population return, whereas the Garden District and Audubon, middle to upper class areas have actually seen population increases. Lakeview, which was comparable to the Lower Ninth ward in terms of damage, has seen about 65% of its population return. It was about 94% White with an average income at $63,984 before Katrina whereas the neighborhood of the Lower Ninth was 98% Black with residents having an average income of $27,499. While the inequality of the immediate effects of Katrina was nationally televised, the effects of an unequal recovery have gone virtually noticed.
Even less well known than the post-Katrina demographic inequalities, however, has been the environmental fall out. Almost eight million gallons of oil were spilled in Katrina. Part of this total represented one of the largest inland oil spills in US history. In Chalmette 1,050,000 gallons of oil were released at the Murphy Oil Refinery because workers failed to take the legally required provisions to secure facilities during a hurricane (Picou and Marshall 2007; Steinberg and Cruz 2008). Likewise the massive flooding of homes in New Orleans helped to create the largest contamination event in the country’s history (Picou, 2009). Air sampling, which was acknowledged by the EPA to be severely flawed, revealed dangerous levels of mold (Johnson, 2008; Godsìl, Huang, Solomon, 2009), while environmental studies of the soil have indicated elevated levels of lead (Brown 2006), polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) (Caputo, 2006), and arsenic (Cole and Woelfle-Erskine 2006). Diesel fuel was found in 91% of the soil samples taken in Orleans parish by the EPA (Solomon and Rotkin-Ellman 2006:7). Overall, 43% of all EPA soil samples collected in New Orleans exceeded the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality’s guidelines and should have initiated immediate clean up and decontamination efforts.

Freudenburg and others have focused on how Katrina was both caused by and continued to reveal systemic problems in the city and surrounding area (see, Freudenburg et al., 2009a, 2009b; Bullard and Wright, 2009; Laska and Morrow, 2006). As noted above, Southeastern Louisiana is frequently affected by hurricanes. About every 2.3 years the area is brushed with a hurricane. Previous hurricanes, such as Betsy (the hurricane of 1965 that residents still talk about and use to make sense of Katrina), caused a fraction of the damage and destruction. In fact, after Hurricane Betsy, which also caused levee
breaches, particularly in the Lower Ninth Ward, the Corps began “The Hurricane Protection Program” which supposedly made the city less likely to flood. Why then was Katrina so bad? As Freudenberg et al. (2008, 2009a, 2009b) noted, much of the reason had to do with the destruction of the wetlands; an area the size of a football field disappears every 30-45 seconds in Southeastern Louisiana. As explained earlier, much of the destruction is the result of the petro-chemical industry, but Corps’ projects, particularly that of Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO) (also known locally as “Hurricane Highway”), have been a significant contributor (Freudenberg et al. 2009a,b), as were the failures of the levees (over 60 breaches city wide) and pumps (which were immediately overwhelmed and of which the Corps knew would fail well before the Hurricane).

The thing about Southeastern Louisiana (and what I heard continually from people there) is that we don’t know how much of the toxicity and environmental pollution (or for that matter blight) is due to Katrina and how much existed before. While we know that the devastation was magnified by pre-existing environmental degradation, it has become difficult to separate pre-Katrina problems from those existing today (Johnson, 2008). As Erikson (2007:xviii) noted, while Katrina may have become known to us in August 2005, “what we mean by Katrina began long before the storm, and it will be an ongoing event for a long time to come. The storm is not over.” Indeed the disaster was so overwhelming that several social scientists have called for a paradigm change in the way we think about disasters (Brunsma, Overfelt, Picou, 2007, Picou, 2009, Erikson, 2007). There have been calls to recast Katrina as a “post-social” disaster (Williams, 2008) or as a “natech disaster” (Picou, 2009), even as a tragedy, in order to simply get
away from the etymological complications of the word disaster (Freudenburg et al., 2008). However we define it or label it, Katrina was part of a larger landscape; it was part of a larger problem.

2. Southeastern Louisiana [Coping with Race, Water, and Capitalism]

Southeastern Louisiana was carved out of swamp land in a way that made future development both risky and constrained. There has always been a tension between the site (its’ physical location) and the situation (its’ relative (dis)advantages) (Kelman, 2007). The history of and problems with developing New Orleans in many ways mirror that of the larger area of Southeastern Louisiana. Kelman (2007) noted that the boundaries of New Orleans have always been fuzzy, the city and its surroundings (especially environmental) difficult to disentangle, with the environment and humans co-existing in a rather non-harmonious way. The geography and the attempt to control the environment have longed influenced patterns of urbanization. New Orleans and the surrounding area have always had water problems, whether it be the Mississippi River and flooding or drainage and runoff. The water problems in turn have caused problems with drinking water, burial, garbage, sewage, and environmental disease. The area experienced major floods in 1735, 1775, 1783, 1785, 1791, 1799, 1809, 1811, 1813, 1815-1817, 1837, 1849, 1871, 1901, 1909, 1915, 1927, 1947, 1965, and 1995. It has always been at the mercy of large hurricanes and flooding, but the Army Corps of Engineers’ water projects and levee system have made particular places more vulnerable over the years. Levees built between 1735 and 1812 were to protect most of the area between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, but because they were the responsibility of
individual plantation owners there were major gaps in the levees. And because levees simply redirect water elsewhere, reducing the impact of the River in one place, notably New Orleans, levees simply meant a problem in the more rural areas in Southeastern Louisiana. Additionally, by building the levee system, and thereby reducing the footprint of the river, the height of the water was increased and hence the flood level increased as did the damage caused by subsequent flooding. Levees also led to the development of areas that had previously been considered too low lying for urban development and thus led to increasingly greater risks and costs if the levees failed--what Burton (1962) calls the “levee effect” (see also White, 1945).

The floods and the constant water created horrendous conditions. When the Union occupied the city the plan in New Orleans was basically to let them die of yellow fever. The city was regularly the source of the most severe viral outbreaks in the US. The cause was always water. Records show that 7,849 people died in New Orleans in 1853 due to yellow fever. The first case of yellow fever to strike Louisiana occurred in 1769, but the first epidemic transpired in 1796 when 638 people (out of a population of 8,756) died from the disease, translating into a mortality rate of 72.86 per thousand. In the 100-year period between 1800 and 1900, yellow fever assaulted New Orleans for sixty-seven summers. Its main victims were immigrants and newcomers to the city, and for this reason it was also referred to as the “stranger’s disease.”

Louisiana’s first explicit water pollution law, passed in 1910, forbade discharges of oil, salt water, and “other noxious or poisonous gases or substances that would render said water unfit for irrigation purpose or would destroy fish in said streams” (RS 38:3087.77). It passed basically to make sure that rice farmers were protected from the
early incubation of the oil industry, but it made no mention of drinking water nor did it
protect residents in vulnerable neighborhoods from what was going on there.

The assumption made by politicians and industry executives was that the Mississippi
River was one of the greatest dilution machines ever made. Despite the trash that was
being put into it, the idea was that there was really no way to foul it. Before 1910
anything that you could push or drain into the Mississippi River was allowed. If you can
imagine it, we are talking about tanneries, slaughter houses, breweries, all allowed to put
whatever they wanted into the River.

Likewise, sewer systems were ditches that basically lined the streets (Colten 2005:
55). When that “system” backed up people just pushed sewer into the Mississippi River.
When they stopped doing that and collected sewage in privies people known as
vidangeurs would pick up for a fee and chunk it on barges that would then put it in the
river. Not only was this the source of their drinking water, but when the River overflowed
its banks it went directly into poorer neighborhoods. The privies themselves, even when
they worked were a problem because their contents were simply deposited back into the
soil, (the vindangeurs picked up about 2000 tons of waste in 1900 leaving 98,000 tons to
seep into the soil or overflow into the streets). The solution to the problem was simply to
flush the streets. But only those streets that went downhill towards the river, which of
course meant only wealthy homeowners saw any improvement in sanitation. Eventually
the barges rather than just push it over board next to the wharfs were required to go
downstream a ways and then off load the waste. Things were so bad that the city
contracted a private company to take over in 1890s where they could manufacture
fertilizer out of the waste. The city sold its entire garbage fleet and demolished the
wharves, but the company didn’t last and couldn’t do its job—despite suing the city when
the city began picking up garbage for taking its resource—so eventually even in 1900 it
was dumped into the river. The city then began to try to get people to recycle—no dead
animals, offal, slop, etc. it all had to go in to water tight containers which were then put in
designated parts of the city. The situation was still so bad for the River that a report
produced by the city stated that graveyard water was purer than New Orleans
groundwater. Not only was the water system the poorest in the nation, but few houses
were even connected to the system.

The overall effect of how water was managed in New Orleans, however, was
twofold. The first was that water would be the purview of industry and the Army Corps
of Engineers. While the federal government during the 1950 kept pointing out problems
with the Mississippi River, the state government responded by granting 36/37 permits for
industrial discharges into the river in the 1950s and 60s. Of the 163 enforcement actions
taken by the state during this time only 1 was against a refinery. When in 1960 a huge oil
spill in Baton Rouge caused a panic about the River. The state created a warning system
that used the everyday, highly toxic levels as the baseline and only issued warnings when
the toxicity rose measurably above that baseline. Industry thus only had to
share
information about abnormal releases with the state (a practice still in effect today). In
1962 as the nation read Rachel Carson’s silent spring, a massive fish kill occurred in the
Mississippi River. While 250,000 fish had been killed in 1960 and the petrochemical
industry blamed sugar cane farmers for a chemical they used, the 1962 kill occurred
upstream from the farms and closer to industry. Also, it was over 5 million fish. The spill
promoted congressional hearings. Little, however, was done and by the 1980s many of
the restrictions placed on petrochemical companies had been removed and industry again controlled water in New Orleans. Despite having the highest cancer rate in the US, in 1984—the year the world’s fair was held there, New Orleans won a national award for best tasting water. Little had changed in twenty-five years. In the thirteen months I was in the Lower Ninth Ward the neighborhood was advised to boil water or not use the water on seven different occasions. And for some residents, due to what the city called infrastructure upgrades, water was not available or only available periodically for weeks at time.

The second effect or outcome was that not only did infrastructure in poorer neighborhoods not keep pace with the rest of the city, what was built was often dangerous or environmentally harmful for residents. In New Orleans because development radiated out from the French Quarter to the battures (back swamps), poor people were continually pushed to the less desirable and notably less protected areas. Because of the pattern of this development some of the nations deadliest epidemics have plagued New Orleans (Kelman, 2007). In the twentieth century the invention of the wood screw pump allowed water to be taken out of low lying areas and battures and put into canals. As Colten (2005) notes, extending infrastructure to these areas became problematic because they were typically inhabited by blacks and poor whites. Additionally many of the battures became used as dumps and landfills. After WWII many of these landfills became hazardous waste sites and created what Foote calls “landscapes of tragedy” (in Colten, 2005: 13). The most obvious example of these landscapes in New Orleans is the Agriculture Street Landfill, which although being a dump, eventually became the site of
one of the largest minority housing projects in the city and a school just a few years before being designated a Superfund site.

New Orleans was one of the most integrated cities in the country. It wasn’t until white flight in the 1970s, following school desegregation that there were any majority black neighborhoods. To some degree that insured that infrastructure problems affected whites and blacks equally and that something would be done about it. But drainage in the 1940s and 1950s opened up new areas to blacks. But these areas typically differed dramatically from white areas. The battures didn’t get sewage systems until the 1940s. Even today in areas like the Lower Ninth Ward infrastructure isn’t upgraded at the same rate or to the same degree as predominantly white areas.

In the 1930s and 1940s the only way to enforce nuisance laws and hence environmental laws were through private property laws. Using private property laws to safeguard the environment, however, had dramatic costs for black neighborhoods. Dumps quickly became landfills and then hazardous waste sites (eventually schools and public housing projects for minorities in New Orleans) and waterways became sewers and then toxic sinks (the Mississippi River is the 3rd worst polluted river in the world). The government had been completely ineffectual, mostly just making suggestions to businesses or the elites, it now realized that it had to take charge. And of course this meant the federal government because the local government was not going to police local elites. In 1948 the state decided that dumps and open pit fires—which is how they got rid of garbage at the Agricultural street Landfill—was dangerous to public health and they made it illegal for cities to operate open garbage or waste refuge dumps or to burn trash in the city. New Orleans sidestepped the law by just continually overturning the trash.
Citizens, mostly white, complained. They complained about the smell and the rats and the flies and that when in rained trash and waste slid down into their streets and yards. This was a frequent occurrence. New Orleans responded by spraying massive amounts of DDT on the site and claiming it was the only way they could dispose of their garbage, courts agreed with them. The Agricultural Landfill site stayed open until 1958 and it burned underground until 1960. Then in 1965 it became the place to store debris from Hurricane Betsy.

By the late 1980s demographics changed in New Orleans and the economy had changed. There were fewer jobs in the oil industry and the tourism sector was booming. Disparities between white and black neighborhoods (and the lack of government interest in the latter) were obvious. The city responded to complaints from black leaders by building public housing. One of the most attractive sites—from the viewpoint of city officials was the Agricultural Landfill site. Blacks moved in hoping to grab a piece of the American Dream—home ownership, but after a decade or so began to notice that many in the neighborhood-in particular the elderly and the young were ill. By the late 1980s when the city was proposing a school to be built at the site, residents knew something was wrong and protested its construction. The state already found elevated lead levels there and it was known that cancer rates were higher in the Ag Street project than elsewhere in the city. Two weeks before the school opened the NOLA school board debated abandoning it. While residents were being told not to let their children play at the site and were given detailed information on ways to keep dirt out of their homes, the city was simultaneously telling them nothing was wrong. The EPA’s rating on the site went from a 3 to a 50 in one year—putting it on the National Priorities List. Eventually, after only a
couple of years, the school was closed. What was instructive, other than the building of the Ag Street Project were the environmental conditions and the residents’ reactions.

While the EPA was telling residents they were living on top of a Superfund site, multiple studies done in the late 1990s found low levels of toxic substances and that cancer rates were normal (still about three times the national average). The result is that residents did not know who to trust. Black officials were telling them nothing was wrong and that they were fortunate to have had middle class housing. The city complained that because of the EPA’s findings that could not invest any more in the site’s infrastructure and thus their hands were tied. There was a good deal of confusion and uncertainty. While some residents did not trust the EPA—whom they viewed as outsiders, others believed that the city was lying. Some, mostly younger residents, wanted the government to buy them out and relocate them, others wanted to school re-opened—not wanting the community broken up. The city could not afford to pay for relocation, so it supported the EPA effort to remediate the site (for which they would receive federal funding). But they blocked EPA efforts for years because they could not be seen as admitting that they had been wrong about the environmental conditions and that they had placed black school children in harms way. A decade later 99% of the site had been remediated, while 1% belonged to nine homeowners who refused to leave.

The story of the Agricultural Street Landfill site is important because it is the archetypal story for the environmental plight of black communities in New Orleans. Residents saw a break up of their community; they felt that they were not compensated enough—it is difficult to put a price on losing your 16 year old daughter to cancer, or even losing your home; people who lived near by wondered what was going on—were
they safe?, what about people who weren’t sick now, would they be sick later, would they get money for that?; the city wanted the EPA to pay for the problem but they wanted control the process—all of these story lines would emerge just a few years later as many sites—including the Ag Street Landfill sat submerged under toxic water.

In their book on environmental justice Roberts and Toffolon-Weiss, who use Louisiana as a proxy for the rest of the country, ask the obvious question of why Louisiana (2001). The answer, which they provide in part, is that historically, and even today, Louisiana has had a troubled history filled with vast racial divides, one of the highest rates of economic inequality in the country, weak civil society, environmental agencies that favor industry, local politicians that are supported by the petro-chemical industry, and an abundance of available land adjacent to the most used waterway and one of the most important ports in the country.

As such, the entire stretch of land along River Road, a road stretching from New Orleans to Baton Rouge, was eventually developed by the petro-chemical industry. Today there are over a 150 plants along this 70 mile stretch of road. These plants that are responsible for 129 million pounds of toxic releases each year. And this total does not consider that eighty-eight percent of all U.S. offshore oil rigs are located in Louisiana’s Outer Continental Shelf.

Robert Bullard calls this 24/7 exposure, “toxic terror” (in Lerner, 2005: x). There are hundreds of communities in Southeastern Louisiana which are terrorized by these chemical plants everyday (for case studies see, Roberts and Toffolon-Weiss, 2001; Lerner, 2005; Greene, 2008; Button, 2010). Additionally, this area is also home to over 2,000 hazardous waste pits and toxic dump sites (Roberts and Toffolon-Weiss, 2001).
The area also has more oil spills than any other in the nation. Below, in chronological order, is an abbreviated list and description of oil spills and refinery accidents or violations in the area over just the last decade.³


6/2/2000 Norco: Louisiana DEQ notifies Shell/Motiva of thousands of emission violations of benzene and other chemicals

8/18/2000 Convent: Refinery explosion

11/28/2000 New Orleans: Oil taker Westchester spills 567,000 gallons of crude oil

2/12/2002 Geismar: Explosion and fire at Shell Chemical

3/2002 Franklin: EPA begins clean up abandoned well leaking into Intercostal Canal

6/2002 Southeastern, LA: BP spills 90,000 gallons of crude oil

10/2/2002 Norco: Shell/Motiva spews oily substance over community

5/3/2002 Baton Rouge: US Kirby spills 20,000 gallons of diesel into Mississippi River

12/2/2003 Barataria Bay: Exxon/Mobil pipelines leak 15,400 gallons of oil

2/19/2004 New Orleans: Tanker Genar Alexanders spills 40,000 gallons of crude and No. 6 oil

8/29/2005 Southeastern, LA: more than 7 million gallons of oil spills during Hurricane Katrina

7/23/2008 New Orleans: A collision results in 400,000 gallons of heavy fuel spills at the Port

4/7/2010 Venice, LA: Cypress Pipeline (BP and Chevron) leaks 18,000 gallons of crude oil into Delta National Wildlife Refuge and Gulf.

Furthermore, as witnessed in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the federal levee failures, the “normal” problems associated with the presence off the petro-chemical industry can potentially be exacerbated during extreme weather events. The result is that New Orleans is regularly described as “sacrifice zone” for the nation’s toxic waste (Johnson, 2008). And while New Orleans as a whole has suffered from the catastrophic convergence of environmental degradation, a declining industrial base, the global recession, and extreme weather patters, the neighborhood that has come to symbolize the confluence of these problems is the Lower Ninth Ward.

3. The Lower Ninth Ward

The Lower Ninth Ward has always occupied a precarious geography in the minds of other New Orleanians. While the city has been divided into wards since 1805, the boundaries of later established wards—like the 9th have changed many times as the city expanded. Likewise, no one knows how many neighborhoods exist in the city. Some put the number at 73, some have said 125, most can’t name more than a dozen or so. The 9th ward an be divided up into three sections: The Industrial Canal, built in 1923 geographically bisects the Ninth Ward into two sections, the Upper Ninth and the Lower Ninth, and simultaneously separates the Lower Ninth from the rest of the City. The area east of the Industrial Canal is divided east and west by the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway and the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet--the MRGO which is now permanently closed as a result of Hurricane Katrina, but which was responsible for the destruction of wetlands and thus served as the “Hurricane Highway”, funneling storm surge over the levees and
flooding the Lower Ninth Ward in 1965 and again in 2005 (see Freudenburg et al. 2009a, b). This east and west division created in the 1950s was responsible for establishing eastern New Orleans, or as it is locally known New Orleans East.

The Lower Ninth is further divided into two neighborhoods. The Holy Cross neighborhood, which received a formal designation as a historic neighborhood in the 1981, was settled by working-class blacks, Irish, German and Italian immigrants. It was named after a Catholic school for boys build in 1859—which served as the main hub of the community. Development radiated out from Holy Cross into other areas of the Lower Ninth that had been uninhabitable or was simply farmland. As industry located along the Canal the Lower Ninth became the place for working class blacks to live. The neighborhood went from a sugar plantation/processing site, where folks drove horse-drawn carriages to the French Market to sell their wares, to an industrial site in just a generation. The city, however, ignored the neighborhood. As noted in subsequent chapters residents have always felt that while they were in large part the growth machine for the rest of the city, they were never given anything in return. As a result the community was close, depending on local Social Aid and Pleasure clubs for protection, insurance, and for protesting.

Like most urban areas it experienced significant racial fluctuations going from predominantly white in 1975 to 98% black less than twenty-five years later. “Blockbusting”—the real estate scare tactic in which whites are duped into selling properties below value to real estate companies who then sell them at double to triple the value to upwardly mobile blacks, took place immediately after school integration in the 1970s. In the 1980s and 1990s poverty, drugs, and crime hit the neighborhood hard. The
neighborhood was known as the “murder capital of the murder capital” (Landphair, 2007). It was the dogfighting capital of the South. The cockfighting king lived on Desolonde Street (Wooten, 2012). Many homes were simply abandoned and many businesses left. Ironically, by the early 2000s residents felt that the neighborhood was coming back.

The Lower Ninth Ward was hit harder than any other neighborhood during Katrina and the federal levee failures. While other neighborhoods dealt with similar flooding, no other neighborhood had to deal with the symbolic and structural destruction of their neighborhood in the aftermath the way residents of the Lower Ninth have. Residents were not allowed to return for three months, and only then were allowed to observe the damage under a “look and leave” policy. Water and electricity remained unavailable to most for up to a year and half after Katrina, furthering the damage caused by flooding.

Furthermore residents were uncertain if they would be allowed to rebuild or what kind of federal, state, or local support they might be given. Initial plans called for the Lower Ninth Ward to be turned into a green space. Early returnees had to pay for the electricity used by streetlights and drive miles to buy potable water. Because of the number of people needing the services of contractors, many residents paid cash premiums or the majority of the total assessment up front to move up waiting lists. In what has become the most widespread case of contractor fraud, many never saw the work done or had work done that would later not pass inspection. In many cases the contractor fraud cost residents the bulk of their aid. Bureaucracy and red tape have continued, at the present writing, to prevent people from returning and rebuilding. Those who have returned have had to deal with racially discriminatory allocations by government agencies which use
pre-Katrina values as the basis for aid rather than the cost to rebuild. Those residents who have rebuilt have had to do so in a piece-mill fashion, leaving them susceptible to thieves who steal copper wiring and metal fixtures to sell for scrap. The neighborhood remains in a state of flux due to these secondary traumas (Gill, 2007) or what I have called secondary violences (Harvey, 2012, forthcoming). As of this writing, 2013, over seven years after Katrina and the flooding, there is no library, no grocery store, no fire station, no community center, no police station (or sub-station). It is the most blighted neighborhood in the US. The bulk of it, north of Claiborne Ave., is abandoned, heavily blighted, with intermittent areas serving as a dump for other neighborhoods and majority white parish of St. Bernard. The neighborhood is only at 25% of its pre-Katrina population. It has become a paradigmatic example of an abandoned community.

When I arrived residents were no longer reeling from the original decision by the Bring New Orleans Back Commission to not rebuild their community. They were not surprised that three citywide recovery-planning efforts had come and gone. They were nonplussed that the Corps was still trying, after two decades and the closing of the MRGO, to expand the locks at the Industrial Canal which would once again bring flood surges into the neighborhood in the aftermath of any future hurricanes. They were not optimistic about the lawsuit surrounding the barge that had been left in the Industrial Canal during Katrina and had consequently broken through and flattened an entire block of homes, killing an unknown number of residents. Most had not heard about the Inner Harbor Navigation Canal Lake Borgne Surge Barrier that was to cost more than $1 billion and hopefully prevent another Katrina. They were, in the words of one resident, “over Obama”. And despite felony charges against their local councilperson, looming
redistricting which would certainly change the neighborhood from blue to red, and police
having told them not to count on them catching the contractors who defrauded them out
of Road Home funds, they didn’t believe that they were struggling to stay afloat any
longer, they believed they were too busy moving on
Chapter Three: The Presentation of Community

"They sicken of the calm, who knew the storm." Dorothy Parker, 1928

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us…” Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities, 1859

In New Orleans there is a tradition called a jazz funeral. Before Katrina very few whites took part in the tradition, but post-Katrina they have sought out historically black neighborhoods like Treme and St. Roch to watch and sometimes participate. The jazz funeral, which was traditionally reserved for musicians or important members of the community, became popularized by Mardi Gras Indians. The Indians—typically, before Katrina at least, were gangs that policed their communities, but who now represent an important cultural legacy of the authentic New Orleans, would solemnly march down a street. Usually they would depart from the home of the recently deceased, accompanied by a brass band playing a funeral dirge. After leaving the cemetery the band tended to play more upbeat songs, usually jazz. The march would often become raucous with members of the procession stopping to visit well-wishers and occasionally having a drink here and there. Sometimes the well-wishers and passers-by joined in and followed the band and family forming what is called the second line. Second lines eventually became a popular cultural activity in their own right, no longer necessitating a body. In the years following Katrina, perhaps because of the need for community or because of the presence of so many bodies, jazz funerals and second lines suddenly became ubiquitous. The funerals and second lines also become symbolic in that often what was being lamented or
mourned was the passing of the neighborhood or a sense of community or even New Orleans itself.

A few months after I arrived in the Lower Ninth I received an email intended for community stakeholders that sought help in planning the fifth anniversary of Katrina and Federal levee failures. I emailed my primary contact in the community and someone from the local councilperson’s office who sent the email to see if it was okay that I attend and take notes. By the third meeting I was on the Planning Commission.

Discussions centered on how to commemorate the memory of Katrina, but the commission had a number of other issues to deal with. There were two other commemoration activities planned that would likely interfere both temporally and geographically with any type of event the commission decided to hold. There was a great deal of conversation about these other activities and what they represented and what they might communicate to outsiders. One of the events was being planned by a community stakeholder to commemorate the death of his mother and granddaughter, so we were in little position to ask him to cancel or postpone his plans. In any event he had held his event for a few years now and was well into the planning of this year’s commemoration. Eventually he attended the commission’s meetings and helped co-plan both events.

Despite a number of attempts, little reconciliation could be had with the other group. In a rather tense meeting with members of the other planning committee, a community member directly asked one of the young men, whom was perhaps 23, what he hoped to accomplish with this commemoration, the second line he was planning. Clutching a hand full of advertisements that featured a dj and a washer and dryer to be auctioned off that
day, he said “we want to present the community.” The elderly lady who asked the question replied, “so do we”.

It was quickly decided that a funeral march and second line would be appropriate. Members felt that the two would simultaneously demonstrate the mourning for those that had died and those that had not returned, in essence the physical and psychological death of their neighborhood and community, but that it would also point to the hope that everyone had for the future. The next few meetings devolved into the minutiae of who would be allowed to throw the ceremonial wreath into the Industrial Canal, should we have Anderson Cooper or Maxine Waters give the main address, would President Obama be there—he better, would we serve breakfast or lunch?

All three groups that held events that day did so using a second line. Some folks marched or, what is actually called second lining, in all three. All three, however, recognized that what they were doing, in the words of the Lower Ninth resident and young black man from the Upper Ninth, was presenting the community. Not so much representing the community, but as Goffman (1959) noted in the presentation of self, actually presenting the community. All were cognizant that this could be the final time that the national media paid any attention to the Lower Ninth. Members of the community wanted to demonstrate how hard they were working to rebuild their community, but that they also still needed help. They wanted to show people the streets that had been taken over by brush and weeds and houses that were missing a roof or a wall. They wanted people to see that there were not any stores in the neighborhood and that few people had returned. So much of what took place in the Lower Ninth Ward was to show others what was happening, the ongoing social disruption and social
abandonment, to verify that it was actually happening. Time and time again I was asked “what do you think is going on here” or “does this seem like other neighborhoods”. Eva, who was eighty-three and lived in the Lower Ninth most of her life said one day over coffee,

“We’re not crazy. This shit is real. What they doing to us, this is real. Sometimes you have to catch your breath, you gotta take a pause and think, because you start to doubt yourself and then you think to yourself, ‘no I was right, this is happening’. And you do that everyday. It’s like a reality check you gotta do everyday.

When those not from the community confirmed that something here was amiss, that it didn’t make sense, that it wasn’t fair, some ontological security was restored. Much of what the planning committee did for those few weeks was struggle to come to terms with their ontological security at the level of the community. Many of my conversations with people like Eva seemed to be reassurance, a dialogue aimed at helping them regain some cognitive order and make sense of what was missing in their community.

In this chapter I focus on the relationship between community and moving on. In particular I focus on challenges and steps towards restoring ontological security at the community level. In other words, I focus on the ongoing effects Katrina and the Federal levee failure had on people’s orientation to the community. For some this involved separating, at least at some level, themselves from the community and for others it was an inexorable pull towards the community. For almost all it involved some kind of discussion as to what community hubs should be rebuilt, what should be done to bring the people back who were still far flung across the country, how to re-establish the values of the community, and questioning, often aloud, whether it would ever come back—what would the future look like.
I separate the chapter into two sections. The first part, “The Fight for Community”, describes how Katrina pushed people together. As noted in the last chapter disasters are often described as bringing about a “community of sufferers” (Fritz, 1961), an “altruistic community” (Barton, 1969), or a “therapeutic community” (Freudenburg and Jones, 1991). Those who are fighting for their community come together to rebuild and find meaning and security in being with others who understand their plight and are focused on similar efforts. Of the hundreds of people I spoke with and interviewed I can count on one hand those who did not tell me how wonderful it was to live in the neighborhood or asked me when I planned on buying a home there. For these people Katrina had a silver lining, it brought people together again and helped restore social capital.

The second part of the chapter, “The Flight From Community”, tells a different story. Here residents engaged in myriad tactics to distance themselves from the community. This distancing, which is both geographical, interactional, and cognitive, involves limiting one’s relationship with the community at large or delimiting one’s perception of the community to a particular block or certain people. Both sections look at how people use the fight and the flight to restore ontological security.

**The Fight For Community**

Research has shown that both the physical and psychological dimensions of home play a large part in security and in the routinization of behavior that makes us feel safe (Dupuis and Thorns, 1998; Merdjanoff, 2013). For many residents in the Lower Ninth their homes or those of their friends, places of worship, community centers, even the familiar network of streets and parcels of land provided a sense of place. We are unconsciously linked to
the places we are from (Basso, 1996). The shock of losing the familiar forces us to
examine those previously unconscious links to home.

I came back and it was like being somewhere else. It took me four weeks to find
my house. I’d drive out and look around, but there weren’t no streets, no street
signs of course, no landmarks. The other houses were gone, your neighbors house,
the house you know that so and so lived in, all gone. They was all gone. So you
just drove around and looked and all that looking made it worse because it didn’t
look like anything at all. When I found it I only found half. The other half was
down the street, two streets over and to the right, down there [he points to an open
lot]. It didn’t feel like home for a long time because nothing was there. (Mr.
Chauvin, black male, 70s)

I think the hardest thing to deal with in those first few years was just the change.
For those of us who grew up there, grew up in the Lower Ninth, you were just
returning to a different place. It’s hard to explain if you didn’t go through it, but
you left and everything looked like it always had, your stuff, your memories were,
they were all there. Then you came back afterwards and like it was all gone. I
mean everything was gone or just unrecognizable. You didn’t know if you were
looking at your memories or someone else’s. That’s hard, it was tough. (Rick,
black male, 50s)

Residents like Rick, who in this conversation talks of the Lower Ninth as “there” rather
than “here”, often used language to describe how the neighborhood was gone and
whatever existed now constituted a different place. In both my interview and in
subsequent conversations with Rick he would often look out at the landscape as if he was
still trying to get his bearing. Part of moving on for residents involved negotiating what it
meant to be from the Lower Ninth Ward and the links between place and identity and
change.

Miller and Rivera (2008) use the term “disaster landscape” to denote the difference
between the post and pre-disaster physical landscape. As they note, the suddenness with
which the landscape changes necessitates a “new normalcy”, this new way of seeing and
doing things sends reverberations through other landscapes, such as the cultural,
economic, and political. Our identities are rooted in place (Relph, 1976), and when places
that we are accustomed to inhabiting change, we change, and how we approach others changes. In her work on symbolic interaction Milligan studies dramatic changes in the physical landscape of place and observes that not only do interactions change, but how people envision future interactions also change (1998). While many residents foresaw these new landscapes as filled with promise, others were worried.

It’s like a reset, a do-over. You know what I mean man. We can build this community from scratch. We got everything we need, plus more than we ever had. No one cared about us before, now we got all these groups and people coming down to help. We can tell them, ‘build us a church’ and they do it. So we can do it. We got a new governor who comes down here, actually comes to the Lower Ninth. We got this, this is our chance to do something for our people. (Doug, black male, 50s)

I’m think a lot about the next generation. We had survival skills. We knew how to do things and what we had to do, you know, to get along. I mean we didn’t always have jobs down here in the Ninth and we didn’t always have people asking ‘how you doing’. This ain’t going to last. It might be worse than it was. And these young people, it’s a new world for them and that world going to go back to like it was before, with the gangs and the drugs and murders and no jobs and nothing. I mean nothing was here before, but we adapted. But it was slow. You know what I mean. There was some drugs and gangs when I was in school, but then later it got worse. But that just crept up on you. These kids gonna go from being paid to plant tomatoes and paint fences to no one caring about them in a second. It’s going to happen. It’ll be quick too. And then what? What they gonna do? (Lisette, black female, 40s)

Residents were adamant that post-Katrina they were in a different situation. They spoke of being proud, for the first time that they could remember, of being from the Lower Ninth. It was no longer a stigma, but a badge of survivorship. Perhaps the opportunities and change in identity prompted some to worry, but for many the promise was too great to ignore. They were excited to begin a new conversation about their neighborhood. They recognized that place is as much a social category as it is anything else and that it must therefore be rebuilt through people.
For many residents then Katrina was a wake-up call. While the vilification of residents on television and elsewhere was not always obvious to those watching from elsewhere, residents noted that while they didn’t like what they saw, the media depictions of their neighborhood nonetheless resonated with the decades long downward spiral that many had witnessed first hand. It was a painful reminder of the deterioration of their community.

To restore their ontological security along the level of their community, residents primarily used four tactics. First, residents would often verbalize their ideal community. These discussions usually took the form of what should be rebuilt and how, what was missing in their community, and what the future would look like. It was easier for many to live in or work towards the ideal rather than the existing community. Second, residents sought to expand their community. Here residents took the opportunity to connect with volunteers, non-profits, visitors, even other neighborhoods in the city to create social capital just in case something like Katrina happened again. For many members of the Lower Ninth it was important for them to tell others and remind themselves, as one resident informed me after a day of removing discarded tires from a lot, that “we’re all in this together”. For others, however, it meant shoring up the existing lines of community. This involved a careful delineation of who was and who was not a member of the community. To be sure, this was in part an effort to make sure that community member’s voices where heard over the din of outsiders as to what should be rebuilt. In part, however, it was also a matter of trust. Many residents were skeptical of the aid they were receiving. While at times they playfully dismissed their worries by asking volunteers why they were here, at other times they fed those same concerns by participating in conspiracy
theories as to what strings may be attached to the aid. Finally, residents stressed how they were simply different from other neighborhoods and other communities in New Orleans. They believed that this difference made them worth saving and that ultimately, if they convinced enough people of that difference, then they would be saved.

1. The Ideal Community

Residents of the Lower Ninth Ward were originally told that community meetings were mandatory. Either to prove to the powers that be that there was sufficient interest to rebuild the neighborhood or as a way to disseminate and collect information, while many residents could not remember why they attended meetings, they remembered going to 4-5 meetings a week for those first few years. Five years after Katrina many residents still attended multiple meetings each week. These meetings involved lengthy and heated arguments about which community hubs should be rebuilt first and then the subsequent order the other hubs should be brought back. Many in the community believe that in order to attract people back to the neighborhood a certain strategy needed to be followed. While I discuss what I call risk entrepreneurs--people who specialized in creating large projects focused on establishing particular hubs--in the following chapter, most residents had a defensible idea on how and in what order the community should be rebuilt. In describing this order they were allowed to verbalize what a community meant to them.

You gotta build the schools. Ain’t no one gonna move to a neighborhood that ain’t got no schools. We had 7 schools before Katrina and nows we got 1. People can do that math. It’s just wrong. It ain’t like we being treated hows they says they would treat us. They ain’t being fair to the Lower Ninth. Other neighborhoods got their schools back, but we ain’t. Once we got schools then people will come back. (Theresa, black female, 40s)
I don’t care what Donna or Julie says, if you don’t have jobs then why would anyone want to live here. People stayed in Houston and in Memphis and in Dallas because they found jobs. I know people who have been looking for work for two or three years now and cannot find anything permanent. They get by, but it’s not easy. So they can’t ask their former neighbors, who they still friends with, or their cousins to move back. What do they tell them? We got a great church? I mean that’s important. I don’t want to, I know you’re recording this, so I don’t want someone to come back and say ‘oh he don’t care about the church’, because I go and I tithe and I help out there, but you aren’t going to pick up your family and move 700 miles because of a church or a school. But you would do that for a job. Right. I’m not saying nothing here nobody don’t already know. I’ve got family and friends who want to come back My best friend, since the 6th grade, is living in Phoenix. He wants to come back home, they all do. But there ain’t nothing here for them to do. I can’t tell them to come back. I can’t do it. (Mel, black male, 50s)

In both statements we hear what community means to the residents. Sometimes this meaning making activity involved reminiscing about the community pre-Katrina. When asked how the community had changed in the years preceding Katrina someone might wax nostalgic about the many churches in the neighborhood or the mom and pop stores that dotted St. Claude. But often community was explained in the future tense. Everyone, like Mel and Theresa above, had a plan.

While these individuals and even groups were not unsympathetic to someone else’s plan, they recognized, after all, that they had similar goals, they nonetheless were very defensive about their plans for the neighborhood. Several meetings I attended ended in arguments about prioritizing schools versus jobs versus homes versus infrastructure—like roads, police or a health center. After being in the neighborhood for several months, residents would ask what I thought should be rebuilt. There was never a correct response and such queries usually ended with the resident shaking their head and saying “well, that’s cause you not from here”.

Non-profits had become so worrisome about offending residents with their plans to rebuild the community that they often held dozens of meetings to inform the community
of their plans. This openness often involved sharing charrettes and allowing members to vote on projects, walking residents through models of houses built to scale, holding meetings where any community member could come and voice concerns, and attending weekly community meetings and giving reports on the progress of various projects.

There were also several large community forums which coincided with the election of Mitch Landrieu, the new mayor, who wanted to signify that his administration planned on confronting issues in the neighborhood rather than extending the previous administration’s laissez-faire policy. Several of these meetings were administered in a way as to make discussions and participation more manageable. These meetings would be scheduled around a particular topic, schools, crime, jobs, or blight, for instance, and other topics would be tabled for later meetings. A representative from the mayor’s office whom I worked with on a community project explained that the first few community meetings were not structured around particular topics and that they were chaotic. At one meeting, titled the Second Annual Lower Ninth Ward Consortium, twenty-four non-profits were each allocated five to seven minutes to discuss their work and their future plans. The meeting was confusing and residents became frustrated as they struggled to have the community groups or non-profits answer their questions. Residents would ask questions of non-profits concerning work or projects that the particular non-profit had not done or was not in charge of. A few days later a community stakeholder summoned the organizer of the meeting and myself to his house to discuss why so many people left during the meeting.

People are just tired. You just can’t come in here and tell them that before we do X we got to do Y and then have someone else tell them they have to do A or B before that. People here have been told that for 5 years. They put all their energy into something and then, that…it doesn’t happen. They get told that we have to do
something about the blight, but they don’t see the blight because they are focused on crime or the streets. So each meeting is like that...and most people don’t see why someone else, other people, keep talking about their, about that particular problem. (Pierre, black male, 60s)

Pierre explained that meetings like this one did not allow residents the opportunity to participate in the construction of the future community and they rebelled. He noted that most residents were so focused on their version of community (which often aligned at least partially with other residents), that asking them to consider multiple possibilities, in a sense multiple communities, at this point was cognitively overwhelming. They simply could not do it. Inviting people with contrasting priorities, both presenters and audience members, had proven to be disastrous.

There were also a number of instances where a meeting on a single problem turned into a debacle as different residents attempted to seize control of the discussion. Here individual strategies of restoring the community interfered with one another. In one notable instance, in an emergency meeting on redistricting, residents seemed to confirm their need for their version of the community.

Field Note April11, 2011: Second Redistricting Meeting (L9)

Went to the second redistricting meeting today. Much different than the first. It was basically several lawyers explaining what redistricting was and how it would most likely fail; that people needed to be vigilant and protest it, but that in the end it would probably be overturned. It began with several short discussions from people nobody knew or cared to know, but got really interesting during the Q & A, which is what it was suppose to be. The whole thing was filmed for public tv, so I’m hoping to see it somehow. After a few questions/statements about redistricting, Mack noted that he had personally asked some elected official a few years ago, at a meeting much like this, to look into delaying redistricting in those areas most devastated by Katrina. He said there had been some agreement that using pre-Katrina numbers in those cases seemed reasonable because those areas are in flux...several people murmured either their support with using pre-Katrina numbers or their recollection of the previous conversation with the official. Rather than simply explain to Mack that it would require some kind of constitutional
amendment, one of the officials in an attempt to sympathize with Mack and others droned on about the purpose of redistricting and the long history of trying to suppress the black vote. Mack noted that Katrina was simply an extension, probably the most effective, of black suppression. Someone, I couldn’t see who, took this opportunity to bring up another failed promise—the grocery store. The person convening the meeting, the only black person on stage, said they understood there were other problems, but that we were not here to talk about that—just redistricting, that redistricting was important enough to address on its own. That was it. Although the person complaining about the grocery store sat down, the next person to the mic explained that you just can’t come into the Lower Ninth and tell people what they are going to be able to say and not say. Thunderous applause. She, I think it was Dotty, went on to say that they were going to sit there and let the people talk about whatever they wanted to because everything was related—bringing back Mack’s point—which apparently escaped the convener. Thunderous applause again. The next person went on to agree with Dotty and then started to talk about the crime spree and tried to tie redistricting in by stating that new politicians not from here wouldn’t care about their problems like crime. That was pretty much it. Someone then went on to talk about a drug store and how the population is increasingly elderly and does not have access to a local drug store. Then someone talked about the streets being in need of repair. The next few people asserting their right to talk about other things did just that and the panel just sat there and took it.

At this particular meeting each person talked about what they perceived to be the biggest problem confronting the community or what the community needed most. While redistricting was a serious matter and will have serious consequences for the neighborhood, each resident wanted to focus only on what they perceived to be the problem with redistricting as an afterthought.

2. “We’re All In This Together”

One of the immediate outcomes of Katrina that had lasting implications was that communities, indeed families, were scattered across the country. While many residents told me heart-wrenching stories about not seeing parents or children for months, in a handful of cases for over a year, they also implicitly communicated lessons learned and experiences they had from losing a sense of community. Some spoke of the necessity of
staying with family members or going back home and re-connecting with loved ones or “getting in touch with their roots”. These residents were able to at least partially replace their lost community, even if just temporarily, with a newfound (or perhaps an oldfound) community. Other residents were displaced to far-flung locations, places they have never been to before. While various degrees of effort was made in different cities to welcome the Katrina diaspora, in places like Houston for example, where volunteers were encouraged to help the new residents form new networks, many residents nonetheless spoke of a long and trying process of establishing themselves in new communities. The effects of scattering enabled people to see what other communities looked like and help them make tangible connections with people in other communities. For many this was their first time outside of New Orleans or away from Louisiana and the experience had lasting impressions.

These residents, who eventually returned to the Lower Ninth spoke of new discoveries of the importance of community. The ongoing trauma visited upon on their community and the desire to connect-either to new places, new people, or in a new way back home, had profound effects on them that made them rethink their connections to others. These effects were most visible in three different areas: in how they approached race and the desire to connect with people racially different from themselves, in seeing their community as a node in a larger network of communities working for social justice, and in a desire to rebuild social capital in the Lower Ninth. Below, in brief, I describe all three.

3. The Racial Order of Things
On a slow day at the volunteer house Ry received a phone call from someone named Mr. Chauvin. Justin had asked weeks earlier if I had interviewed Mr. Chauvin and hadn’t recalled anyone ever mentioning him before. After the call Ry vouched that Mr. Chauvin was a character and said I that I really should meet him and besides Mr. Chauvin had apparently bought a garage door and wanted someone to bring it inside his house. When Ry and I arrived Mr. Chauvin was standing on his porch, beaming.

Mr. Chauvin had COPD and his house was littered with oxygen tanks, big ones the size of a helium container you might find at a carnival and smaller ones that he could carry to the A&P to grab a case of beer or some hotdogs. There were 10-15 in just about each room and their presence literally filled the house. His home had 3 bedrooms, but for the most part, sans oxygen tanks, he lived alone. His nieces and nephews lived with him from time to time, but because of the numerous tanks I don’t know where they sleep or what they do when they are there—other than listen to stories from Mr. Chauvin. His house was finished, completely repaired. It was one of the few on the block that looked like a normal house. And being across the street from a large park—the only one in the neighborhood where someone actually seemed to be keeping the grass cut, it looked like a nice place to live.

Mr. Chauvin had been anticipating us, but it couldn’t have been easy for him to stand on the porch for the 10-15 minutes it took us to get into my car, stop for some Barq’s rootbeer, and drive over. He had apparently spent that time rehearsing one-liners or maybe it just came natural for him and he was excited enough to have an audience that he went on stage early, eagerly awaiting us. “You boys have a hard time finding the place—it’s the house that’s actually a house?” “I could carry it myself, but I figured you boys
needed the exercise”. After Ry and I carried the garage door inside he asked if were
going to be able to install it. He said, “it looks good and all on the floor, but it would look
better on the garage.”

It turned out that Mr. Chauvin didn’t have a garage. He had a carport made of cinder
blocks, but nothing that a garage door could easily attach to. He asked if someone else
could come over and do some tiling. Fanni, a film student from Belgium who had been
volunteering for several months arrived to do the tile, but quickly found that there was
nothing left to tile. Mr. Chauvin pointed out a few other projects he was hoping
volunteers could help with. The awning was a bit twisted; he would like his porch painted
one day; he was thinking of redoing parts of his kitchen. I told Mr. Chauvin in exchange
for an interview I’d put up his garage door. After finishing, more like quitting, with the
garage door several afternoons later, Mr. Chauvin asked me if I still wanted to talk about
the neighborhood. He motioned for me to come inside and he turned off his soaps and sat
in his favorite chair and smiled. For Mr. Chauvin, having the volunteers over meant a
captive audience, but it also allowed him access to people he had never had informal
relationships with before.

When I first signed up [for volunteers] it was too late, everybody had went back to
school and I had to wait another whole year about till May came. [But] my house
looks like a professional did it, but the Lower Ninth Ward group did it you know and
I thank God for that and a lot of people thank God for that. It was volunteers who did
my house and nobody professional helped. I helped them. Show what to do and
everybody got along good, having fun, and everybody wanted to work by my house
all the time because I sit there and make jokes and [we] started laughing. I treated
everybody nice and they love to come over here. We had little cookouts and
everything. It was nice. And it didn’t matter that I was black and they were white.
And that was it and we all got along. (black male, 70s)

In the year that had passed Mr. Chauvin missed the volunteers. He missed telling his
stories of growing up in the Lower Ninth and being in the military, but most of all he
missed being around people who were not like the people he grew up with or lived around.

Many of the residents of the Lower Ninth Ward had never had anyone ask them how they felt about living in the neighborhood, what their life was like, what they thought about the world, and they had certainly never had groups of white kids over to their house to talk with (or work for them). In the aftermath of Katrina, when they could not get anyone to listen to them, the volunteers performed a particular function. For several people I spoke with, like Mr. Chauvin, having the volunteers come back to do miscellaneous, unnecessary odd jobs meant reliving those days and reconnecting to a phenomenon they were still trying to make sense of.

Katrina also allowed them to reflect on their life and share their experiences with others with whom they might not have established relationships with under normal circumstances. Mr. Chauvin explicitly noted that he liked having the volunteers over because they were white. While he had been in the Navy and worked with many people of different racial/ethnic groups he had never had white people over to his house before—especially young, white people. Having white kids sit on his porch, eating lunch with them, teaching them how to use tools, was momentous and extremely enjoyable. It broke the racial order, especially in a neighborhood that was 98% black pre-Katrina. For Mr. Chauvin and others the new racial order, where whites and blacks worked together and white kids looked to black adults for knowledge, was the way things should be. In the year since the volunteers left his house Mr. Chauvin had missed those relationships. He made up work for volunteers so that he could reconnect to others. While some did this to make sense of Katrina, to revisit the scene of the crime, Mr. Chauvin revisited Katrina to
relive those days where things made more sense to him. Others, likewise, noted the sudden appearance of whites in the neighborhood and how it had changed their attitudes towards whites or their racial worldview.

For Mr. Chauvin and others Katrina allowed them to broaden their community by making connections with folks whom they otherwise would not have met if it had not been for the disaster. The destruction of their community gave them an opportunity to go beyond the interactional bounds of the Lower Ninth. Some, like Mr. Chauvin, spoke of having contact with people not from the community when he was young and in the Navy, but losing that over the years as the community became more isolated from the rest of the City and as he grew older and his employment kept him in the neighborhood. Others, however, spoke of the unusual contact with whites while away from the city.

I was in the dome, what do you call it in Houston, the old one, [the Astrodome]. Yeah, that one. And folks was everywhere and I just sat there in a blanket, all covered up. My bible was next to me and folks would just come by and put envelopes in my bible or stuff them in my blanket. Envelope here and there, people just be passing by. I didn’t talk to no one those first few days, people just be doing this and I just sat there. I guess I was in shock or something, still getting use to what was going on. After a few days I opened one of those envelopes and there was a hundred dollar bill. Well, I got a bit excited and opened others and they all had cash in them. I must have had about twenty-five hundred dollars in my bible and on me. And all from white people. I’m not racist or nothing like that, but like that was the first time white people ever reached out to help me, to care about me, whether I was doing ok or stuff, you know. I mean, that don’t happen in New Orleans, you know. I can count the time on one hand some white person asked me how I was doing. Those few days in the dome had a impression on me that I took home. I took that with me and I wanted to do something with it. 

(Ms. Margie, black female, 60s)

Ms. Margie returned to New Orleans and volunteered with a non-profit where she taught primarily white, school-aged volunteers, how to do electrical work. The first day I worked with her she took me and the nephew of the C.F.O of a major bank aside and told
us she would be more than happy to offer us an apprenticeship if we ever wanted to become electricians.

She, as several others, told me a number of stories of growing up in the Jim Crow South. Over dinner one evening at her place she recounted being chased down the street by a group of white boys carrying sticks. She marveled at how much had changed since then, and then remarked that it was really since Katrina that it had all changed. At her funeral a few months later I arrived to find close to four hundred people gathered to mourn her. In the back were thirty to forty mourners who were many decades younger than most who were there that Friday morning. They were all white. I thought Ms. Margie would appreciate that three dozen or so, mostly kids, that she didn’t know five years before had come to say good-bye to her; that she had friends from across the country that considered her part of their lives.

While New Orleans, and the neighborhood in particular, has a unique history of race relations, the influx of whites allowed residents to feel connected to the outside world. While some interpreted the presence of whites as gentrification, others welcomed it as a sign of progress. As Mack noted, each new arrival of a bus of white students from the Northeast or from California reminded residents that “we [residents] were not alone, that others cared, and that we’re in this together”. The presence of whites in what would otherwise be black space provided people in the neighborhood, even other whites who were long term volunteers, a sense of relief; a feeling that the neighborhood wasn’t done, that others were still coming to lend a hand.

At the end of each day of volunteering at the Village, Mack offered what he called “a reflection” for the volunteers. Sometimes members of the community would stop by, the
person whose home was worked at or whose lot had been cleared, but most of the time it was just Mack and his brother and a handful of semi-permanent volunteers. The reflection consisted of each person saying what they learned that day and what they would take away. Mack wanted them to take their experiences back to their communities and hopefully raise awareness and money for the neighborhood. Mack usually ended the reflection by saying how the day had changed him. After I had been to several reflections and more importantly had been in the neighborhood for eight months, Mack asked me to end the reflection that day. I told a group of undergrads from Wisconsin that I had spent most of the day trying to rebuild a wall. But the floor and ceiling of the house were warped from water damage and after several hours we concluded that we would have to replace sections of the floor. It had been a frustrating and agonizing day. I told them that I had stopped at the Village to hang out with Mack who always made me feel better about the day and on the way I had seen several students working on a garden. I explained that was really all we needed. That while a garden may seem insignificant, their presence was what mattered. Mack nodded and patted me on the back and just as with several of the undergrads he exclaimed, “I think he got it”. For Mack having people, especially young whites, witness what was going on in the neighborhood was important. Otherwise, as he would say, “ain’t no one gonna believe us”.

Lee, likewise, used Katrina and the experiences of the neighborhood to expand his idea of community. He would use the last few years as a pedagogical device to teach white volunteers about black history. He would present himself as a former Black Panther and explain race relations in New Orleans and how the neighborhood had overcome racial segregation, White Flight, and now Katrina—which for him and most others had
obvious racial undertones. Desiree, another resident of the neighborhood, who operated a mobile snowcone machine and would drive over to her house that was being rebuilt to give out snowcones to the volunteers would go on to tell me how important it was to establish good relationships with the volunteers because this would probably be the only time they went to the “hood”.

4. As A Node for Social Justice

The presence of whites in the neighborhood allowed residents to simultaneously connect to the outside world, allowing them to believe, importantly, that they were still cared about and it allowed them to believe that strangers were familiar with their suffering and recognized what the government was doing to them.

Field Note July 17, 2010: Night Out Against Crime

Went to Ms. Mable’s house for the Night Out Against Crime. I figured I wouldn’t know anyone there, but it turned out that the lowernine.org gang showed up. There was a new guy from NY and we talked for awhile. The mayor showed up and took some pictures with everyone, including one on of the levee with Ms. Mable and us. She was holding a beer. The highlight of the night, however, was her brother. There were several white residents there, but they intermingled, whereas the volunteers pretty much sat by themselves. Ms. Mable’s brother went and put his chair next to the first volunteer and began to interrogate them. When he found out they were from Oregon he went nuts. He said he didn’t even know where that was and proceeded to ask all of the volunteers where they were from. He pretended he couldn’t believe they had come all this way, down to New Orleans, and what for he wanted to know. To help? No, he said, “you came to see the greatest injustice ever perpetuated against citizens of the USA, least since slavery. Welcome to the South! Welcome to the Lower Ninth! Enjoy your stay!”

Ms. Mabel’s brother may have forced the recognition of the absence of social and racial justice on a few volunteers that night, but in doing so verbalized a narrative that many wanted the volunteers to understand, that what they were witnessing, what they were
taking part in, now made them part of it. They were now part of the community, and as Mack understood it, when they went home to Wisconsin, New Jersey, or Oregon, they extended the boundaries of the Lower Ninth.

Others sought to extend the community by establishing sister cities. For some this was symbolic. Residents of Amsterdam had come and given presentations that noted the similarity with problems of water and levees and folks in the Lower Ninth saw them as part of their community. Colleges like the University of Wisconsin and Louisiana State University had established a significant presence in the community and residents saw them as part of the community. While I was there delegations from Haiti visited and a connection between earthquake survivors and Katrina victims was established. The extension of community, however, was also something may foresaw as pragmatic. Several residents spoke of host towns—towns or cities that would host them in the event that something like Katrina occurred again.

I opened a safety deposit box there [where he evacuated]. I got a copy of driver’s license, my social, and my military i.d. I left a few hundred dollars there and a checkbook. I also left copies of keys. I think everyone should have a plan. You should think of it as living in two places. This is my home [the Lower Ninth] and that’s my home [Texarkana, Arkansas] in case I have to go quickly from here. After living there for four months, hard months too, I feel like I can go back. Everybody needs a place like that. (Mr. Marky, black male, 60s)

We need a plan. I mean, it probably won’t happen again in my lifetime, but it’ll happen again. You know. We need a plan. We need some place to say okay, you can come here and sleep in the, in this shelter, and we can give you food. I mean Houston just didn’t work out. Putting people on planes and saying off you go just didn’t work out. We got people all over this country trying to get back to New Orleans, to the Lower Ninth, who just can’t. If people could have gone somewhere as a group, as a family, or known, just to know your family is in Shreveport or Dallas because that’s where you go if something happens, that would be a big difference. But that place has to be willing to participate. They got to be okay with you being there and knowing that you are coming. And then we got to that for them. If something happens elsewhere we have to be ready to help others. This is going to happen to other people and the best thing for them is to go
somewhere where the people living there understand what they are going through and can then help them. The people here in the Lower Ninth they know what to do and what to watch out for. We can tell people not to trust contractors and that insurance companies are not your friends. We can help now. We are in that position. But we might need help too one day. (Patricia, black female, 40s)

For many residents their experiences in Katrina resulted in them wanting to reach out to others. Rather than staying isolated they saw that they would do better by being more connected to other places. Being part of another place ranged from saving some items in a safety deposit box, to keeping in touch with families or friends one stayed with during their evacuation, to co-renting apartments and homes with others. One resident even bought a small house a few hours drive away from New Orleans to evacuate to, but planned on visiting it quite often.

They also tried to connect to other neighborhoods in New Orleans. Mack explained at a meeting on uncertainty and risk held outside of the Lower Ninth that marginalized groups elsewhere in New Orleans need to come together to work against the forces that resulted in preventing them from coming back—both as a community and physically rebuilding. This went against the grain of thought at the time of every neighborhood being for itself as by year five post-Katrina it was proving difficult to build solidarity across communities as they competed for rebuilding resources. Building solidarity, while limited, was often achieved by participating in Farmer’s Markets, Blight clean-up events, or sharing tools.

And I looked around that room and Cecil B Demille, Frank Capra, it was like a Frank Capra thing, Lisa Jackson is in the front of the room with some other folk, there were people from the neighborhood, people from the North Shore, people from the Parish, people from further over…people from Houma Nation, there were people in, umm, work clothes, people who were clearly, uhh, I don’t know like for example if they were from Lafourche or Thibodaux or New Orleans East, but there were representatives of the Vietnamese community, and you looked around that room and people that were gathered together, and they were like
having a pretty civil conversation…and it was like yeah, we can do this, we’ve done this before. (Sandi, white female, 50s)

In collaborating with other communities residents were able to see what others were going through and how they were solving their problems. This insight often helped them rejuvenate their own organizations or members of the community by adopting new courses of action to mitigate their problems.

5. Establishing Social Capital in L9

The final way residents tried to expand community was by creating social capital in the neighborhood. While the narrative offered by community members differed—for some the community had been on a decline for decades, while for others it was rebounding right before Katrina, most described the community as defeated. They told stories, similar to the description in Chapter Two, of drugs, gangs, crime, and poverty overwhelming the community beginning in the late 1970s. They spoke of how the city abandoned them and how they struggled to keep up with basic infrastructure. Most sorrowfully, they spoke of residents simply not caring anymore. Membership in the neighborhood associations had dwindled to a handful of residents. Few residents attended meetings outside of the community. There were no attempts on the part of residents themselves, or even others, to solve the community’s basic problems.

Back before Katrina you had plain apathy. No one cared. Street light broken, you didn’t even know who to call. Now you got a list of people—they might not come out here and do anything about it, but we know a lot more now. Police come to the community meetings. They might not come if you call them if you have something stolen or if you see something going on in your street, but at least they know where we are now. We’ve had three meetings with the Mayor or his people. That never happened before. Again, it doesn’t mean things are getting done, but people care now. They know things aren’t being done and they get angry about it. They tell their neighbors. We get people at meetings now who not only are
seeking information, but they have information to give us. It’s different. (Paula, black female, 50s)

This exchange of information occurred frequently at neighborhood meetings. Meetings often spiraled off topic as residents talked amongst themselves about pressing concerns. Residents would also bring other members of the community to meetings if they knew something was going to be discussed that was especially important to that resident. These conversations were often extended beyond the confines of the meeting with residents dropping by the non-profits the following day to continue the discussion. Work sites often transformed at certain times of the week or month into spaces where residents would stop by and chat or ask questions. These impromptu visits facilitated strong relationships between both volunteers, non-profits and community members. A good deal of my conversations took place with those who stopped by the work site to see what was happening or how we were progressing. Likewise, a neighbor might stop by a worksite and invite volunteers to lunch or ask us over to look at some work they were doing on their house. In this way then, simply knowing what was going on (or being interested in what was going on) was sufficient to make you part of the community.

While the non-profits sought to foster social capital between themselves and residents through crawfish boils parties, and dinners—like the Night Out Against Crime mentioned earlier, there was also an attempt by those non-profits and various organizations to spread social capital amongst residents. A few of the more visible non-profits often hired community members to work on projects or give tours and they always made sure to invite residents or stakeholders to important events.

While residents disagreed on the direction of the community before Katrina, most spoke approvingly of those working to save the community. Many assumed that because
returning had been such an arduous task that only those who wanted to help out would have returned. A number of interviewees remarked on Katrina separating the “bad” from the “good”.

Everyone here wants to be here. There here to help rebuild this community. Before we had a lot of troublemakers, mainly young men that didn’t have anything to do. Very few of them are here. Actually I’m beginning to see a few more than in the first few years after. But for the most part the young folks here get it. They don’t want to live in the ‘hood. They go to school and they see other neighborhoods that are clean and safe and have a corner store and a candy shop and they want that here. They’ve heard stories from older brothers and sisters about what it used to be like and they don’t want that. That’s why they out helping clean –up and volunteering. We, folks in the neighborhood at least, use to be scared of the kids, now they helping out and it makes all us feel good. (Joanne, white female, 60s)

Those that have stayed—and I ain’t saying nothing bad about those who dropped out, it’s hard to give all that time, lots of my friends did community work, went to meetings, it was 24/7 back then, they did it—but those that you meet at the meetings week after week and work with on Saturdays, that’s what keep us going. There is a group, like a core of us, that try and be there for the others. You work with this group this Saturday and maybe next Saturday they work on your project. And then we all come together to help out on bigger things. That’s how we’ve kept this community going for the last five years. It use to be everyone for themselves. You had family and stuff, but you couldn’t trust the guy down the street, sometimes not even family [laughs]. But now, it’s changed. You give trust and you get trust. Right? It’s a different place. (Ms. Mindy, black female, 60s)

Both Joanne and Ms. Mindy spoke of reaching out to others and of participating in events they would not have post-Katrina. While residents were weary of seeing the community as a complete tabula rasa, they nonetheless saw it as a chance to work out community issues with others in a way that previously was unthinkable. And both spoke of trust as well. Joanne noted later that it was “now on them do something for the kids”. In this way the teenagers in the neighborhood had done their part (or were doing it) and now it was up to others to make sure the teenagers had safe schools (or at least a school), safe parks, and could walk down the streets without being victimized.
Many volunteers shared the enthusiasm of being in the Lower Ninth that the residents had. It seemed like a unique opportunity to work with others on a meaningful endeavor. Most volunteers ended up staying with non-profits longer than they had intended and a few dozen or so I knew made New Orleans their permanent home. All spoke of feeling like they were part of the community and wanting to extend that feeling—temporally, but also to others, either new volunteers or even residents who had dropped out of the community. And while many residents warmed to these volunteers and other outsiders who postponed their lives to rebuild the Lower Ninth, there were plenty of others who used them to draw stark boundaries of community.

6. “You might be from here: But you ain’t from here”
Part of reconstituting community in the aftermath of Katrina involved separating those who belonged to the community from those who did not. Separating society into “us versus them” allowed some residents to build a simple cognitive model of the neighborhood in a time when such models were in flux. It was a path to restoring one’s ontological security that was familiar—as most residents had fought whites to integrate portions or parts of the neighborhood and had thus already struggled with “us and them” categories, but it was also familiar in that it allowed residents to put people they were uncomfortable with or suspicious of outside of the bounds of their community. It is a form of cognition that depended on lumping and splitting (Zerubavel, 1995). People who were dissimilar from one’s neighbors were lumped together and those who might have had more in common with volunteers or state/federal officials (basically others) were split apart from them in order to maintain separate identities. This process has much in
common with Anderson’s (1983) imagined communities in that it is based on the mental images that community members have of themselves and their community rather than the actual day to day interactions they might have had with community members.

That lumping and splitting occurs in the aftermath of a disaster should not be surprising. Holbrook et al. (2011) note that even subtle reminders of death or uncertainty create exaggerated preferences for affirmations from our cultural in-group. During times of uncertainty we tend to respond negatively to criticisms of people we see as being similar to us and respond positively to criticisms of those who are not like us. In general, we become biased towards those groups we perceive being part of when we feel attacked or threatened. This response seems universal, as it ranges from 9-11 to more micro-events like bullying or scapegoating. The defense of our imagined communities fosters social support and reduces anxiety by allowing us to maintain our perceived cultural values.

Our allegiance to cultural groups affects our perceptions, observations, memory, and other cognitive functions. We see this in studies of fans of baseball and soccer teams who oversee fouls against their teams and undercount fouls committed by their teams (Cikara, Botvinick, and Fiske, 2010). So it would make sense that in extreme situations those cognitive functions become even more biased.

While several scholars Navarrete, Kurzban, Fessler, and Kirkpatrick, 2004; Navarrete and Fessler, 2005; Kirkpatrick and Navarrete, 2006) note that this process is hardwired, that is, mortality salience influences neural activity in processing information regarding in-group individuals (Henry et al., 2010), the social causes of it are equally important. As mentioned in Chapter Two, residents of the Lower Ninth Ward have often seen
themselves as forgotten or marginalized from the rest of the city. The neighborhood, geographically speaking, is the last neighborhood in the city. It is connected to the city via a series of draw-bridges. The neighborhood is closer, at least geographically, to St. Bernard Parish, which is predominantly populated with families who left the Lower Ninth Ward during white flight. That, put together with the fact that their neighborhood was marked as green space in early plans for rebuilding the city, and it becomes understandable why some residents went to great lengths to separate themselves from others in order to re-affirm the boundaries of their community.

The most evident example of making sense of Katrina by creating or maintaining an us versus them identity was at a community meeting with a representative from the Department of Justice. The particular community group wanted the DOJ’s help in suing the city for environmental racism and racial inequities in various aspects of recovery. The DOJ representative was extremely cordial and forthcoming. She answered all questions and provided several courses of action for the non-profit and for those in attendance (which was 200-250). She was also very pragmatic, but could not understand why residents were hesitant to go to the neighboring parish (St. Bernard) to look for employment. Resident after resident, perhaps a dozen or so, one after the other, attempted to explain the problem to her. Below is a field note from the meeting.

Field Note March 9, 2011: Meeting with DOJ on Environmental Racism

Went to the Community Voice meeting to hopefully meet with Vanessa. Really interesting meeting. It was pretty packed for a discussion on environmental racism. Vanessa read a letter, an indictment of sorts against pretty much all three levels of government and had a few people speak afterward--a representative from the teacher’s union, someone else from CV. Then she introduced the representative from the DOJ. She was very sympathetic and began by saying she understood that this was an exceptional situation and that there were some serious
things happening that deserved the attention of the DOJ. But she also made clear that she couldn’t make any promises and that the community itself would have to do most of the work, documentation, social justice movement work, etc. Things were going well until she began to suggest several pragmatic solutions. While she did a lot of homework, she seemed to be oblivious to the fact that bringing her here was not the first step, but the last straw—the last attempt to give the political/justice system a chance. She asked in response to queries concerning why businesses would not relocate here, but in the Upper Ninth and in Chalmette, why didn’t people just go work in those areas. This of course upset people because, as they pointed out, 1) you shouldn’t have to go out of your neighborhood to find work—if there are no places of employment there, then something is wrong and besides this ignores the larger point of spending money in their neighborhood rather than other competing neighborhoods and generating tax revenue; 2) places in Chalmette and elsewhere in St. Bernard Parish will not hire them because they are from the Lower Ninth. The latter became a point of contention as the DOJ rep asked how they knew that if they hadn’t tried. It was painful to watch people explain 30+ years of institutional racism and discrimination. One guy summed it up nicely when he said something like, “Why would some guy who moved away from his neighborhood because I moved in hire me for a job in his new neighborhood?” Other residents noted how the police harassed them when they crossed the Parish line. Not only did they make apparent that the DOJ rep was not from here (she claimed to understand the problems of the Ghetto—she didn’t use that word, but skirted around it—being from central Atlanta), but that they were isolated from every other community, especially the surrounding ones.

Of course this process was not limited to large meetings, it was also an everyday phenomenon. In asking people for interviews or talking with people about my research I would regularly hear: “so you not from here”; “oh, you moved before Katrina”; “you not really one of us”; or “you white, so I knew you wasn’t from the Lower Nine”. Many of the volunteers I spoke with who had moved to the neighborhood or the City post-Katrina, all of whom were all white, were in despair about not belonging. They had taken time away from their lives or were establishing new lives, usually around issues of social justice that they thought benefitted the same people who held them and their motives with a degree of suspicion. But belonging to the neighborhood was a difficult proposition and differed according to different stakeholders. One couple on whose house I worked
lamented that they had only been living in the neighborhood for 20-25 years and hence weren’t really from there.

In my attempt to make it seem that I was a partial native, explaining that I was born in New Orleans and spent some years in St. Charles’ Parish, I usually only aggravated the matter. One resident explained that I “got a long way to go before you is from here” and another told me “[y]ou might be from here: But you ain’t from here”. Towards the end of my thirteen months a handful of stakeholders began to refer to me as being from the neighborhood, but even then their claims were sometimes rebuffed (and I would be asked to leave the room or a conversation might be tabled for later--which I took to mean when I was not present).

This act of boundary maintenance prevented some from leaving the neighborhood. Darren, for example, would leave the neighborhood to eat breakfast in nearby Chalmette, but refused to go into certain neighborhoods in New Orleans. He explained it as “people knowing where I’m from” or “not being comfortable in those places”. When he absolutely had to do so, to register for housing services or other mundane bureaucratic exercises, he would ask me or someone from the volunteer house to drive him. But he would still be apprehensive as we drove through “those” neighborhoods.

At one meeting in the Upper Ninth, where Mack was asked to speak, he made the point of emphasizing the us versus them mindset of residents of the Lower Ninth, but also elsewhere. He noted that it was difficult for other neighborhoods to get behind community efforts in the Lower Ninth because they were much further along in the rebuilding process. He painted a picture of some neighborhoods still struggling to get their feet under them to those whose worries were closer to their pre-Katrina situations.
At the suggestion from a fellow panelist that they were all in the same boat, Mack explained he couldn’t possibly be in the same boat because they were looking at different shores and that Mack’s boat was miles away from shore and taking on water. Mack later explained to me that’s why folks in the Lower Ninth have to stick together.

Other neighborhoods likewise used this strategy to draw attention to the publicity the Lower Ninth was allocated in the media or how the problems of the Lower Ninth attracted volunteers and non-profits while they had to go it alone. At one meeting, I was told it was a relief that no one from the Lower Ninth was there--“because they suck up all the pity in the room”. And one day off, during the Jazz and Heritage Festival, when we had volunteered to help out another organization for part of the morning, work finished, we went into a bar. As we stepped out of the truck Tim asked if I had another shirt with me. He said, don’t wear that (my lowernine.org volunteer shirt) in there. They don’t like that we help rebuild a black neighborhood; they think we should be rebuilding theirs.

While New Orleans has always been a city of neighborhoods, post-Katrina the boundary maintenance and identification of neighborhood differences was evident to people who were just beginning to orient themselves to the neighborhood. Residents would often complain that no one else could understand them because their situation was so unique. They often took umbrage at the suggestion that others were empathetic with their plight. At another meeting, the consortium mentioned earlier, one resident threw her hands up at “outsiders” trying to fix her neighborhood. She stormed away, only to turn around and yell, “You get to go home at night!” Her point was difficult to ignore, as many of those attempting to solve the social ills of the neighborhood were not living in the neighborhood. Lee would often walk away from conversations with others regarding
what “should be done” in the neighborhood because he resented what he saw as “outsiders”’ opinions. Even when asked what should be done, if residents disagreed with you, they would just wave you off as an outsider. Mack noted casually one day that the reason I was accepted in the neighborhood was that I just worked, I never told anyone what to do or how things should be done. As I was leaving the Village he put his hand on my back and said, “You respect knowledge from the 9th, and that’s important because most people come here and try to do their thing when we already have a way of doing things. That shows folks real quick that you ain’t one of them”.

Meetings also often brought out an us versus them dilemmas. At a Holy Cross Neighborhood Association meeting there was concern over changing election procedures. Despite meetings being well attended, often fifty or so people on average, the number of dues paying members had dropped precipitously over the last few years. There were very few members to choose from for possible officers that were not already serving in some official capacity, and worse, there were fewer members to elect them. At one meeting when the treasurer asked dues paying members to raise their hands only three non-officers did so. On the day of the election, when the president asked non-members to leave, over two-thirds of the room got up and left. When someone remarked that it might be easier if the members left to vote, the vice-president said that they “needed to stop re-enforcing this us and them point of view, that if people were going to the meetings and working to help us, it made no sense to treat them differently”. And at the next meeting another office approached me to apologize for “what had happened at the previous meeting” and with her hand on my shoulder let me know that they all thought of me as a part of their community.
The “us versus them” form of boundary maintenance was, however, more of a tool of inclusion than exclusion. Certainly “outsiders” were for the most part excluded, but seeing the community in this way allowed residents to draw a fairly comprehensive border around their community. Rather than picking and choosing which community members were “in”, residents assumed everyone from the Lower Ninth was a part of the community and everyone who lived elsewhere or was from somewhere else (pre-Katrina) was not able to be part of the community. This strategy is different from the phenomenon of spatial and social coarctiation, discussed below, which involved winnowing the neighborhood to particular streets or institutions or people, in that here broad brushstrokes were being used. Not being from “here” was nonetheless a difficult brush with which to paint everyone and was at times contested among community members. One couple, which were from a different neighborhood in New Orleans and had moved to the Lower Ninth after Katrina, had become very involved in one of the neighborhood associations and were visibly committing their lives to the rebuilding of the neighborhood, but nonetheless were often spoke of as not being from “here”. Sue spoke of how difficult this was for her. “There are certain ways of thinking things that we just don’t do, or don’t know about. People here think and see things in New Orleans in a different light then they do in the neighborhood where we lived. If you don’t, and we definitely don’t most of the time, it marks you as not from here.” Sue, who is on a number of committees, said that she has a tendency to “sit on her hands” in most meetings—depending on whether there is a majority of “outsiders” or not—as there often is. “It’s difficult”, she continued, “because I’m a talker, as you know, but early on I would just say things and later on be called for it, and I spent more time defending what I
said than actually doing anything. I was told several times that I didn’t get it because I was from Mid-City.”

Another long-term volunteer, who runs a nonprofit and has since bought a house in the neighborhood also expressed ambivalence about being from “there”.

Old-timers just don’t see it [rebuilding using sustainable building practices] that way. You got to respect that or you they will remind you. They do it constantly. I don’t mind admitting that I’m pretty brash and I thought that would go over here, that I’d be okay. But it ain’t nothing for some eighty year old lady to tell you off. I work here night and day, seven days a week, for 4 years, almost 5. I’ll meet someone at a meeting for the first time, say last month or recently, and they’ll shake their finger at me and tell me I don’t know what I’m saying or that they don’t like what I’m doing. I want to ask them where they’ve been. You know. I’m here everyday. I gutted houses, I was one of the first people here gutting houses and who knows what shit I got because of that. I make it possible for people to move back. I get them grants and free money and shit for their houses—furniture and stuff. I get their houses rebuilt and then at the end of the day I’m told off. But what am I going to say to someone who lived here for 80 years and whose home was washed away? I don’t know. I want to tell them, you know what, that I paid my dues, but you just say “yes mam” and go about your business. (Lori, white female, 40s)

For these new “residents’ being subject daily to boundary maintenance and their testing of it presented dilemmas. While they want to be thought of as being part of the neighborhood, they still respect the “old-timers” view that they aren’t part of it.

Nonetheless, there was one group that both post and pre-residents could scapegoat to create a common enemy—tourists.

**7. Fucking Tourists: “Misery is the River of the World”**

The final way people engaged in establishing community using us and them categories was to focus on tourists. Tourists in this sense came to represent the “other”. As many residents rarely left the neighborhood, their contact with “outsiders” came mainly from the tourists they met or interacted with. This group also consisted of short-term
volunteers who many residents saw as volunteer-tourists. While some residents differentiated early tourists who rarely got off the bus to talk or lend a hand from more recent tourists who were oblivious to the fact that no part of their ticket fees went to the Lower Ninth Ward, many were likely to cast all tourists into the same group. These tourists represent the worst of the rest of society. Residents believed they were insensitive to the ongoing disruption and abandonment. As one resident complained as a bus drove past her porch, “here come the lookiloos”. Lee and I often spoke about tourists because he not only dealt with the tourist-volunteers who he interacted with on a daily basis, but he was also paid to be a local tour guide, at first irregularly and then biweekly as part of an arrangement with a local non-profit.

L.S.: They just don’t get it. [Who?] The tourists, man. I mean, damn. People cut their grass Friday evenings. Every Friday you can smell fresh cut grass. They tilling their gardens. They might harvest something on Saturday mornings, cars washed. So come Saturday evening, come Sunday everybody is on their porches and it looked like they ain’t done shit all week. But if you look around, all the work is done. This is their relaxation time. Let them be. Don’t judge them. Do you understand? I gave a tour [Lee rolls his eyes and clinches his fists]...and they have some guys sitting on the lawn and on the porch, about four of them. I know them. They all work offshore. They do their work three weeks on and one fucking week off. This their one week off and they took care of their business. They got three days to just chill and that’s what they doing... [in his most touristy voice] “Oh wow those guys are so lazy. Look at them. They want us to do all this work for them and look what they’re doing.” I ended it right there. I don’t want to be a part of it. I don’t want you to be a part of it.

D.H.: I’ve heard that time and time again. You don’t know those people.
L.S.: I ended it right there. I don’t want to be a part of it. I don’t want you to be a part of it.
L.S.: Because I know these guys. I know they worked three weeks to have really three days off. It takes hours to get back from their dock. I mean a day to get back from their dock and then a day to go back. So that leaves five. It takes two days to take care of your business. That leaves them with three days out of the fucking month to do what they doing and you’re going to criticize them. And yet
you’re going to pay all this money to come look at them and not contribute to them. But just come to criticize. I love them and I don’t like you. You’re just a fucking tourist man, you’re nothing to me, you know.

A year later Lee texted me and told me he had to get out of the Lower Ninth. He likened the situation to the Mayflower and the landing of the Pilgrims. Lee saw himself as a lone Native American trying to accommodate the newly arrived others, but could no longer stand their diseases, vices, and strange customs.

Tourists and short-term volunteers who came to the Lower Ninth primarily to enjoy the debauchery of the French Quarter were an easy target for residents. Many residents were easily able to other them. They could create a figurative island separating themselves from others to compliment the literal geographic island that helped them make sense of their isolation.

It’s like we’re a zoo or something. People pointing and taking pictures, I mean how you feel if I do that, what if I did that to you, comes up to Ohio or Boston or up there and when you get a divorce or your house catches fire or your kids get sick and I start taking pictures. How you’d feel then? Me and fifty friends taking pictures of your car that got wrecked. You’d wouldn’t like it, that, would you. You’d start to question what was going on. But I wonder if those animals know they in a zoo? Maybe those tourists are the animals. You know. Maybe thay’s the animals and we should be taking pictures of them [laughs]. That’s what I’ll start doing, taking their pictures. (Frederick, black male, 50s)

Frederick perfectly captured not only the antagonistic relationship with the tourists that many of the residents have, but also related the sense making process that many residents go through in regards to the presence of the tourists and the stark differences between residents and tourists.

While I was in the Lower Ninth tourists came under attack for most of the community’s ills.
The streets of New Orleans are regularly ranked as among the worst three in the nation. Those of the Lower Ninth Ward are by far the worst in New Orleans. Of those that have not been reclaimed by nature, potholes that can trap a sedan mark the others. Despite the streets of the Lower Ninth long being in ill repair, buses carrying tourists bound for the Brad Pitt Homes were frequently seen as the worst offenders. These buses were likewise blamed for creating traffic problems. And while traffic was a problem when the draw-bridges were up, most streets in the Lower Ninth saw a handful of cars a day and the buses were limited to a few blocks.

Tourists were also often seen as potential developers or gentrifiers. Even when they tried to reach out to members of the community tourists were viewed as interlopers and eyed with suspicion. The anomosity held by residents towards tourists was even registered in the reactions to a few residents’ ideas on jump starting the economy of the neighborhood by building tourist attractions. One resident exclaimed that she was basically run out of town for suggesting that a pier along side Bayou Bienvienue be used as an art gallery, restaurant, and “ecological infotainmuseum”. And while bike tours of the Lower Ninth, which emanated from the French Quarter, were extremely popular, the idea of operating such a business from the neighborhood was scoffed at whenever anyone mentioned it. A few residents even bought into an odd conspiracy theory that had the City keeping the Lower Ninth Ward as close to it’s post-Katrina state as possible to offer tourists something to look at.

Most, residents, however, saw tourists as non-sufferers, as people who couldn’t understand what they were going through. Whereas other residents (and to some degree newcomers) could empathize with what was going on there, community members felt
that tourists represented the apathy and misunderstanding that they thought epitomized the rest of the country. For many framing others as indifferent made the most sense. It had to be this way. What else could explain why the calvary wasn’t coming.

In what was the largest, single volunteer event for the non-profit I most regularly worked with, two hundred and fifty volunteers from All State donated $10,000 to do a day of service in the Lower Ninth. My job was to take seventy-five of the volunteers and have them blight map sections of the Lower Ninth and Holy Cross neighborhoods. After explaining what we were doing, and more importantly why, I walked a few streets to make sure the volunteers were making some progress. At the time I had lead or participated in two other blight mapping sessions and residents were equally likely to yell at you—believing the information would be used to demolish their home or to cite them for some small infraction—or to invite you in for a cup of tea, so I wanted to reassure volunteers that either occasion was normal. One couple I accompanied for a few minutes, a woman who was a claims adjuster, commented that she had personally signed off on so many claims for this neighborhood that she just didn’t understand why it wasn’t in better shape. She wanted to know what had happened to “all that money we gave them”. I told a number of long-term volunteers that afternoon about the exchange and they would roll their eyes. A few days later I told Lee. Although I could see his blood pressure ratchet up, he just smiled and said “Now you get it, don’t you. There’s us and there’s them”.

8. “We Just Different”
One final way in which Katrina ended up pulling people together was by using the disaster to highlight the uniqueness of the Lower Ninth Ward. Much was made about the community having one of the highest rates of home ownership among black communities in the nation, being the first site of school integration in the “Deep South”, and generally being one of the few places in New Orleans with a sizable middle class black population. Few people, however, that I spoke with admitted to being proud of their Lower Ninth identity before Katrina. Post-Katrina, however, in a fight to save their community, residents began to pitch their neighborhood as having a specific identity (usually one of survivorhood) and as a good place to live. Their job was to mark the neighborhood as being different from others in the City. Several people rephrased a popular t-shirt slogan at the time, “It’s a NOLA Thang, You Wouldn’t Understand”, by stating it was a “L9 Thang”. A handful of residents I spoke with emphasized that you couldn’t understand or make sense of life in the Lower Ninth without having lived there for one’s entire life. These residents, while sympathetic to my research goals were nonetheless doubtful that I could “understand” what was going on in the community.

Well, I’d say surely, at least one thing for sure, let me know what you find out, cause I been here for fifty-three, no, wait, fifty-two years, and I don’t know what’s going on here. It’s just a different place, that’s all. And I know you hear that about New Orleans and that’s true, but it’s different, for different reasons. Here, life’s just different. You just don’t know. One day you wake up and it flooded and the next someone got shot and then a house burns down and the local politician is arrested because they all corrupt…Daina, it’s just different and I can’t tell you why, but people here is just use to it. So when you ask “how did Katrina change things”, I got to tell you it didn’t. Yeah, it made life hell for awhile, but then we had the recession and then BP. It didn’t fundamentally change things, change the people I mean. [So, if Katrina would of happened elsewhere it would have changed people?] Well, it did happen elsewhere. I mean, Mississippi and Florida were affected. But yeah, it would have been different for others. I mean it was different for people in Bywater [the adjacent neighborhood]. (Melinda, black female, 50s)
People say thay ain’t no place like the Ninth and they’s right. We roll kinda differently. You know that by now. You seen it. And you know, you just roll wit it. So ok, like this guy next door. He ain’t never come back. House flooded, stuff still in there, never come back. Where else in America you gonna have a neighborhood wiped out, just bombed, and you and I sitting on a porch looking at it and talking about it. Nowhere [laughs]. We just different. Somehow we got made a bit different. I was a, I think the second person come back, on this block. Not in the whole Lower Ninth, but I don’t know. We wus, unh, like, November or something like that. And people in Texas, that, cause that’s where we’d stayed, in Texas dey be asking, “why you going back there, you done flooded twice.” And I thought, dey don’t know we flooded all the time. Flooded two times dat summer. And you know it gonna happen again. And I’ll be back. Maybe you come, maybe you’ll come back too and we sit on the porch again and talk again about the water. (Mr. Miroux, black male, 70s).

Many qualified the difference in terms of repeated peril. Paul, for instance, suggested that the BP oil spill was not as bad as it seems, and certainly not as bad as Katrina. Sitting on his front porch he pointed to several houses, jabbing each one with his finger. “And that one, and that one, and that one, look, look at that, each one done that way by Katrina”.

For Paul the spill only affected a handful of people in the neighborhood. He pointed to some unknown house in the distance, his finger unsure of itself, “so maybe that guy lost his job”. But later talking about the release from the Chalmette refinery, Paul mentioned how he was sick and his neighbor was not. Then perhaps realizing his previous comment about the spill says, “that’s how it is here, always something happening to someone. Constantly I mean. Ain’t nowhere else like that. It didn’t hurt me, but I’m sure that spill caused trouble for this place.”

The difference between the neighborhood and others was also seen in an adversarial way.

They don’t like us. Never have. I mean I don’t know if they dynamited us or not, but look at us. The city done this to us one way or another. It looks like Beirut or Baghdad. This ain’t America. And people drive by or come by on the tour buses and they think this happened all at once, but this is years man. I mean, come on. This don’t happen all at once. It takes years of neglect for this to happen. And you
drive around the city. We’re the only ones like this. I don’t know why. It ain’t about race, most of New Orleans is black, was black, before you know, and it will be again, I don’t care what they say. But I don’t know why they city does this to us (Andy, white male 50s).

Likewise, Tom (white male, 50 years old) noted that the community has fought all three levels of government against projects such as building the Industrial Canal, the MRGO, dumping, plans to turn the neighborhood into green space post-Katrina, the locks on the canal, the list is endless. “This has been a long time coming”, says Tom. “We keep telling them that this, x or y, is going to happen. Then it does. It is not easy living here. It is a constant fight with somebody.”

Unlike those above who empathized with the plight of others and saw disaster and disruption everywhere—as discussed in the next chapter, those who saw the Lower Ninth as an exceptional place tended to emphasize the frontier like quality of living there. Residents claimed that while disruptions and misfortune happened elsewhere, they didn’t occur with the frequency and severity (or even intentionality) as in the Lower Ninth. It was a difference that normalized the disruptions or the absence of a quick recovery.

When asked if they ever would recover, Paul told me, “Yes, that’s what we do”. Likewise, in my interview with Sandi, which for the most part was positive and upbeat, as we approached the third hour of talking she said, “I’m trying to be optimistic. I really am. It’s hard though because this has happened before and it just seems to set the tone for the community. I don’t know how we can change it.” Similarly, at one neighborhood association meeting, after discussing several major zoning ordinances—which may or may not be implemented in the near future, residents were briefed on the oil spill, told of an incident involving a handful of juveniles that the media were labeling a gang, and then invited to participate in a class action lawsuit regarding the Exxon-Mobil refinery in
Chalmette. One attendee, leaving the meeting exasperated, noted that there is no other community like this. Another remarked, “I lost my home in Katrina, my job in the BP spill, now I’m getting into a class action over the Exxon-Mobil in Chalmette.” When asked if he is optimistic about the future, he says he can’t be, “no one knows what is going to happen here”. Another resident overhearing us turned to me as she left and said, “who else has to deal with all this”.

Putting the Lower Ninth Ward outside of the norm allowed disruption to become normal. Residents expected trouble and paradoxically that gave them some security. The absence of peril was what made them nervous. The Holy Cross Neighborhood Association meeting typically ended with then President Bill Waiters asking if there was any “new problems”. Generally, no one would respond and Bill would say something like, “come on people, this is the Ninth Ward, I know something happened”. “Just another day in the Ninth” came to sum up instances that elsewhere would have elicited disbelief or concern. When police replied to a call concerning a drive by shooting by asking if the car was still there, newly arrived volunteers shook their heads in disbelief and one remarked, “it’s true what they say, only in L9.”

For many residents then pulling together by rebuilding their community helped restore their ontological security and allowed them to begin to move on. Disaster researchers have frequently found that the desire to put one’s community back together is primary after a disaster. Solnit has written of post-disasters as a time where many find community for the first time (2009). Prince (1920) noted the camaraderie that evolves after a disaster. And Fritz, in a classic piece on post-disaster communities, called them “therapeutic” (1961). In their interviews with residents of New Orleans in the immediate
aftermath of Katrina, Hawkins and Maurer had one resident exclaim, “You fix my community, you have fixed my life…” (2011:153). Because I met a large number of residents through the rebuild non-profit I was associated with, many residents expressed similar sentiments to me. Some spoke of specific hubs, like the Sanchez Community Center or a health clinic, that once returned would make them feel whole again. But most spoke of community in an abstract, general way. They felt that they could not be whole again until their community was whole again. For many, however, focusing on the community was overwhelming. For these residents the disrepair and disorganization of the community as a whole, the drastic change in both the physical and social aspects of their community, was simply too much. It was much easier, and ultimately more assuring, to turn away the larger community.

_The Flight From Community_

Unlike those situations where people are pulled into the community, sharing their suffering with one another, survivors also engaged in actions that limited their participation or identification with the broader community. Erikson (1994), for instance, noted that most of the communities he visited lacked any characteristics described in the first part of this chapter. He wrote that disasters tend to open up the fault lines of society, exposing deeply held religious, racial, or class divides. Rather than being “therapeutic” these communities are often “corrosive”. I saw some of what Erikson described as corrosion first hand in the Lower Ninth. There were certainly neighbors who no longer trusted folks in the neighborhood. There were victims of contractor fraud that had been perpetuated by relatives or former friends. Some residents were wary of doing interviews in their home for fear I would speak off handedly to someone else about their home. One
resident even went so far as to walk me half-way through his living room and stop and suggest we do the interview on the porch. But this was rare. Most residents did not act in a “corrosive” way. Perhaps it was because as Erikson notes it is usually the non-afflicted trying to distance themselves from sufferers and in the Lower Ninth there was no one who was not afflicted in some way. What did happen, however, is over time some worked to distance themselves from the community or from what others were doing for the community to restore their ontological security or to move on. These residents either intentionally marginalized themselves or fell prey to the underlying marginalizing policies inherent to the secondary violences I wrote of in the previous chapter.

Likewise, in their work on cultural trauma Alexander et al. (2004) noted that in order to mitigate their role in the suffering, some refuse to participate in the process of trauma creation, thereby restricting solidarity, and leaving others to work through the trauma on their own. In the Lower Ninth this was much more common than fostering corrosion. In order to make sense of Katrina, and in particular to move on, residents felt the need to separate themselves, or pull apart, from the community. For the remainder of this chapter I describe a mix of strategies and conditions that residents either used to sever ties with the larger community or that worked to reduce feelings for community.

1. De-Individuation

In the days immediately following Hurricane Katrina many citizens became entrenched in the dehumanizing process of proving their lawful citizenship. Katrina was used as an excuse to criminalize and incarcerate those who in the midst of a disaster who were deemed to be non-citizens. To fight against that process, residents went to great lengths to re-inscribe themselves into the official citizenry. People no longer existed in real,
corporeal form, they only existed on paper—as legal bearers of official documents. I call this counter-process de-individuation. The extreme form of this practice is probably best told in Dave Egger’s Zeitoun (2009). These practices were, however, extended to the point where people were reduced to being documents. This process became codified under the Road Home program where residents had to prove direct ownership of their homes in order to receive rebuilding grants. In the Lower Ninth this proved to be a major obstacle to rebuilding as many homes had been handed down to family members over a period of generations. These homes were “family homes” where cousins, uncles and aunts, and grandchildren could stay until a more permanent place became available. In many cases the legal owner was deceased, having never officially willed the property to any particular individual, or the property was legally owned by several family members. The end result, however, was the same, former inhabitants of the space were prevented from rebuilding their property. In several instances this obstacle caused further violence as families became disrupted, separated, and later fought over property rights. The family unit was replaced with the capitalist orientation of legal owner. Likewise, people were no longer seen as members of the community, but simply as property owners.

One resident who lost family members during the flooding counted himself lucky because the documentation he needed to prove he owned his home survived. While others who returned to the neighborhood in the months after Katrina scrambled to find documents, he was able to use his documents to become one of the first owners of the famed Make It Right houses. While still grieving for his family, he had nonetheless appropriated the language of de-individuation to make sense of the aftermath of Katrina.

Yeah, I was definitely one of the lucky ones. I don’t think people realized, they do now, for sure, the importance of being able to show what you had...and the
condition. I tell everyone take pictures and keep them safe...and save everything. All that paperwork you don’t think is necessary, that’s what separated us, those people who are back, they had their paperwork and those still struggling to get their homes back, they didn’t, don’t have it. I was lucky man. I mean it. I suffered, but I had my papers...hurricane didn’t take that away. (Sean, black male, 60s)

The lesson learned by many residents from Katrina was in the event of an emergency to prioritize documentation above all else. When asked what they would do differently, people rarely mentioned evacuating earlier or taking family mementos, they spoke about documents. They have accepted that in the aftermath of severe social disruption documents, or being able to prove who one is or what one owns, is more important than people.

Paul’s experience was slightly different from Sean’s, but still demonstrated the internalization of the de-individuation process. Paul’s family had lived in the Lower Ninth for almost a century. His primary and extended family had at one time occupied over a half of a block, but by the time Katrina hit only his mother remained and most of the other homes had fallen into disrepair. Paul was determined after Katrina to fix all of the homes that his family had owned, but soon found that his mother did not have clear title to all of the houses. Furthermore, family members challenged his ownership status for the remaining houses. In the years that followed Katrina a bitter, and apparently un-resolvable situation arose whereby Paul could not receive money to work on the homes, family members refused to sell him their rights to the home, and the City prevented him from working on the homes until he could demonstrate ownership. After exhausting other options, Paul used the legal status of his father’s business, of which he had been a partner, to acquire one of the homes, despite that the business had not really been operable for several years pre-Katrina. After proving ownership of that home, he used the
business as a front to buy other houses at an auction. Eventually family members sold him their rights or stopped contesting his claims. Paul explained while working on one of the homes one day,

“I, we, wouldn’t be here today, if I hadn’t done it. I feel bad because there is no business and I know that’s why I got the houses and why we continue to get volunteer help, but what would this be...these houses will be used again, you know. It’s funny though because I had to do something I wouldn’t normally do, wouldn’t have thought of doing, to get it done.” (white male, 40s)

As an individual Paul could not, in his words, “get it done”, but as a business he did in a few months what he had not been able to do in three years.

Many families, the primary building block of communities like the Lower Ninth were destroyed as a result of Katrina. Residents told stories of having members put on planes at gun-point and taken to Phoenix or Omaha, never to make it back home. Many marriages dissolved under the stress of living apart or living in difficult conditions. Children sometimes went to live with grandparents or other families. Others, however, spoke of the secondary violences breaking apart their families. Families fought one another for possessions or titles to homes. Many sought help or aid from some neighbors, but not others, which often further divided community members from one another. As I mentioned earlier, in order to help out struggling family members some signed over portions (in some cases all) of their rebuilding grants to family members to do work on their homes to simply never see them again. Some family members wore out their welcome, and while having no place to go, were nonetheless kicked out. The result of the constant fight for survival paradoxically reduced the inclination to form bonds at the community level. Survivors often remarked that while they hated what “the storm” had done to them, they didn’t see any other way to survive.
One question I asked in interviews, to help establish the interviewee’s connection to
the neighborhood, was how long the family had lived, either pre or post-Katrina, in the
neighborhood. This question frequently elicited comments about severing ties with
family members or what “that storm” did to their families. Below both Clement and
Douglas’s comments illustrate the loss of family and the desire to separate one’s self
from others.

I don’t see them anymore. It was a difficult situation, after ’05, or was it ’06. I
don’t remember. We got back from Tulsa and things just fell apart pretty quickly.
Todd, my brother, said that mom always meant for him to have the house and she
died in Tulsa and hadn’t said anything to anyone else. My brother Todd, he’s a
good guy, but he hasn’t worked in years. He can’t afford to pay taxes or fix the
place up. So I tell him I’ll take the house and he can live there. He doesn’t have
any other family, no kids or nothing. No, he says. It’s his. Well I let him get as far
as he could and of course the house just sat there for the first few years, getting
worse and worse. So finally I stepped back in and said I’m taking the house. I had
found my grandfather’s will where he gave the house to mom and went to the
court and after a year or so it was mine. But Todd and I don’t talk. My sister
didn’t want nothing to do with the house, but she thinks I stole it from Todd, so
we don’t talk anymore either. (Clement, white male, 50s)

Basically you had to cut people loose. I mean we all have folks in our families
that weren’t doing anything good, not doing anything useful. It ain’t like they
were up to no good or making trouble in the neighborhood, I don’t want to give
you that impression. It was like they lived here and just didn’t do anything. So we
had cousins here and an aunt and even one of my brother’s friends. It ain’t that
big of a place. And afterwards some of the cousins came back and I let them
know they had to help out. They need to get jobs, you know, contribute
something. They didn’t do nothing. They wanted to go back to like it was before,
you know. So I had to basically kick them out. That was the hardest thing I ever
did and hopefully ever have to do. I mean they were family. So, yeah, I’m not the
most popular guy in the family anymore. Basically, you know, no one wants to
talk to me anymore. They say I ruined the family. I don’t know what else I could
have done. It was, still hard as it was with just me taking care of my family, my
kids and wife. (Douglas, black male, 60s)

For others, however, coping with the disruption took them out of the community structure
and put them into a different organizational framework, such a business or non-profit.
Lee, for example, helped run a bicycle shop in the Ninth Ward before Katrina and has put
most of his aspirations into rebuilding a bike shop. Although he had a business plan, because he was unemployed and had very little collateral, he was unable to acquire a loan for the bike shop. Yet, while several financing opportunities had presented themselves, Lee refused to be a participant to them. Having observed the moderate success of non-profits in attracting funds, Lee wanted to start a non-profit.

That’s the way man. I can’t do it no other way. I just got to get my status. If I can be a 503, then I can get money. Ain’t no one giving money to Lee. But people will line up to give money to Lee’s organization. That’s the way they all do it. You ain’t doing it, you gonna fall behind. That’s the way I’ll get my bike shop, see. I know lots of people that are individually poor, but 503 rich. (black male, 50s)

Whereas theories of deindividuation, such as Bon’s (1895) or Zimbardo’s (1969), explained how individuals once placed in the larger collective could engage in previously sanctioned behavior due to a loss of personality responsibility, deindividuation necessitated the separation from the larger collective because of the hyper-inscription of personal responsibility. In New Orleans it became the process by which residents proved themselves to be legally sanctioned to do work or own a home—their resilience was to be credentialized.

Residents, even those who temporarily participated in community events or associations, believed that to “get it done” required that they step out of the collective and take command of their situation. In many ways it was in an inverse of C. Wright Mill’s observation of the connection of personal troubles and public issues. Rather than see personal troubles as located in the structure, residents sought to take ownership of their problems by de-associating themselves from the community, and in a sense the structure itself.
One afternoon at the Village I explained to Mack this tendency I had observed of people to sink back away from the community. He verified what I was thinking and said, “It’s like, I can cope with my problems, but not with yours. There’s just too many yous, you know.” For many the community’s problems were overwhelming. In an interview with a former leader of ACORN she described this phenomenon while simultaneously explaining how it was understandable.

Look honey, in those early days we had to go to lots of meetings. You had to go to meetings to learn how fill out paperwork, which paperwork you needed, what to do with your paperwork. It was like 4-5 meetings a week, it seemed like. They took attendance at some of them to know who was there, if you want and such, how many people from the Lower Ninth was there. So, yeah, we’ve lost some people along the way. It was just too much for some. They done. They don’t want to be troubled no more. So they sits in their house and watch tv or do some project at home, but they don’t have nothing to do with this fight no more. I can’t blame them. They did it for awhile and now it’s someone else’s turn. They got to be who they is. (Paula, black female, 50s)

Many residents associated physical infrastructure with social infrastructure, as Elliott and Pais (2006) have noted, losing one results in damage to the other. Residents who no longer saw the value of their community, who saw it as broken, were less likely to participate in rebuilding the social commitments they once had. It was in the words of Paula just too hard, they had been fighting for too long. It had become easier to just concentrate on one’s personal troubles rather than all the public issues.

2. Spatial and Social Coarctation

*Coarctation is the process of becoming pressed together or narrowing, constricting, or confining to a narrow space. I use the terms spatial and social coarctation to describe the narrowing of community, both in physical, geographic terms, but also in cognitive*
Residents described the Lower Ninth Ward pre-Katrina as a communal landscape. One knew where one was by who was sitting on the front porch or working in their yard. Lee described it as a series of smells that connected the homes to streets and the streets to the larger community. But this community has been drastically confined since Katrina.

Ahh, you knew where you were, now...I’m talking, I’m not talking about time of year, but you knew that too, you knew what street you were on or whose house you were near because of the smells. It isn’t like that no more. You know that smell of grease? Like fish frying. You know, I know you know. You don’t have that anymore. The shrimps, the cabbage, you knew where to get the sugarcanes and corns, right now this time of the year, you, we would be smelling that sugarcane. It’s like everything went inside. Everything good went inside and don’t come out no more. (black male, 50s)

When asked about the safety of their neighborhood some residents would speak in terms of rigid boundaries, naming streets that properly defined the neighborhood—which is not difficult to do as it is hemmed in by levees and a canal—but others used flexible or fuzzy boundaries. It was apparent that they no longer knew how to speak about the neighborhood. Because large parts of the neighborhood remain abandoned it is not clear to some residents if those spaces are still part of the neighborhood. For others, a tactic of dealing with the blight and disorder was to narrow one’s mental image of the neighborhood. Henri (white male, 50s) adopted this tactic most clearly. When asked how the neighborhood was doing Henri spoke of his two neighbors and a house “over there”. Commenting on the safety of the neighborhood, Henri said he knew there were some problems somewhere in the neighborhood, but that “this street” was fine. Henri’s understanding of the neighborhood stood in opposition to his being a past board member of the neighborhood association and the fact that I often spoke with him outside of the neighborhood. Many interviewees repeated Henri’s understanding of the neighborhood,
where people spoke of the neighborhood in terms that made it obvious they felt it had become constricted.

This section is doing well. I mean we’re not all back. We saw that yesterday working [when we boarded up some neighboring homes], but this part is good. It’s kind of its own little, a little place of its own, separate from everything else, from what’s going on out there. It affects us. But not as much as if we were in it. I mean you know it [the neighborhood’s problems] is out there, but they don’t affect us as much here. (Gloria, black female, 60s)

Like others, Gloria spoke in general terms about the rest of the neighborhood. It is “out there” somewhere and like others had mentally cordoned off parts of the neighborhood that threatened a progress narrative. Still others, however, simply do not go into the neighborhood any longer. Rather than just narrowing their image of the neighborhood, they have narrowed their interaction with the neighborhood.

It’s not safe, no, it’s not. I use to walk these streets every day. I’d say Hi Mrs. Peters, Hi Mr. Tye, Hello Miss Ava. But they ain’t there no more and it’s not good for me to walk around by myself. No police, nothing. What’s to stop someone from doing something to me? Who would even see it. I just sit here on my porch....I like it. I wish I could see my neighbors again. I had good neighbors. I would walk and watch the kids playing and talk to everyone. I’d walk to the store. I’d cross Claiborne [one of the two main streets that bisect the community]. I’m lucky to cross Charbonnet now [her street]. Not no more, Lordy no. You walk around, you know, you don’t see no one on these streets, not no more. (Helen, black female, 80s)

Likewise, Dan (black male, 40s) spoke of social practices that have been narrowed. “You used to sit on your porch and waive to everyone. You know everyone. Now you don’t waive to no one and no one waives to you. You just don’t know anybody any more.”

Post-Katrina the boundaries of the Lower Ninth have narrowed. This is in part due to the fact that more than half of the Lower Ninth Ward was uninhabited in 2012, but it also owed much to the myopic view of who counted as a neighbor. Sitting with Dan on his front porch for over two hours, I saw two dozen or so people honk their horns and wave
hello, and several people walking by stopped to see what we were doing and how Dan was feeling. Dan’s family, however, is from a different part of the neighborhood and had been well known for decades (his father and uncle were both postmen). Dan said that the neighborhood was not what it used to be. He explained that he used to go back and forth between Holy Cross and the Lower Ninth and now that he lives in Holy Cross he doesn’t see the people he used to know. He blames the city for not rebuilding the Lower Ninth and feels the spatial constricting in social terms.

Residents like Dan, Gloria, and William have narrowed their understanding of community, both spatially and socially in order to be more secure—all physically and psychologically. This coartication has helped residents mentally distance the problems associated with the ongoing social disruption. Residents often spoke of avoiding certain parts of the neighborhood that still resembled their post-Katrina state because it reminded them both of the work that needed to be done and that they had lost over 800 members of their community during Katrina and thousands since. Like William who simply gestured to unnamed streets or areas, many residents would claim to not know what was going in particular parts of the neighborhood. When a few of us spent the day looking for staging sites for tools for an upcoming volunteer event and found several manhole covers missing in the middle of the streets, we told a group of residents upon our return what we had found. We assumed that they would be concerned that children riding bikes could possibly fall in. They all were in agreement, however, that no one goes to that part of the neighborhood anymore, so it didn’t really matter what was happening over there.

3. Territorial Ambiguation
Wacquant (2001, 2007) noted that territorial fixation and stigmatization and spatial alienation are defining features of advanced marginality. *In those places where residents are isolated from the larger community or society as a whole, places and by virtue of being from that place, people, are stigmatized.* Members of the community, but also outsiders vilify the neighborhood. Being from “there” “disqualifies”, “dishonors” and “disables” residents from social acceptance (Wacquant 2007: 67). In the Lower Ninth, however, while territorial fixation and stigmatization occurred, the initial disaster and, to the degree they are known or acknowledged, the secondary violences, complicated the status of residents. Many outsiders still saw the Lower Ninth Ward as a ghetto, as a place for social refuse, but others saw it a socially abandoned community and sympathized with residents who understood their situation as first and foremost a violation of the social contract. Residents saw the neighborhood in terms of a moral ebb and flow. As mentioned previously, many believe that Katrina acted as a moral filter, separating good citizens and community members from criminals; only those individuals who want to make the community succeed have returned. Other residents, however, saw the community as basically a microcosm of what existed before. This paradox of place represents what I call **territorial ambiguation**. In the aftermath of social disruption, it captures the tendency for disasters to both obviate and fixate the meaning of place. Places like the Lower Ninth Ward retain their *original stigma*, it is ensconced in the collective memory, but it also projected a number of *possible futures*. For residents who pulled away from the community, however, this ambiguation amounted to too much uncertainty. Residents grew wary of not knowing what to expect or what to do. Rather than terra firma they lived on a shifting moral landscape.
The Lower Ninth post-Katrina has retained its moniker as the murder capital of the murder capital and yet on any summer day you can see high school aged girls from Northeastern prep schools carrying rebuilding supplies down side streets. This flux of normalcy and normlessness was extremely disorienting to residents. Chuck gave one of the best examples of this in a conversation on whether or not the neighborhood is coming back.

Ahh man, just like the other day that thing happened. You drive around and you see, I know you know cause you out there man, you see people cutting grass, picking up things, planting trees, painting. And you get a good feeling and all, all right. It looks good. Then someone gets shot up and you be like same thing different day. I mean how can that happen. How is it, you know, you got this good thing and then this really bad thing. I don’t understand. (black male, 40s)

The event Chuck referred to was a beautification project to celebrate what would have been the birthday of Pam Dashiells, a community activist who died in 2009. The event drew a consortium of non-profits and Senator Mary Landrieu who used the day as an opportunity to bus in potential donors for possible infrastructure projects for the Lower Ninth. While the event was protested by a community group as a photo-op for Landrieu, the local bus stop was rebuilt, trees and grass were planted, and an area dedicated to Dashiells was replanted and cleaned up. The event was considered a success by most. Later that afternoon, however, just a few streets from where the Senator and non-profits had worked, a young man was killed in a drive by shooting. The two events, separated by a few hours and a few hundred yards, make both the space and narrative of the neighborhood ambiguous.

The result of this territorial ambiguation is a place that is at once dangerous and yet peaceful and safe. Residents want to project a sense of home and security, but at the same
time are forced to acknowledge the emptiness of the neighborhood. This ambiguation produced a good deal of cognitive dissonance. At town halls and community meetings, residents brought up problems and issues that they believed prevented their neighborhood from moving forward, but in many conversations and in formal interviews they described the neighborhood as “a good place to live” and as a “place you want to raise your kids”. They are at once protective of the neighborhood’s identity, while simultaneously worried about it becoming something else.

  For many residents not knowing what to think resulted in them pulling away from the neighborhood with a wait and see attitude. These residents existed on the margins of the community. To some degree, like those who engaged in connecting, described in the following chapter, they would check in once and awhile to see how things were doing and then disappear again. The two following comments from residents to a query about what would make them move demonstrated this ambiguousness. “I don’t know. I guess I’ll give it another year or two. If it don’t get better, if more people don’t move back by then, I guess I’ll leave.” “Boy you asked it! That’s been on my mind everyday because of this shit. Look around, what would make me stay…I dunno though I’s raised here, it’s home. If it stays like this, I gotta leave. Can’t no one live like this very long.” Neither Roy or Winston did anything to improve the condition of the neighborhood. The residents on the margins seemed to think that interfering with the fate of the neighborhood would somehow be unfairly tipping the scales one way or the other. The uncertainty and confusion associated with territorial ambiguation froze residents.

  4. Disaster Capitalist Logic
Common to many marginalized neighborhoods is an economic indifference as to what goes on in the neighborhood. While this usually takes the form of tolerating, perhaps even participating in underground economies, in the midst of ongoing disruption the indifference is exaggerated simply because of the fact that there are so many other things to worry about. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina one of the largest, if not the largest, instances of contractor fraud occurred. Contractors approached residents and offered to move them up their rebuilding queue if the resident would pay upfront. It was also very common to pay a retainer to a contractor. And as is a common practice in the industry, contractors would bid a job and work for a few days/weeks to demonstrate that they “were on the job”, until another job was bid and the process would be repeated. In places like the Lower Ninth Ward, however, where there were thousands of jobs, contractors would spend a few days working (if that at all) and then never return. Many residents have very emotional stories of losing significant portions of their insurance or Road Home grants to unscrupulous contractors.

I should’ve known something was up. They’s too nice. They, there’s two of ‘em, said they’d do it cheaper, said they get to it in a few weeks, if I write a check for $20,000. I send that check to a post office box. Police said whoever owned it, it was a fake or whatever. They said they has lots of complaints against those guys. And I knows who they is. I knows where they live...police ain’t done nothing...said I could get a lawyer, but I ain’t got money or time for a lawyer. (Henirietta, black female, 80s)

Following Klein’s work on disaster capitalism, disaster-capitalist logic represents the extension of that process to its final conclusion. While Klein argued that neoliberal policies are pushed through by a small group of wealthy and powerful in the aftermath of disasters, disaster-capitalist logic represents the internalization of that logic by citizens. Many residents of the Lower Ninth understood that they are experiencing the shock of
disaster capitalism and that people, including some in the community, still profit from Katrina, and this is a point of contention, but for many it was a reason to give up on the community. The question of how people could profit off of fellow residents was in turn answered with a withdrawal from community. Disaster capitalist logic thus assumes that members of the community are trying to profit off of one another’s misfortune; it becomes a way of interpreting and anticipating the actions of others.

This logic is also reflected in social interaction (or the lack thereof). Neighbors often know what Road Home option others took and become bitter if Option One was taken and the neighbor has not taken any efforts to rebuild. Despite knowing the numerous obstacles to rebuilding with Road Home money, the neighbor who has rebuilt felt in some way cheated. More so, however, neighbors believed that others wanted to know how they got to where they were in the rebuilding process.

Both Henirietta and Helen no longer welcomed visitors in their home. Part of the reason was that they were both elderly and lived alone and understandably feared being the victim of a home invasion, but both also said that they do not want their neighbors to know that they ended up well. Thus even as Helen lamented the loss of her neighbors, she sealed off her home as a possible space of interaction. Another resident, Marcus, explained this logic.

A lot of people are doing better after Katrina. Every thing is new. You know, new tv, new sofa, new fridge and ice box. But a lotta people ain’t. A lotta people don’t have these nice things and they look at what you got and they wanna know how’d you get that. You know, what did you get out of it? And it’s hard because you don’t know. I mean you want them to have nice things, you know, you want them to get fixed up, but you don’t want them going around talking like Marcus gotta 45 inch flat screen, Marcus gotta new kitchen, Marcus gotta new stereo box. Because the first thing you know some cousin or someone hears them and Marcus ain’t got nothing no more. Ya catch me. I used to have folks over from time to time.
We’d have meetins here. Then I noticed people be looking around. And I thought...that’s really no good. People get jealous and they look at you differently. (black male, 50s)

Marcus noted that neighbors assumed that the other has committed some type of fraud or other crime to get where they were in the rebuilding process. The result was that rather than share resources many neighbors kept information to themselves. This is true of the non-profits as well. New grants or lines of funding, even if not applicable to the mission of a particular non-profit, were rarely passed along to those it could benefit. Rebuilding itself became a marginalizing phenomena.

The result was that a lack of trust prevented residents from actually participating in the community. Having been betrayed by relatives and friends, they no longer wanted to be a part of something larger than themselves. For these residents the community had become corrosive, but in a slightly different way than Erikson and others have used the term. Rather than fighting with others in the community and producing a toxic environment, residents in the Lower Ninth Ward saw the community as corrosive and simply opted out. They experienced everyone else as being out for themselves and this was not the community they remembered. For Henirietta and others the community had become so intolerable they wanted no part of it.

5. **Symbolic Repair**

Much of the rebuilding and recovery efforts in the Lower Ninth Ward could only be seen as symbolic repair. *Symbolic repair is the tendency, particularly among elected officials and directors of non-profits, of appearing to repair the community without actually doing repair work.* Having worked with the Mayor’s office on blight remediation projects, I surmised that these efforts were symbolic attempts to demonstrate to residents that some
progress was being achieved towards making them whole again. Much like the event that Senator Landrieu participated in, which was protested by a local non-profit yelling “photo-op”, trees and flowers were planted rather than schools and health clinics built. Likewise, because many non-profits could only supply volunteer labor and were limited in the monetary or material contributions with which they might assist homeowners, many volunteers are engaged in lot clearing and gardening projects. While their lack of skill and short time spent in the community prevented them from significant participation in rebuilding projects, these “make-work” projects were interpreted by homeowners as “window-dressing” that allowed the non-profits to keep functioning and the politicians to stay in office.

The symbolic repair, however, slowly eroded the hope of residents that something meaningful would be accomplished. One resident noted for instance that he had seen the same lot cleared four times now, while the two homes still standing on his block were in need of being demolished. Another resident commented that he had seen groups of volunteers with different non-profits work in the same lot on consecutive weekends. These kinds of projects also alienated volunteers, several of whom mentioned having cleared lots the previous summer or spring break only to return and find those lots in need of clearing again.

Because of the severity of structural problems in the Lower Ninth undue focus had been given to aesthetics. While many of these projects were labeled as blight remediation, very few were concerned with the demolition or removal of structures that were beyond repair. Residents questioned the asymmetry between small and large remediation projects and argued over which project should be the focus of the
community. When it was announced in Summer 2011 that $45 million would spent repairing the roads of the Lower Ninth (New Orleans is annually reported as having the worst roads in the US) many residents objected that the money was not going towards the building of a school, the creation of park/public space, restoring sewer/water systems, or levee projects. Other New Orleanians questioned spending money on roads for a community that was in such disrepair. Thus even when large-scale remediation projects were undertaken they were viewed as symbolic. Below I use a field note and two interviews to demonstrate the immediate effect symbolic repair had on residents.

Field Note November 22, 2010: Blight Mapping with the Mayor

We had our first community wide blight mapping initiative today. Not a lot of bang for the buck. After planning for a few weeks and meeting with representatives from the Mayor’s office and several other non-profits, we had very little community support. Maybe 10-15 folks showed up to help map. A few dozen or so others had shown up to see what was happening. The all grabbed a free blight mapping t-shirt and waited for help to arrive. When the help the Mayor did promise finally arrived it was a busload of elementary school kids. If not for lowernineorg and CSED there wouldn’t of been anything accomplished. After posing for a lot of pics with the Mayor I took 8 kids with me and we “mapped” a few blocks. While it is interesting to listen to the kids talk about their impressions of the neighborhood and to see how they tried to figure out if a home was inhabited or not, it was still very, very discouraging. Afterward I spoke with Lisa and she said that’s why people don’t care to help anymore. For years they gave public officials the benefit of the doubt, that they genuinely wanted to help, but perhaps just didn’t know how. But that this happened time and time again. The aid or help just turned out to be superficial or a band-aid. She said that one time district officials had promised to help rebuild a park and their promise had delayed locals from working on the park for months. When they finally did show up it was just three or four people with hardly any equipment. She said she personally knew four people that day that just quit. It was too much for them to invest that much hope and then have it crushed by a public official who was just looking for a photo-op or a line in the TP. She said that this was basically the same thing. Afterward the representative from the Mayor’s office just said that he had hoped for some more chaperons and then asked if I thought we would get any good information out of it. Then he said we could do it again in a few months. I was shocked.
That house down the street, that yellow one, it’s falling apart. The other day a group of like 20 kids went down there and, with machetes and some other tools and cut the weeds and then had a lawnmower come out and cut the grass. Look nice now. But 20 of them could have taken that house down in the same time and cleared the lot. That’s all going to grow right back. Look I don’t mean to be complaining about free help. It’s nice. I mean ain’t no one from here doing it. But school kids from Oregon or Main or wherever ain’t going to get the job done. It’s, it gets tiring and you start to guess, I figured it out a few years back, it’s not like it’s going to change. Right? So what do you do? What are we suppose to do? (Rodney, black male, 50s)

I used to help out all the time. But then it gets to where you just do the same thing over and over. Let’s clear this lot, ok then this one, ok let’s go back and do that first one again. I use to cut at least 4-5 yards a week besides my own. I don’t anymore. The Mayor makes a big deal of cutting the grass and they bring out someone and they cut it once or twice in a few months and then money runs out of that budget or something and it goes back to the way it was. Then the Mayor or someone else will make some announcement that, that things are going to change. There is a new program. And it’s in the paper and people make a big deal about it. But the program never starts or when it does it is so underfunded that it can’t do nothing. It’s all about planning and there’s never any doing. (Andy, white male, 50s)

After five years residents were quickly able to devise between a photo-op and a meaningful attempt to help the community. There were lots of the former and very few of the latter. For someone newly arrived to the community it was difficult to discern between the two and many residents resented volunteers who often made the photo-ops possible. On the other hand there were some residents who felt that any attention might help or that even if an event was a photo-op, if it meant a few new park benches, then they would take it. For the most part, however, this symbolic repair reduced residents willingness to participate in community events. Once they had been burned a few times, they didn’t want to play along anymore. On several occasions, before I knew better, I asked residents I saw on an everyday basis why they did not attend a specific meeting or event. The response was often something like ‘you’ll learn eventually that they don’t matter’.
In his work on repairing low-income communities Hou (2010) advised that apathy and action are not opposites. In historically marginalized communities there is often a lack of a basis for community bonding (Jakle and Wilson, 1992). Problems in the Lower Ninth stemmed from both the chronic aspects of structural racism—such as un/underemployment, inadequate education, to lack of power and corrupt public officials—and the acute nature of the disaster. There was in the words of one resident “simply too much to get done”. Apathy and action, the flight from it community and the fight for it, are therefore two acts in the same play. In addition to the residue of toxic waste, Katrina left a residue of skepticism. Residents often ambled back and forth between wanting to get something done and despairing that nothing could be done. Of everyone I spoke to there over the course of the thirteen months, Paula’s words, spoken so plaintively, “we’ve lost some people”, still haunt me the most. They echo years after I first talked with her on her couch as an episode of Good Times played in the background.

The theme song played loudly.

Good Times.
Any time you meet a payment.
Good Times.
Any time you need a friend.
Good Times.
Any time you're out from under.

Not getting hustled, not getting hustled.
Keepin' your head above water,
Making a wave when you can.

Temporary lay offs.
Good Times.
Easy credit rip offs.
Good Times.
Scratchin' and surviving.
Good Times.
Hangin in a chow line
Good Times.
Ain't we lucky we got 'em
Good Times.

Paula began to hum the tune to the show. Embarrassed she said, “I use to really like that show”. I told her I did too. “But it probably meant different things to us, you know”, she surmised. My reply, which I quickly said and then wished I could take back because she and I while friendly were not close friends, was that it probably meant something different to everyone there now. As we said good-bye that day she mentioned something about a meeting and asked if I thought we would ever finish rebuilding the house down the street. I told her next week. She smiled, and then she started humming the tune to *Good Times* again.
Chapter Four: Dealing with Disaster

Doing Devious Things With Our Minds

Field Note February 19, 2011: Lee’s Day

I arrived at All Souls Church to interview David and realized there was a tour going on. I didn’t want David to associate me with the tour, so I was hoping they would be gone before he arrived, but no luck. Turns out though that David was interested in the tour orientation and happy it seems that so many people are still interested in what’s going on six years after the flooding. He was almost bubbly. He went inside and said we could talk after everyone left. As he entered the church Lee and some woman exited. The woman was wearing her Hurricane Katrina earrings. She proudly showed them off; tiny houses with a blue tarp--the tarp was some type of jewel. She was in tears over a film that was being shown during the orientation for the tourists. Lee just sat on the stoop of the church. He said he couldn’t watch the film. It was too real. The woman, a tour guide in training, acknowledged how hard it was to watch. Lee eyed her suspiciously for a moment and then ignored her for the rest of the time. He pointed to a spot a few yards from us and said he saw a dead boy there during the flood. The boy had half of his face eaten off, but Lee said he probably knew who he was. He paused and said that he still avoids coming down this street because he doesn’t want to think about the boy. He said he probably knows who the boy is, but works to try and convince himself that he is unsure. He could easily find out if he wanted whether or not his suspicions about the identity of the body are correct, but he doesn’t. He tells me as he eyes the street that the mind does devious tricks to keep things straight. The woman goes into a story that is suppose to confirm Lee’s observation, but she is interrupted by the tourists exiting the church. Lee gives me one of his looks and tells me to come by the volunteer house later on.

In the thirteen months I spent in the Lower Ninth Ward Lee and I became good friends.

He lived in an abandoned mobile home across the street from the volunteer house where I worked. His home did not have electricity or running water, so he spent a lot of time hanging out at the house--often on the porch talking with volunteers. In turn for using the bathroom or shower he would cook meals and he provided an informal orientation of sorts to the volunteers with stories of the neighborhood and Katrina. Lee and I did not speak to one another for the first three months I volunteered. Then one day, a mutual friend of ours, Joe, asked how the interviews were going. Lee said he would like to talk.
It was time he said. As other volunteers went this way and that, looking for tools for their respective crews, Lee found a quiet corner, under a makeshift tarp, and said that he had post-traumatic stress disorder from the storm and that he had not granted any requests for interviews, but that now, five years after the storm, he was ready to talk. I reluctantly agreed and he told me to come by his trailer on Saturday.

As we sat on tree stumps, dressed in similar torn slacks, talking about bikes and fishing, Lee explained how Katrina had “messed with his mind”. He told me how he had to walk and then swim to downtown—four miles round trip—to get drinking water and food for the seven or so people who were stuck in the house with him waiting out the storm. On his second day he noticed a couple of dozen people who had been abandoned in a retirement home. He spent the next three days trying to convince police and the National Guard and other first responders to accompany him back to the Lower Ninth to rescue the elderly and infirm who were trapped on the third and forth floors. On the fourth day he was successful, but only because he told them some kids in a gang were making crack in an abandoned house and that they were using the house to stockpile stolen goods. When the police realized his ruse, he was struck in the head with a butt of shotgun and handcuffed to the iron fence surrounding the retirement home. Wincing, he told me he spent most of the day, six to seven hours, cuffed to that fence in five feet of toxic floodwater. That experience, combined with his daily swims, had left him with permanent skin lesions and an internal disorder that doctors could not diagnose. It forced him to take medications that he could rarely afford and that left him lethargic and nauseous. Combined with the failure to rebuild his community, it also left him with a profound need to make sense of what had happened to him.
Large scale events like Hurricane Katrina, events that warp both our individual sense of what is normal and the social order, create a need to establish meaning. These events are a reminder of our fragile mortality and our precarious place in the social life of things. Communities, relationships, houses, life itself, these things are revealed to be held together by fine, tenuous threads. Where order once seemed the norm, the continuity of life becomes questionable. Giddens noted that people have a need for “ontological security”—“the continuity of their self-identity and the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action” (1990, 1991). Disasters often rupture our ontological security. They make us question who we are or perhaps alternately who we want to go on being.

With New Orleanians this security was heightened because of the attachment to place.

Over eighty percent of people living in New Orleans were born in Louisiana. Many who lived in the Lower Ninth had been part of the neighborhood for generations. While Katrina fit with the narrative of the place, that anything can happen, that it is a difficult neighborhood to live in, that narrative nonetheless began to be questioned by others. Few of us have been witness to a national conversation on whether or not your home should be rebuilt; if your neighbors should be allowed to come back; if you have the right to go to the school that your parents and grandparents attended. Communities like the Lower Ninth Ward were asked to demonstrate their survivability before being given aid. Faced with the immediate destruction of their neighborhood for the second time (once by Katrina, the second through decree), many tried to reaffirm their identity and reestablish some constancy of their surroundings.
Whereas the last chapter dealt with how victims regained ontological security through their re-negotiation of community, this chapter deals more explicitly of making sense of Katrina. In order to move on residents had to come to understanding of what to do with Katrina. Residents needed to answer questions such as: What was Katrina? Why did Katrina happen? What did Katrina reveal about the world? In particular I look at four different strategies to create order and in doing so discuss the cognitive tools that make these strategies possible. These strategies are connecting, chunking, immersing, and blending. Moving on requires creating order out of the chaos of social disruption. This chapter looks at how this is done.

1. Connecting

Connecting involves the strategy of re-connecting to Katrina at various times to make sense of the disruption. I thought of it as periodically coming back to the buffet when digestion allowed for a little more to be consumed. While many used connecting because of the cognitive benefits, others were forced to because of monetary situations or because they were situated in multiple homes in different, often far away, locations. Others used connecting to make sense of Katrina by connecting the disruption to larger issues—such as climate change or neoliberalism. For these folks Katrina was to important to be rendered a natural disaster. Henri was the first connector I met.

Henri told me to be at his house at eleven-thirty. It was a nice house; one of only three that had survived the flood that were within eyesight. There was a vacant lot across the street and next door a home that had been partially burned down--Henri would later tell me addicts trying to keep warm had started a fire and it had burned part of his new roof as well. Henri’s house was a classic double shotgun. The shotgun is the archetypal
home in New Orleans. The name implies that you could stand on the porch, open the
front door, and fire a shotgun through the house, with the bullet exiting the back door.
The double was simply two shotguns that shared a common wall. I’ve always thought of
them as the row houses of the South.

Henri, like many others post-Katrina, had converted his double into a single. He lived
alone, although actually he had adopted a dozen or so of what he called Katrina kitties--
both the cats people left behind and the denizens of the animal population that bloomed
in the aftermath--so he didn’t need the extra room. But as he explained he had been
waiting a long time to do something with his house. The barge boards taken from ships in
the 1800s had been exposed, much like someone might expose the industrial features or
brick of a loft in a townhome conversion. The floors, he paused to tell me, were original
to the home; the guest room; the study; Henri’s room; the bath; and the kitchen--all
redone. We took some time to digest the bath. It had been a second bedroom on this side
of the shotgun, but Henri had it rebuilt to be the sole bathroom. It would have been a
large bedroom, but as a bathroom it was cavernous. Henri, not really knowing what to do
with the room, put a sink in one corner, the claw footed tub along a wall, and a toilet in
the far corner. As I was thinking of how I would have expanded the kitchen into the
bathroom, Henri sighed and said it was the bathroom he had always wanted. I looked
closer and realized that the tiles had been salvaged--Henri said they were a family
heirloom, as was the claw foot tub. The room was painted bright white, almost like an art
gallery. A hand stitched rug from an antique shop in the French Quarter had been placed
in front of the tub. A stained glass window let in different hues of light that bounced off
of the tiled floor.
Despite the house being immaculate, Henri apologized for the mess. He had friends in town and was out until three or four and didn’t have time to clean. He showed me into the kitchen where we could sit and talk and then asked me what I thought of the house. It dawned on me then, that since I had introduced myself as working with a non-profit that did rebuilds--and it turned out the organization had helped Henri with some of his house--he figured I was writing mostly about rebuilding--and hence architecture. As a result we spent a good time just chatting about the house. I told him I had some of the same books at my place and we shared an affinity for early Texas swing music and alt country—in general anything on vinyl, but definitely Bob Wills, Lefty Frizzell, and Ray Price. The kitchen had been nicely done with a mod-retro look. The rest of the furniture suggested an earlier period of New Orleans--not necessarily antiques, but worn and dated--in a pleasing way. The porch was great, filled with Southern ephemera. I liked the colors he chose. In fact, if I had a house in New Orleans, it would look just like Henri’s--with some modifications to the cavernous bath. Running out of things to say, I told him it was certainly the nicest house I had seen--which in between demoing and rebuilding was true--and that he had done the rebuild really well. Henri looked down for a second. I could tell he wanted to say something that he thought he shouldn’t be saying. Finally, he stammered, “You see, for some people, Katrina was a good thing.”

Amidst so much suffering Henri was embarrassed that he was doing okay. Heck, better than okay, he said it himself, he was better off now than before Katrina. Henri went on to tell me that he had to fight for a year with the insurance company. The contractors who put his slate roof back together did it wrong and he had to sue them to recover his expenses so that he could pay someone else to do it. That roof was partially burned in the
fire next door. He had six feet of water in his home and it had ruined most of his book collection, some first editions that probably were not replaceable. The porch had been built wrong. It slanted. And because the house was on a heavily blighted block at the end of the neighborhood, theft and vandalism were common problems. He only had one neighbor. The hurricane shutters on the western part of the house were permanently closed because of the two houses that were in a torpid state of falling down. It had taken him three years to get back in his home. But for Henri things were good and he was happy.

Henri threw me for a loop. I had come to the neighborhood expecting horror stories, stories filled with loss and destruction and despair, of dead bodies and a despondent government, and here was Henri, drinking his morning coffee, smiling, showing me his study and heirloom tile. Henri and I shook hands. We agreed to meet up for a beer sometime in the Upper Ninth Ward. We walked outside on the porch and I noticed for the first time that Henri was probably still wearing his pajamas. “Beautiful day, can’t wait to enjoy it”, Henri said. It was nearly one o’clock and close to a hundred degrees with a hundred percent humidity. In the fifty-foot walk to my car I was already sweating. I glanced at the two blighted homes that five years after Katrina had yet to be gutted and looked back at Henri and nodded.

The next time I saw Henri was a few months later at a community meeting. We shook hands and he sat in the row in front of me. The meeting dragged on. The President never could get the parliamentary procedure right and kept starting bits of the meeting over. It was an uneventful meeting and sparsely attended. Even the two police officers who always sat in the back, arguing with each other over who had to give the community
police report, had skipped out. When the meeting was finally coming to an end at the request by the President for any new business, Henri raised his hand. Henri wanted to address gang activity near his neighborhood.

Henri spoke quite eloquently for a few minutes about the gang of teenagers that were vandalizing a nearby park and writing graffiti on homes that were somewhere between being rebuilt and being left for decay, but in any event had been abandoned for some time. He suggested that these might be the same kids that were racing through the neighborhood on three wheelers and makeshift motor bikes. He wanted to know if there could be some consensus on the idea of him purchasing a motion operated camera that could capture images of these kids as they wreaked havoc on the neighborhood. He offered to keep a log of the offense and the time it occurred for the police. If others wanted to work with him, he did not mind heading up what he called the task force. I was dumbfounded. I wondered if Henri had watched too many episodes of The Wire? At that point I had probably been going to the neighborhood meetings for four months and had only seen Henri twice. Moreover I had been to 30-40 other community meetings and had never seen Henri. There had been nights out against crime, potluck dinners, cleanups, and fundraisers, but no Henri. Was this the same Henri that said his neighborhood was doing okay, despite being one of only a couple people living on the block?

I asked around and found out that Henri had been a past President of the neighborhood association and that for many years he had been very active in the community. He had been a pillar during the aftermath, but had for the last year or so, no one could remember for how long, been rather awol. And now he was back, wanting to take the lead on some initiative against the underage gangs.
Henri’s behavior seemed in stark contrast to those around him who seemed to be continually engaged in the affairs of the neighborhood. Those who offered to head up committees or proposed pet projects were highly involved in other community groups or projects. Eventually, however, I met others who like Henri seemed to keep at a distance from the ongoing response to Katrina and the social disruption, only to reengage at various times. Henri and others like him did not participate in what those who study disasters call chunking--the dominant way people make sense of disaster. Rather than breaking up the disaster into manageable pieces, they seemed to connect to Katrina at various times and at various ways. It was almost as if they could not cognitively deal with Katrina and the ongoing disruption. As if it was just too much to think about or too difficult to think about for any prolonged period of time. People like Henri might work on their house for a few weeks or months and then disappear to live with relatives for a similar period of time and they would do this on several occasions. Some would work with a community group or attend meetings for a few weeks or even for months at a time and then stop, only to suddenly restart again. Others would re-establish ties with non-profits, stopping by for visits or asking for additional help on a new project. They would take a break from dealing with or thinking about the devastation and disaster and then get back to it. From speaking with people, both those who observed this pattern and from some who participated in the process and had come to terms with it, this process had been consistent since 2005. I call this process connecting.

Connecting involves separating one’s self from the ongoing disruption and sense making activities associated with Katrina and the federal levee failures. Time spent away from activities associated with Katrina offered a cognitive break from thinking about the
disaster. Several of those involved in running community groups and non-profits would ask me not to call after 5:00. Because I worked with the rebuild group from 7:30-5:30 I would often schedule interviews for the weekend. The need to break from the disaster on weekends, however, made it difficult to interview some residents who saw that period of time, as one volunteer noted, as “Katrina-free” time. And while I was often invited to birthday parties and holiday events, on several occasions I was asked to not talk about Katrina.

Frequently Henri would socialize in other neighborhoods, the Upper Ninth or the Marigny, rather than the Lower Ninth. It was difficult for him, as for others, to think about anything other than neighborhood problems when in the Lower Ninth. Lee, likewise, would sometimes ask me if I wanted to go fishing. Not to fish, but just to sit in the boat and “be free from the neighborhood”. While work was difficult to come by for many in the neighborhood, many expressed appreciation simply for somewhere else to go during the day. Sandi, for instance, noted how important it was that she worked outside of the neighborhood.

Weekends are hell. I mean I have a great view where I am. I look at the levee and don’t have to look at the rest of the neighborhood you know. I can’t imagine having to look out my window and see all this, this constant reminder of what we are going through, you know. But if I want to take a walk or bike ride, I can’t escape it. I feel trapped in here. Don’t get me wrong, it could be worse. I mean, I’m here, my house is rebuilt even if I don’t own it. But the weekends, it sneaks up on you. You’re having a good day, reading a good book, or waiting to go see friends, and then Katrina happens. [What do you mean?] Oh, you just come into contact with it here even when you don’t want it or expect to. Someone invites you over for coffee and you have to pass six houses that need to be fixed or a yard that hasn’t been cut, the grass hasn’t been cut in 3 years. Even needing to go to the grocery store you remind yourself, “Oh yeah, we don’t have that because of Katrina”. So I don’t mind work. Workdays are good.
Some members of the neighborhood associations or community groups used different emails (work and personal) or had different phone numbers. Dave, for instance, who worked with one of the community groups forgot to check his personal email for a meeting we had scheduled one day because, in his words, “he associated contact with me as being work related”. One serious miscue occurred early in my field work when I called Sandi’s work number on a Saturday to confirm our interview. When she did not respond I assumed she forgot and we would simply reschedule (as was actually the norm with most of the interviews). She called several minutes later exasperated and I rushed over. Quite furious with me for already encroaching on a day off, she later calmed down when she realized she gave me her work number because she associated talking with me about Katrina and the neighborhood as something associated with work and not her off time (and hence had not provided me with her home number). An officer in a neighborhood association suggested I call her by her middle name--as her friends do--when we were not in an association meeting, but if instead we happened to run into each other outside of the community. And many would “forget” meeting me at a neighborhood meeting when we were “re-introduced” at a potluck dinner or at someone’s home.

This switching allowed people to shift their attention to other projects, but it also allowed them to control their exposure to information about Katrina or the neighborhood. Switching prevented them from thinking about the uncertainty and confusion that marks the neighborhood and to connect to those things like work, friends or family, or other neighborhoods that held more certainty or were more stable. Unlike work in the neighborhood, which often lacked measurable signs of progress, working on other
projects offered the opportunity for closure or the satisfaction of making progress towards some identifiable end.

As a cognitive strategy connecting also had the advantage of offering perspectival distancing. Spending several weeks in the neighborhood at a time often made it difficult to perceive progress being made. Upon returning to the neighborhood, often after spending just a few days away, one noticed new houses being built or new infrastructure or a family that had seemingly just moved back. Volunteers who returned after several months would often exclaim that the neighborhood seemed entirely different to them. Roger, who was a first responder and then later helped out from time to time with one of the non-profits, lived and spent most of his time in Chicago, but was nonetheless often asked for his perspective on plans when he returned for a meeting or event. When asked how he avoided the insider/outsider dichotomization, I was told by someone familiar with his role in the organization that his distance from the neighborhood affairs gave him greater insight and made him less prejudicial towards one plan or another. Essentially his ability to re-connect to the neighborhood and Katrina gave him an advantage over others who could not. Because continually thinking about or working on problems stemming from Katrina was simply overwhelming, connecting offered an opportunity to renew one’s focus and energy. But people used connecting for different reasons.

1a. Economic Determination

Field Note October 24, 2010: *At Home Depot with a Melted Ic ee*

I spent most of the day on the floor at Home Depot. Tim and I went over to Mr. George’s hoping to put in some window sashes. We looked around for a few minutes and came to the conclusion that Mr. George had still not bought or scrounged up the wood we needed to build the sashes. As we were about to leave,
Mr. George popped in to tell us Home Depot was having a sale on lights and he wanted to know if we could give him a ride. It was after lunch and Friday and I could tell Tim wanted to be through and didn’t want to drive Mr. George around the Parish, but we agreed. Mr. George was appreciative. We went to Home Depot and Mr. George pretended to be overwhelmed at the selection of light fixtures. He asked if we would help him decide what to buy. I put down my Icee and started looking with him. Tim watched. In a series of selecting and choosing and discussing the merits of what seemed like the same exact set of fixtures for an hour, although I found dozens, but apparently never the right ones and never any that matched. Mr. George and I debated which two pairs matched the best and decided to go next door to Lowe’s. we found Tim who had wondered off and was reading a magazine about decks. Lowe’s had the same selection and the same problem—no four sets or at least not any under $20 matched. Mr. George wanted to pay around $80 for all the lights and that was going to be a problem. I again got down on the floor and reached far into the back of the shelves to pull out lights. Someone who worked there saw me crawling into the shelving and assured us that those were all the lights they had. We went back to Home Depot and spoke with some one who said the Home Depot up in the 7th Ward was going out of business and had lights. We asked if would call over there and see if they had a pair or two that matched the ones Mr. George had finally settled on. Tim gave me a quick sigh and wandered away again. After awhile the man came back and said no, but they a pair of these others, which began the process of matching sets again. Mr. George finally agreed to be drive in the morning over to the Home Depot across town to get two pairs to match what we ended up buying. On the way home Mr. George discussed plans on how to get there and whether we would want to eat breakfast over there or wait until we got back to the volunteer house. When we got back to his house he wanted to show us where the lights were going to go in the barber shop. The clock in the shop was at 5:20. Four hours had passed since we went looking for the wood sashes.

For Mr. George and many others connecting to Katrina was a financial necessity. The cognitive benefits it presented were mostly outweighed by the pace of rebuilding and the uncertainty as to whether or not they would ever finish. Mr. George and others often grew frustrated at the lack of progress and at times would give up rebuilding for several months. As discussed elsewhere much of the financial necessity was due to contractor fraud, problems with the Road Home Program (and to a lesser extent other grantors or aid organizations—which included providing homeowners with a fraction of the funds necessary to rebuild their homes), sporadic access to volunteer labor, and to a lesser extent the theft of building materials. Additionally, the Road Home Program and other
agencies began to selectively give the rebuild non-profits the homeowner’s funds directly rather than give them to the homeowners. This policy also forced many homeowners to queue or be pushed further back into the queue and thus caused them to wait to rebuild and then connect back to Katrina.

Most homeowners saw the financial forces causing them to connect to Katrina as punitive. A number of homeowners would say “that’s what they do us, because they can” or “this is how they treat us”. This was especially true after homeowners discovered funds being given directly to non-profits, whom they already saw as suspect because they were mainly staffed and run by outsiders; they thus believed that they were being forced to suffer egregiously through Katrina created poverty while others were economically benefitting. The fact that large sums of money had been allocated for projects, $90 million for schools, $10 million for grocery stores, $54 million for street repairs, but work had yet to commence on any of these projects added to their overall belief that money was at the root of their problem.

When you asked me if it’s someone’s fault I didn’t know what to say. That day, I’d said no. The next day, the day after that, and then the next, probably no. Today, yeah, almost 6 years later and I’m still waiting on checks to rebuild, hell yeah, it’s someone’s fault. (Erness, black female, 40s)

While most have been forced into connecting because of economic necessity, some have made it work for them. Roy, for instance, despite being given only nine thousand dollars to rebuild a single and a double shotgun, was able to have volunteers quickly rebuild his house (in exchange for tolerating the rebuild organization staging tools next to his house and across the street), and then had the double shotgun rebuilt (which he used for rental income). People like Roy or those who had other places to stay could therefore
connect with Katrina when it served their purpose or whenever they wanted. Several families had their homes rebuilt to the most minimal level of legal occupancy possible and then when they had money would seek out help to install carpet or paint or in some cases to finish electrical work or plumbing. This allowed them to avoid being in constant contact with the non-profits and let them work the system to their advantage.

I met Rob while helping to rewire his house. He and his family had been in their house for several months despite living with plywood floors, non-working electrical outlets in most rooms—which for some reason tripped an alarm every five minutes, and incomplete bathrooms. Rob noted the advantage, both cognitive and financial, of “occupying his home”.

We’s not really suppose to be here. You sees that. We got a cousin to get us a permit. That ways we ain’t got to keep two houses and no one stealing the wires and such. Also, I ain’t got to go to meetings no more. Yeah, you wouldn’t believe that, when we’s trying to get back they had meetings every day. Now if I need something done I might go to a meeting and ask for help or I’ll do something, you know, stop by the [volunteer] house. But now I can work, you know, at Home Depot and Celey works too. We just comes and goes and not worry abouts keeping up with everything. (black male, 30s)

Many homeowners who were able to move back into their homes, like Rob, stopped attending meetings because they felt that the information provided there was no longer beneficial for them and that it kept them from having to continually think about Katrina. Others would connect with the community organizations when they needed help. Mr. Vitrac noted explicitly that he tried to avoid meetings as much as possible and “do his own thing” whenever he could because of the emotional drain of having to listen to problems. Mr. Vitrac had purchased most of a block, nine houses in all, a small four-plex--where he had grown up, and a two-plex apartment. Mr. Vitrac and his sister, who were rebuilding the houses, would attend community meetings for weeks at a time and
then be absent from the community. They both lived and worked elsewhere and only
came to the neighborhood when they could work on one of the houses. Mr. Vitrac told
me that he knew of several people in the neighborhood who were cautious about using all
of their savings to rebuild, so they would only use a little at a time and it seemed this was
the plan he had adopted.

I try not to spend too much money rebuilding. That’s why I use the volunteer
labor whenever I can. It takes longer, contractors would already be done, be
finished, but it saves a lot of money. I’ll go to work in the city, then stop by here
for a few days, then I’m gone again. (white male, 40s)

Mr. Vitrac had a lot invested in the neighborhood, but minimized his connection to the
neighborhood by using volunteer labor. For Mr. Vitrac reconnecting to Katrina was a
voluntary strategy. He reduced his exposure to the problems associated with Katrina, but
benefited where he could. It was also a financial strategy. He would work on one house
and then sell it and use that money to begin work on another (often moving up the non-
profits’ queues by donating a small amount of money).

Other residents would buy the wrong materials and tell the volunteers to come back.
Some would do so explicitly. Laurent’s strategy perplexed many and delayed the
rebuilding of his house by weeks at a time. Despite wanting to finish his home so that his
family could move back from Dallas, Laurent would deliberately buy the wrong size
boards or nails. If we sent Laurent for 2x12’s we would come back with 2x8’s because
that was what was on sale at the lumber yard. If we send him for a particular size door we
knew he would come back with something that would not fit in the door jamb. Using this
strategy Laurent believed he could save money by making purchases at the lumber yard
when he had money and could keep volunteers from going to work elsewhere. This
allowed Laurent the ability to “quit” Katrina for a few days and then seamlessly reconnect when he had returned the wrong product.

Desiree also used finances as a way to connect, but in quite the opposite way as most. Desiree had come into a bit of money, her daughter was rumored to have won a lottery, so she would make changes to the design of her house or after seeing something rebuilt on the cheap would come across an expensive, salvaged door and want to replace it with what had already been installed. At times Desiree would tell me she felt bad about making the changes because she knew we could be elsewhere helping others, but that she liked having us around.

Several of the residents who used connecting as a strategy did so because they felt uncomfortable with the progress in the neighborhood and wanted the condition of the homes to mirror that of their friends and family. While some residents, like Lee who started the chapter by explaining how he avoided certain streets, refused to travel into those spaces that remained unfinished (or more likely untouched) or to simply not “see” those empty spaces in the neighborhood or blight or crime when describing their community, others explained that they felt guilty for having their home rebuilt while others were still struggling to rebuild. They felt cognitive dissonance at achieving some degree of order when so much disorder remained. A few, like Desiree and Mike, sold already rebuilt homes and bought dilapidated structures to rebuild—not to make a profit or “flip”, but to connect back to the rebuilding process.

1b. “This My Lower Ninth Family, My Real Family Down I-10”

Family obligations were the final reason many people using connecting as a strategy. One of the untold tragedies of Katrina has been the separation of families. Many women and
children stayed in Houston, Dallas, Memphis, and Atlanta, while husbands returned to the Lower Ninth to rebuild their homes. William moved back to rebuild his home in 2009 to surprise his wife. They planned to adopt three children when the house was finished, but as of 2011 the house was still unfinished and his wife was still living in Atlanta. When asked if it was hard to live like that, William quickly replied that life is hard in general. Likewise, Laurent had hoped to move back to the Lower Ninth and squat in his abandoned home while his wife and children remained in Dallas. His plan was to rebuild one side of his double shotgun and rent it out while he worked on the other. When both were finished he would move his family back to the neighborhood and open a new business (they had used the home for a day care before Katrina). Laurent spent half a year cozying up to the non-profits and passively harassing them to help them rebuild his home. Because he was an able bodied middle-aged man, he was a low priority and placed at the bottom of the queue (he also lacked money to donate to the non-profits). But after several months, and with a lull in rebuilding, he managed to convince several volunteers to start work on his house. Laurent would work for a few weeks and then feel the need to see his family in Dallas. He would return more depressed than when he left. Laurent’s family did not necessarily want to move back to the Lower Ninth. His children had since finished high school and were now in college. His wife had a better job. He was tired. In addition to squatting in a home with no electricity and a leaky roof, he had to convince his wife to let him stay in the Lower Ninth and to possibly give up a better life in Texas for what was left of her neighborhood. Like many others, Laurent both enjoyed and lamented his time away.

In Dallas this stuff just don’t exist. Whereas when I’m here, Dallas is here too. I can’t escape Dallas. But I go there and I don’t have to worry about
the roof and Darren is trying to rebuild the porch and the back room when
I said no. I mean I have to keep on you guys, you know, calling and stuff,
and then you get on the phone and tell me what’s going on and I want to
come back, but for the most part I don’t have to worry. It is a nice break
from all this Katrina crap, you know man. I feel refreshed when I get back
into the City. I get me something to eat and then I’m ready to deal with
you guys. I’m just kidding, but you know how it is. (black male, 40s)

Others repeatedly told me that it was stressful to have to reconnect to the neighborhood;
that each time they had to drive back into the city from “somewhere normal” it was like
reliving Katrina all over again. “You get over that bridge and you just see all this and you
go through it again”, explained Rick. Connecting made life a bit easier, but it was not
without its perils.

In between working on his house, Laurent would drive his van to other work sites or
hang out at other non-profits to see if they would help with something else. Then he
would stay at his house for a week or so before trying again. On one of those weeks I
showed up with some dinner to see if he wanted to talk. He was surprised and in some
way upset to see me despite that we had become close during the Christmas holidays.

L.H.: Well, I wouldn’t have talked if you hadn’t showed up with some
BBQ. This is my week off from you guys.

D.H.: I know. I thought it would be a good time, since we’re not working
on the house. It’s less hectic...

L.H.: That’s true. I don’t have to fight with you guys while you try and
take over my house. But maybe we can do the interview next week. We
can talk one day after work. I just don’t want to talk about that stuff today.
I’ve been on the phone all day with my wife and I’d just rather talk about
something else than this place.

For Laurent connecting was both structural (family and economic) and cognitive (time
not to think about Katrina). It also provided cognitive offloading for Laurent.
The strategy of connecting allowed many to offload their worries and problems onto others. The non-profits and community groups that helped out would shoulder the mental burden of having to think through the problems associated with rebuilding. They worked on obtaining grants or dealing with the Road Home or worked on permit applications for the homeowners, so that homeowners could worry about family members or work.

Through cognitive offloading many residents could also focus on “getting right”--a common phrase in the neighborhood and not worry about bureaucracies or petty problems in the neighborhood. Residents would often stop by the volunteer house to see how their affairs were being managed. Other would check in at a work site to see the progress on their house.

Overall, connecting was used by residents as a strategy to reduce the mental work associated with understanding Katrina and living in the neighborhood, but it was also forced on people. Hence, it was both voluntary and involuntary. It allowed for, but also came about from shifts in attention. Connecting required people keep one foot in the neighborhood and one foot elsewhere. It allowed people a cognitive break from the problems of living and rebuilding in the neighborhood, but required that at some point they step back into the thick of things. This allowed people the perspectival distance to look at the neighborhood in a new light, even if it meant seeing something they didn’t like.

1c. Making Sense of Katrina By Connecting it to Other Phenomena

According to many academics Hurricane Katrina necessitated a paradigm change in the social sciences (c.f. Brunsma, Overfelt, Picou, 2007). The disaster sent reverberations through fields such as: race and ethnicity, poverty and inequality, gender, urban and
environmental studies, social justice, and trauma studies to name just a few. The Social Science Research Council’s “Hurricane Katrina Research Bibliography”—a list of books, articles, and chapters compiled by Kai Erikson and Lori Peek, which was last updated in October, 2010, stood at ninety pages. For academics Katrina was an exceptional disaster because of the number of people affected, the death and destruction the storm caused, and for the unique insight into social aspects of life that are usually obscured in everyday life. As a result Katrina has been framed as a break down in civil society (Dynes and Rodriguez, 2006), as a militarized event (Tierney and Bevc, 2006), as a racialized event (Dyson, 2006; Marable, 2010; Jackson, 2011), as a toxic event (Godsil, Huang, and Solomon, 2009), urban spectacle (Gotham, 2007), and as disaster capitalism (Klein, 2007; Gunewardena and Schuller, 2008; Adams et al. 2009). For residents of New Orleans’ marginalized communities that are still mired in social disruption, such as the Lower Ninth Ward, however, Katrina has become primarily understood in two different and often competing narratives: as one of the most portentous examples of climate change or as paradigmatic case of neoliberalism.

1c-i Katrina as a Climate Event

Understanding Katrina and the aftermath as a climate event was often used to reduce or diffuse, at least to some extent, the culpability of particular groups or institutions. No one, after all, can safeguard the entire planet, nor, according to this group, can we expect that things like Katrina won’t happen to us.

When you think about it, it’s really no one’s fault. I mean, who could have predicted something the size of that [Katrina] would hit us. It just overwhelmed everything. It’s not like we weren’t prepared or anything. It was, [it] just overtook everything. Pumps stopped working and the levees just couldn’t hold back that much water. We’re talking about a once in a
lifetime storm. I mean, it was massive. How do you respond to something like that? (William, white male 50s).

Katrina as a climate event mitigated fault and reduced blame. If, as William, believed, no one is to blame, then there really is nothing that could have been done to prevent Katrina, and perhaps more importantly, the social disruption caused by the secondary violences are due to the exceptionalism of Katrina. As another community stakeholder, claimed, “no other community has had to deal with what we’ve had to”. Residents like William saw Katrina as a one off. You cannot prepare for or anticipate the unthinkable. If there was no “blueprint for something like this…we just make it up as we go along”, as one resident told a group of volunteers, then missteps by the Corps or by the government could likewise be explained or forgiven.

Residents who saw Katrina as an inevitable event in an era of annual hundred year events believed we are all to blame for the environmental conditions that caused Katrina or that we should simply have known better.

We do live in a swamp, what was a swamp. We shouldn’t really be here, not a large neighborhood anyway...not for lots of people. I don’t know what people expected, but I kind of figured if something happened it would be bad. We did all this stuff to the land here, really everywhere, when you think about it. It’s payback. Look what we’ve done. (Orenetta, black female, 40s).

The planet changed and we should have, but didn’t realize it. Anybody that grew up here in the Lower Ninth can tell you that the Bayou use to be full of fish, crabs, those cypress trees, we had everything here, lemons, oranges, you could grow anything you wanted. Now we don’t have any of that, or at least not much. Look at the Bayou. It’s dead. People from here should have known better...seen it coming. It’s on us. (Douglass, black male, 60s)

Douglass, using a saying that is popular in the neighborhood, “that’s on us” or alternatively, “that’s on them”, signified in a rather curt way who was responsible for
what, believed, as many ecologists have noted, that the loss of the wetlands were responsible, in large part, for the flooding of the neighborhood. The loss of the cypress trees and other ecological changes were visible to anyone who visited the neighborhood. Because of these changing conditions Douglass and others saw the aftermath of Katrina as something that could have been partially avoided had people simply paid attention.

Terri also echoed the idea of “that’s on us” to make sense of Katrina.

Look we got to do something, this is a first step. People don’t care about the environment, so we have to. They’ve destroyed our community for fifty years, with the Industrial Canal, and the pollution, and stuff. That’s what’s caused this mess. That’s why they don’t want us to rebuild, they want to use it as a dump, it’s toxic. That way they don’t have to pay off anybody who gets sick. We just go our own way, move out and in twenty years we all find out we got cancer. We have to do this ourselves. But in a way we can’t because this is huge, a huge problem. But we have to do something. If we learned anything from Katrina, I know this sounds bad, but we, at least us here in the Ninth, learned we’ve got to do a better job taking care of the planet. (Terri, black female, 30s)

Others, rather than seeing Katrina as “something they should have seen coming” or a product of history, as a teleological event in our centuries long disregard for the environment, saw the aftermath as part of a greening narrative. Here Katrina is an opportunity to make up for past environmental degradation. Those who have understood the aftermath of Katrina in this way have focused on rebuilding a sustainable community. This has involved the restoration of the wetlands, focusing on issues like food justice, and the building of homes to both safeguard against and in preparation for future climate events. These actions fit well with the current narrative of the community being the “greenest” in the US.

I mean who knows who is to blame. I wouldn’t say anyone is to blame. I mean, people could have done a better job responding, but you have to understand that this was, I mean this was a difficult situation, right after the storm. What we are doing here now, and I hate the phrase, but we are
trying to make it right. We weren’t very smart before, but we are now. We know we have to rebuild in a particular way, a way, that this all, all that we are doing makes sense for the environment. And we are doing a good job. We’ve got a lot of houses that use solar for energy and lot of these homes, you know this, [have] been rebuilt with reused materials and we’ve reused a lot. A lot of stuff that others would have just thrown away, you know, just bulldozed, we stopped and collected and reused it.

(Clement, white male, 50s)

A few, perhaps aware of or because others made sense of Katrina by placing it in a neoliberal context, directly contrasted the environmental aspects of Katrina against those of governmental failure or abandonment.

Some people say this all happened because we’re black or we’re poor. This happened because our planet is changing, changing for the worse, everyday just getting much worse. You don’t have to read the paper everyday to know something weird is happening. Some places are getting record drought one year and record water the next. Nagin and Bush didn’t do this, to this neighborhood. No one said “let’s get them people living there”. No one cares about us that much [laughs]. I know people who think that, like George Bush or someone pushed over the levees. Like he was the one who dynamited it. Maybe I shouldn’t say things like that. I don’t know. But this is happening everywhere, all over the place. We just got ours, that’s all. People better get use to this...this is going to get worse.

(Dauphine, black female, 50s)

In a neighborhood that had been completely flooded twice in forty years, that is heavily polluted, and in particular places used as a dumping ground, it was somewhat shocking that some could believe the worst was still to come.

Others, however, interpreted the ongoing disruption as part of a different kind of crises. As the original plan for the neighborhood was to turn it into green space, some residents, in particular those who do not support the greening of the neighborhood, believe that the aftermath of Katrina is best understood as an agreement on the part of neighborhood stakeholders with the city to become more green. For this group, Katrina is interpreted as a climate event by others, so that they may environmentally hijack the
recovery. Some who believe this are still in the process of rebuilding their homes, they have not received the assistance they need to rebuild, and as such have missed out on things like free solar panels or weatherizing or sustainable building materials. These people resent the Make It Right houses and efforts to build and sell sustainable homes in the neighborhood. They see environmentalists as preventing, or at least slowing down, their recovery. They have been left out of the green narrative. Many blame the government for what happened, and perhaps more importantly, for what has not happened.

1c-ii. Katrina as a Neoliberal Event

In her book on disaster capitalism, Klein (2007) used post-Katrina New Orleans as a recurring example. She showed how in the immediate aftermath of Katrina market mechanisms came to supplant social welfare policies. This included the privatization of government (the replacing of public infrastructure with contract infrastructure, the most obvious of which included the replacement of public education with charter schools), and the detainment, incarceration, and ultimately the permanent displacement of the poor. Extending Klein’s analysis, Adams, Hattum, and English (2009) have shown how disaster capitalism has become a way of life in New Orleans. They noted that the personal effects of the disaster and the socioeconomic and political conditions combined to create what they called a “chronic disaster syndrome”. While they focused mainly on the displacement of the most marginalized New Orleanians, they also found that the failed recovery efforts continued to “authorize violence by way of its inhumane erasures and interventions” (2009: 630). This was a neoliberal project that in New Orleans “underfund[ed] community rebuilding efforts, and [alloeds for] an evisceration of the role
of government in providing public security” (681). This project was similar to what Wacquant (2009) has described as “punishing the poor” and at times resembled what Bougouis and Schonenberg (2010) have referred to as “lumpen abuse”.

The ongoing failure to rebuild and restore New Orleans allowed for and justified the existence of a post-normal society. This idea of a post-normal society was exactly how many residents of the Lower Ninth Ward described their neighborhood.

Look at this place. Ain’t no one suppose to live like this. It looks like dying here [long pause]. I call the police, but they say they can’t do nothing. You call the city and they say they working on it. Ain’t nobody doing nothing. We got houses, that one right there, ain’t no one touched it since the storm. We can’t get people back if they don’t want them to come back. This ain’t normal, living like this. We living like animals back here. (Grace, black female, 80s)

The lot in front of Grace’s house had grass over eight foot tall. There were 12 houses on her block, but only three were occupied. She rarely ventured away from her street and was hesitant to allow neighbors into her home, behaviors that were in sharp contrast to her pre-Katrina patterns of walking through the community and welcoming strangers to sit on the porch and talk. Listing in the doorway she said, “if something happens to me, ain’t nobody gonna know, police don’t care”. Others complained of response times. Calls concerning the theft of building materials had become so commonplace over the last couple of years that police no longer responded. In November of 2011 a local news crew found close to a dozen bullet casings hours after police had responded and allegedly collected all of the evidence at the scene.4 Residents viewed this lack of concern with the neighborhood as evidence of social abandonment. They used it to impugn local officials, but also to frame their dissatisfaction with elected officials at all levels.

4 Of the two drive-bys I witnessed police were called but never bothered to respond.
Proponents of using neoliberalism to make sense of Katrina have the history of the neighborhood and the abysmal failure to safeguard it to point to. The abandonment and broken promises referenced in the above photograph have plagued the community for decades. In many ways then the neoliberal frame was easier to understand than an environmental frame. How can Katrina portend a more calamitous climate event, if what is happening to the neighborhood in the aftermath is more or less a continuation of a pre-Katrina narrative? Residents have long felt the vulnerability of their neighborhood. The increasing vulnerability (that the community might not make it back) was in many minds a logical extension of the previous neglect that Katrina simply expedited.

The abandonment, or as Sanyika (2009) termed it, “Katrina cleansing”, was meted to those communities who couldn’t survive on their own. In a sense, residents had to prove that they were a viable community before they would be given aid. In the real sense, what counted of course were individuals and individual responsibility. Johnson, for example, noted that the more celebrated rebuilding efforts came to represent “a landscape of neoliberal urbanism” that made recovery measurable on an individual basis, determined by market forces, and ultimately, “prioritize(d) the aesthetics of community over democratic, metropolitan planning” (2011: xl). More than anything else, residents will tell you that rebuilding has reinforced a notion of autonomy; a separation from the rest of society.

They [other neighborhoods] didn’t suffer this kind of damage. Yeah, they back. They back because they were allowed to go back. We ain’t been allowed to get back. This community is a total rebuild. It’s a game really. They tell us, well if you get x number of people back, then, well, will give you a school or maybe a Wal-Mart. But we all know that’s crap. People ain’t going to come back, you know, unless that shit is already here man. You ain’t going to move into a community without a school or a grocery
or a, you know, whatever, are you? No, no one is. So here we is. We on our own. (Horace, black male, 50s)

Chalmette gets a Wal-Mart and we don’t. That don’t make no sense. They used our numbers to get one. Counted us as part of them. We can’t do that? No. We can’t have a Wal-Mart because we don’t have enough people living here. Why can’t we use their numbers or count people in Treme or the Upper Ninth? Then we’d have enough. And it ain’t about Wal-Mart. It’s about not having anything of our own. It’s about not wanting people here. (Lisette, black female, 40s)

While climate change and neoliberalism were the two dominant frames used to make sense of Katrina and the federal levee failures, there was much variation within those frames, and one might note, the implications for dealing with related issues. Likewise, others made sense of Katrina in other ways. For some Katrina revealed a failed social contract with the state, some saw it as a problem of economic development, while others saw Katrina as part of the “new normal”. What these varied interpretations revealed, however, was a state of perpetual uncertainty and the need to connect Katrina and the ongoing disruption to a larger phenomenon.

2. Chunking

As discussed in chapter one there is almost always a bias for action in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. In the aftermath of 9-11 and similar events there was an urge to not just sit around, but to do something; people donated blood, they called friends, they flew flags, went to church, and of course they also bought guns and looked for people to retaliate against. Likewise, in New Orleans people rushed to the city with boats, they donated money and cell phones, many of those who were there went looking for others to rescue. Rarely in the aftermath of a disaster do people seize up out of fear or panic; they act in a calm and concerted manner. This bias to act often extends from the first few days
to become a long-term strategy. Because disasters can seem overwhelming, however, *we have a tendency to separate those things that are immediately doable or need to be done from those that are less manageable*. In studies of businesses, Peters and Waterman found that when faced with problems successful managers engaged in what they called “chunking” (1982). *Chunking involves breaking down larger problems into smaller, simpler units*. As Wuthnow (2010) noted, this process is extremely similar to “terror management” which enables activity rather than withdrawal. Terror management theory involves a cognitive mapping of the world where *order is valued over chaos and ritual over impulsive behavior or anxiety* (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon, 1986; Lienard and Boyer, 2006). Here, despite that the world may be literally falling apart people look to build continuity and for familiarity for assurance that the world can be put back together. They use their established cultural worldview to provide relief from uncertainty and disorder (Rutjens, et al., 2009).

Lab studies of terror management have shown that thoughts of death or reminders of one’s mortality drives people to view their lives and actions as meaningful (Landau et. al, 2011). We tend to use mental shortcuts, schemas of how the world works, to deal with peril. In particular, in a number of studies, Landau et al. (2011) found that exposure to concepts related to death or danger was associated with giving more attention to the reason and function of mundane, everyday actions rather than viewing them as meaningless sequences of behaviors. Preparing breakfast or making the bed, for example, is imbued with meaning and is done so in a familiar way to achieve continuity with the pre-peril past. Schimel et al. (1999), for example, found that reminders of mortality or peril lead to a dislike for stereotype-inconsistent behavior and that people are quicker to
process information confirming stereotypes when faced with threats to their mortality. Likewise, in a number of studies on mortality salience on political preferences, Kosloff et al. (2010) found that respondents preferred candidates who espoused values matching the individual’s political orientation rather than those who were simply charismatic or likable. Taken together, both Landau, Schimel, and Kosloff’s work suggests that when faced with disruption we prefer to stay on the same mental track.

And while terror management results in simplistic representations of the way the world works, this cognitive simplifying portends that it is important for establishing and moving towards some goal after a disaster.

In part, as illustrated above, this process is hardwired. Psychologists, long ago discovered in laboratory conditions that when we are placed in stressful situations and are asked to group items, we search for the lowest common denominator. We search for the simplest way to combine elements to prevent mental fatigue. It is something we automatically do, but it is also social and is heavily determined by language and culture.

Zerubavel, for instance, argues that one of the ways we cut up the social world is by creating “mental chunks” (1997). For sociologists chunking is not an individual phenomenon, it is a social convention. Think, for example, of the way we handled diverse threats in the US for close to ten years. Despite no objective criteria, we essentially chunked them into color-coded categories representing different levels of peril. Or think of common idioms such as “a drop in the bucket”, “take one day at a time”, and “first things first” that express this preference for chunking. Most of all chunking is simply a way to process information and to deal with the outside world. It is a way to keep people
cognitively anchored and on task and it creates structure and order when it is needed most.

I use the concept of chunking then in two ways. The first is more akin to what people who study disasters would call chunking. It is the same type we see in studies of business managers or lab studies of terror management and morality salience. *This form of chunking simply shows people cutting up the post-disaster social world into doable parts.* Chunking here becomes a way of putting one foot in front of the other; a way of making it through the day. The second is perhaps more similar to what cognitive sociologists would look for in studies of boundary creation. *Here chunking is way to minimize or simply separate social phenomena into different categories.* At times this is also done to make things doable, but it is first and foremost a sense making activity. It is a way to regain familiarity or certainty in places like the Lower Ninth Ward where unfamiliarity and uncertainty reign. Both forms are indicative, however, of cognitive simplifying. That is, the taking of a complex world and rendering it more understandable.

2a. “We do one room at a time.”

The clearest strategy of chunking that helped people get through the ordeal of living in the aftermath of Katrina was in gutting houses and rebuilding. While emotionally traumatic, gutting or demoing houses often provided some closure. As one resident said it “gave us something to do, it kept us sane”. In fact, a number of residents explained that the six to nine month wait they endured to begin gutting their homes was the most agonizing time in their lives.

While it might seem commonsensical to gut a house by going from room to room, there are actually other ways that are as logical. It would, for example, make more sense
to remove the heaviest or largest items first or perhaps in a lesson I quickly learned, the
most toxic items. The handful of individuals I watched gut or helped gut their homes,
however, went from room to room, salvaging what they could, then removing items and
sheetrock. What’s more the progress was calculated. Homes were rarely gutted in a linear
manner, from one room to the next, but in a way suggestive of which rooms were of most
importance (i.e. bedrooms first and bathrooms last). Obviously when there were several
volunteers working on a house they would fan out and attack multiple rooms at a time.
Such a strategy represented the best use of time sensitive manual labor--you never knew
if you would have volunteer help the next day or the following week. But within the
groups themselves the volunteers would typically take responsibility for a single room.
Even when there were only a handful of volunteers they would take responsibility for one
room or work on one room at a time. The only exception was when new volunteers were
faced with the task of gutting a house. In this event the volunteers would often take
sledge hammers to a wall, say in the kitchen, for a few minutes, and then proceed to a
bedroom or bathroom. After spending a few minutes working on the second room they
might go back to the original room or a new room. This behavior suggested a cognitive
overload. Volunteers were overwhelmed at the task at hand and had not developed a
strategy to deal with their emotions or come to terms with what had happened in the
space. Interestingly, even these volunteers, after a few hours, would end up working in a
single room until all of the drywall had been knocked down and all of the nails pulled
from the studs. Residents, however, always went room to room.

Rebuilding and recovery involved chunking at both the micro and macro levels. At
the micro level residents rebuilt homes, typically using the strategy outlined above—
focusing on one room at a time. Unlike those who use connecting as a strategy who were forced to leave the rebuilding process for periods of time, many of those chunking simply saw their homes as individualized and separate spatial compartments. They proceeded to rebuild at a snail’s pace. Many volunteers, for instance, grew frustrated with Thomas. Thomas’s home was an easy rebuild. It was a small house, approximately 850 square feet. But he did not want anyone to work on the house unless he was present. The house had been gutted and despite having all of his grant money available, he wanted to proceed room by room. When a new crew of volunteers showed up he would lead them through an orientation and let them know that “we do one room at a time”. In this way he could exert control over the process and achieve some consistency in how he imagined the process.

Chunking was used as a strategy by Thomas and others mainly for cognitive consistency (Kruglanski and Freund, 1983). Cognitive consistency is valued for its adaptive role in the regulation of uncertainty when decisive action and control are needed most (c.f. Sorrentino & Short, 1986; Swann, 1987; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994); it is a way to maintain the logic of one’s thought or way of thinking. Because the rebuilding and recovery phase proceeded at a torpid pace, particularly in the beginning, many residents years later still measured their progress with the early stages of resilience. Rebuilding a room at a time gave them the satisfaction that progress was being made without committing them to finishing their homes. The moving on process here involved having a consistent framework by which to measure one’s self.

David for instance realized early on that the rebuilding money given to him by the Road Home Program would not be sufficient for rebuilding his house—not by half. Sitting on the back of his truck one day eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches he
confided that he had thought about getting a job to pay for the materials and for contractors, but that employment seemed like a distraction. He said he couldn’t explain it, but he had to finish the house before he looked for work. According to David, he “just want[ed] to get back. If I got back in the house, then I didn’t need to worry about anything else, never again. Nothing else mattered. It [everything else] would take care of itself. I wouldn’t have to think about it [Katrina] anymore.” As David kicked at the dirt below the truck it was obvious that he had thought about the reasons he couldn’t look for work. He could not use connecting as a strategy because cognitively it required too much work. For David chunking simplified his life. His plan was house, employment, new truck, vacation. I asked him what he would do if someone gave him a new truck today or if he had an opportunity to take a vacation this week. He shook his head. “I wouldn’t take it, neither of it. It mess up the plan.”

David was not alone. Andrew wanted his roof finished. When he arrived on site one day and found volunteers working on a bathroom he became enraged, ordering everyone out of the house. Not understanding the cognitive need to finish the roof before beginning work on other parts of the house, the administrators at the non-profit wouldn’t allow volunteers to return to Andrew’s house for almost a month. For others it was finishing a room or a particular project. Some argued with various non-profits’ rebuild strategies and stressed how working on multiple houses or projects at a time seemed to waste resources or time. Their preference was to finish one house at a time.

Houses seemed to be the metric to gauge moving on. At the Holy Cross Community Association’s biweekly meetings the church bell at Little Zion was rung several times to signify the return of a homeowner to the community. At one meeting when the bell was
rung prematurely, the homeowner was still living elsewhere as they waited for power to be restored, attendees looked forlorn after the meeting—as a ritual had been ruined. Another time the President of the association defended his hesitancy to ring the bell by asserting that they were not “technically” back in their home just yet. These patterns reflect a cognitive consistency at the level of the community. When taking a break one afternoon in front of a house an older man out for a walk asked if we were finished with the house that had been under construction for over two years. My reply, which was in the affirmative, but subsequently qualified, in that we still needed to remove the painting tape from the closets and install a few shelves and poles for hanging clothes. It was met with a quick retort—“well then, you’re not finished, are you”.

Several residents remarked that they did not know what they would do when they finished rebuilding. For them rebuilding their homes and participating in the rebuilding of their community had become the main barometer of their wellbeing. Mr. Bell, who had lived in the Lower Ninth all sixty-seven years of his life, had waited three years to finish his house. Although he was constantly working on some small project or another and had been living in his house for two years, he said it wouldn’t be finished until he installed burglar bars on the windows. Then, in his words, “he could rest”. Despite the house being finished he could not gain cognitive completion. Even eight months after we first met he was still mulling over paying for new bars or waiting until a friend came across some at a junk store or resale shop. For many finishing the house was very emotional. It meant that they would be forced to move on and in some way that making sense of Katrina would be finished. A field note provides another example.

Field Note October 29, 2010: Doorbell or Sewage
Working at Ms. Miler’s house still. Darren came up to me and said he had promised the neighbors that while we worked on the house we could do a few small projects for them. And that by we he meant me. He pointed to the house on the corner of Dengiby and Charbonnet and told me the lady who lived there was having a couple of problems. The pipe connecting her waste water to the sewage was disconnected. It had been leaking for 3 1/2 years and was causing the house to sink on that side. I looked at Darren incredulously and said I don’t really think I would know which pipe to fix, I haven’t had much experience with plumbing. He laughed and said he was sure I’d figure out which pipe it was once I was under the house. He said the elderly lady, whom he called, momma--as he did all the elderly women, also had a broken doorbell and that this was particularly aggravating because she couldn’t hear people knock on her door so she missed a lot of packages and visitors. I smiled and told ‘D’ I would start with the doorbell. After a few hours I figured out that the only problem with the doorbell was that the wires were misconnected at the chime box. About that time ‘D’ came inside and asked how I was making out. He jumped in to help and before long the bell chimed. He happily rang it 4-5 times and said that’s us--which he always says when we fix something. I heard deep sobbing coming from the kitchen and looked over. Ms. Bridges was holding on to the counter. She came over with her hand in front of her face and mouthed thank you several times. She steadied herself against the wall and said she had waited 3 1/2 years to hear that sound. Then she looked off into the living room, with a forlorn look, and said, only half-jokingly, I don’t know what I’ll do now. As if complaining or worrying about the doorbell had occupied most of her time which was suddenly freed. To which ‘D’ replied, he still gotta fix the sewage. Ms. Bridges smiled again.

Mrs. Bridges had chunked all of her problems onto her doorbell. It came to represent everything that had gone wrong with rebuilding, both her house and the community.

Despite suffering from massive contractor fraud, subpar contracting work that had caused the house to noticeably shift, and a host of other problems, the doorbell not working had become the last thing to do, the last thing to consider in regards to Katrina. For her the sewage now represented the unfulfilled promise of the doorbell.

Moreover many were oblivious to the pace at which they were proceeding with rebuilding their homes. Because they were proceeding one step at a time they often forgot how many steps they had already taken. They would correct themselves in conversations regarding how long they had been working on their home, what year they came back, or
even how long it had been since the disaster. They were so focused on the immediate present that the past was difficult to account for.

Yeah, I figured, honestly you know when I saw this place, when we got back, yeah, I knew it would take a few years, but it’s been three years, so I figured we’d further along than this. It was bad, but not that bad, like Betsy, ummm, yeah, or Camille. Did I say three years? Wow, I meant five. (Corinna, white female, 40s)

Well, no I knew it would take awhile to get back, at least to the level it was before the storm. This was a good neighborhood before and we lost a lot of families. Now, I didn’t think it would take me that long to rebuild my house. I didn’t foresee the problems with the insurance company or all these hassles with the city. Who could have. So no, I don’t think, I didn’t think we’d be having this conversation next to an unfinished house, that it would take me two years, three years, has it been three years? Wow, it’s 2010 right, so yeah, three years to rebuild this house. (Peter, white male, 40s)

Others simply did not want to talk about the past. Creating small, manageable steps in a linear progression, meant not talking about Katrina or reflecting on yesterday. While I discuss several of these strategies at avoiding the past (and hence avoiding interviews) in the Appendix, a few are worth briefly mentioning here for their relation to chunking.

A handful of potential interview subjects were forthcoming regarding their reluctance in talking about the aftermath of Katrina. One resident, who knew me for several months before I asked for a formal interview, readily agreed to talk, but then canceled on five different occasions. Unlike other residents who canceled, many of whom I would only see sporadically, I saw Kelly at least once a week and we occasionally worked together on community projects. At a community meeting she asked if I still wanted to talk. I told her I would, but having become familiar with the reticence of people to talk and the strategy of multiple cancellations, I told her it was up to her. Reluctantly she agreed. She began the interview by letting me know she was sorry for canceling so many times, but that she did not really want to talk to me. She admired what I was doing and noted the
need to write about the ongoing disruption, but she herself wanted to move on and for her that involved not talking about the past six years. Likewise, a few subjects were partially hostile during the interview. Gabe, for instance, noted on several occasions during our interview that he did not really want to talk about the past, but that he would because someone in his church had asked him to do the interview. He noted that the past was a blur and answering questions forced him to fill in the details. It was too painful to do. Others also spoke of blurry pasts. By chunking the present was more manageable, it was not as bad as it otherwise could be made to be. Also, a handful of interviews were spread out. The experience of reliving the past or talking about the ongoing disruption was too emotional to be done at one time or people felt more comfortable simply breaking the interview up into “doable parts”. Here the interview itself was chunked. Dominick made a game out of it as we began to have what he called his “weekly session”. While this strategy filled other cognitive functions, it also allowed him to tell his story on his own timeline.

2b. Fuzzy Futures

While identity creation always involves some form of chunking, the future identity of the neighborhood was imperceptible to those who chunked. Chunking simply did not allow them to clearly consider what the neighborhood would look like in 5-10 years. The future, much like the past, was blurry because time had been broken into irregular pieces, with the present occupying most of their temporal space and the past and future banished to negligible amounts of space. Here uncertainty and confusion dominant and plans and possibilities were in a permanent state of abeyance because the present itself remained.
Consider the following residents statements in response to a query about what the neighborhood would be like in five to ten years:

I don’t know what the future will be like. I suppose kinda bad, mo’, less like now. [Will it get better or worse] Who knows? You just don’t know. I guess it’ll look a lot like it does now. (Derrick, black male, 50s)

In 5-10 years? I mean, I just don’t know. I guess there will be more people living here. Maybe we will have a grocery store. In 5 years it might just be like it is now. In 10 I would expect something different. I don’t know what that is, but I guess, I think, I mean I would hope it would be different. (Joanne, white female, 60s)

No clue. No idea. How could I know? You know, I wish I had a crystal ball, but I don’t even think it does any good to think about it. It would just be frustrating. Like if you knew it was just going to be the same. What would that do for you? I don’t like to worry about that. (Theresa, white female, 50s)

Even those who were optimistic about the future couldn’t tell you why they were hopeful or what might bring about a better future.

It will get better, not perfect, ok, let’s not kid ourselves. This is what it is. We living in New Orleans, this is the Ninth Ward, the Lower Ninth. It will be better than it was. Better than before Katrina. But I can’t tell you how. I don’t know how it will get that way. I don’t know what it will look like. It’s hard you know. (Mike, black male, 40s)

In 5 or 10 years, it will be much better. [Why?] I guess we will have more houses, more people living here, but I don’t know. They needs to be the right people, not like that other that we had here before. But I don’t know how you get the right people, not the drug and the gangs, people like that. We don’t need that, those people here again. If we get a good school that might just do it. I bet it would. (Debbie, black female, 20s)

Mike and Debbie’s answers were illustrative of many residents who had either mentally separated or saw a need to separate the past and the future. In some ways they realized that their past and future was inexorably linked and they would often go back and forth between the two in their explanations of what the future of the neighborhood might look like, but most hoped they could avoid their past. In this way they chunked their
neighborhood into different units of time. They were simultaneously working in the present to make both the past and the future more manageable, but often without a clear picture of what either was. While Debbie spoke of the pre-Katrina gangs and crime, many of those who engaged in chunking wouldn’t recall why the past was bad or why what made it bad should be avoided in the future. Here chunking limited their ability to perceive anything except for the present.

While I discuss various temporal strategies below on blending, in general chunking required a lot of cognitive work to separate the past and future. And while not talking about the past or maintaining a fuzzy future was one way to create time, in particular, to make the present more manageable, others resorted to other strategies.

For some the future was rather myopic. Because of the uncertainty they choose to focus on temporal paths immediately ahead of them, often for just the next few months.

Well in a few months we got that court decision on the barge and I’m pretty hopeful about that. I think that will change the neighborhood, get more work started. People need someone to blame and it would get us more money, all those families on the levee, they’d get money to rebuild. (Patricia, black female, 40s)

I think if we can get another hundred or so families back by 2012 then we will make it. Right now we at a tipping point. It could go either way, really it could. I think in a few months we will know. (Mel, black male, 50s)

The resident who mentioned the possibility of the company who owned the barge which crashed through the levee, in what became an internationally recognizable photograph, was not able to elaborate on how those families would rebuild with Brad Pitt’s Make It Right project already occupying that particular space. As with others, so much hope was placed on the future, the certitude that things had to get better, that there was very little clarity on what steps were required to make things better or how the future might have to compete with the present (or past). As Mische (2009) has noted in her work on
projectivity, people may become so focused on the distant future that the short-term is often glossed over. Because so much cognitive work was required for making sense of the present, the future—even a fuzzy one—simply remained unthinkable.

When I mentioned to a president of one of the neighborhood associations how overwhelming the rebuilding process seemed, he put his arm on my shoulder and said, “You just do what you can, man, don’t worry about any thing else, just do what you can do today.” In her work on climate denial Norgaard (2011) finds that one way of mentally dealing with the uncertainty and confusion surrounding environmental peril and the fragility of our environment is by focusing on something you can do. This is what many residents were still trying to do five years after Katrina. Putting one foot in front of the other was simply the easiest thing to do.

From a cognitive economy perspective chunking makes sense as there are cognitive limitations on our ability to process information. Chunking makes even more sense perhaps in periods of extreme disruption when information and order are in flux. When peril is no longer the focus of our attention, but remains distal and highly accessible, what Wegner and Smart (1997) called “deep activation”, the mechanisms we use to defend of our worldview increases (Landau, 2011). Chunking is a cognitive strategy that is best understood as a form of cognitive simplifying. People have a strong need to organize large, seemingly unwieldy amounts of information into simplified cognitive models (Kahneman, Slovic, and Tverskey, 1982; Neuberg, Judice, and West, 1990). Chunking allowed people facing peril to deal with uncertainty by taking steps toward simple and familiar ways of organizing their social world. As Simon (1957) noted, cognitive simplification is a type of bounded-rationality. In situations of bounded-rationality,
cognitive biases and simplification dominate. The cognitive maps people make represent simple illustrations of us versus them and reveal the islands of meaning they create to process their social world. And while chunking and cognitive simplifying represent the predominant strategy, there are novel cognitive strategies that residents use to make sense of Katrina.

3. Immersing

While immersing was rare, there are many limitations to it—cognitive, psychological, financial, and spatial to name a few, it was perhaps the most interesting way residents were trying to make sense of Katrina. In immersing residents threw themselves into what I call risk projects. These projects represented ways to reduce the risk of the neighborhood—either to a natural disaster or as being discounted as a legitimate neighborhood. Those who used immersing devoted all of their time and energy to solving particular social problems. They also spent considerable time and effort to try and convince others that this particular problem was the lynch pin to getting their community back and to join them in their work. These projects varied considerably and a few will be discussed below, but they consisted of: creating tourist sites in the community, creating community centers, building gardens--both for food justice and sociability, creating and running non-profits, building bike shops, running farmers’ markets, restoring ecological sites, and rebuilding houses.

Immersion was a totalizing strategy. It was in many ways the opposite of connecting. Residents who immersed never took a break. When Ms. Forstall left the neighborhood one afternoon to accept an award at a banquet Uptown, everyone joked that she was on
vacation. Those who choose immersion as a strategy did so 24/7. It also differed from chunking in that the handful of those who immersed usually (though not always—there were one or two exceptions) worked on multiple projects—often more than one could count.

Immersing was one of the more obvious strategies, once identified, but because there is a limit to how many people can operate a risk project in any given community, there were only ten to fifteen residents who used immersing as a cognitive strategy at any particular time. Moreover, establishing relationships with people who engaged in immersing proved to be difficult not only because of their attempts to incorporate people into their projects, but also because of their immersion they had little time for anything else. Interviewing or talking with them was often only feasible by working on their risk project or in discussing their risk project ad nauseam. Below are a series of field notes from my first several encounters with Mack, whom I later discuss in-depth as the paradigmatic case of immersing.

Field Note October 23, 2010: Cigarettes and Flowers

I called Mac and he asked if I could come over and talk. I went to the Village and he wasn’t there. There were a lot of kids cleaning up, cutting grass, etc. I sat and waited for Mac. After forty minutes or so Smitty came up and told me Mac was down the street. I walked a few blocks and saw Mac talking to a couple of high school students from the Northeast who were working on a community garden for him. He stood there smoking a cigarette, proudly watching them. We spoke for about thirty minutes and then walked with the girls back to the Village. Once there Mac asked if I would sit and watch the “reflection”. Afterwards Mac and I sat outside and talked for another hour or so. He said he wanted to collaborate on some project, but didn’t go into any details and we agreed to talk more.

Fieldnote November 13, 2010: Solitaire at the Village

Went over to Mac’s to talk about our collaboration. He had some administrative thing to take care of and asked me sit for a second with him in his office. Not sure
what he was doing. He talked on the phone for about thirty minutes with his brother and played solitaire on the computer. I stared at the blueprints of the Village that someone did on Autocad or some program like that. Bizarre. The Village looks nothing like the blueprints. You would have to dynamite it and rebuild it. The blueprints had mainly white people in what appeared to be a campus cafe talking and drinking coffee and people reading books, relaxing. The entire thing was surrounded by lush landscaping, which contrasts with the two abandoned shipping containers and the dilapidated houses that are outside our window. After that someone working at the center came in and Mac talked to both of us about his vision for the center for about two hours. We agreed to meet again to talk about our collaboration.

Fieldnote December 17, 2010: The Vision...Again

At Mac’s for four hours. He again talked about his vision for the center. I sat and listened to him talk to another group of students--from Berkeley I believe--and then he and I talked about the importance of them returning home with ‘the story’ and telling others. I figured that this is Mack’s next fundraising venture. I thought it was smart. Nothing about the collaboration.

Fieldnote January 24, 2011: Giant Steps at the Village

At Mac’s for three hours. Went there to talk about the collaboration and ended up walking around with Mac looking at all of the work taking place. The group building the levee protection system is tiling the entry way and sheetrocking the hall. It is really impressive. The entry way looks very professional, which of course contrasts with the rest of the place. But Mac is happy. Sat in the office listening to him talk with Jeff-of-all-trades about some other projects and who owes them money. He walked some woman from BC to her car and Mac and her spoke for about an hour. We then went back inside and talked for another thirty minutes about how hungry we all were. Mack said he couldn’t remember why he wanted me to come over, but wanted to know if I could help with some work tomorrow.

Ward “Mack” McClendon was immediately easy to admire. He had a way about him that was both accessible, despite (or perhaps because of) being busy he would sit and talk to anyone for hours, and charismatic, you want to listen to him to talk for hours. He had a good story to tell, but he was also extremely knowledgeable about the ongoing disruption. I had met Mack on a few occasions and heard him speak, he made sure that he was heard at all of the community meetings, but at one particular meeting his plea for his
community was so eloquent (and historically accurate in terms of racial oppression and urban marginalization) that afterward I re-introduced myself to him. We spoke for a few minutes and he said I should come by the Village--which I took as an offer to talk more and which I realized a few months later was an invitation to work with him full-time at the Village, but in any event marked the beginning of me dropping by the Village, often for hours at a time, for several months.

The Village came about because Mack was looking for a workspace to rebuild antique cars--a hobby of his before Katrina. In the aftermath, looking for, in his words, a way to distract himself, he purchased a large building and quickly realized that it could become much more than a place to work on old cars. Mack spent a good deal of his time talking with volunteers. The “reflection” that he did with all tour groups was a way to inoculate them to social apathy. He would introduce them to the ongoing disruption and abandonment and then ask them what it means, how do they make sense of it, what have they learned. He then asked that they go home and tell people what they learned and try and teach others. But much of his time was spent working on the Village--both in the metaphorical sense of the Village as in the Lower Ninth Ward and in the physical sense of the brick and mortar building.

The field notes above represent his preoccupation with the day-to-day goings-on of the Village. As of 2012 Mack’s home remained unfinished. In the seven to eight months I spent with Mack I never heard him mention his home once. Visitors and volunteers were surprised to learn that he doesn’t live at the Village, which for all intensive purposes he

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5 As an example, one day Mack had more volunteers than he could provide tools for. Rather than scramble to borrow tools from another non-profit, he turned it into a teaching moment. At the end of the day he asked how it felt to want to do work, but not have the tools or ability to do it. The students/volunteers explained that it was very frustrating. Mack explained that was the way every single person in the community had felt every single day for the last couple of years.
actually does. Furthermore, the Village served as more than simply a community center. At various times the Village was an after school center where kids could play basketball or work on a computer, it was a job training center, a community garden or a place to learn about gardening, a place for piano restoration, a library, a farmer’s market, it offered volunteer housing (up to 83 volunteers), had an apartment for rent, hosted an open mic night, it was a great place to watch Saints’ games, and was the epicenter for a program called “Where’s Your Neighbor?”--an attempt to document and locate all members of the Katrina Diaspora. And Mack was always looking for ways to extend the mission of the Village.

Where chunking is a cognitive strategy to make things doable and to simplify, immersing is the opposite. To be sure, Mack immerses himself in the Village and all things Katrina to make sense of Katrina and to restore his ontological security, but in doing so complicates rather than simplifies. He avoids cognitive simplicity. Furthermore, in multitasking he makes sure that nothing ever comes to completion. The Village itself was a work-in-progress. Five years after beginning work on it, it remained unfinished. Mack’s motivation was to avoid closure.

Our need for closure reflects our desire to find an answer or solution to a pressing concern. Often we “seize” upon any particular solution to reduce confusion and ambiguity (Kruglanski, 1990). Individuals with a high need for closure tend to prefer order and predictability and are typically close-minded (Neurberg, 1997). They prefer mental rigidity and avoid situations (and people) that require them to be mentally flexible. Others, however, when faced with peril resort to cognitive tasks that prolong their attachment to the future (c.f. Kruglanski, 1989). In their work on how we deal with
peril, Landau et al. (2004) found that one way individuals decrease their anxiety
regarding errors in making decisions or in strategy is to not commit to any particular
future, but rather to continue considerations of alternative plans for action. And for these
people when plans of action are chosen they tend to involve complex cognitive solutions
(Van Hiel and Mervielde, 2003).

People who tended to engage in immersing had little difficulty in coping with change.
In fact, many welcomed the change that accompanied Katrina and spoke of it as an
awakening. In his work on personal discovery, DeGloma (2010) noted how social
awakenings took on a particular logic and form. Despite very different problems,
DeGloma’s awakeners and their “awakening narratives” (2010: 519) were quite similar.
As he wrote, “When individuals tell such stories, they describe ‘‘seeing the light’’ or
‘‘waking up,’’ at once knowing that their prior beliefs and perceptions were ‘‘false’’ and
‘‘deluded’’ while their current understanding is ‘‘true’’ and ‘‘enlightened.’” (2010: 519).
Mack, for instance, would tell volunteers the story of being “blinded” by individual
pursuits before Katrina and “not seeing” the value of community. He would tell people,
“it took Katrina to open my eyes”. The stories of those who immerse have similar arcs.
Katrina has given their lives new meaning.

Jayla, who ran a non-profit, and was very active in the community, was a software
programmer in New York before Katrina. She grew up in the Lower Ninth Ward and had
recently bought property there, which she assumed she would use for vacations or
perhaps retirement. Immediately after the Hurricane she moved, believing she had “found
something more important to do with [her] life”. Like Mack she believed she was waiting
for something to happen and she used this opportunity to create more meaning in her life.
Tom, who became active in the community post-Katrina, explained that before he felt as though he had “blinders” on and that dealing with the ongoing social disruption had given him a “path towards purpose”.

Likewise, Ms. Forstall, who helped run a local non-profit and was very active in one of the neighborhood associations, worked in a similar capacity before Katrina, but said this job (at the non-profit) was more meaningful because it was work for her community, not an organization. “I get to stay here in the neighborhood pretty much twenty four/seven and that means everything I do goes to help my friends and family, the people I care about. It’s a good feeling to know that everything I do is for a good cause.”

A handful of studies have shown that under ontological threats people take the opportunity to examine the meaning of their life (McGregor, 2004; McGregor et al. 2001). In some of these studies uncertainty and reminders of constant peril led to higher scores on identity-seeking scales linked to searches for meaning. Threats cause us to seek out our identity and to pursue that identity with extreme focus. McGregor et al. (2001) call this “compensatory conviction”. Major social disruptions like Katrina require that people put their lives into perspective. Those who immersed spoke of “getting my house in order to” and often did so with extreme conviction and would take on new risks or were open to novel avenues or paths for finding meaning. McGregor and Jordan (2007) noted that in response to threats people develop extreme zeal for their passions and projects.

While most of those who used immersion as a strategy switched careers, some simply approached their jobs with renewed vigor or interest. Darren, whose story I began the introduction with, was more or less a handyman or jack-of-all-trades before Katrina, but
was now more focused. People who knew Darren well would say that he changed after Katrina. He worked everyday, rebuilding houses with what Mack says is an extra spring in his step. And while he avoided more formal means of participating in the community, such as neighborhood meetings, because he was always working he remained an ever present fixture in the community. When you ask Darren why he doesn’t take an afternoon off, he would reply that he doesn’t get a break or a vacation because there are important things to do here. But the list of things to do never ends. Darren didn’t so much multitask as simply try to do everything for everybody all the time. The two excerpts from field notes below captures this day-to-day activity.

Field Note May 9, 2010: *Mother’s Day at Desiree’s House*

Went to Desiree’s house for Mother’s Day. Lots of people there, not really sure who was who. Talked with a couple of guys grilling. One may have been the same guy from the crawfish boil. Other than that kind of surprised that the handful of volunteers and the residents/family kept to themselves. There was some intermingling but not as much as I would have figured. Darren went back and forth between both groups and yet somehow kept his distance from both. He found a ladder and tried to do work on Desiree’s snowcone truck. Everyone else is have a drink or anxiously watching the pit and Darren’s trying to fix the gutter strip on the truck. He went back and forth getting in his truck and leaving to find tools, pulling up in his truck and parking it much closer to where everyone was sitting than it had been before; basically letting everyone know he was working. When he realized he didn’t have the right tools he decided to go inside the truck and start serving snowcones and snacks. I had to take a few pics, it was too funny. Afterward he grabbed a broom and swept the house. He wanted to paint a bit, but Desiree wouldn’t let him so he just sat on the back porch of the unfinished house while everyone else ate. I tried to bring him a plate, but he said he wasn’t hungry. I think he was upset that he couldn’t do more work around the house. He just kind of sat there and pouted for awhile and then went and pretended do some work on his truck.

Field Note: Dec 10, 2010 “Here take this sawzall and see what you can cut”

At Laurent’s house today. Took awhile to get started. Someone pulled up and talked to Darren about a new project. I tried to listen in to see if it might be a possible source for an interview. Darren left to look at the house while we
continued to unload tools. When he returned he told me he had to go to a different site because Summner or someone had found a gap in a floor we did a few months back. I started to move the jacks around—the house still groans and creeks. I was under there when Darren returned and as soon as he was under the house checking the jacks someone else pulled up to talk to Darren. He tapped me on the shoe and asked if I would go cut this man’s hedges. I almost laughed, but said sure. I asked if we had any hedge trimmers back at the house and he handed me the sawzall and then I did laugh. I think the guy was Rev. Duplessis who when I explained my research invited me to church (see separate field note on “Duplessis’ house and hedging”). When I got back to Laurent’s Darren was gone. I looked at my watch and it was only 9:30, it was going to be a long day. Christoff said someone had stopped and asked if Darren could come over and help estimate how much wood they would need to build a porch. I smiled at Christoff and asked him if he knew what we’d be doing next week and he laughed and said we’d be building a porch somewhere.

I use the field notes above to try and demonstrate Darren’s immersion in the rebuilding process. He was the only resident who worked with lowernine.org. And while other residents worked with and comprised other community groups, he was the only one rebuilding everyday and he was the only one who worked with the organization that didn’t take a day off. In the thirteen months I worked with him, once, one Saturday he told me he wasn’t working; he was turning his cell phone off and wasn’t coming out of his house. At two that day I passed by a resident’s house hoping the resident would be outside working so I could do an interview and there was Darren working on the roof. He had taken a half of a day off.

Darren would go straight from a funeral to work. While everyone else was changing clothes he’d just put a jacket on or change shirts in route and get back under a house. Darren like Mack had not rebuilt his home. He was squatting in a trailer across the street from the volunteer house. On cold nights he would stay at his father’s house. Although he was working on qualifying for an apartment from the Housing Authority-New Orleans I thought it odd that he had rebuilt 40 something houses and worked on a hundred more,
but didn’t have one of his own. When I asked how come he didn’t just grab a piece of
something he knew no one would come back and claim and rebuild it for himself he said
he was just too busy.

3a. Self-Esteem Projects and For Others

Landau et al. (2004) explain that terror is partly managed through efforts to maintain
one’s self-esteem (see also, Baumeister, 1982; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Solomon,
1999; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, and Schimel, 2004). Ongoing terror or
the constant threat of peril can cause individuals to try to boost their self-esteem by
making and maintaining favorable impressions on others (Steele, Spencer, and Lynch,
1993). This can be done by appearing knowledgeable or intelligent or by trying to repair
their integrity to enhance their self-worth (Landau et al., 2004; McGregor et al. 2001;
Pyszczynski et al. 2004). Threats to these domains can involve avoidance of closure
(Landau et al. 2004). People can take on projects that simultaneously make them appear
intelligent or that simply enhance their self-worth. As Rudman et al. (2007) noted, people
are able to recover from a threat in one domain by stressing their success or efforts in
another domain. These compensatory cognitions are a way that those who engage in
immersing deal with the disruption of Katrina; they channel problems in one domain
(family, work, etc.) into a completely different area to maintain self-esteem and self-
worth. Steele (1988) calls this the “fluid compensation” principle. As Heine et al. (2006)
note, fluid compensation is most observable in feelings of uncertainty and in situations
where individuals are reminded of peril.

In part then those who immerse are trying to enhance their self-worth by creating
large, complex projects, often in areas unfamiliar to them. But they simultaneously work
to create self-esteem for others as well. Jayla, mentioned above, is probably the best example. She went from working with computers to working with compost to feel better about herself, but also for her daughter.

J.M. I used to work in computer animation, that was my professional background at Blue Sky and so...now I’m not doing that all [Laughs] complete 180 and this -- ... So now I’m developing a nonprofit around a community building through urban agriculture and also have a business – another business that I’m developing, a for profit business Raw Vegan Personal Catering. So – umm, yeah so I knew, you know, just the kind of person that I am. I don’t know what I’d be doing but I think Katrina presented an opportunity for me to push my life in a direction that it’s, you know, that it needed to be and, you know, I was working in computer animation which was fun but it wasn’t my life work. That was not what I wanted to be known for when I die, you know. I was going to – I wanted to let myself gravitate to what I was passionate about you know, and what I wanted to...how I wanted to be a contribution and so [laughs] I found this [laughs] and I started organizing people to clean it up and you know, we formed the garden committee, we started planting, we celebrated Mrs. Ernst’s birthday here who is the garden’s name sake. We you know had different groups come here – so we just you know, it developed like that and I just started seeing, umm, for me like the community garden is more about the community than gardening.

D.H. Do you like what you do?

J.M. I struggle with that; sometimes I think it’s good of – well, my job, my job is to be the best role model you know, for my daughter that I can be so I think it’s really important for her to see that instead of running away from something that’s problematic, that you know, I stick with it and I’d come up with the solution and I’d start to make change.

The Ernst Garden is perhaps a hundred and fifty square feet. Next to it is a small, perhaps two to three hundred square foot cottage. The cottage serves as a tool repository and lending library. This is Jayla’s domain. Jayla had other gardens in the neighborhood and other projects. She frequently led cleanup crews and volunteered for other community related projects. Often, however, few members of the community helped out with her project. She told me one day when we were working at another garden that it created self-esteem issues for her; she felt that her work might not be worth it, worth the sacrifices she
has made. And yet her work provided her with an opportunity to give lectures to and lead volunteer groups. She was known in the community as the “food person” and the “gardener”. She would give updates on community gardening at the local neighborhood association’s biweekly meeting. Her gardening thus allowed her to appear knowledgeable and yet also concerned for the welfare of others.

Jayla spoke of Mack as a role model for others. She thought that Mack who went from being, in his words, a thug to community leader, as the most positive story of the neighborhood. Likewise, Mack spoke of Darren’s job as being a role model for young people, both those who visited, but also the kids in the neighborhood. I asked Mack one afternoon if he thought of himself as a role model.

No. I don’t think of that in that way. I mean, I know people in the neighborhood see me that way, but that ain’t me; that’s not why I do it. Me and the word role model should not appear in the same sentence (laughs). You work with the role model. What Darren does, he doesn’t have to do that. He could be making real money rebuilding houses or even, he could just ask to work by himself. That guy can do whatever he wants to. Darren does what he does because he is a teacher. He gets much, at least as much, enjoyment out of showing volunteers how to do stuff as he does doing it.

Mack essentially pegged Darren. Darren’s best days were when new groups of volunteers who were staying for a week or so showed up. He took on longer term projects, such as myself, but he knew if he had a week with someone he could teach them a skill. His worst days were when something happened that made him appear less knowledgeable, such as when a homeowner or volunteer challenged the way he was doing something. Whereas someone else might consider the suggestion or try and explain why they were doing the task in that particular way, Darren would often blow up or walk away. He simply could not handle challenges to his self-esteem. To bolster his self-esteem he would often take people through a step-by-step explanation of how he was going to solve
a problem and afterward a step-by-step explanation of how he did it. Intricate parts he
fixed on tools or ways of bypassing bureaucracy or homeowners’ dilemmas would result
in long re-enactments at the end of the day.

Others tried immersing at various times, but were less successful. Immersing, to some
degree, necessitated having collaborators or the recognition by others that you were
knowledgeable. If others didn’t recognize your ideas as having merit, then immersing
became unpractical. Immersing necessitated social recognition. A number of people I
interviewed whom I thought of as “ordinary” folks from the neighborhood told me of
previous attempts to immerse that had gone awry. Julie, whom I met at a neighborhood
meeting, looked disheveled and upset, but had spoken so eloquently in opposition
towards a plan supported by the rest of the members that I wanted to speak with her.

After a few minutes of small talk, she agreed to an interview the following weekend. On
the day I was to interview her I arrived a few minutes early and called to make sure she
still wanted to talk. She said she was not home, but would be home in thirty minutes, so I
waited in my car outside her house. Ten minutes later she called and said she was there.
Assuming she had overslept, I went on with what turned out to be a very interesting 150
minute long interview. After the interview I realized why she needed the extra ten
minutes as she began to remove several props staged around her. There was a photo of
her with President Obama at the White House. An award from the City for being the
business woman of the year. She wanted to offer proof of her success as a businesses
woman and community leader. The final prop was a thirty-slide power point presentation
of the non-profit/for profit business she wanted to build in the neighborhood. She said
that she had been successful as a business woman, but just couldn’t do it anymore, not
after Katrina. To compensate she had developed this tourist site that she wanted to hand over to the community. Julie said, “I did it for them (the community), but I did it for myself too. I needed this.” Other members of the community, board members of the various associations, thought her proposal was too radical to work. But she took pride and solace in the fact that it was quite different than anything else being done at the time. “No one else came up with anything like it. I don’t think anyone else could have, because of my background and stuff, the things I told you about being, about getting a contract from the NFL for the Superbowl and, my whole family is entrepreneurs. So I’m thinking outside the box. They just don’t understand because they in the box. I just need to educate them.” Julie spoke of her former successes, but also modified each one by explaining how they ended. She thought she may have broke even on her contract with the NFL--she explained that she lacked the acumen to negotiate with them, and despite her identity as a successful business woman--that they took advantage of her because she was “just a girl”. Another time she was simply not cognizant of particular City codes for the restaurant in which she was a major partner. Other business ventures had met with similar ends. After Katrina she was channeling her problems in the business world into the domains of non-profit and community work.

Mack also regularly spoke of his goal. His Village was not just for residents of the Lower Ninth Ward, it was a model for people all over the world. “This is a blueprint for the future”, he would say. Mack definitely worked hard for his neighbors. He regularly put in 16-18 hour days at the Village. But he also worked hard for himself. Mack, who wasn’t thought well of in the community before Katrina, has now become a symbol of resilience and rebirth. Mack presided over his recollections with great gusto. He regularly
gave talks; he was a panelist for community issues for meetings outside of the neighborhood; he had been interviewed by Anderson Cooper and by the BBC; he has given lectures at local colleges; he went on a small speaking tour in the Northeast at several colleges and universities; and, he has been featured on the Moth and NPR. He enjoyed being, in his words, “a player--a community player”.

Field Note February 9, 2011: *Mack and the Mayor*

Saw a flyer for a park clean up hosted by the Village on Saturday. We’re already committed to another project that day at the same time, so I went to Mack’s to tell him I couldn’t make it. He let me stammer on for awhile and then smiled and told me he just got off the phone with the Mayor. He said the Mayor was upset that he hadn’t been included on the cleanup, said Mack was making him look bad. So they agreed to reschedule it on a day when the Mayor could make it, maybe in two weeks. I thought it was a major inconvenience, they supposedly were going to have a band play and a crawfish boil while the park was being cleaned. But Mack was happy. He said, “Mayor can’t do nothing without Mack”. He saw it as an affirmation of what he was doing, both the cleanup, but also everything else. “Now you can do both things”, he said, and winked as I left.

In typical Mack style the event was to be a park cleanup, a block party, and a demonstration to local drug dealers that the community was taking back the park. As far as I know the cleanup never occurred. But that wasn’t really the point of the cleanup to begin with.

Most of my encounters with Mack, as with others who immersed, are in the form of field notes. Those who immersed simply did not have time to be bothered with interviews unless it was going to be on television or have an immediate impact. The “project” Mack wanted to work on me with, that never went above being a prelude to a conversation, was a documentary about the Village. Immersing for Mack, and the others, was a way to feel better about one’s self, but also to demonstrate some effective change for the community. Self-esteem projects can, and often do have, derivative benefits.
3b. Sunk Costs and Anti-Social Tendencies

The threat of peril is often countered with more extreme convictions. Those who engaged in immersing, more so than others, were often unwilling to change strategies to meet future goals. The future was so uncertain that the specifics of their present course did not matter, as long as they could reasonably believe that the present was meaningful. Julie, whom I spoke of above, had yet to adopt a replacement strategy for her failed immersion. She was simply waiting for the opportunity to immerse again. She believed that waiting was a small price to pay for the opportunity that was sure to come some day. Darren had no plans for the day when the non-profit that was his main source of income ceased operating, but saw his work indefinitely continuing on in some capacity. Others who ran non-profits spoke of the increasing amount of uncertainty in their life because of the tenuous nature of funding. And yet with increasing uncertainty those who immersed became more committed to their immersion and risk projects. They increasingly cut ties with the outside world and doubled down on their day-to-day course of action—they escalated their commitments to their risk projects.

In an experimental study of escalation commitment, Yen and Lin (2012) found that in two different imaginary scenarios, one where they asked participants to send additional troops into battle when previous attempts had failed and a second where they asked participants to continue developing military technology when the enemy had already developed the technology to detect it, participants who were reminded of their mortality were more likely to send troops or continue development. This is often referred to as “entrapment” (Brockner & Rubin, 1985) or in economics as “sunk cost effects” (Arkes & Blumer, 1985). We tend to downplay the future likelihood of being unsuccessful
because we focus on previous investments. When reminded of death or disruption we give very little cognitive weight to the exact details of the future. Yen and Lin’s particular contribution is that they link these cognitive heuristics to situations where people are forced to think of perilous conditions or death. They concluded that a need to reduce the uncertainty that others feel under threat of peril resulted in them (those who give little weight to the future) disallowing information that negated previous positive assessments and that then increased self-esteem and self-justification, such as the belief that past work would result in something meaningful. Their findings fit well with the findings of Jonas, Greenberg, and Frey (2003) that threats of mortality increase our need for cognitive consistency.

When immersing revealed itself to be a poor strategy or where the risk project was increasingly proving to be untenable, admissions of culpability or failure would have had a negative impact on one’s self image and hence were avoided. Mack, Darren, Jayla, Aaron, and the others went to great lengths to justify their original decisions, often refusing to admit that they had committed hastily to a plan that had not been thought out. They refused to believe they had made mistakes. For Darren this meant ignoring homeowners who believed he had strayed from the agreed upon work or ignoring fellow crew leaders or administrators who advised against taking on particular projects. In those instances Darren typically doubled-down on the project. Laurent’s story, which I began with is illustrative, but hardly a week passed where Darren was not questioned on decisions to work on particular properties. Aaron, who ran a gardening non-profit that paid kids from the neighborhood to work in agricultural production and simultaneously demanded that they take classes at the “school” where they gardened, refused to believe
he had made a mistake by refusing to ask for the community’s blessing before starting his non-profit. Two years after he began his work, at a neighborhood meeting, he sent two representatives who apologized for “getting off on the wrong foot” with the community and asked if there was anything they would like the non-profit to do. Despite some outrage at the tardiness of the outreach, some of it feigned as Aaron’s non-profit is one of the more successful in the neighborhood, a few outspoken members simply thanked the representatives for letting them know what the “school” was up to and invited them back. When I asked Aaron about the chilly reception at the community meeting and in the community in general and if it might be different had he integrated community stakeholders into some of his previous plans or decisions, he maintained that he had not made any errors regarding his assessment of the community.

A.M. No, it wouldn’t be different. I did everything I could for them. It’s not up to them and I don’t need them. You know. I’m not doing this for them, so I don’t care about them. I’m doing this for the kids and the kids don’t care, you know, that I didn’t ask for permission for this or that.

D.H. One resident was pretty adamant that you could only have gotten away with the School here in the Lower Ninth, that anyone else would have run you of town.

A.M. Yeah, I’ve been told that to my face. Some people were sore that we had farm animals here. Like they don’t know that this whole area, back-of-town here, use to be farm land and swamp. We got rid of the animals, but I’m thinking about getting more. The thing is I don’t care what those people think. I’d do it the same way again. This is working, so why should we change what we’re doing. I wouldn’t change anything for the people who complain. I’ve done something for this community that they couldn’t.

Aaron put one foot forward toward reconciliation with community stakeholders, towards rectifying the only visible mistake he had made in what was otherwise a win-win situation for the community, but then took two steps backward when the reconciliation
was rebuffed by a handful of residents. Any error on his part was re-interpreted as a successful strategy when others questioned what he was doing.

Ms. Luison similarly refused to acknowledge problems with her non-profit. While she was quick to point out problems in the neighborhood or problems with particular individuals, she held the efforts of her group in high regard. Despite charges from others that she profited handsomely from her position and that her non-profit was spread too thin to be effective, Ms. Luison would say “we going to keep doing what we’re doing”. At one meeting, sitting next to each other in a church pew, she blamed her problems on the non PROFITS and the residents. She noted that her organization was here long before most of the others (some of which are now better financed) and that the residents had grown apathetic with rebuilding. “I’m trying to help them, but you can’t help people who don’t want to be helped”, she told me. She viewed the residents as “lazy” and “uninformed” and suggested that they were impeding rebuilding. Neither Aaron or Ms. Luison enjoyed speaking for more than a couple of minutes. At the meetings they attended, which were rare, they would leave immediately after speaking. Over the course of several months my interactions with them were usually limited to a few minutes here and there. But they were not unique. Those who engaged in immersing, while extremely reliant on others for accomplishing their strategy, nonetheless separated themselves from others--in particular others who immersed.

McGregor et al. (2009) noted in a number of observations of neural patterns in experimentally manipulated conditions that simulated peril that activity in the brain emerged that mirrored antisocial defenses. Their subjects felt that their worldview was being threatened and alternated from being proud and trying to establish meaning to
defending their worldview against various threats. To be sure many of those who
immersed bounced back and forth between being highly social, interacting with
volunteers, glad handing possible donors, trying to befriend the media, and being
antisocial, blaming volunteers for the lack of success or progress, trying to sabotage the
efforts of other non-profits, refraining from any collaboration with other non-profits,
avoiding people where possible. Mack explained this behavior one day as we were both
confronted by Jalissa who although trying to immerse had been unsuccessful in
maintaining her immersion. Jalissa was upset that no one in the community took seriously
her efforts to decorate the levees with murals. She was upset with Mack who she felt did
not support her at community meetings and at me because she thought, as several people
did in the community, that I was a member of the media or had media connections and
had not helped publicize her work. After she left, Mack said I was lucky because that
kind of behavior was really common in the immediate aftermath, but that now it was
more isolated. He inferred that people in the neighborhood have always had a chip on
their shoulder and that they carried that chip for so long that even now, when some things
were going their way, they found new chips. He went on, “it’s different than just being
upset because your house isn’t fixed or because your community is still suffering, these
people are mad because the world doesn’t fit their image, they design they got in their
minds, you know. But it never did. But now some people are working towards that and
they, for whatever reason are not.” At times Mack lumped everyone who was typically
unhappy or disgruntled into the same camp, but at other times he differentiated between
those “normal” residents and those who were stymied in their attempts to be something
else or as Mack said, “someone” else.
Lori likewise often lashed out at volunteers and residents. Despite not being from the neighborhood, but being a first responder, she felt that the neighborhood was her home. Residents, however, often pointed out that she was not from the neighborhood and so as a defense she would belittle volunteers as she saw other residents sometimes do. She had adopted their view of outsiders without becoming an insider. But she also distanced herself from residents. Like Ms. Luison she would say “you can’t please these people” and that she was tired of “being everyone’s mom”. One afternoon, after being particularly critical of the staff and overtly hostile to one of the residents, she asked me what I had thought of the meeting with the resident, where I had been asked by her to sit in on because of my familiarity with the ongoing work at the resident’s house. When I told her that I thought it was a difficult situation she explained why she appeared to be anti-social most of the time.

L.M. You have to erect walls around yourself. Otherwise these people take advantage. They want all of your time, and it’s just too much man. You know. Like that guy, we shouldn’t even be working on his house. We are doing him a favor. He’s like number 300 on our list. And he complains?

D.H. Yeah, that’s true, I mean I’ve experienced that too. But Jeff [the resident] might not know that, I mean that he is number 300 or that we have to deal with a dozen or so other people everyday who want the same thing.

L.M. No, they all know. It’s just a game to them. You have to learn how to play that game, their game. So when I’m in the neighborhood I’m just that way. I automatically become defensive, on the self-defensive, when I drive over that bridge because I know everyone I meet is going to want something. So I kinda always have to be ready for that.

Lori believed that she became anti-social because her job demanded it and that it was part of the role she played in the neighborhood. Much like Goffman’s conceptual front stage
and back stage, Lori believed that she turned her anti-social behavior off and on depending on her social and physical location.

Lori and Mack in particular, because I spent much time around them, so much that both kidded I must be writing about them rather than the neighborhood, often felt the need to explain egregious instances of anti-social behavior. If I went to the Village and Mack’s office door was locked, he would usually let me know what was going on the following day. Lori would pull me aside sometimes and explain why she had been particularly hard on a resident or a crew leader. Because these risk projects are simultaneously, among other things, self-esteem projects, those in charge of them put everything they have, both psychologically and often materially, into them. Their failure, even bumps in the road, are interpreted as a personal failure, as an attack on them. They therefore cast all others as their attackers or tormentors and at times minimize their contact with them.

3c. Risk Entrepreneurs and Katrina Ambassadors as Trauma Carriers

In the Lower Ninth there was a hierarchy of risk, but that hierarchy was very subjective. Various risk projects were advocated by risk entrepreneurs. Risk entrepreneurs were usually identified with their particular non-profit or risk project. The two were often interchangeable. For example, people would use Mack’s name and the Village to mean the same thing. Going down to the Village or going to see Mack was the same thing. Residents would say, “the Village is doing this” or “you’d better check with the Village”. Even those who were not immersing, but still had a project were identified as “the lady with the murals” or “that women who wants to build a dock and soap factory”. Risk entrepreneurs spent their (and often the community’s) resources highlighting one
particular threat and trying to convince others that this threat was at the top of the hierarchy of trouble; other threats were hence not as problematic or not as likely to cause as much trouble for the community. These entrepreneurs shifted other community member’s assessment of trouble from one type to another.

I know you think rebuilding is the most important thing, you’ve been working on the blight project too, but we’ve got to figure out a way to get you working for me [laughter]. I can’t do this on my own. I know you’ve read about food deserts. If we don’t get more people to starting working on the food situation then it’s just going to go away. You’ve been helping out with the garden too, so I know you know what you are doing. Are you interested? I need you on my side. (Delores, black female, 30s)

While Delores’ comment was said partially in jest, other risk entrepreneurs were more adamant that others help or follow them. My work with a particular non-profit was often interpreted by those who immersed as me siding with or affiliating with that non-profit. Despite my appearance at their work sites and my work for other non-profits, some of the risk entrepreneurs remained very guarded and were hesitant to speak with me. They viewed volunteers, particularly long-term volunteers, as resources and the competition for that resource was a zero-sum game. Hence part of their job was to convince long term volunteers (and in particular those who moved to New Orleans as a result of volunteering) to switch their allegiance. They spent most of their time however, jockeying for attention and respect within the community, but also in trying to convince the community to see the neighborhood as they did.

Risk entrepreneurs had a particular way of seeing the world and their neighborhood. They were in many ways similar to DeGloma’s (2009, 2011) “trauma carriers”. DeGloma noted that various survivors of trauma or advocates or even organizations engaged in significant cognitive and identity work to define and identify the causes and
consequences of trauma. Quoting from Alexander (2004: 11) who wrote that trauma carriers, “have both ideal and material interests, they are situated in particular places in the social structure, and they have particular discursive talents for articulating their claims – for what might be called ‘meaning making’ – in the public sphere”, DeGloma noted that the trauma carrier saw their job as carrying on the trauma for others. The job of the trauma carrier in the Lower Ninth was to interpret the trauma and make sense of it for others, particularly volunteers and visitors. They contextualized the trauma narrative into a larger story about the community and race relations or poverty. The story that Mack revealed in his reflections and wanted volunteers to take back to their community was his trauma narrative. He allowed for some individual differences depending on who was present, but his desire to expand the trauma and suffering of Katrina beyond the neighborhood and New Orleans was apparent when he instructed the volunteers to tell others about their experiences.

While Katrina Ambassadors were similar to risk entrepreneurs, particularly in their visibility, the main difference between the two is that risk entrepreneurs have a particular project while Ambassadors sometimes lacked a project and focused instead on the general trauma of Katrina. Katrina ambassadors were more likely to note how their trauma was similar to others or were more likely to put the trauma into a larger narrative. They nonetheless immersed themselves into the narrative of the community in way that it became their job.

I met Raimond Galvez during the meetings for the planning of the 5th anniversary of Katrina. He was planning his own commemoration and wanted to both help out with the larger community event and be as forthcoming as possible about his own. As much of the
conversation regarding the commemoration had been concerned with others’ plans, it seemed like a wise strategy. Raimond, however, was far more organized than the rest of the members of the planning committee. He had brochures; a book had been made for his 4th anniversary commemoration; he had detailed plans for when the parade would begin, a time sequence of what would happen after the parade, a list of food to be served—he even had phone numbers and estimates for caterers. We had nothing, or at least it seemed that way. The book Raimond brought with him, made by someone in London, was quickly passed around the table and soon made its way to me. The front cover was picture of Raimond holding two photos. One was a picture of one of his granddaughters and the other a picture of his mother. Raimond would later tell me that they floated off in Katrina’s floodwaters. They were on the roof of Raimond’s house, holding on to each other, and a torrent of water washed them away.

Whenever Raimond told the story he did so matter-of-factly; “They didn’t know how to swim” he’d say. When I handed my business card to Raimond he put in it a binder with thousands of others. Looking up at his wall there were pictures of him shaking hands with President Carter, Brad Pitt, and Danny Glover—for whom he is a dead ringer. He laughed when looking at the pictures when I asked if anyone has ever told him he looks like Brad Pitt. He didn’t offer to show me around the house. He was tired, and had been sleeping off the effects of a pork sandwich. At times he gestured to other rooms or details in the room we were sitting in. I don’t know what to ask that he hasn’t been asked before. He had done more Katrina interviews than I ever would. He repeated to me again, matter-of-factly, that I could ask him anything I wanted. Did I want to talk about death, he asked? Instead we talked about differences in the North and South, about Raimond
playing football at college in Minnesota, about his public speaking, about fried chicken, and growing up poor. Raimond was an accountant. Raimond liked being under-estimated. Raimond could swim. These were all facts about Raimond Galvez. More intangible was that in order to make sense of Katrina Raimond had become a spokesperson for his neighborhood. He didn’t call himself that and he can’t remember how it happened, just gradually he assumed. He lived in the middle of a work zone. Trucks delivering supplies for Make It Right, tour buses, kids from New York walking down the street, greeted him every morning. Where his neighbors complained, he saw it an opportunity. He would amble down his stairs and meet them, telling them what happened there.

Raimond was the ultimate Katrina Ambassador. The months that followed our interview we would run into each other here and there. At the commemoration for the 50th anniversary of desegregation of public schools in New Orleans at McDonogh #19 elementary we shook hands and made small talk. At the Village one day after giving a talk to a group of volunteers from Ohio he walked over and put his arm around me and told the volunteers to just do what this guy does. At a community meeting he pulled a chair up to mine and introduced me to a city council member that he said I should get a long with and then disappeared. He somehow managed to be involved with most things Katrina. If there was a book signing, a play, a dinner benefit for the neighborhood all in the same day, he would somehow be at all three.

The day I interviewed him at his house we ended up walking outside, standing on the front porch for awhile. I sensed that I had taken up enough of his time and that he was showing me the way out, so I had already turned off the recorder. We talked for another hour. When you walk out of Raimond’s house you immediately see a large flag pole with
an American flag and a large rock. The rock symbolizes where Raimond believes his
granddaughter and mother were when they left the yard. Their names and dates are
inscribed on the rock. Seeing the rock Raimond reiterated he doesn’t know why he does
what he does. He can’t imagine doing anything else. After a long silence he told me
needed to do this, not so much because of what happened on that day, August 29th, but
because of his community. He then gave me the name of Ferrand Letcher and as I
climbed into my car, he yelled after me, “Smitty, talk to Smitty.” Watching a tour coming
towards him he walked down the stairs barefoot, told me to have safe trip, and started
walking towards the tour group—before I could even back out of the driveway.

When people I didn’t know met me for the first time they would always say I should
talk with Raimond and Smitty. I would nod appreciatively and let them know I had. In
some way they were being helpful. They wanted me to “get the story right”; talk to an
ambassador. In another way they were easing themselves out of a conversation, of
potentially having to speak about Katrina. Katrina ambassadors were different than those
who merely told stories because they often left themselves out of the story. They were not
primarily trying to make sense of Katrina or move on, but rather they were trying to help
others do so.

3d. Creativity and Cognitive Mobility

Those who engaged in immersion did not consciously weigh the costs and benefits to
being immersed. Unlike people who chunked or connected, those who immersed gain
benefit from maintaining uncertainty and ambiguity. They excelled in situations where
flux was normative or required new ways of thinking. Lewin (1935), for instance, argued
that when thinking about reality becomes difficult or intolerable, people often resort to
fantastical thinking to crowd out negative thoughts. Likewise, as Kruglanski and Webster (1996) and Livi (2002) found, people with a low need for closure are more likely to explore other worldviews. Those who immersed themselves into large projects tended to avoid linear thinking and instead focused on multiple possible futures. Rather than proceeding from one project to the next, like those who used chunking as a strategy for moving on, those who were immersing sought multiple, creative avenues for arriving at the future. It was not that they didn’t care about the future, they just were not attached to any single way of getting there. In this way they tended to be both creative and embrace cognitive mobility.

In instances where traditional solutions to problems became tenuous, constant peril could increase one’s creativity. Those who immersed tended to see their projects as creative solutions to pressing problems and often talked about creativity as an important aspect of their life. In my conversation with Jayla she spoke positively about creative thinkers not being wedded to a single point of view, but rather being able to maintain options.

I just read an article, who was it? I think it was an old magazine, actually. An Oprah Winfrey magazine – what is it about?, about creativity, and it said that creative people tend to be less depressed or you know, because they’re – they tend to be broader thinkers…are able to think about kind of variety of solutions to problems where people who tend to be more depressed, are usually people who have only like one train of thought. Alright, you know very narrow thinking. You can only think of – one or two solutions. So that when – you know, when they get stuck, it’s like that’s it; they just get stuck and they are not able to step outside of that.

A number of individuals who ran non-profits often spoke of the neighborhood needing more creative solutions to traditional problems. In his study of five different post-Katrina neighborhoods, Wooten (2012) discovered that one of the main takeaways from Katrina
was the need to be creative—to do something radically different than what had been done before and from what other communities were doing. At times this ended up with them blaming residents who were “stuck in the past” or “stuck in gear”. At other times the indictment was community wide. Mack, for instance, regularly spoke of the neighborhood not being able to make the same mistakes it had made in the past and needing to chart a different course. Part of this came from needing to see the neighborhood as an exceptional place, different from other places in New Orleans, but part also came from the need to match the interpretation of their neighborhoods’ predicament with their creative solutions. As Mack explained to a group of volunteers one day, “Old problems need new solutions”. Vess et al. (2009) noted that following reminders of peril, individuals who have a low need for structure are much more likely to be novelty seeking and consider novel interpretations of the world. Those who immersed saw themselves as radically changing not only themselves, but their neighborhoods as well.

In many ways then the risk projects were novel attempts to dramatize the condition of the neighborhood. The competition to promote their project became a competition in creativity. This linkage was facilitated by things like the participation in design charrettes for schools, parks, community centers, and attendance at community symposiums where residents had an opportunity to vote on projects. Architectural and design and engineering graduate students were thick in the neighborhood years after the flooding (sometimes universities would have a semester of in-residence study for students). The folks behind the television program This Old House rebuilt a few homes for their show. Brad Pitt had 15 of the top architects in the world design the first Make It Right Houses.
Community centers had dozens of blueprints on their walls from students as far way as Wisconsin, New York, and California. While many residents resented the urban experimentation that came to stand in for aid, those who engaged in immersion supported the creative offerings of others and eventually took up that creative impetus. In fact, the more creative their solution to the problem was, the more likely they saw themselves as succeeding. In some ways those who sought creative opportunities for themselves and their community had embraced the creativity of others and in some ways because of their past experiences they attracted the creativity of others to their own projects.

As Mische (2009) noted in her work on projectivity, clarity, the degree of detail with which the future is imagined, is connected to socialization. Futures are modeled for us by those around us. Those who immersed seemed to have one thing in common, they moved around a lot. Most folks who live in New Orleans were born in Louisiana—close to seventy-five percent—which is the highest number for any of the fifty largest cities in the country. Many of the residents of the Lower Ninth needed two hands to count the number of generations of their families who were from the city. Those who immersed, even if they were “from” the Lower Ninth, meaning they had long roots there, had moved around the country after college or at some point in their lives just got out—as a few who immersed explained. Mack, for instance, fondly recalled of living in California and the Northeast. Jayla was working in New York pre-Katrina. Raimond went to college in Minnesota and worked in the Northeast for a while. Susan spent summers in D.C. with her grandparents. Smitty owned a coffee shop in California for most of his life. A few came from military families and others had moved around to find work in their early adult years. They had seen firsthand different ways of doing things and had come into
contact with different worldviews. Growing up they had multiple futures modeled for them. Those residents who had always lived in the Lower Ninth saw the world in one particular way, those who immersed were more flexible. Rather than see the future (or even the past or present) in terms of black and white, they used a multicolored spectrum. *Their geographic mobility led to what I call cognitive mobility—the ability to see and think about the world in different ways.*

*Cognitive mobility means not being attached to any particular, single future.* Those who were cognitively mobile, almost all of those who immersed, often simultaneously projected different, often contradictory futures. It was easy for them to see scenarios where the Lower Ninth did not recover. The often spoke of turning points, but after months of talking with them it became apparent that those turning points were *omnitemporal*—they occurred all the time. They could also, however, see the neighborhood as something greater than before. And could often switch from a utopian to dystopian perspective in the same conversation.

Yeah, people want to know what it’s going to be like here. I mean we all wanted to know that, want to know that, as we’re moving back. You know. You don’t want to move back to something that ain’t going to exist in 10 years. But this place could be something special. I don’t know. We’ll have to wait and see, won’t we. I could see it going either way. (Susan, black female, 40s)

Well this is a turning point. If we don’t do something soon it just ain’t gonna happen. I mean, how many communities recover from something like this 20 years after the fact. It either happens now or it doesn’t happen at all. Don’t get me wrong I want it to happen, I want this community to succeed. But it might not and we got to be ready for that too. (Mack)

At times, during interviews, the benefits of geographic mobility were verbalized. Susan for instance, who ran a non-profit, mentioned learning about non-profits in D.C. During summers in high school she volunteered at a couple, so she explained her gravitation
towards that work as something that just “felt right, natural even, to get something similar going here after Katrina”. Musing over this trend one afternoon at the Village, Mack pointed out a few people “active in the community” that had not been geographically mobile, but agreed that most who were active had been exposed to different ways of doing things. Likewise, Lee who did not immerse, noted that those who were advocating for what he called “big changes” had left and then come back to the community, giving them new perspectives. While Lee often spoke of this in a problematic fashion, he nonetheless credited this tendency with keeping the neighborhood going.

Immersion is the least tenable of the strategies for moving on. It required an almost 24/7 presence in the neighborhood. Darren took a half-day off over the thirteen months I worked with him. Mack said he didn’t know if he would ever be able to take a day off again. Neither he nor two others who ran non-profits had taken a day off in over three years. It also required the support of other individuals. Those who immersed had either located themselves in niche positions in non-profits that required the constant support of the non-profit, had begun their own non-profit and therefore needed a constant stream of volunteers and donors, or had an alternate source of income—such as disability or retirement. It was, however, the most novel strategy. Whereas the literature on disasters stresses the continuity of beliefs and actions in the aftermath of a disaster, those who immersed usually intentionally broke with their pasts to do something new. The social disruption caused by Katrina and the flooding created an opportunity space that had not existed before.

4. Blending
The final strategy for moving on is what I call blending. *Those who engaged in blending tended to seek continuity.* Unlike in chunking where continuity was appreciated on a day-to-day basis, in blending continuity was appreciated on a larger, historical level. It was a strategy that helped to maintain a sense of self, which was important during a period of intense personal and social disruption. Whereas those who were chunking often required stressing the present by ignoring the past and present, *blending required smoothing large disruptions like Katrina into one’s temporal framework.* Here the past, present, and future were joined as a seamless experience of exploitation and trouble. This was most obvious in situations where people refused to recognize pre or post Katrina time periods. Katrina and the aftermath became part of a sequence of events.

While continuity is the norm in the aftermath of disaster among businesses and institutions, it has largely been ignored by social scientists (Henry, 2011). Those who study disasters are primed to look for social change and yet the relationship between the two remains weak. In a number of experiments (c.f. McAdams, 2008; Landau, Sullivan, and King, 2010), where people have been reminded of their mortality they were more likely to perceive their past actions as influential and see their current self as representative of and as a culmination of their past. They were also more likely to connect their present to their past and future.

To be sure Katrina disrupted their lives and some had engaged in short term strategies that were probably closer to chunking. But they had chosen to make sense of Katrina by seeing the disruption caused by the flooding as normal. Trouble permeated their experiences. Their future and their past looked the same. This framework allowed them to see major disruptions as a normal part of the life course. As a resident of the Lower
Ninth Ward remarked after being asked about the aftermath of Katrina immediately after the BP oil spill and an explosion at a nearby petro-chemical plant that covered the neighborhood in toxic pollution, “that ain’t nothing, we us to it”. Another resident said of my disbelief of how the explosion at the petro-chemical plant was being perceived by residents, “just wait till tomorrow”. He was not implying that eventually residents would come to understand the potential for toxic suffering (Auyero and Swistun, 2009) caused by the explosion and dusting, but that they had already made sense of it and were waiting for something worse to happen in the near future. In a geography of trouble, Katrina, as difficult as it is to believe, was simply another chapter for many. While this is obviously a case of sampling on the dependent variable, meaning I only spoke with those who wanted to speak or had returned from their displaced status, many of the elderly residents I worked with and worked for noted that having lived through Hurricane Betsy, the Civil Rights Movement, crime and gangs in the neighborhood, an economic free-for-all that kept them at the margins of poverty, and just being black in general, had helped them move on from Katrina (Germany, 2007). A few went so far as to tell me that they thought they were probably more likely to be able to move on from Katrina because of their collective past and that younger people, especially those in their twenties to thirties, would have a much more difficult time. At Ms. Mabel’s house one day, moving plants around her yard and sensing I probably would not get a formal interview in, I asked if she thought Katrina had any life lessons for people in the community; had she learned anything from Katrina. Her response, “Yeah, she messed up my yard!”, came to symbolize how many long time residents of the community acted when I asked similar
questions. Questions about the place of Katrina in their life course were as annoying as the Hurricane itself.

Andre, a seventy-year old former Black Panther, reminded me that while Katrina may have had life lessons for some, for those whose life already held similar lessons, Katrina was simply “one more obstacle, one more road block”. And Betty, who was almost ninety, and trying to repaint her kitchen with me, said Katrina was “just one more thing on my plate”. These comments seemed shocking, especially in light of Andre still being without his home and Betty whose home was being rebuilt was nonetheless far from living in it. There were obviously many older residents still trying to make sense of Katrina, but the ability to craft a story or even concentrate on “a take home message”, as Jean noted, proved to be a major difference for some.

Jean was the president of the local retirement home. It had been built since Katrina and had a diverse group of residents. Jean and I were close for a couple of months. He would often ask me to accompany him to meetings and I would oblige. When I first approached him for doing an interview, unlike many, he quickly said yes, but asked for a few days to prepare. I assumed he needed to mentally prepare, but instead when I arrived I came to understand that Jean had been preparing documents. Upset, as many were, about the ways in which friends and family, “people who looked like me”, as Jean noted, were portrayed during Katrina and questions that had been asked of those who had struggled to survive only to be removed from their city, Jean first and foremost wanted to me to understand how “these people” lived. Jean wanted me take note that many did not evacuate because they had exhausted their evacuation funds the year before during a mandatory evacuation. It was not the case that they did not plan for these kinds of events,
but that they had not had time to financially recover from the last time. He was
incredulous that people elsewhere thought that folks who had lived through this before
did not know what to expect. He also asked me to remember that Katrina hit on the 29th
of the month and that poorer people generally receive any aid they might get at the
beginning of the month and people who work and are paid biweekly would not have
received their most recent checks. He said he personally knew many people who were
waiting over the weekend for that check to come on Monday to evacuate. There were
other myths that Jean wanted to counter. For each he had some documents or some
“homework”-as he called it-that he wanted to share with me. This is what Katrina had
become for Jean, an event to be explained away or at least something that could be made
more familiar within the context of living in a marginalized neighborhood or poverty
itself.

In some sense blending seems to be the ideal strategy for moving on. As Becker
(1997) notes, continuity is hardwired into us and is a universal expectation across
cultures. It has a “culture-specific shape” which in the West involves linearity (pp. 5).
When I asked folks if Katrina was like anything else most emphasized its enormous
impact on their lives, others as noted with those who immersed would talk about others’
experiences of disaster, but those who blended would either launch into a litany of past
disruptions or just nonchalantly say “sure” or “yeah”, with little follow-up. But unlike
Becker’s interviewees who had undergone personal disruption, infertility or cancer, for
example, who resented the uncertainty and unpredictability associated with disruption,
those who blended seem nonplussed. At the heart of blending was acceptance. It was not
necessarily that disruption was seen as good thing, but that residents saw it as
unavoidable. When asked if there were things we could do in the future to mitigate future disruptions, those who blended consistently said no.

But blending came at a cost. As Becker (1997) noted in her work, continuity necessitated emphasizing the self over the social. Not all, but many of those who used blending isolated themselves from others (as discussed in the previous chapter). Those who did participate in community events or attended meetings often seemed aloof or distanced from events. They were more concerned with parliamentary procedures or the meeting itself than what was going on in the community. For them continuity had become a cultural ideology. In an attempt to make me understand why she wasn’t concerned with climate change or the environmental problems of the neighborhood, Dot said, “that’s just us, that’s how it is.” There was no binary logic of order and disorder, disorder was order. The ideology of continuity amidst constant peril was achieved in a number of ways.

4a. Katrina As Temporary

Others who used blending saw Katrina as a disruption, but sought to minimize the degree to which it came to mark their community. For many this involved a temporal negation of Katrina. After working with her on her front porch one afternoon, Ms. Dallas told me, “another thing I don’t like is when people say pre or post Katrina, like we should live our lives differently now.” Ms. Dallas believed that the negative effects of Katrina would eventually subside and things would return to normal. She was confident that in ten or so years no one would be talking about Katrina. Several others would later comment on the pre and post marking of time. John, for instance, said that it made sense in the immediate aftermath, but he didn’t understand why people were still doing it. “People will point to a
building and say pre-Katrina that use to be a Dollar Store or a grocery. Why say pre-Katrina? I can point to it and say it use to be a field or a drug store. It just reminds people about their problems and they don’t need that. It just don’t make no sense.” Likewise, Iris was equally upset about marking space as frozen in time. “Why do that? In ten years are you going to say well that use to be, before Katrina, that was a uh, that was a church? Why live like that? Everything used to be something.” Those who used blending had an unexpected and emotional reaction to language that sought to give some kind of permanence to the damage caused by Katrina.

The planning committee for the fifth anniversary of Katrina that I was fortunate enough to be included on presented the opportunity to talk with a number of residents who saw Katrina as temporary. While the committee included people with different strategies for making sense of Katrina, people who saw Katrina as a temporary phenomenon, not something that would come to mark or have a long lasting effect on the neighborhood, were attracted to working on a project with an identifiable beginning and end. And to be sure these meetings and the day of the 29th was the only time I ever saw or spoke with several members of the committee. Many members of the committee used a progress narrative to talk about the neighborhood in a way that glossed over the last five years (as well as periods of the 1980s and 1990s).

Things were getting better. This used to be a bad place. After the gangs and stuff though, I think that was in the late 80s, maybe early 90s, I can’t remember that was long ago, the parish, they come in here and boarded up a lot of houses and pulled some of them down. It was a different direction for us. It showed people around here that the parish cared, that they were willing to do something to make this place better and that had an affect on people. People started to care about their lawns and their houses and stuff. And by the time of the hurricane this was a good place. That’s why people moved back. That’s why they want to move back. Those people in Houston and Memphis and Baton Rouge. They want to come back because they know the direction we headed. People don’t know that this was a good place to grow up. It
was a family neighborhood. For many years this was one of the best places in the city to raise a family. So we’ll get over this quick, just like the other stuff, the drugs and stuff and this will be a good place to live again (Phil, white male, 50s).

Phil had moved back into the neighborhood after Katrina. He grew up in the neighborhood, but his family moved out after white flight in the mid 1970s. He saw it as a good investment and wanted to convince other upwardly mobile people, mainly volunteers, to move to the Lower Ninth. Other members of the committee, surprised at my and others interest in the neighborhood, would make short talk about how the neighborhood was pretty close to being back. “it ain’t like this was the perfect neighborhood before. Now I ain’t complaining, it was fine, it was good and all, but some people think that it was the Taj or a quaint village or something that it wasn’t and they want it to be that again.” Whereas most of the residents, activists, homeowners and association members I interviewed thought the neighborhood was a great place to live, the members of the planning committee I spoke with thought the neighborhood was doing okay, but had a way to go. They seemed more realistic. Tim, for instance, summed up this point nicely.

People talked about a blank slate after Katrina. And everybody here got all offended. Saying “We ain’t no blank slate, this is our home”. Saying all that. But then they the ones acted like it was. They thought it was a brand new day and that we ain’t going to be having the problems we had before. I guess they thought the city would come and make it right and fix it up nice and everything. But we were in the mess we was in because of the city and Katrina didn’t change that. That ain’t going to be changing. You know how many politicians came here before Katrina. You know how many came here after. We get lot’s of promises, but ain’t nothing going to be changing. It’ll be the same like it was before. People here need to get real. They think that with some meetings and protesting they can change how people up there [Uptown] think about us, about the back-of-town. That ain’t going to happen (black male, 60s).
Tim was pragmatic about the effect meetings had on the community. He admitted to briefly attending meetings after Katrina and he remembered the meetings being mandatory and that both the fact that they were forced and the outcome of the meetings (little change occurred afterward) dampened his motivation for continuing to go to them after they were no longer required. He thought that in part they were made mandatory in order to prove to the city that people wanted to come back, but that they also provided a mechanism for people to share and work through their problems. Others, however, were optimistic about the direction of the neighborhood.

People make a big deal about it, but look, our parents went through that in Betsy. You live here long enough and that happens. And look what they did. They rebuilt the neighborhood. So yeah, I mean I think so [we can rebuild]. But it ain’t nothing, you know, like this neighborhood, for the last twenty years or so, it has been a really good place to be. I mean all the schools in New Orleans are bad, so you can’t really say much about that, but where else in the city you got views like this, up on the levee? Maybe Algiers Point, but that’s it. We two and half miles to the Quarter. People want to be here. It’s a good place to be and its’ gonna get better (Able, white male, 30s).

You know all that [Katrina] did was get rid of the trash. People didn’t want to be here just moved on a littler quicker than they would. The good people who were here before, trying to make this a community, they came back. It’s the same people. It will just be a much better place to live than before because now you got everyone that cares about the place here (Noel, black male, 50s).

People like Noel, Able, and Phil were able to look past the debris and detritus that filled the neighborhood and see green grass growing and kids playing. Noel and I talked one day while walking down a part of the neighborhood that had been abandoned. The few homes standing had not been cleaned out or gutted. I assumed he would change his tune or he would acknowledge that things were not as rosy as he made them out to be, but instead he began to describe how this area use to be farm land and he hoped in a few months it would be cleared and he and others could grow on it again.
In response to the question “[i]s this a good place to live” those who blended always looked at me as if they were perplexed by the question. They took it as a personal insult. As if they would be living here if it was not a good place to be. They interpreted the question as meaning Katrina had made it a bad place to live or that it was a dangerous place to live because of flooding or hurricanes; as if something had changed about the neighborhood. Many avoided not only times where “Katrina stuff” would be discussed, but also places. Knowing that the Village was one of the primary places where tourists went to hear about Katrina’s effect on the neighborhood, Mr. Kerlec would hang out on the front porch, near the door, but would not go inside. In this way he could talk with Mack and others who stopped by, but make sure the conversation stayed away from rebuilding or recovery. Many afternoons he and others would gather and talk about the day’s events or reminisce about growing up with overbearing mothers or about their family’s ingenuity at making ends meet. John, likewise, avoided communal spaces. He said he stopped going to church because every week the sermon was somehow tied to Katrina and the ongoing trouble. He lived in an area of Holy Cross that had pretty much recovered, there were few houses on the street still in need of repair, so he rarely left that area. Others took refuge in work outside of the neighborhood or held multiple jobs so that they stayed busy.

I come to the farmer’s market, but that’s about it. I just like to stay in my yard and work in the garden. It’s hard because my house is rebuilt and you know, I mean I’m getting on with my life, so a lot of my neighbors aren’t. So hanging out with them, even talking with them at the end of the day, ain’t particularly interesting. I gotta be honest, it’s depressing. But the farmer’s market reminds me what the place was like. People coming and going and everyone is happy, so even if I don’t sell much, it’s still a good place to be. I mean it’s only a few hours, but I’m really thankful for it. I think this is the future of our community too. So also that’s why I come here. This is good for us. Its like a model of what we should be trying to do. We need more this (Mr. Cal, black male, 60s).
4b. *Uninterrupted Things*

Some residents rebuilt their home as they had been before the hurricane out of necessity. Many were, as mentioned in the previous chapter, not given enough to rebuild their homes, so they made due with patchwork here and there and thus often replicated past designs and layouts. Others, however, wanted an exact replica of their home. After finishing a floor in her home, Ms. Tiffany exclaimed “I’m going to paint this room purple because that’s the way it was before.” Likewise, Dory, whose house I worked at on and off for thirteen months once gave me a tour of one side of the double shotgun that we were converting to a single and pointed to corners of the room where the red chair would go or where she would hang family pictures. She intended on putting everything back where it was before. When asked about the other side of the house she said she didn’t know what would go there. She was thinking about a game room for one of the rooms, but had yet to decide.

That the Holy Cross Neighborhood Association wanted homes rebuilt to particular specifications, basically what the neighborhood looked like in 1981 when it was declared a historic neighborhood, presented problems for some who had to rebuild partially rebuilt homes that had not meet their historical requirements. The cost of replacing windows was enough to forgo finishing their homes. For others it provided them with the rationale to rebuild their home with as few changes as possible. Dory was not able to imagine the part of her “new” house that did not exist before Katrina. As she only used her pre-Katrina experiences to interpret her surroundings, it was an empty space.
Others tried to obtain the same job they had before. Todd, who was a talented carpenter, had been out of work for several months and refused to consider working now for anyone other than his pre-Katrina employer. When he evacuated with his family to Tulsa he lost his job. He wanted his old job back to restore a sense of sameness. Laurent was becoming open to different careers, but seemed physically and cognitively incapable of getting a different job. Likewise, Mary worked for the State before Katrina and was still waiting, five and half years after Katrina, for her job. She said it was all she knew.

Some wanted their gardens back, while others looked to replace lost items. Lacy wanted to return to Florida where she spent her honeymoon and take photos of the beaches and coastline so that she could replace the photos drowned in the murky brown water of Katrina. The first thing Monique did was buy a new dog. She said she realized it wasn’t the same dog and that she wouldn’t be able to replace the pet she was forced to leave behind, but that just having a dog in the house made it bearable. People likewise tried to get their families to move back. While Katrina interrupted countless families, with members evacuating at different times and with extended families too large to relocate together, those who blended worked the hardest to reconstitute their familial arrangements.

I call my grandma and my Aunt Sarah everyday. I want them to come home. They don’t think it’s safe, but I tell him it’s safe. It just doesn’t seem the same without them. It’s hard to go past their house and, they lived together…and not get upset. It’s like a hole there or something. Like they died even though they are alive and happy actually, I mean they are doing well in Texas, but I want them here. That’s my family and that’s the way it use to be. And I guess that I want it be like before. (Susan, black female, 40s)

Susan and others felt as though they could not move on while their families were still away. In most instances their families’ reactions to Katrina were difficult to reconcile
with their version of Katrina as a minor or temporary disruption. Susan for instance could not come to terms with her aunt’s insistence that the neighborhood had changed and had become much more dangerous. Susan said that she was now taking walks around the block in the evening to prove to her aunt that it was safe. In these instances the community, let alone the self, would not be whole again until the family was back together. Others spoke of how having their family back had helped them move on or how the success of getting one or two members to return had buoyed their spirits for a while. And yet even for those who had their families return other problems loomed.

Town meetings were a good place to meet those who potentially used blending. While most residents simply wanted another community center, those who blended were upset that it might not be built at the same site or that it might not be called the Sanchez Community Center. When residents found out that another site, one outside of the neighborhood, had been established for Holy Cross prep school, and that the school was not coming back to the neighborhood that it was named after it, those who blended were very vocal in their denunciation of the school and the responsible officials. While some residents could have cared less, for many it was an anchor of the community and they wanted to know if they would have to change the name of the neighborhood. The move presented a secondary violence—an additional disruption—to the residents. Many wanted to sue the school to make Holy Cross change its name to reflect its new geography. Others wanted another school to take the original site and noted that because of the neighborhood’s name, the school could still be called Holy Cross as in Holy Cross High or Elementary. For those who blended the large community hubs had to be put back the way they were before Katrina for life to go on. Not bringing the school or community
center back to the neighborhood was like amputating part of the collective conscious. For those who blended, however, not having whatever was rebuilt have the same moniker or occupy the same footprint was equally devastating.

4c. Blaming the Victims (Ourselves)

As Becker (1997) found in her study of how people deal with disruptive illnesses, the ideology of individualism is primarily concerned with the rehabilitation of the self. Rather than emphasize problems with cultural or social continuity, individuals focused on maintaining the continuity of the self. This allowed people to own their continuity; it made them the agent responsible for the continuity (Becker, 1997: 99). While it might not be surprising that individuals dealing with illness sought to focus on the self, it is probably more surprising that people choose to do so when an entire community has been disrupted. There are, however, a number of reasons why folks in the Lower Ninth Ward would rather see themselves as responsible for their own continuity. First and foremost, the city and other elected officials did such a bad job of protecting people, focusing on the continuity of the self became a way to mitigate the ability of others in controlling what happened to them. Second, if viewed at the level of the self, the project of moving on could be located at various places. Some were just beginning the moving on process and others had already finished. Focusing on the self allowed for some success stories to be told without having to devote much attention to community level problems. Moving on became doable. This level of focus helped residents gloss over the larger social issues and ills and in fact minimize those problems as only affecting (or worse, being caused by) handfuls of individuals. Finally, by locating the aftermath at the level of the self the
narratives of the past and the future were made more understandable. While focusing on
the continuity of the self allowed people to remove Katrina from the conversation, it
curiously resulted in residents blaming others or themselves for the death and destruction
wrought by Katrina.

It’s all our fault. We should have seen this coming. You don’t have to be a genius
to know that those levees could fail. People just didn’t pay attention to the
obvious, that the, the ground is sinking, something like a quarter of an inch or
something each year and the River is getting higher. So if it goes, it goes, you
know. Each time it’s going to get worse. So you know next time it’s, it will be
really bad (Wiley, white male, 40s).

Nah, it’s our fault. This on us. Us that grew up here know better. This land was all
swamp. We living on swamp land. So there ain’t no one else to blame. I mean you
trying to hold back a mighty River and you can’t control it. It goes where it wants
to go. That’s the deal and we all, those of us from here know it. We seen it go
before. So, I mean, look, I stayed, so whose to blame. I can’t blame Nagin or
Bush or the Corps. I could of moved years ago and I didn’t, I stayed through
floods. My parents lived here in ’64 or ’65 when Betsy flooded us out. So, I mean,
we got to put blame where it goes, on us (Robert, black male, 50s).

I was unprepared to meet residents like Wiley and Robert who blamed themselves for the
flooding of the neighborhood. I had excepted, and of course found, residents who
blamed politicians or the Army Corps of Engineers, and as pointed out in the section on
connecting some residents did blame a legacy of racism or neoliberalism or other macro-
level phenomena, but taking the onus of the blame or putting it on your neighbor was
perplexing to say the least. The early pattern that emerged that helped explain the
blaming of the victim narrative was those that used this strategy had finished rebuilding
their homes. In some way then it was a cognitive orientation that helped folks mentally
process the manifest, physical inequality that was quickly taking shape (or not) in piles of
wood and brick. Similar to those who used connecting as a strategy, but minimized the
fault of others by connecting it to uncontrollable or unknowable phenomenon, who
balked at the idea of fault, some of those who used blending as a strategy were reluctant
to see anyone at “fault”, but were okay with taking their share of the blame. Ed was the
first person I formally interviewed who pointed out the difference.

D.H. Do you think that what happened during Katrina or afterward was anybody’s fault?

E.T. Umm, I don’t like that word.

D.H. Katrina?

E.T. [laughing] No, fault. I think it implies that someone should have done
something and I’m not sure that really describes what happened here. It’s easy to
say it was the Corps fault, but we’ve been battling the Army Corps of Engineers
for 50 years. We’re going to be battling them for another 50 years. When this
happens again, because it will, everyone who lives here, everyone who is
contemplating or contemplated moving back knows that and had to think hard
about that, knows that it is going to flood again, knows that we are going to get hit
by Category 4 or 5 or probably worse in the future, and they know that the levees
are going to fail and we are going to flood. So in 50 years when we are right back
here again are we going to say, ‘Well it was the Corps fault”? It seems silly to me
to say it is their fault. I blame them, but only in part. I think we have to accept the
largest share of the blame, the people who lived here. I’ve been going to those
meetings, HCNA, town halls with city, the Corps invites us to meetings, for years
and sometimes I’m the only one or there is 4 or 5 others, same people every time.
We had almost 20,000 people living here and you have 1 or 4 or whatever
number, it was never more than 10 people at those meetings, and you can’t say it
is the Corps fault. They are going to do what they do and we have to do
something about it. Just can’t sit back and wait for something to happen and then
start pointing fingers. I think it’s our fault. We let this happen. It’s kind of like
those trucks that come through the neighborhood. The big 18-wheelers that go up
to the port. We’ve had meetings about getting those things out of the
neighborhood and no one shows up. But I can tell you whenever there is an
accident you’ll have a hundred people at the next meeting saying it’s the company
at fault when they’ve had 30 or 40 years to do something about it. It’s just lazy, a
lazy way of thinking. So I blame us. My neighbor, I love her she’s a great
neighbor. She’s never been to single meeting. What can I tell her? It’s like teasing
a dog for years and then one day the dog bites you. Is it the dog’s fault you got
bit? No, it’s not. It’s just like that.

Ed knew he hadn’t convinced me, so throughout our interview he kept bringing it back to
whom else could possibly be to blame. At community meetings, particularly HCNA
meetings, that were sparsely attended he would look back at me and shake his head. It was clear that most of the people who were invested in the various social movement projects that were historically rooted in the community felt that the community itself played a large part in the disaster and the prolonged aftermath. For these people, like Ed, righting the disruption therefore became a personal responsibility. They wanted to see the government help out with money, they wanted to see the Corps stop challenging the community and instead work with them, they wanted the MRGO closed, but they also wanted their neighbors to be politically active and take an interest in the neighborhood and, as Ed added, each other.

Other residents would cast doubt on the very idea of being at fault.

Who cares if the levees were blown? Does it matter whose fault all this was? It doesn’t. I’ll tell you why. It flooded. If your house flooded, it flooded. It don’t matter how it got that way, you still got to deal with the water. It don’t matter at the end of the day who caused the flood because they ain’t coming to get the water are they? (Edgar, black male, 50s)

No, I worked up on those towers, in the crane box, on top of the bridges, you seen them? They way up there man. I worked in there for 25 years after I retired from the Navy. I seen everything in this neighborhood. Way up on my perch. If something going wrong, if someone was doing something in this neighborhood I’d a seen it. You know. Ain’t nobody’s fault. No one did anything wrong (Don, black male, 70s).

For residents like Edgar and Don, both of whom suffered a great deal and were in poor physical shape, which in part had been caused or exacerbated by Katrina, if “no one did anything wrong” or if “don’t matter at the end of the day”, then Katrina wasn’t a big deal.

Others pointed to specific individuals who might be at fault. For many Bush or Nagin or Governor Kathleen Blanco or even the local councilperson Jon Johnson was to blame. That Johnson eventually pled guilty to stealing federal funds that could have been used to
help rebuild the Lower Ninth was proof for some that they had been right. Here the
effects of Katrina were reduced to one person. If that one person could be removed from
the equation, then things would start to go back to normal. For those who blended this
was of course the hope, but often difficult to continue to believe when that person was
removed from office, as when Obama preceded Bush and yet little in the neighborhood
changed. Many thus no longer resorted to blaming a particular individual, but rather
sought to blame “us” and only spoke in hindsight about having blamed someone.

4d. Going Against the (Cultural) Grain

When I arrived in New Orleans five years after Katrina hit, the city had been thoroughly
washed with the “re” prefix. Everywhere you went people talked about renew, rebirth,
rebuild, reuse, reclaim; it was the “new” New Orleans after all. There was a fervor
associated it. It was partially punctuated by the Saints winning the Super Bowl.
Everywhere in the city there was a sense that anything could be done, that anything was
possible. Those who blended had a difficult time adjusting to the new city. While it might
seem that those who blended would appreciate the idea of reusing and reclaiming, since
they were the ones rebuilding their homes with reclaimed wood and reusing items from
their homes (or others as reuse shops sprung up all over the Ninth Ward), the idea that
there was a “new” New Orleans or even a new Lower Ninth did not sit well with the

Their dislike for outsiders and for gentrification was palpable not so much for what it
was or what it meant, but because it was simply different. They did not want anything
new because they wanted the old. Signaling a rebirth then was like death. Riding a
bicycle down Dauphine in the Upper Ninth you passed a sign that read “don’t come to
my city and talk about renewal”. Another on Charters read “reuse means someone else
loose”. Talking with a homeowner one day about replacing a door, before I knew how people felt about the reuse and reclaim shops that dotted the Upper Ninth, I was instructed not to go there anymore. Tim and I had accompanied a homeowner a few days before who was looking for a particular door and I figured Chuck—the homeowner—who didn’t venture out of the Lower Ninth often—might not know about the shops.

Chuck explained that a lot of what was for sale at the reuse stores had been taken out of homes when people were away or donated by well meaning non-profits who had helped demo houses. He explained that homeowners received nothing from this. In Chuck’s words, “they take that stuff out of our places and we can’t afford to buy it back, only Uptown people can buy that stuff”. Chuck said his neighbor swore that he had seen Chuck’s front door listed for $350. When Chuck went to see it, he couldn’t find it. Other residents who couldn’t bring themselves to go, one described it as a grave yard, would sometimes ask us if we were going by to look for some drawer pulls or window sashes. They considered shopping there a defeat, a transgression or sin that rendered them guilty of being a newcomer or gentrifier.

Psychologists write of an “end of history illusion” which basically asserts that we are not well equipped to imagine the future. We basically expect to be the same person in the future that we are today. Those who used blending as a strategy suffered from this illusion the most. They focused on their self and their home and avoided, where possible, thinking about the neighborhood and others. While they would often acknowledge the numerous changes in the neighborhood over the last 50 or so years, they nonetheless wanted the future to be August 28th, 2005. They would gloss over periods of decline to keep the neighborhood on a positive track and saw the disruptions and trouble they
frequently had to endure as part of life. More than others they saw Katrina and the aftermath as natural, not part of a changing world or as part of larger forces that worked against them. In their choice of blending they sought to demystify Katrina. Whereas others saw Katrina as a turning point or used it as a cognitive bookmark, those who blended simply looked away.

All four of these strategies represent a way of making sense of and getting over Katrina. There were folks who adopted different strategies at different times. Many people used chunking as a short-term strategy only to later adopt connecting. For some immersion simply didn’t pan out, so they switched to blending or chunking. Because there were always a number of residents who served as viable role models or provided schemas for any particular strategy, options were always open. Lee, for instance, a solid connector, talked about getting his 501c status so he could become a non-profit. He didn’t want to run a non-profit or head up a non-profit, but rather frequently spoke of his desire to become a non-profit. He spoke of wanting to tackle something larger, in some way so he could focus on different issues and problems. Likewise, Laurent and some of the other connectors spoke of a more facile strategy, which resembled chunking, as what they would like to be doing if they could. Whereas a few folks who were immersing related that they didn’t know how much longer they could continue at the frenetic pace required of that strategy. These residents demonstrated that they understood other strategies, that they recognized other people were doing things differently.

Nonetheless by year five most had settled down into a particular way of moving on. Their strategy had become automatic, a part of who they had become. Some were not cognizant that they had chosen a strategy for moving on. They simply woke up in the
morning and did what they did. They constructed their everyday reality through the tools they had available to them.
Chapter Five: *Katrina as the Future*

The eminent historian William Langer believed of the long term aftermath of any social disruption that: “it seems likely that the group would react in a manner most nearly corresponding to the underlying requirements of the majority of its members, in other words, that despite great variations as between individuals there would be a dominant attitudinal pattern” (1958: 291). Disaster studies have proven Langer correct, but only in the short term. Despite Langer’s belief, I found no dominant attitudinal pattern. While post-disaster communities have been neatly defined in term of being either “corrosive” or as a “paradise”, the Lower Ninth Ward ebbed and flowed back and forth between the two. This seemed to be the experience not only of residents, but also of volunteers and visitors—some of whom found it to be a barren landscape—an apocalyptic setting from a sci-fi film—and some of whom found it be a caring, and nurturing community—a new place to call home.

Despite the flux most residents stuck with a particular strategy for moving on. Some residents tired of Katrina. They too began to suffer from what people elsewhere called “Katrina Fatigue”. They didn’t want to talk about Katrina any longer, they didn’t want to live in her shadow any more. They figured in that way Katrina would go away and they could move on. Some residents embraced Katrina. They became spokespersons for death and dislocation. The way they were moving on was by confronting Katrina. Some did this
in a step-by-step fashion—by chunking. They broke Katrina down into things they could grapple with; Katrina became something that was manageable. Some went whole hog—starting non-profits, rebuilding everyday, becoming involved in politics—through what I’ve called immersing. The latter, those who immersed, had often moved around a good deal and had lived in other states and countries. They could see things from a different perspective or a different context. Other residents, however, could only make sense of Katrina by coming to terms with the disaster at particular times or places, or for moments here and there. They reconnected to Katrina when cognitively or economically possible. Unlike those who engaged in chunking who were always nibbling off small pieces of the disaster, those who connected would often go without for some period of time and then pull up to the table again. People who had lived in the community for a long period time tended to use blending as a strategy. For them Katrina was katrina. It was not something to make a big deal out of. It was not necessarily something to be forgotten, but simply one more thing in a long line of problems that residents were forced to deal with. For these residents Katrina and the ongoing disruption was something to be cognitively minimized; to be thought about as little as possible and to deny any importance to.

The disaster did, as those who study disasters have noted (c.f. Klinenberg, 1995), magnify already existing fault lines. The divide between the Holy Cross and Lower Ninth neighborhoods did not disappear. Holy Cross had achieved about 50% of its former
population, whereas the Lower Ninth only had about 10% of theirs. Some residents saw this as a continuation of racist policies that favored Holy Cross and its 10-12% white population. Others saw it as a result of ecological factors and that Holy Cross had, to some degree, remained more intact, both structurally and socially, after Katrina. Using Katrina as means to put the past behind them, some simply wanted the divide to go away.

Fieldnote March 2011 Jayla’s New Fence

Went to work at the Guerilla Garden today. From past experience I knew few, if any, residents would be there, but I thought maybe I would get lucky. Nope. Not a single resident showed up to help sand and repaint the fence. There were a lot of garden materials too, that needed to be spread out, but I’m not sure what she plans on doing with those. The trees she planted in the fall are not doing well and it looks like the compost pile is about the same as when we worked on it in October. A bunch of kids, maybe 60, from Connecticut were there. Jayla led them across the street to the field where Darren and I got attacked by wasps and gave them a brief introduction to the neighborhood and what she was doing there. It was close to what she had told me, about her daughter and wanting to come back and prove that you could make a difference. Then she took questions. The first question, a guy asked how many people came back, how many had returned. Jayla told him about 25% and then introduced me and said that I would probably know better. I told him that Holy Cross was a bit over 50% and that the Lower Ninth was at 10% and if you combined them it was close to 25%. Jayla shot me a quick look and told the students that people use to talk about the neighborhoods as being different, but that after Katrina there really was no difference between the Lower Ninth and Holy Cross. They were the same.

The exchange with Jayla reminded me that I was still skirting the insider/outsider divide. It reminded me that it was still difficult to have conversations about what had happened or even, at times, what was happening. It reminded me that reality didn’t matter, it was what people thought that mattered. As someone trained to see the world as socially constructed it was sometimes difficult to remember that there were good reasons why folks thought that levees had been blown, why they thought the neighborhood was a good place to live. It reminded me that there was no single story about Katrina and that the
stories that did exist kept changing. People I met kept reminding me of the importance of stories.

One of the first repeat volunteers I met was a middle-aged woman from Texas. She had been a first responder and was here, volunteering for the fifth time. She said she was hopeful. She said the first few years were really tough. She said you got here and it was all gray, mud was everywhere. And there were no children. You didn’t hear children playing. It wasn’t until her third year there she actually heard some kids playing down the street. As she wept she told me that for her that was when she knew the neighborhood would make it back. She told me this as we were gutting a house 1,922 days after Katrina hit. I wanted to talk to her and ask more questions, to get another outsider’s perspective on what had changed during that time, but by lunch she had left to work another site. During gutting she had come across a pile of children’s toys and schoolwork that the water had pilled up into a corner of the house. It was too much for her. It reminded her of how far the neighborhood had come, but also how far it had to go. It wouldn’t be the last time something like that happened to a volunteer.

Mr. George, who you met in the introduction, was having two houses, side by side rebuilt, one for his sister and one for his mother. His mother’s house was an architectural marvel. It had the smallest fire place I had ever seen that might have kept a tiny room warm in the winter and the house dropped off in the back to what would have probably have been the first kitchen, built somewhere in the late 1800s-no steps just a drop off. The house was stripped to its studs. Strangely, a number of us found it aesthetically pleasing, but we were anxious to get Mr. George’s mother back, who at 95 was tired of living outside of the Lower Ninth. On a larger fire place, on the mantel, a bible had been
opened. There was dust and other debris on top of the pages so that you could barely make out what verses the last reader had pondered. I blew off some of the ash (part of the house had been set on fire by some homeless trying to stay warm) and dust and read “For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands” (2 Corinthians 5:1-2). His mom died before she could move back. The house as of 2012 sat idle. Mr. George didn’t know what to do with it. The house sits on the corner of a busy street off of St. Claude. As Tim, a friend and long-term volunteer noted one day, “thousands of people will come by here to work on homes and not know the lady who was suppose to live there. They won’t know that story.” There were hundreds of stories, if not more, like the one of Mr. George’s mom. Middle-aged sons and daughters who had returned to the Lower Ninth, some after living far away, to help rebuild their family home. I only knew of one who was able to finish before their mother or father died.

Paul’s mom had lived in the Lower Ninth her entire life. In the 1990s, in her sixties, she had been the victim of a home invasion. Her two children pleaded with her to move. She stayed during Katrina and had to be evacuated. She ended up living Uptown while her children tried to settle accounts so that she could move home. By the time I met Paul his mother had died. He and his sister went ahead with the idea of fixing up the family home and a few others that had been in their family for nearly a century. We had helped gut a few homes that the family purchased to rebuild, and a few of the longer term volunteers, including a few who had left the organization and moved into the neighborhood, had started to rebuild one of the houses for a few hundred dollars here and there. On one hot summer afternoon I dropped by hoping to interview Paul, but I could
see he was busy working on the house, so I put the tape recorder and my notebook on the ground next to a saw and started to help rebuild his back wall. We worked for most of the afternoon. At the end of the day he tried to hand me a handful of tens and twenties. I told him I was more than happy to help out, but that he could keep the money or give it to one of the other guys who normally helped out. He suggested that maybe we do the interview then and though it was late in the day I took him up on his offer. We sat on two tree stumps, hunched close to each other and began to talk. He started off talking about his father—a photographer whose studio he grew up working in and then what it was like to grow up in the Lower Ninth. I asked about Katrina. Paul, whom I had spoken with on dozens of occasions and who had mentioned his mother’s death a number of times, began to cry. He said that he knew Katrina killed his mother. He, as many others would, described his mother as being in perfect health on August 28, 2005. In the year so afterward she developed a heart condition. Then she had a stroke. Then she died. After a few hours of talking, I handed him the twenty-five dollars and a copy of the signed IRB. He put the money with what he had wanted to pay me and said it would all go charity or maybe he would give it to Jonah or Joe who were suppose to stop by the next day and do some work. Then he thanked me. He said it was really tough talking about Katrina, but he was glad he did.

Although I had begun to slowly distance myself from the volunteer organization by taking on non-rebuilding projects, I had inadvertently entwined myself further into the everyday activities of the bureaucratic side of it. As January neared we became increasingly worried what we were going to do with the thousand volunteers from All State and began looking for projects for them. This involved driving around with Erin, a
long-term volunteer who had convinced her parents to pay for her transfer from an elite liberal arts college in the Northeast to Tulane—but then dropped out to volunteer. We would drive around taking pictures of abandoned buildings and lots and then when I headed back home to write up notes or go to another community meeting, Erin would begin to try and track down the owner(s) of the building or lot. Most of the time it was a dead-end. A church was held in trust and the trustees were scattered from Nebraska to Florida. Several people claimed to home a house that was really beyond repair. A man said that Louisiana Recovery Authority owned his house and lot, they claimed he still did. And so for several days, we spend the afternoon driving through the Lower Ninth taking pictures, looking for projects and finding empty homes. One afternoon Erin received a call from someone who ran a non-profit who heard we were looking for projects and suggested an abandoned house next door to hers. We drove out to take a look. Most of the front had been ripped off and you could see inside, like a doll house. We delicately trudged through the house, with each stepped we risked dropping through the floor boards. The house had been completely destroyed, first by Katrina, and then by squatters. More than half of the walls were gone and the back of the house had been raised by something, so that not only was it off of the foundation, but was now higher than the front part of the house. You had to actually climb up into the back of the house. We figured we had a winner. Surely if the leader of the non-profit wanted it demoed we could do it. As we stepped out Jonah and Lou drove up and asked what we were doing. Lou blew up. “That’s someone’s house. You can’t go in there. You just can’t go in someone’s house and look around. Who, what makes you think you can do that?” He told Jonah to drive away. Erin and I exchanged glances. We were both on good terms with
Lou. Later that day he apologized. He said he used to know the people who lived in the house. “It’s still their house, you know”, he said. It was tough he said. He knew they weren’t coming back, but he said he couldn’t actually come to terms with it. “Too tough” to deal with, he said as he crossed the street to his house.

For me it was tough simply imaging the neighborhood I rode my bicycle through everyday, the neighborhood where people would stop and talk to me and ask me where Darren was, ask me to take them somewhere in my car, gesture for me to come and sit on their porch—with 20,000 people living there. My second day in the neighborhood a car approached me and a volunteer from Scotland at a job site. We had been left alone for the most part and were taking siding off of the house so we could reuse some of it once we replaced the rotten plywood underneath. She gingerly rolled down her window and asked if anyone was living next door. The house she was referring too was twisted in half. I had been in it that day looking around and trying to take pictures but it was too dark. Adam, who was helping me with the siding, had almost fallen through the floor checking on me. There was no back to the kitchen. I remember thinking then, how does the back of a house come off, but the refrigerator stays in place? I starred blankly at her and told her I didn’t think so. She handed me a few papers with addresses on them and asked if I knew about those places. I didn’t recognize the addresses I wasn’t as familiar with the streets of the Lower Ninth—Desolonde, Egania, Charbonnet, or Tricou as I would be in a few months. She explained she worked for the Census and drove away. Later when the census numbers came out and I saw that there were over 4500 people in the neighborhood, I wondered if the twisted house with the missing wall and missing occupants had been included.
For all of these people, for all of us, the Lower Ninth was a paradox. To paraphrase Dickens, it was the best of places, and it was the worst of places. Everyone had multiple stories about the neighborhood and everyday a new story was made. Most of these stories contained important lessons.

**Lessons Learned**

In addition to being the ‘crescent city’ and the ‘big easy’ it is also called ‘the city that care forgot’, ‘unnatural city’ and the ‘death hole of dixie’. It has been in a fight against nature since its founding. It is a city that should have never been built. As Manaugh and Twiley (2006) noted, as the Corps’ public relations director admitted, you “can move teepees but you can’t move Vicksburg.” And it is a city without a future—it will one day be underwater; before that its people will have left because it will no longer be safe to live there because of flooding and other environmental threats.

There are few cities that are such a product of the relationship between the social and the ecological. It was only founded as a city because of the natural levees that produced a large swath of high ground—what is today the French Quarter—but use to be the entire city; today is only possible because of the massive drainage projects that have influenced urbanization and made it possible for the city to grow. It only looks the way it does today because of the social response to environmental conditions—the only other large city in the US that can claim to have had as an interesting and long term relationship with nature is New York City. More importantly for New Orleans those decisions made long ago about how to combat nature haunt it today.

To yet to treat Katrina and the levee failures as an extraordinary disaster would be a mistake. Katrina is the future. Not necessarily the disaster itself, but the secondary
violences that came in her wake. Many who watched the media coverage were shocked to see the level of vulnerability in New Orleans. But that exists everywhere. The hurricane and flooding let us see what we have overlooked and what has been less spectacular, but in reality other places and other processes have been just as disastrous. Detroit, Camden, Youngstown, or parts of West Virginia that have been surfaced mined, or where industry has made it impossible to live, like in Centralia or Treece, these too are New Orleans.

The grab for profits by private-sector companies that were aided by the market driven governance not only exacerbated the original disaster but gave way to problems for long term recovery. As Adams (2013) rightfully noted, with Katrina we saw the capitalization of suffering. But the “processes taking place and the structures that are in formation in the recovery of New Orleans are connected to the transformations and assemblages that are being created across the country” (Adams, 2013: 188). Katrina is spreading.

Societies and cultures are going to need to become more adaptable to deal with instances of social disruption that parallel Katrina. My friend Mack used to talk about a blueprint for others, so they wouldn’t to go through what the Lower Ninth did. He would often remark after a long day at the Village that if that was the only thing that came out of this, out of the aftermath of Katrina, then it would not have been for nothing. Here is what I hope is the start of that blueprint.

First, the biggest mistake made in the immediate aftermath of Katrina and the levee failures was in not understanding the culture and history of the Lower Ninth Ward. Approaching the neighborhood as a tabula rasa ignored that there was a history and a way of doing things there, that it was home for 20,000 people. Most of those people were the first in their family to own a home or they inherited their parents’ home who were the
first to own a home. In a country where home ownership has been a cornerstone of making it, of American identity, telling them they could not return, that they could not have their homes back, was paramount to telling them they had to start over, that they were no longer Americans—ironically both of which was directly communicated to them in the media in other ways. The people who lived there had fought to live there. They fought the demise of their community after white flight and they fought to integrate the schools. They fought developers and the Corps who wanted to radically change the neighborhood. They fought gangs and crime and they kept their neighborhood from disintegrating. They had one of the highest homeowner rates of any predominantly black community in the country. They were coming back regardless of what the city thought about their neighbors. That history was ignored. There is something about history that seems important and in the Lower Ninth they forgot that.

Likewise, the local was simply ignored. Context matters, even after a disaster—perhaps even more so. Local knowledge was ignored in favor of expert knowledge. Nowhere was this more obvious than in rebuilding. Make It Right, who had proposed hiring 60% of their workforce from the local community, never made it above fifteen or twenty percent. Mack explained to me one day that he wanted to take me to visit with the men on sat out on the neutral ground all day, drinking and swapping stories. Mack said they were mostly craftspeople—carpenters, electricians, that “should be working but aren’t because people have a certain idea of black, of a black community and they don’t realize that these people built these houses and they built this community and that they can do it again. So give them a chance”. In the immediate aftermath Bush suspended the Davis-Bacon act, which resulted in the mass migration of workers who were willing to
work for a fraction of a living wage (while living costs, such as rent doubled). This effectively froze out local workers—most of whom were black from the rebuilding process. The same way in which they would be frozen out by unpaid volunteers from well meaning charities, non-profits, and churches in the subsequent years.

The homes build by Brad Pitt, while greatly appreciated by most, nonetheless represented a dramatically new way of doing things. The greening of the neighborhood was described as “green-jacking” by one resident who exclaimed his frustration at not receiving any aid unless he was willing to use recyclable products and “stick solar panels all over [his] house.” The immediate aftermath of a disaster is not the time for urban experimentation. People just want their homes and families and community restored. They don’t want the new at the very time when they are nostalgic about the old (c.f. Lorenzen and Harvey, forthcoming; Harvey, forthcoming). And yet residents have to be more adaptable too. There has to be a common ground where residents are allowed to participate in the process.

Second, as many who returned found out, the early bird gets the worm. Those who were in an immediate position to rebuild have for the most part finished rebuilding. The residents of the Lower Ninth were not allowed to return for almost a year. In perhaps what was the most obvious instance of the secondary violences residents were subjected to, they could only “look and leave” for almost a year. Even then power and water was not restored to most of the neighborhood for almost two years. By that time residents had exhausted the paltry sum FEMA had given them and they had begun to spend their rebuilding money on rent and food—often in other states. Residents were subjected to numerous tests of commitment and had to endure endless meetings to “demonstrate” their
intent to return. After struggling through multiple rebuilding plans by the city, most simply gave up. They spent all of their grant money rebuilding and were not even halfway finished. Intentional or not, we need to do better next time.

Rebuild hubs in each community. The Lower Ninth was promised $90 million for schools in the aftermath of Katrina. They have one. Most of the students, 90% or so in the neighborhood, are bused out. Speaking with students they told me of catching the bus (not waking up!) at 5:30 and getting back long after dark. They spoke of friends who had stopped going to school because it was just too much of an ordeal and parent who didn’t care because they couldn’t take their kids to school when they missed the bus, half way across town, when they had to be at work. These complaints fell on deaf ears until on night when word got out that a girl had been dropped off at the corner of her street in the dark and walked a quarter of a mile passed abandoned homes, until a group of boys jumped out from behind ten foot tall brush and dragged her to an abandoned home and gang raped her. Rather than address the issue of schooling or even busing, the city’s response was to raze the house and cut the weeds. In their rush to erase the memory of what had happened, they hit a water main and flooded the street.

And rebuild new hubs. As someone who supports sustainability practices, residents of the Lower Ninth and elsewhere in the city needed new buildings. The non-profit I worked with rehabbed houses. Because residents were given grants far below the cost to build a new home, they were forced to work with what they had. This meant fixing the slates on a house or taken off rotted cross-timbers that formed a roof and putting up new ones. This meant rather than building a new roof, climbing up and down a ladder and taking measurements after old boards were pulled off. Taking new boards up and having to take
them back down when there were 1/14 of an inch off. On one rebuild project we worked on a roof for close to 3 weeks. We took most of the boards off, put new ones on. We took off what was left of the shingles and reshingled it. Some days we waited for wood or shingles to arrive. Mostly we worked. Everyday on the way home I passed other houses being built from new. During that time I saw a roof built in the three days. That experience was multiplied thousands of times in the Lower Ninth.

More troubling was that much of what was rehabbed after Katrina was still toxic. On a plane ride to Boston in 2011 I sat next to an older man wearing a tie with the fleur-de-lis imprinted on it. I didn’t want to strike up a conversation about New Orleans but he saw me working on a talk about the Lower Ninth and we began talking. Turns out he was a doctor and had been a first responder. We talked for a few hours, most of the trip. As we got up to depart the plane, safely at Logan, he turned to me and said “cancer”. “All of those schools those kids returned to, basically wiped down with cleaner. That’s it. They were still toxic. All those buildings they forced open so people could get back, toxic. The biggest cancer cluster we’ll ever see will be in New Orleans in about 10-15 years.” So bring hubs like schools back quickly, but do so in an environmentally sound way.

Aid programs need to be commonsensical. Anyone who has ever studied housing and race knew that the Road Home’s rebuilding aid was racially discriminatory. That it took a federal court and five years to change their funding scheme is evidence that the city did not want particular people back. Of course, that was obvious when the city destroyed public housing much of which was not flooded during Katrina. Less well known is that the Road Home requited that homes be certified to be at or above 50% repairable. Meaning that if you had lost more of your home, you could not rebuild. The result was
that many spent lots of money and time getting it 50% before they would ask for Road Home money. This simply delayed the rebuilding and the moving on processes.

Likewise the program for elevating people’s homes above the flood stage has been marred by lack of funding, time to reimbursement which is over a year in most instances, and has told numerous people to elevate and then gone back afterward and told them they were not eligible for grants because they don’t live in a flood prone area, is run by the Road Home program. A number of studies have shown that the Road Home has actually increased the time it takes to rebuild. Other programs that were run by for-profit companies that made millions off of the suffering of residents, but did little to actually help them like Halliburton and Bechtel who were being sued by the government for failure to fulfill their obligations in Iraq were given no bid contracts by the government to help rebuild New Orleans. FEMA paid these corporations $229,000 for each trailer they provided for evacuees. The same trailers that were later found to have toxic levels of formaldehyde. The same trailers that FEMA later asked New Orleanians $25,000 for if they wanted to keep living in them. At $229,000 per home, virtually every home in the Lower Ninth could have been rebuilt. This troubled many residents. As Tom told me, “Halliburton got what, over a hundred million I read, to do what? To tie up bodies to light posts? Blackwater got what, who knows? To shoot people trying to aid others?” Everyone had knowledge of the rampant disaster capitalism.

I don’t know when they put the tarps up, but either mine blew off or something and I had the guys come and try and put it up again when I was here getting stuff and I told them “no, I don’t want it”. So they left. I came back the next day, because of my badge I could get in when I wanted, pretty much at least if it was National Guard or something there, and I came back and they were up on my roof with a damn tarp and I yelled at them to get down. And they didn’t speak English, but they left. So I came back a few days later and the tarp is on the roof. And so yeah, all that water that was in the house, rather than keeping the roof open, which
wasn’t the best option, but they sealed up the house. They turned the house into a greenhouse, you know. It just made things worse. And everyone hated those tarps. We found out they got, the company that put them up got like $5000 a tarp and they paid someone $2000 who paid someone else and finally you got some guys here from Mexico getting probably $50/day to put up hundreds of tarps. (Michael, white male, 50s)

Again, this is not unique to New Orleans. It represents larger policy and political-economic shifts in the country and elsewhere. But as Mack would say, people need to know that this is about money.

Social problems are chained (Fine, 2006). You cannot isolate one problem or try and fix one problem without addressing others. Much of the effort to repair the community in the Lower Ninth and elsewhere focused on one particular problem to the exclusion of others. While not advocating for a complete disbandment of others who focused on other needs, many had a if you build they will return mentality. More problematic many in the neighborhood did not see their misfortunes extending to the period before Katrina. New Orleans’ problems are tied to the legacies of institutional racism, an unsustainable economy rooted in environmental exploitation, the domination of a growth machine elite, and a rapidly shrinking population and thus tax base. While these conditions were not solely responsible for the damage caused by Katrina, they greatly facilitated it and have exacerbated the inequalities in rebuilding and recovery. Replacing the public schools with a charter system might (might being the key word) do something to improve education, but it will not change an economy based on refining petroleum and accommodating visitors with a higher standard of living than residents. And while I support the announcement by the Mayor’s office to spend $56 million to repair the roads in the Lower Ninth, as many in the neighborhood have suggested, both literally and symbolically, those roads don’t lead anywhere. They certainly do not lead
anywhere without businesses relocating to the neighborhood, mixed income housing being built, schools being built, the establishment of police and fire services, the reopening of the health clinic. To be resilient means that the entire organism, the entire body, is functioning. We cannot say that New Orleans has recovered when the Lower Ninth is in the shape it is in.

Mack and others echoed the same sentiment that Wooten (2012) found in other neighborhoods to New Orleans’ long-term problems, “you got to get people to think outside of the box”. Again, though, urban-environmental experimentation and thinking outside of the box can be a difficult, but not impossible, line to traverse. While residents wanted to see broad changes in the educational system, why would they support charter schools when it came with the firing of all public school teachers. The single largest employer of New Orleans’ black middle class was the public school system. That particular move is a prime example of not thinking outside of the box. New Orleans is a city of neighborhoods. The public schools were an important part of one's identity. You went to the same schools your brothers and sisters did, the same schools your parents and grandparents went to. After Katrina the city renamed all of the new schools, so now that history, that identity is lost. The building of preparatory and advanced schools in neighborhoods, such as a school of arts or school of science and technology and linking those schools with scholarships at Tulane, UNO, and LSU, would have been a step in the right direction. Likewise, repurpose the land for large scale development that provides jobs for those who return. Located near the port, the Lower Ninth Ward would be an ideal place for a seafood processing plant or for a solar panel distribution center/farm. Since Katrina, the city has in many instances simply repeated past performances. Why did the
city wait to enforce elevation standards after so many folks had rebuilt? Why weren’t historical requirements dropped from rebuilding projects in historical areas so that people could return more quickly? When I asked questions like these to residents in the Lower Ninth I was told “that’s what its like to live here” or more simply, “that’s New Orleans”.

Also, limit the role of non-profits and charities and keep government accountable. The Lower Ninth was besieged by well meaning volunteers. There were thirty-three non-profits in the Lower Ninth when I left, but there were zero in 2005 when Katrina hit. While many do good work, they are not responsible to anyone. Many are marked by high turnover. Their boards are filled with people who live in Missouri, Texas, and California. In addition to doing unpaid work that locals could be paid to do, many have a poor sense of the history of the neighborhood or the city. At worst they have facilitated philanthrocapitalism, at best they do no harm. As Adams (2013) points out, in this arrangement recovery becomes a precarious outcome, balanced between moral conscience and a humanitarian economy. They have also created a mini-arms race among non-profits, who have had to compete for funding; non-profits increasingly are being forced to act as for-profits. In the midst of this, residents have completely lost faith in the government (Storm and ). While town meetings with Mayor Mitch Landrieu were well attended, with close to a thousand turning out, creating standing-room only conditions, these meetings quickly spiraled out of control and most left more exasperated about the state of their neighborhood than optimistic. The sign that hung from a chain linked fence off of St. Claude for over a year said it all: “5 Years of Broken Promises!” What surprised many perhaps as the equal indictment of Bush and Obama. As their councilman plead guilty to a litany of charges and their former Mayor faced a number of indictments,
residents had few places to turn. At a dinner for former residents, what was billed as the first AALP-NOAH homecoming pilgrimage at the New Orleans African American Museum, as the sole obvious outsider, I stood next to a pot of red beans and rice, being mistaken for a member of the media. Former state senator and city councilwoman Cynthia Willard-Lewis stood next to me and said quietly, “I wouldn’t want your job.” She had just been introduced moments before as the only politician not in jail or on their way. I laughed and told her we had met a few times before in the Lower Ninth, but that I had moved a year before. As she went to fix her plate I casually replied, “I wouldn’t want your job either.” She suffered a stroke a few days later.

The drive to profit from suffering was widespread in the aftermath of Katrina. The gap between government action and for profit companies miscues created large vacuums for charities and non-profits to step into. Mayor Landrieu put the number of volunteers who had volunteered in the Lower Ninth since 2006, most of whom came with faith based organizations, at close to 2 million. The amount of work these organizations were able to do, however, especially after demoing and gutting houses, was minimal. When residents needed the government to step in and begin rebuilding homes, the government had become complacent, letting church groups and high school students do the heavy lifting. There is certainly room for volunteers and charity groups in the aftermath of disasters, but they cannot be held responsible for rebuilding communities.

Finally, Mack used to say that “folks need to think like a disaster.” San Francisco has taken Mack’s idea to heart. They have created Neighborhood Empowerment Networks where neighbors are relied on for information and aid. Mack’s suggestions were mostly humble. He wanted each community to have a list of certified contractors so that in the
aftermath people know whom they can trust. He wanted a database of friends and families so that everyone knew they could contact multiple people to let them know where they were. Lots of residents wondered why radio stations were not capable of transmitting outside of the city or why their cell phone calls were all routed to room in a building below sea level. They wanted to know why temporary cell phones were not distributed or why no one bothered to write down people’s names and where they were headed. Why had people been taken, some at gunpoint, to far away places with no means to return? Why were pumps not tested before Katrina? Why was not the entire levee system rebuilt after Katrina? Why were homes (even by MIR) rebuilt on their same footprint? The answer is that for many of us Katrina did not change the way we think.

In her book *Never Saw It Coming* Karen Cerulo (2006) detailed the cultural and cognitive reasons we fail to imagine worse case scenarios. As she noted (pp. 12),

> [c]ommunity vision is always biased. Such biases occur because the cultural knowledge from which the habitus is derived is organized in terms of “relevances.” In other words, every community’s cultural knowledge base contains a variety of facts and beliefs, but certain items are emphasized and prioritized over others…[we] prioritize and attend to different categories of people, places, objects, and events. But amid such differences, a significant majority of thought communities also hold one thing in common, namely the relevance of best quality…the best people, places, objects, and events as highly relevant, highly important, and worthy of intense focus. In contrast, most communities relegate the worst to a remote position of little or no importance or relevance.”

Katrina, or something like it, had been predicted by a number of people. *The Times-Picayune* ran a series forecasting the damage a Category 5 would do to the city. Papers were presented at conferences, one a month before, outlining exactly what happened during Katrina. Few listened. Certainly those elites in charge of the city did not listen. The city has historically disregarded the Lower Ninth residents’ claims against the Corps,
denied their claims for infrastructure improvements, and did not listen to their worries about MRGO. The city has seen the community and its residents as of little importance. We would like to think things like Katrina won’t happen. But thinking that way renders us unprepared when they do happen. Cerulo, like Mack, encourages us to think like a disaster. That’s the way the residents of the Lower Ninth realized in the long-term aftermath of Katrina, think like a disaster.

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If Weezy and George had lived in New Orleans they probably would have lived in the Lower Ninth. They wouldn’t have had a “deluxe” in the sky, but rather a shotgun style house—maybe pink with blue and green trim. They still would have been upwardly mobile—as the theme song reminds us. But after Katrina, who knows? The Lower Ninth, which in the words of so many residents that I had to stop counting, was a diverse community made up of working and middle class families. There were doctors, lawyers, teachers, oil rig workers, fishermen, and chefs. The people I met, however, no longer seemed upwardly mobile. They were stuck. Stuck dealing with the secondary violences of an ongoing disaster.

Actually, after a few months of being in the Lower Ninth Ward the word “disaster” no longer had any meaning for me. It encompassed the physical structures, the houses, roads, streets, but it went deeper than that. It applied to institutions, such as churches, police, and civic centers. Socially there had been a disaster too. In his work on the Chicago Heat Wave Klinenberg (1995) presented and argued for a “social autopsy” of post-disaster society. In part this means looking at the social conditions that produced the disaster. In New Orleans this has meant looking at how we treat people living in
marginalized communities and trying to understand how things got that way. The Lower Ninth has presented itself as a difficult patient. In coming years we will have new patients. The question remains, however, will they fare better than the Lower Ninth?

My work in the Lower Ninth Ward has me looking for parallels. The fishermen of Gloucester, Massachusetts seem an unlikely comparison group and yet upon moving to Massachusetts I have been immediately struck by the parallels. Much like Katrina, the demise of the fishing industry in New England has been both an acute disaster and a chronic situation. A way of life seems to be on the brink, a transition seems to be occurring for a community from a home for working-class, blue-collar fishermen to a service industry for the tourist class. In many ways, in New England and elsewhere, this is an old story—it has already happened in Mystic, Connecticut and Plymouth, Massachusetts, but in some ways the loss of community and identity is still new to Gloucester. The end though is in sight. There are also familiar story lines. The residents have a constant battle with the government or an oversight agency. And they tell similar stories of the environment and change. There is also a good deal of uncertainty and confusion in their stories. They seem in some ways to be poised to make sense of the ongoing and oncoming social disruption in similar ways.

Another project that will use the lessons learned in the Lower Ninth Ward is a study on doomsday preppers. Folks in the Lower Ninth prepped very little for the next Katrina. They bought bigger cars to haul more family or stuff out of danger, they traded big dogs for little dogs who are apparently more apt to be able to be smuggled into hotel rooms, and they spoke of having a bag packed, ready to go. Elsewhere, people who are less experienced with disasters are prepping for the end of the world (or an end to
something). They are learning how to butcher animals, how to live off the grid, they stock up on apricot jam and AK-47s. Their understanding of disasters and they way they make sense of disruption represents an extreme, but increasingly popular perspective. While they represent a curious mix of ex-military, do-it-yourself soccer moms, and back-to-the land environmentalists, their entries into this world and their interactions with others—who have similar goals, but different beliefs and ideologies—are not well understood. Similar to folks in the Lower Ninth Ward they question the motives of government and the limits of communality. There are interesting comparisons here to be sure.
Appendix: Hustling Burawoy

Studying places like the Lower Ninth Ward presents many challenges. I briefly mention some here so readers get an idea of how the research for the book took place. First, as Sherman (2010) noted, isolated places tend to make sharp distinctions between outsiders and “people from here”. This distinction compounded and festered resentment in the Lower Ninth because before Katrina there were very few outsiders. While many residents proudly described their (or more likely generalized others’) profound racial and social worldview changes that have accompanied the influx of mostly Northeastern, white middle to upper-class volunteers, they likewise noted that it took the worst disaster in modern history for these racial and cultural exchanges to take place. As one long time resident turned community organizer explained, “We had zero, as in none, non-profits here before Katrina, now we have 33 working in the Lower Ninth. Zero for 20,000 people. Thirty-three for three thousand. This community existed before 2005. We needed help before Katrina.” Assumptions were made by both residents and volunteers about others. White volunteers made racialized assumptions about poverty, aid, and idleness, residents made assumptions about why volunteers were there or what their plans were. Despite being born in New Orleans, and having spent several years living in a neighboring parish, I was white and “not from around here”. I was simply part of the hoard of young, white (semi) professionals that had descended upon the Lower Ninth “to help”. It took several months of day-to-day interactions before residents would introduce me as “from here” or tell someone “it’s cool, this is Daina.”

My outsider status did have several benefits. People tended to remember me. While there were lots of volunteers present in the community, few were as immersed in day-to-
day events as I was. I was typically the only volunteer present at neighborhood and community meetings and because of my research, the one of a handful of volunteers to go back and forth between non-profits and organizations. I was also asked to lead a project at the non-profit I volunteered with that became a part of the community’s and then Mayor’s agenda, putting me in contact with neighborhood stakeholders and making me more visible. Furthermore, few volunteers stayed for as long as I did.

I also differed from most outsiders in that I was doing research for a book length project. I therefore took what residents had to say seriously and was appreciative of their time and perspectives. I genuinely wanted to meet their family members and friends. I also had background knowledge about their suffering and the structural conditions and growth-machine logic (Logan and Molotch, 1987) that had caused the damage to their neighborhood. Compared to other outsiders I measured up well.

I also grew up in St. Charles Parish, about thirty miles from the City and had decamped--as many others had after Katrina--for Houston in the late 80s. This did not mean I was “from there”, but residents, assuming that since I was there volunteering I was not unsympathetic to their worldview, would say things like “well, you from here, so you know how the City treats us” or “you know how it was down here before Katrina”. Despite never having actually lived in New Orleans before my research, I was more local than many volunteers.

Another difficulty in studying any place after a disaster like Katrina is asking people to relive what is likely the most traumatic experience of their life. Even though I would explain to potential interviewees that I was not interested in their “Katrina story” but rather what the last few years had been like, many people simply did not want to revisit
that part of their lives. Several interviewees told me that they were reluctant to talk and one who rescheduled our interview on six different occasions admitted to simply not being able to bring herself to talk about “it”. While I frequently gave up after the second no-show, a handful of residents would approach me months later and tell me they were ready to talk. They, like others, expressed a need to talk to someone. Sometimes they did, often they did not.

Finally, along with the debris and detritus that mar the Lower Ninth, reporters, documentarians, tour buses, and academics are legion. I imagine that very few doctoral students have had to compete with Spike Lee, Anderson Cooper, Brian Williams, NPR, the BBC, or Oprah for interviews. I was asked what network I was with on more than one occasion. On a few occasions I was asked where the rest of the “research team” was. One interviewee wanted to know if I made a film about the book who would play him. In another interview, sitting amidst pictures of the interviewee shaking hands with Brad Pitt, Danny Glover, and Jimmy Carter, the interviewee asked for my business card and proceeded to put it in a folder with several hundred cards, proudly exclaiming that he had done an interview with everyone in the book.

My approach to studying the Lower Ninth Ward and the social disruption that residents had to deal with on a daily basis was based on Burawoy’s “extended case method” and Venkatesh’s “hustle”. I think good ethnography of poor, urban areas, which means useful ethnography, has to come to terms with both. Ethnography is at once as Burawoy noted, the use of multiple dialogues to interrogate empirical reality, but also as Venkatesh discovered coming to terms with his role of a participant observer of residents of the Robert Taylor homes “shaped in some way be the prevalence and importance of
hustling in social reproduction (2002: 96). It is not the case that these two ways of understanding ethnography are incompatible, but that one is overly concerned with the scientific rationale of understanding in a reflexive way, while the other stresses the reflexive relationship between the informant and the fieldworker in particular spaces of ethnography.

Behind the extended case method is the belief that social life cannot be understood without being immersed in the community that one is studying. To immerse myself in the Lower Ninth Ward I volunteered with a non-profit, lowernine.org. Lowernine.org is a rebuild organization that helps homeowners by supplying volunteer labor, both skilled and unskilled. It works with residents who can supply materials for rebuilding, but cannot afford to pay contractors or laborers to do the work. The work ranged from repairing walls and porches, tiling floors, or painting to complete rebuilds, From 2008-2011 they averaged about 35 rebuilds a year, roughly the same as Brad Pitt’s Make it Right and the other primary rebuild non-profit in the neighborhood--Common Ground--both of whom are much better funded. At other times they cut abandoned lots, worked on urban farms, or helped with other community projects. And because it is located in the middle of the Lower Ninth Ward, residents frequently stopped by to talk about their homes or to see what group is up to.

I originally volunteered because I thought it would be a good way to meet homeowners and get to know some of the structural constraints to rebuilding. Additionally, I thought it would be both an act of good faith on my part to demonstrate to homeowners that I wanted to give and not just take. Plus, I was born in New Orleans, and while I never lived there before my research and hadn’t even lived in Louisiana for over
twenty years, it still very much felt like home and I wanted to do whatever I could to help out. I originally volunteered for three months, but ended up working with lowernine.org for thirteen months. My role at the non-profit went from showing up a few days a week to helping with small projects to organizing projects and representing the organization at various meetings.

Another way I became immersed in the community was by attending numerous community meetings held each week. There are over thirty non-profits that were serving the community in 2010. There were also at least three active neighborhood/community associations. Many of these non-profits and associations held monthly or biweekly community meetings. Additionally many organizations called special meetings to meet with politicians or to discuss concerns or projects that might include other non-profits. In addition to the non-profits, the Mayor’s office, state congress people, universities, and groups of concerned citizens often held community meetings. Most meetings were open to the public. I took extensive notes at almost all meetings.

I also sought out several people in the community. These individuals were the stakeholders that ran or helped run community groups or old timers that were de facto community representatives or archivists. This group, especially the archivists, had grown weary of formal discussions and while refusing to be interviewed on tape would talk about anything and everything for hours everyday. Much of the background material on the community presented about the neighborhood comes from these conversations.

Most of the material for this book, however, comes from informal conversations with homeowners whose homes I worked on or visited. There was a lot of down time on work sites and neighbors were generally curious about who was moving back and how long it
would take us to finish the rebuild, that most of my days were spent having informal conversations on the back of pick-up trucks, sitting on porches, at the volunteer house, or from roof-tops. In total I conducted thirty-eight formal interviews with residents of the Lower Ninth Ward. I probably, however, spoke to well over three hundred members of the community. My field notes from these informal conversations tallied over three hundred pages.

While the interviews with the homeowners and residents followed a structured protocol, the interviews with the leaders of the non-profits sometimes diverged from the protocol to focus on their particular role in the community. All of the interviews were tape recorded, transcribed, and coded using a qualitative software program. Interviewees were compensated twenty-five dollars for their time. Many of the stakeholders and community groups donated their “fee” to various organizations. The shortest interview lasted thirty minutes. Several of the interviewees were well practiced and answered in very canned ways. Others, due to time constraints, gave thirty minutes or an hour as a set time. The longest interview took three and half hours. The interviews averaged slightly over ninety minutes. Two interviews ended somewhat prematurely because of emotional duress. Both of these interviews were with people I had grown close to over the year I was there and both thought that they were ready to tell their story, but after ninety minutes or so, they had enough. One of these interviews was finished, informally, a few weeks later. I interviewed ten whites and twenty-eight blacks. Most of the people I interviewed were between forty and fifty years old. All but two were homeowners (those

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Interviewees quoted in this paper have been given pseudonyms. For most of the informal conversations I had with residents, homeowners, or community leaders I have also assigned pseudonyms. In some cases, however, either because the person is connected with a well known non-profit or agency and hence everyone would know them anyway or because they ask I use their real name, pseudonyms were not given.
were squatters who had been born and raised in the community) and all but one currently lived in the Lower Ninth Ward (he and his family moved nine days before Katrina hit, but he owned and rented two homes in the Lower Ninth, was a past president of a local neighborhood association, and was still one of the most active members of the community).

Despite my strategy of getting to know people before I asked for interviews, interviewing people whose homes I helped rebuild and people whom after six to seven months had seen me at three or four meetings a week proved to be anything but easy. People would generally acquiesce to an interview pretty quickly, but would frequently not follow through. I would generally try and schedule the interview a few days after the potential subject agreed, but many subjects would delay by saying next week or even in a few instances next month. I would call the day before the interview to make sure we were still meeting. Most subjects at this point would reschedule, while those who did not often failed to show up the next day. I would call and try and reschedule no more than three times. On most occasions either the third time was a success or the resident would find me again sometime later, often months after the initial agreed upon meeting, and ask when we were going to talk. Despite occurring several times, I was always surprised that after failing to show multiple times people were still interested in interviewing. I assumed that many residents felt obliged to do the interview and were too polite to say no, but when it came time just could not bring themselves to do it. I realized mid-way through the interviews that for the most part those that were successful, meaning they showed up, were those in which I had been out “hustled”.
In his ethnography of the Robert Taylor Homes, Sudhir Venkatesh noted that the residents tended to see him as just another “hustler”. As this was the dominant social mode by which they operated and interacted with one another, it made sense that they related to him as an “academic hustler”. Others have likewise noted that the power dynamic inherent to the ethnography of urban, poor areas, favors the ethnographer, typically in a more privileged social position, over the less privileged informant. Venkatesh’s subjects recognizing that he was getting something out of talking to them tried to out-hustle him. As he wrote this hustle shaped his ethnography:

the ‘hustle’ became the dominant frame that shaped tenants’ perception of the data collector and that, correlative, mediated their exchange with such actors. The ‘hustle’ put in place a set of structural constraints that defined what spaces and practices I could access and whom I could observe. (2002: 107).

For residents of the Lower Ninth Ward hustling had become the dominant modus operandi. They have had to hustle to preserve their community, to have public services restored, for promised rebuilding monies, for volunteer services, for everything. As one community leader told me,

“It ain’t easy living here. Everything is a struggle. We got to blackmail politicians just to get them down here, to keep them true to their word. The whole thing is who is scratching my back, you know, what you gonna do for me? That ain’t no way to live, but we living it. It ain’t easy, it gets tired.” (Linda, black female 60s)

Additionally, many residents were weary of people profiting off of “their stories”. Residents therefore saw my research as part of a hustle. Their perceptions may even have been abetted by my role as a volunteer.

Several interviewees noted that due to the work I did for them they felt comfortable doing the interview. In other words, we were equal. After recognizing the hustle, it became more apparent to me that many residents saw me as a hustler (well intentioned)
and because of that they were going to out hustle me. I will give one example taken from my field notes:

*Meeting Mr. Chauvin*

Went by the office today to see where everyone was and talked to Ry. Mr. Chauvin called. He bought a garage door and wanted to know if someone could come over and put it in his house. I told Ry I’d go with him because I wanted to meet Mr. Chauvin. Justin had said I should interview him because he was interesting and they had spent several weeks hanging out, working on the house the year before, and he was a talker. After Ry and I carried it inside he asked if we were going to be able to install it. Ry said we had some extra volunteers coming in next week and he could probably send a few people out to do it. I told Mr. Chauvin I’d come over and do it Thursday or Friday. I told him I’d bring Justin and maybe we could talk. I explained my research and he interrupted and said, “that’s all good. You come over and put that [garage door] in and once it’s up and works, then we’ll talk. But not before that. You catch me.” He walked us out and I waived and told him I’d see him Thursday.

True to Mr. Chauvin’s word, despite several attempts at conversation, he wouldn’t talk to me until the door was up and working. It took several days to install (in part because he didn’t actually have a garage and we had to build one out of a makeshift carport built of cinderblocks). The day we finished up he motioned for me to come inside, sat down on his couch, turned off his soap opera, and asked me what I wanted to know.

Despite using Venkatesh’s hustle to locate my fieldwork, I was nonetheless weary of reproducing what Rios (2011) calls a “jungle-book trope”. Rios and others have criticized urban ethnographers, Venkatesh in particular, for exaggerating the violence of urban communities, exoticizing the residents, and ultimately, for furthering the marginalization of the population. I simply wanted to describe the day to day suffering and the ordeal of living with social disruption that members of the Lower Ninth endured. It is, however, a violent place and this violence cannot be diminished or diluted. But this violence pales in comparison to the secondary violences, described in detail in chapter two that have been
perpetuated by the government and others on the community since (and obviously before) Katrina and the federal levee failures.

I moved to the Ninth ward in New Orleans a week after the BP oil spill occurred and lived there until June of 2011. Although the primary research questions I asked were related to everyday life in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, it was obvious that the spill cognitively affected residents. A number of events also occurred while I was there, including an explosion at the Chalmette-Exxon processing plant in neighboring St. Bernard Parish which dusted the Lower Ninth ward with toxic particles, the rising of the Mississippi River to historic levels, a lawsuit against the Army Corps of Engineers to block a lock expansion project for the Intercostal Waterway which borders the Lower Ninth Ward, and increasing concerns about the pollution from a local scrap company. These events were often used by both interviewees and in impromptu conversations in the field to reference previous disasters or toxic events. This chaining of events prompted me to extensively collect archival media sources and become familiar with previous case studies of environmental justice in the general area. I also collected current media sources on environmental problems, disasters, risks and threats while in the field. This multi-method analysis allowed me to better understand interpretations of disasters and risks and identify patterns in the cognitive reactions to these threats.

All told I spent close to fourteen months in the Ninth Ward. Much of this time was spend volunteering at lowernine.org and thus rebuilding houses. I went from one of maybe thirty steady volunteers those first several weeks to one of eight to ten long-termers. Only one other non-profit, Common Ground, had long-term volunteers living in the community, so people knew who we were and what we were doing. While
lowernine.org always gave me the latitude to work with whomever I wanted or go wherever I wanted, after several months many days had me venturing down the street to meet new residents. Likewise, at the community meetings I went from an interloper to being called upon for advice or for some version of the “facts”. It was a slow transition. The first person I called to see about moving to the Lower Ninth, Warrenetta Banks, whom I’ve given a pseudonym throughout, told me not to come. She had literally just finished her two hundredth interview. “People are tired, tired of talking and having nothing happen” she told me. Charles Allen III, who was active in the community but later became the Director of Environmental Affairs under Mayor Landrieu, likewise cautioned me: “You can’t just be a taker, you have to give something to these people. What are you going to give?” When I explained I understood, he said, no and wanted to know specifically what I had to offer the community. Both were right (and both do incredible work for the Lower Ninth). I often interviewed people who had given too many interviews. One was overtly hostile. One didn’t bother to answer questions but rather gave me talking points that had been so well rehearsed that the fact that over fifty people were working on his home with large power tools made little difference to or distraction for him. Despite my better judgment I was Warrenetta’s two hundredth and forty-eight interviewer. I figure I logged right at 2800 hours of community service. I spent approximately another two hundred hours in meetings. I gave as much as I could, but as Charles probably knew, it could never be enough. I consider the residents there my friends, as good as any I’ve met elsewhere.

In addition to documenting the cognitive strategies of restoring both individual and collective ontological status, my goal here has been to do as little ethnographic violence
as possible. I have tried where possible to narrate recovery efforts using the words of residents or the residents’ perspectives where possible. In part I do so to minimize interpreting their ideas or feelings, but also to capture the lived experience of dealing with the abandonment. Residents had been through so much, I didn’t want to increase their suffering. I hope that I have not.

Many simply wanted me to tell their story or the story of the neighborhood. This I have also tried to do. This has not been an instance of value-free sociology. I came to greatly enjoy my time in the Lower Ninth. I was asked to lead or join the board of a handful of non-profits and somewhat reluctantly declined. I made many friends there and it was difficult to leave them behind in their struggle for social justice. The day I told Mack I was leaving was one of the hardest. In a second I went from being the one academic who had stayed behind to fight the good fight to joining the litany of researchers, thousands, who had come to the neighborhood, gotten their story, and was now leaving. I hope that in some ways this is in part the blueprint he was after.
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