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The Lower Ninth Ward: resistance, recovery, and renewal

Alexandra Giancarlo

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, agianc1@lsu.edu

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THE LOWER NINTH WARD: RESISTANCE, RECOVERY, AND RENEWAL

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of Geography and Anthropology

by
Alexandra L. Giancarlo
B.A. University of Guelph, 2003
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Dedication

I want to dedicate this thesis first and foremost to my loving parents (Pamela and Luigi) and courageous brother (Nicholas), as well as my supportive extended family of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins: Rose, John, Carolyn, Matthew, Nancy, Derek, Charlotte, Jim, Jane, Charlie, Helen, Assunta, my deceased loving grandfathers Tony and Fred, and the Banovsky family. They have always encouraged me to follow my heart and been by my side every step of the way.

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Abstract

After Hurricane Katrina of 2005, New Orleans's Lower Ninth Ward became an icon for the failure of recovery efforts and the persistence of inequality and poverty in American society. However, for as long as this community has been marginalized it has been creating advocacy organizations and counter-narratives that battled discrimination and imbued its cultural practices with meaning. Residents often speak of a profound sense of community attachment, a commitment to educational prospects, and a deep historic and cultural identity. Historically, this area has been home to various social and legal campaigns, mirroring the contemporary protests that arose when residents encountered unwillingness on behalf of officials to rebuild their community. One of the most recent manifestations of this activism is the community's campaign to re-open the Dr. Martin Luther King Charter School (MLK) after Hurricane Katrina.

Although the media has devoted considerable attention to the re-opening of MLK, thus far little scholarly research has focused on how this campaign intersects broader historical trends and how it reflects and reinforces place attachment among residents. From the early creation of social aid and pleasure clubs to the later movements to desegregate the school system and to halt the expansion of the Industrial Canal lock within the community, the school re-opening campaign emerges as the latest effort in a long history of activism and refusal to concede to outside forces. Using the fight to re-open their community school as a contemporary context, I seek to examine connections between a historical culture of resistance and community resilience, often facilitated by a reservoir of powerful social memories, and residents' attachment to their landscape. This study is grounded in critical race theory, social memory studies, and resistance theory. I employ a mixed methods approach that consisted of formal interviews, archival research, and participant observation. By taking an historical perspective of this community's resistance, we can create an

alternative narrative to post-Katrina discourses that present residents solely in terms of victimization.

1. Introduction: The Lower Ninth Ward: Resistance, Recovery, and Renewal

“It was a great place to live in. When I hear people speak in whispered tones, like they’re embarrassed to say ‘The Lower Ninth Ward,’ I’m always surprised, because it was a wonderful neighborhood to live in.”¹

“Our connections came in the school. Most of the kids I went to high school, college with, I went to elementary school with. So once you start pulling this away from the [Lower Ninth Ward] community, then what are you doing to the community culturally? You don’t have [a] connection anymore. You’re not here anymore. There’s no way for us to connect.”²

This study examines a prominent example of post-Hurricane Katrina activism and how it fits into an historical culture of resistance. Although the media has devoted considerable attention to the re-opening of the Lower Ninth Ward’s Dr. Martin Luther King Charter School in New Orleans, thus far little scholarly research has focused on how the campaign behind this achievement intersects broader historical trends and how it reflects and reinforces place attachment among residents. Using the fight to re-open their community school as a contemporary context, I seek to examine connections between a historical culture of resistance and community resilience, often facilitated by a reservoir of powerful social memories, and residents’ attachment to their landscape. In so doing, I hope to better understand why residents are determined to rebuild and return even in the face of environmental and economic uncertainty.

Following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, New Orleans, a metropolis famed for its rich architectural history, its cosmopolitanism, and its easygoing culture, emerged into the spotlight. For many observers, the storm made plain the city’s socioeconomic inequalities that largely fell along racial lines. Those watching Katrina unfold took note of racial disparities in evacuation and recovery; the storm inundated thirty-eight of the city’s forty-seven extreme poverty tracts, and the racial

¹ Interview with Jacquelyn Hughes Mooney, July 10, 2010, transcript on file with author.

² Interview with Reverend Willie Calhoun, June 17, 2010, transcript on file with author.

composition of these areas was overwhelmingly black. Indeed, one scholar noted that if re-development of the city was to be limited to the areas that did *not* take on water during the storm, these new residential patterns would eliminate up to 80 percent of the city's black citizens.³ Furthermore, the black population was largely concentrated in areas of extreme poverty, where the poverty rate reached 40 percent.⁴ Geographers and sociologists have noted the outcomes of this spatial concentration of poverty, including physical deterioration of the neighborhood, decreasing employment opportunities, disparities in quality of public services such as schools, and social isolation.⁵ New Orleans's Lower Ninth Ward is a textbook example of these consequences, fueled in part by historical racial segregation and isolation. Furthermore, the media's assessment of this community often furthered long-standing stereotypes that portrayed the area as "distant" and "uncivilized."⁶

My interest lies in upsetting these dominant narratives by introducing counter-narratives from the community. Geographer Ben Marsh has stated that "Place is, in part, the story a town tells itself."⁷ By asking "What is the story that the Lower Ninth Ward tells itself?" I hope to show that pre-Katrina life in the Ninth Ward was not merely a dismal existence nor are the survivors of the storm helpless "victims" but survivors, going to great lengths to bring displaced residents home. Residents often speak of a profound sense of community attachment, a commitment to educational prospects, and a deep historic and cultural identity that characterized the area. Historically, this area has been home to various social and legal campaigns, mirroring the contemporary protests that arose

³ John R. Logan, "The Impact of Katrina: Race and Class in Storm-Damaged Neighborhoods," Brown University. 2006. <http://www.s4.brown.edu/katrina/report.pdf> (Accessed October 20, 2010).

⁴ Bruce Katz, "Concentrated Poverty in New Orleans and Other American Cities," The Brookings Institute. August 4, 2006. www.brookings.edu. (Accessed July 24, 2009).

⁵ David H. Kaplan and Steven R. Holloway, *Segregation in Cities* (Washington: Association of American Geographers, 1998), 92-93.

⁶ Juliette Landphair, "The Forgotten People of New Orleans: Community, Vulnerability, and the Lower Ninth Ward," *The Journal of American History* 94, no.3 (2007): 839.

⁷ Ben Marsh, "Continuity and Decline in the Anthracite Towns of Pennsylvania," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 77, no.3 (1987): 337-338.

when residents encountered unwillingness on behalf of officials to rebuild their community. In theoretical terms, geographers have addressed many of these issues through studies of place attachment, social memory, urban historical geography, and how these relate to resistance. This study will use the Lower Ninth Ward's fight to re-open its community school as a lens to examine the area's historical culture of resistance as well as the residents' attachment to their landscape.

This thesis progresses as follows: the introductory section outlines a brief history of Hurricane Katrina and its effects on the Mississippi Gulf Coast and New Orleans, and discusses the theoretical underpinnings of my project, including the development of an increasingly close intersection between critical race studies and geographical paradigms as well as the concepts of place attachment and resistance. I also explain my methodologies. Chapter 2 discusses how scholars have addressed the relationship between social memory and resistance, outlining how oppressed groups can draw on a reservoir of collective narratives for survival, particularly when faced with a catastrophic event such as Hurricane Katrina. It also highlights what geographers have written about the nature of place attachment, particularly after a disaster or traumatic event, and discusses how these themes apply to the Ninth Ward. In Chapter 3, I will move to New Orleans and the Ninth Ward more specifically in exploring how the city's historical urban geography has come to bear on current spatial patterns and community identity. In Chapter 4, I examine a powerful precursor to (and, indeed, contemporary of) the Lower Ninth Ward residents' campaign to re-open their school. This movement took the form of an ongoing community activist campaign to halt the expansion of the Industrial Canal within its bounds. Finally, Chapter 5 evaluates what has been written about education for blacks within the South, as well as the pivotal role that the Ninth Ward played in New Orleans' school integration. This chapter explores in-depth the role of social memory in post-Katrina activism and the profound nature of the residents' place attachment, relying heavily on interviews that allow the residents to tell their own community's story of recovery.

1.1 Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans

“Devastating damage expected...Hurricane Katrina...a most powerful hurricane with unprecedented strength... rivaling the intensity of Hurricane Camille of 1969. Most of the area will be uninhabitable for weeks... perhaps longer. At least one half of well-constructed homes will have roof and wall failure....Airborne debris will be widespread....Persons... pets... and livestock exposed to the winds will face certain death if struck. Power outages will last for weeks.... Water shortages will make human suffering incredible by modern standards.”⁸

On August 23, 2005, meteorologists noted the formation of Tropical Depression 12 about 200 miles southeast of Nassau.⁹ By August 25, it had formed into a Category 1 hurricane, heading towards the Florida coast to strike between Ft. Lauderdale and Miami. This passage over land slowed its wind speeds, but caused its eye to become more concentrated due to the absorption of heat and moisture as it tracked over Florida’s Everglades marshes. By Friday, August 26, Katrina was well into the Gulf of Mexico and strengthening. Of greater concern, its original projected track towards landfall at the Florida Panhandle had moved considerably westward towards Louisiana. Walter Maestri, Emergency Preparedness Director in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, recalled a phone call he received from his old friend Max Mayfield, the director of the National Hurricane Center (NHC). Mayfield had stated, “This is it. This is what we have been talking about all of these years. You are going to take it...It’s a 30, 90 storm.”¹⁰ That, Maestri knew, was the longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates of the city of New Orleans. This hurricane risk was as well-documented as it was dreaded within the scientific community.

Throughout Saturday, August 27, Hurricane Katrina had almost doubled in size and National Hurricane Center officials were more and more confident that it would make landfall at or near New Orleans. Governor Kathleen Blanco requested that President Bush declare a state of

⁸ NOAA, http://www.srh.noaa.gov/data/warn_archive/LIX/NPW/0828_155101.txt (accessed October 25, 2010).

⁹ United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Hurricane Katrina: A Nation Still Unprepared*, 109th Cong., 2 sess., 2006, S. Rept. 109-322, 51.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

emergency for the state of Louisiana.¹¹ The following day, August 28, President Bush declared a major disaster for Louisiana; by this point, the NHC declared Katrina “a potentially catastrophic Category 5 hurricane.”¹² That same day, the National Weather Service office in Slidell, Louisiana, issued its infamous predictions of Katrina’s wrath, summarized in the introductory quote. The city received a warning to expect a storm surge of 18 to 22 feet; in Waveland, Mississippi, estimates placed the anticipated surge at 28 feet.¹³ Katrina officially made landfall as a high-end Category 3 storm at Buras, Louisiana, at 6:10 a.m. on Monday, August 29.

As the eye approached the city, a 14-17 foot storm surge entered the “funnel” created by the levees framing the intersection of the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet (MR-GO) and the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway (GIWW), forcing a violent flow of water into the Inner Harbor Navigational Canal (Industrial Canal). As Katrina passed over Lake Borgne on New Orleans’s eastern edge, it forced water onto the levee that protected the northern parts of the Ninth Ward and St. Bernard Parish, causing five to ten feet to cascade over the levee walls. When Katrina reached Lake Pontchartrain, the storm produced a southward surge of lakewater onto the north part of the city as well as New Orleans East (where it also caused a breach near the Lakefront Airport). At 6:50 a.m. water began overtopping the levees along all parts of the Industrial Canal and water gushed into the city to the east and west.¹⁴ Between 5 and 7 a.m., the storm surge in Lake Borgne destroyed levee reaches along the MR-GO and the Industrial Canal, causing flooding that, in some instances, lasted for days. By 7:45 a.m. the levees along the eastern section of the Industrial Canal gave way, sending a torrent of water into the Lower Ninth Ward. Floodwaters reached the second stories of houses as panicked residents fled to their attics and cut escape holes through their roofs. Breaches and

¹¹ U.S. House of Representatives Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina, *A Failure of Initiative*, 109th Cong., 2d sess., 2006, Rep. 109-377, 63.

¹² United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Hurricane Katrina: A Nation Still Unprepared*, 52.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

overtopping occurred along the three major canals to the northern part of the city: the 17th Street, Orleans Avenue, and London Avenue canals. Catastrophic flooding in wealthy Lakeview and adjacent areas resulted (see Fig. 1). Before long, 80 percent of the city was underwater—in some areas to a depth of 20 feet. Although the devastation was already immense, the level of human suffering within the city and along the Mississippi Gulf Coast would only worsen in the coming days. Families remained trapped on their rooftops without water or food and snakes and alligators made the floodwaters treacherous; thousands took refuge in the Convention Center and the Superdome amid desperate conditions while sheet-covered bodies outside the Superdome and on the interstate made front-page news. The world watched, aghast.

All told, Katrina took over 1,100 lives in Louisiana, 700 of which were in the Ninth Ward.¹⁵ Much has been made of the socio-economic characteristics of the hardest-hit areas, and indeed, the results are telling. The data (comprising New Orleans, its suburbs, and Biloxi-Gulfport, Mississippi) show that the neighborhoods of social groups with the least resources were the ones most deeply affected by Katrina. This population was more likely to be African American, to live in rental housing, to live below the poverty line, and to be unemployed. Indeed, within New Orleans, greater than half the persons in damaged areas were renters and 30 percent lived below the poverty line. In the Lower Ninth Ward, in which 99.9 percent of residents' homes were damaged, many simply swept away or flattened by the flood waters, more than a third of residents lived below the poverty line, and 14 percent were unemployed.¹⁶ In essence, the city's most vulnerable citizens were also those at the greatest risk during disaster.¹⁷ This is, of course, not to diminish the widespread and profound effects of the disaster as a whole. Indeed, 640,000 people lived in areas heavily damaged by Katrina, either in Louisiana or in Mississippi, and in St. Bernard and Orleans parishes more than

¹⁵ "Our Work and Progress: Lower 9th/Katrina Timeline," Make it Right NOLA. http://www.makeitrightnola.org/index.php/work_progress/timeline_katrina/ (Accessed October 20, 2010).

¹⁶ Logan, "The Impact of Katrina," 13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

70 percent of their populations lived in damaged zones. Katrina's effects cut across all races and classes. That being said, the stark statistics remain: if the re-population of New Orleans was limited to those populations living in zones undamaged by Katrina, it would lose 50 percent of its white population but greater than 80 percent of its black citizens.¹⁸

1.2 Race, Geography, and Environmental Justice

It was in part to address questions of the “racialization of space and the spatialization of race” that the critical race theory and attendant questions of power and subjugation have risen to the fore as pressing themes within geography.¹⁹ In 1998, the *Professional Geographer* released an issue dedicated to race and geography and addressed the question, “how does racial formation shape space, give meanings to places, and condition the experience of embodied subjects emplaced in and moving through the material world?”²⁰ In the introductory section, Richard Schein states that since race and racism are central dynamics of our world and have profound consequences for political and economic realities, they should also be of critical concern to scholars.²¹

David Delaney's illuminating article, “The Space that Race Makes,” asks what it would look like if geographers are to take the concept of a “wholly racialized world” seriously.²² First, he asserts, it would involve removing essentialized categories altogether. It would require that geographers move beyond conventional geographies of race to understand how every landscape, even those traditionally considered “normal” or “nonracialized,” are actually submerged in racial dynamics; as he states, “there is no outside to a wholly racialized world.”²³ Delaney challenges geographers to

¹⁸ Logan, “The Impact of Katrina,” 16.

¹⁹ David Delaney, “The Space that Race Makes.” *The Professional Geographer* 54, no.1 (2002):8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

²¹ Richard H. Schein, “Race, Racism and Geography: Introduction,” *The Professional Geographer* 54, no.1 (2002): 2.

²² Delaney, “The Space that Race Makes,” 6.

²³ *Ibid.*, 7.

buck simplistic scholarship that considers “inner city” and “the border” as racialized spaces but glosses over the role of race in suburbia or in America’s heartland. Geographers are called to better understand how the social and the spatial are mutually influential: space, Delaney states, can reinforce and solidify elements of the social and vice versa.²⁴

Delaney’s work relates well to recent geographical scholarship that addresses “whiteness” and the social construction of race. Audrey Kobayashi and Linda Peake’s “Racism out of Place: Thoughts on Whiteness and an Antiracist Geography in the New Millennium,” Steven Hoelscher’s “Making Place, Making Race: Performances of Whiteness in the Jim Crow South” and Helen Regis and Shana Walton’s “Producing the Folk at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival” all seek to elaborate how whiteness is an integral part of the American racialized landscape as well as a distinct historical phenomenon. Refuting the existence of white privilege or denying whiteness as a “race” only contributes to its power as the norm against which all other categories are measured.²⁵ From these pieces, some key concepts have arisen that will allow a better understanding of the complexities of the Ninth Ward and New Orleans’ ethnic landscape more generally. Kobayashi and Peake detail the importance of specificity of experience and the diversity of resistance tactics within and between communities of color. Avoiding the conflation of the Ninth Ward’s environmental and social landscape with other demographically-similar communities recognizes the uniqueness of residents’ experiences.

Hoelscher, Regis, and Walton examine Southern racial experiences and the social construction of race. Hoelscher argues that the South is the most appropriate starting point to understand racially-mediated landscapes because it “has provided the main stage on which

²⁴ Delaney, “The Space that Race Makes,” 7.

²⁵ Steven Hoelscher, “Making Place, Making Race: Performances of Whiteness in the Jim Crow South,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 93, no.3 (2003): 662.

Americans have played out (the) fundamental performance of race construction.”²⁶ Both of these articles touch on the notion of “spectacle” and the privilege inherent to the power of looking and the power of telling. Regis and Walton describe how New Orleans’ Jazz Fest replicates social structures in which communities of color are pushed to the margins and describe how their culture is “consumed” by outsiders.

Environmental justice, the term to describe the siting of disamenities (originally, chemical or hazardous-waste emitting facilities) in communities of color, is also an instructive lens through which to view the Lower Ninth Ward’s earlier activist efforts discussed in Chapter 5. Intrinsicly bound up with issues of race, the original term *environmental racism* was coined in 1982.²⁷ Environmental equity, a term used subsequently, emphasized the broader concerns of race and class. The more common term in recent years, *environmental justice*, arises from two distinct uses: a social movement that seeks redress for past environmental injustices and a bureaucratic procedural process that seeks to avoid imposing environmental burdens on minority or low-income populations.²⁸

Most environmental justice scholars also consider the contamination of a community in Warren County, North Carolina, with polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) liquid as the birth of the modern-day environmental justice movement. Eileen McGurty describes how this early example of activism constituted more than “just another demonstration against a landfill” because of the protestors’ allegations of racially-based discrimination in the siting of the dump.²⁹ The area’s predominantly poor and African American residents launched an exhaustive, but ultimately unsuccessful, legal campaign against the state and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

²⁶ Steven Hoelscher, “Making Place, Making Race,” 662.

²⁷ Susan L. Cutter, “Race, Class and Environmental Justice,” *Progress in Human Geography* 19, no.1 (1995): 112.

²⁸ The first book on environmental justice, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*, used a variety of case studies to draw attention to the environmental and industrial decisions that relegated African-American communities and those of lower socioeconomic standing to the status of “throwaway communities.” See Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*, 3rd ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), xvi.

²⁹ Eileen McGurty, *Transforming Environmentalism: Warren County, PCBs, and the Origins of Environmental Justice* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 5.

According to McGurty, this campaign marked a decisive shift because, through the environmental justice “label,” protestors now had an official term for the activism they had been engaging in for years under the banner of “community organizing” or “neighborhood development.”

In terms of Louisiana, one may look to the works of Barbara Allen and Craig Colten to garner a more context-specific analysis of the Ninth Ward activists’ efforts. Allen argues that the 150-mile stretch of the lower Mississippi River from New Orleans to Baton Rouge, home to more than 150 petrochemical plants, is also one of the birth sites of the environmental justice movement.³⁰ Concerns about industrial pollution arose within the small town of Geismar in the 1970s, when a young trucker driver died from exposure to noxious fumes within the area dominated by Mobil, MonoChem, Morton, and BASF factories. With the help of an environmental outreach specialist, these small African American communities began to take action against the “poisoning” of their communities, signaling the beginning of the environmental justice movement within the state. A more recent example centers on the town of Convent, downriver from Geismar, near which the Japanese chemical giant Shintech requested to build a \$700 million polyvinyl-chloride plant in 1996. The community, 81 percent black and overwhelming of low socio-economic status, used the language of environmental racism and discrimination to substantiate their protests and explicitly tested the Civil Rights Act for environmental justice purposes in court.³¹

Within New Orleans specifically, Colten provides an instructive analysis of the conflict that arose over the Agricultural Street Landfill, which was located in a part of the Ninth Ward that had transitioned from predominately white during the early twentieth century to overwhelming black by the 1980s.³² Local officials decided to use the land abutting the dump to create public housing and

³⁰ Barbara L. Allen, “Cradle of a Revolution? The Industrial Transformation of Louisiana’s Lower Mississippi River,” *Technology and Culture* 47 (2006): 112.

³¹ Revathi I. Hines, “African Americans’ Struggle for Environmental Justice and the Case of the Shintech Plant: Lessons Learned from a War Waged,” *Journal of Black Studies* 31, no.6 (2001): 780-781.

³² Craig E. Colten. *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 113.

later construct an elementary school. In 1993, residents and activists filed a class-action lawsuit for compensation for health problems, property devaluations, and relocation costs, causing the controversy to become enmeshed in the larger environmental justice context.³³

Recently, geographers have broadened the discussion of environmental justice to encompass paradigms of white privilege (“an attempt to name a social system that works to the benefit of whites”)³⁴ and a focus on the siting of urban *amenities* (such as differentials in park acreage distribution). This expanded framework includes the historical and institutional structures that have created environmental inequities as well as more subtle forms of racism such as “whites having the power to expel and exclude the dirtiest industries from their neighborhoods.”³⁵ Colten also inverts the usual environmental equity inquiry by examining “inequity by design”—in essence, by identifying gaps in New Orleans’ public sanitation program that may have coordinated with residential patterns of minority citizens.³⁶ These examples from environmental justice scholarship provide a provocative framework within which to analyze the Ninth Ward citizens’ campaign against the expansion of the Industrial Canal lock within their community, which was a prominent precursor to their post-Katrina activist efforts.

³³ Colten, *An Unnatural Metropolis*, 124.

³⁴ Laura Pulido, “Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90, no.1 (2000): 532.

³⁵ Christopher G. Boone, Geoffrey L. Buckley, J. Morgan Grove, and Chona Sister, “Parks and People: An Environmental Justice Inquiry in Baltimore, Maryland.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 99, no. 4 (2009): 768.

³⁶ Craig E. Colten, “Basin Street Blues: Drainage and Environmental Equity in New Orleans, 1890-1930,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 28, no.2 (2002): 238-239.

1.3 Social Memory and Resistance

The concept of social memory, which has been summarized as the “community’s collective values, beliefs, and practices as expressed through the creation and retention of particular narratives about the past,”³⁷ has been a profoundly influential theme within human geography and anthropology. Sociologist Maurice Halbwachs was one of the first to introduce the term as it is used in our contemporary context. Scholars who have examined Halbwachs’ influence assert that this new paradigm of memory as a shared social experience revolutionized how people viewed ostensibly “authentic” records of past events. James Fentress and Chris Wickham challenged Halbwachs’ fundamental notion that memory is mostly collective and structured by group identities in their 1992 book *Social Memory*. They argue that Halbwachs’ work neglects the importance of individual consciousness in reference to broader social aspects of memory.

Geographers have also tapped the rich language of social memory to analyze a variety of memory practices, including how public monuments are connected to the negotiation of national identity and how memorial and monumental landscapes can be sites of discordance. Prominently, David Lowenthal has shown how artifacts and portable symbols of the past (ex. place naming) can be part of a process of normalizing a certain “version” of the past and assuring an enduring identity.³⁸ Relatedly, Dydia DeLyser’s work shows how tourists interwove a fictional story of the half-Scottish half-Native heroine Ramona into their lives, constructing a place for her within a communal narrative of the past.³⁹

³⁷ Jenea Tallentire, “Strategies of Memory: History, Social Memory, and the Community,” *Histoire Sociale: Social History* 34, no.67 (2001): 197.

³⁸ David Lowenthal, “Past Time, Present Place: Landscape and Memory,” *Geographical Review* 65, no.1 (1975): 9.

³⁹ Dydia DeLyser, “Ramona Memories: Fiction, Tourist Practices, and Placing the Past in Southern California,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 93, no.4 (2003): 886.

French historian Pierre Nora sparked a flurry of interest in social/collective memory with his book *Rethinking France: Les Lieux de Memoire*. These *lieux de memoire*, or places/sites of memory, are “the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists.”⁴⁰ By re-fashioning sites of memory as books or time periods, as ideas, or even as a place, everyday folk can wrest control of history from the formal or official realm. These themes figures prominently in anthropologist Helen Regis’ examination of the memory practices of New Orleans’ working class. Although their processes of memorialization are rarely documented within mainstream history, their specific sites of memory—such as unofficial Hurricane Katrina monuments and hand-drawn memorial t-shirts—have profound relevance for these communities. Concentrating on these sites of memory can help scholars of African American history gain access to a non-traditional memory repositories as well as challenge exclusionary historical practices. Significantly, social or collective memory also plays a role in the creation of a Subaltern identity that the Ninth Ward community can use as a source of resistance. In this sense, social memory is at once political and emancipatory, helping to validate alternative historical narratives and enhance the community’s resistance in the face of traumatic or disruptive events.

Geographers, particularly those concerned with resistance tactics, have also drawn extensively on the work of Edward Said and his paradigms of Orientalism, which shows how Western ideas of the Orient were “created” and then maintained through a hegemonic relationship. Postcolonial studies evaluate resistance to imperialism and provide a space for those voices silenced by colonialism. James C. Scott’s *Weapons of the Weak* has also been of profound influence to the field. He provides an analysis of peasant resistance to oppressive labor practices and describes the rural communities’ quotidian forms of resistance, including false compliance, theft, foot dragging, and

⁴⁰ Cited in Emmanuel David, “Cultural Trauma, Memory, and Gendered Collective Action: The Case of *Women and the Storm* Following Hurricane Katrina,” *NWSA Journal* 20, no.3 (2008): 152.

stealing.⁴¹ A burgeoning in the field of resistance studies followed Scott's work, and geographers have continued to apply these themes to broader contexts, including resistance to neo-liberal regimes.⁴² The conceptualization of the Ninth Ward as a "space of resistance" can help assign validity to the experiences and practices that exist outside the mainstream realm, in particular concerning their resistance within a post-Katrina context.

1.4 Place Attachment

The concept of place attachment is one of the most foundational to humanistic geography, popularized in early years by David Lowenthal and Hugh Prince but more significantly by Edward Relph and Yi-Fu Tuan's work of the 1970s. In 1976, Relph's work *Place and Placelessness* argued for a distinction of "place" from concepts of meaning and area and sought to valorize the everyday "lived-worlds" of people and the places where they live.⁴³ Similarly, in *Topophilia* Tuan sought to better explain the emotional ties and affective bonds between people and place.⁴⁴ More recently, Tim Cresswell's *Place: A Short Introduction* asserts that places are "spaces which people have made meaningful."⁴⁵ Another concept that allows us to elucidate the dynamics of place attachment within the Ninth Ward is *cultural landscape*, which asserts that landscapes are not "innocent" in terms of politics, power, and emotional affectivity. The seminal anthology *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* posits that landscape is a clue to culture, and that "our human landscape is our unwitting

⁴¹ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University, 1985), xvii.

⁴² Beverly Mullings, "Sides of the Same Coin?: Coping and Resistance among Jamaican Data-Entry Operators," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 89, no. 2 (1999): 290-291.

⁴³ Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion Limited, 1976), preface, 15.

⁴⁴ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes and Values* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1974), 93.

⁴⁵ Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 7.

autobiography, reflecting our tastes, our values, our aspirations, and even our fears, in tangible, visible form.”⁴⁶

The anthology *Place Attachment* helps to shed light on the influence of emotional investment to our lived spaces. The chapter “Community Attachment- Local Sentiment and Sense of Place,” makes the argument that place attachment is a processual phenomenon, one that may include long-term residence and local social involvement among its prominent aspects.⁴⁷ Setha M. Low’s chapter provides a useful six-fold framework of culturally-based place attachments that I will use to examine the Lower Ninth Ward citizens’ sense of home and attachment to place.

Additionally, a number of geographic works have underscored the significance of place to the development and maintenance of individual and community identity, particularly in the midst of disruption and trauma. The work of Christopher Airriess on the rebound of the New Orleans Vietnamese community post-Katrina provides a provocative counterpoint to the struggles of the Ninth Ward; Airriess posits that one of the main sources of their resiliency stems from a history and collective memory that constituted valuable *political* resources post-disaster. Additionally, the work of David Burley, Pam Jenkins, and Shirley Laska in “Place Attachment and Environmental Change in Coastal Louisiana,” describes coastal Acadian communities’ emotional ties to their landscape in the face of disaster (Hurricanes Katrina and Rita) and ongoing trauma (land loss due to subsidence, climate change, and canal dredging).⁴⁸ These examinations of minority groups’ affective connections to their home should help illuminate Ninth Ward residents’ ties to their community as well as their desire to return.

⁴⁶ Peirce F. Lewis, “Axioms for Reading the Landscape: Some Guides to the American Scene,” In *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays*, ed. Donald W. Meinig (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 12.

⁴⁷ David M. Hummon, “Community Attachment: Local Sentiment and Sense of Place,” in *Place Attachment*, eds. Irwin Altman and Setha M. Low (New York: Plenum Press, 1992), 166.

⁴⁸ David Burley, Pam Jenkins, Shirley Laska et al. “Place Attachment and Environmental Change in Coastal Louisiana,” *Organization and Environment* 20 (2007): 347-348.

1.5 Methodologies

This section outlines some of the methods that I used to explore the connections between community resistance, social memory, and attachment to place within the Lower Ninth Ward. I call upon recent publications in geography and ethnography to critically inform my approach. In general, my approach could be described as mixed methods, using qualitative research techniques (interviewing, participant observation) as well as quantitative tools such as census records. Elwood describes how Susan Hanson and Geraldine Pratt used a combination of quantitative data (in the form of economic indicators and the like) and ethnographic fieldwork (to explore on-the-ground livelihood strategies of both men and women) in their study of the transformation of gender roles and coping mechanisms under newfound conditions of economic dislocation.⁴⁹ I address my topic of study in a similar fashion to serve a variety of research purposes including “validating different forms of data, generating insight from complementary approaches, [and] integrating to create new knowledge.”⁵⁰

Ethnographic techniques, such as interviews and participant observation, proved particularly useful in gauging residents’ perceptions of place attachment as well as the relative importance of the campaign to re-open the Dr. Martin Luther King Charter School. The recognition of the value of qualitative methods has been a hard-won status within the field of geography, as DeLyser describes in her introduction to *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Geography*. This “methodological revolution” challenged the dominance of the quantitative paradigm, and has acknowledged the rigorousness of

⁴⁹ Sarah Elwood, “Mixed Methods: Thinking, Doing, and Asking in Multiple Ways,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Geography*, eds. Dydia DeLyser, Steve Herbert, Stuart Aitken, Mike Crang and Linda McDowell. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2010), 96.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.

qualitative approaches as well as the role they play in validating the human experience.⁵¹ Recent works in oral history theory, an approach that I also incorporate, have stressed the importance of the life history genre: “there are many ways beyond the scientific to gain an understanding of the human condition.”⁵²

Although Duncan and Duncan have espoused an “interrogatory” approach to interviewing,⁵³ I prefer to think of it in terms of *collaboration*, as McDowell describes: “geographers are now much more aware of the ways in which an interview is and should be an interactive and reflexive exchange wherever possible.”⁵⁴ Using the “snowball” sampling method (asking interviewees to refer others to be interviewed) I was able to gain a greater sampling of community members, particularly those directly involved directly and indirectly in the campaign. This type of sampling method has proved fruitful in other studies of disaster-affected communities.⁵⁵ I also spoke with members of the “Katrina diaspora” to gain a crucial perspective regarding what degree of attachment they may feel to their community of origin. However, some have left with no desire to return, and others may have viewed Katrina as a chance to finally leave the area, and it is important that I also acknowledge these perspectives. I also interviewed “outsiders,” those who did not move into the Lower Ninth Ward until after the storm. In total, I conducted thirteen formal interviews (one was a group interview, bringing the total number of people formally interviewed to sixteen), averaging an hour in length. The reader will notice that some informants are identified by their real name, others by a pseudonym, some by their initials only, and still others by the category “anonymous respondent.”

⁵¹ Dydia DeLyser, Steve Herbert, Stuart C. Aitken, Mike Crang, and Linda McDowell, “Introduction: Engaging Qualitative Geography,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Geography*, eds. Dydia DeLyser, Steve Herbert, Stuart Aitken, Mike Crang and Linda McDowell. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2010), 5.

⁵² Michael V. Angrosino, *Exploring Oral History: a Window on the Past* (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2008), 6, 28.

⁵³ James Duncan and Nancy Duncan, “Theory in the Field,” *Geographical Review* 91, no.1/2 (2001): 4.

⁵⁴ Linda McDowell, “Interviewing: Fear and Liking in the Field,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Geography*, eds. Dydia DeLyser, Steve Herbert, Stuart Aitken, Mike Crang and Linda McDowell. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2010), 162.

⁵⁵ Burley et al., “Place Attachment and Environmental Change in Coastal Louisiana,” 354.

These types of identification reflect the varying levels of privacy that interviewees requested- some agreed to speak with me only on the condition of anonymity.

Another ethnographic method, participant-observation, mainly took the form of attending community meetings and forums, as well as volunteering for a five-month period at the MLK school. Of course, this method has its limitations- for instance, the first meeting I attended was a public forum on the city's Master Plan, and the facilitators made its objectives plain: it was to discuss only the Master Plan, and not other simmering issues that community members felt were pressing. Also, there is the issue of who attends and who does not (or cannot) attend these meetings, due to childcare issues or other constraints. My months volunteering in the school's library have given me a privileged perspective on the daily comings-and-goings of the students, teachers, and staff at the school, and have allowed me to create connections and gain the trust of those involved with the school on an intimate level. Watson and Till explain the challenges and importance of participant-observation as a research method: "[it] requires that ethnographers pay close attention to, and sometimes partake in, everyday geographies so they can become familiar with how social spaces are constituted in various settings."⁵⁶ As many scholars have pointed out, I also recognize that considerable ethical responsibility comes with both interviewing and participant-observation as representing another's life is a subject of great delicacy. There are also the unequal power relations between interviewer-interviewee that come along with having the authority and the ability to "tell".⁵⁷

I also incorporated considerable archival data to support the findings from the interview and observation portions. Using archival resources such as census records, I tracked the "nativity" rate in the Lower Ninth Ward as well as home ownership statistics, the findings from which suggested that

⁵⁶ Annette Watson and Karen E. Till, "Ethnography and Participant Observation," in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Geography*, eds. Dydia DeLyser, Steve Herbert, Stuart Aitken, Mike Crang and Linda McDowell. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2010), 129.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 129, 131. See also Stuart C. Aitken, "'Throntogetherness': Encounters with Difference and Diversity," in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Geography*, eds. Dydia DeLyser, Steve Herbert, Stuart Aitken, Mike Crang and Linda McDowell. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2010), 63.

high degree of place attachment does exist and that it is inter-generational in nature. Residency and place attachment are not necessarily synonymous; while my findings do indicate long-term residency by the same family, only by speaking with a sampling of residents could I properly ascertain their emotional connections to the area. In terms of affective bonds and the desire to return post-Katrina, census data and reports from the New Orleans Community Data Center shed light on the community's return rates.

Newspaper records of landmark events, such as the desegregation of two schools in the Ninth Ward, were crucial to provide a historical perspective on the importance of public schools in the neighborhood. Reports from school board meetings and press releases gave a glimpse into the pulse of the conflicts regarding the re-opening of MLK. In order to evaluate the long-term culture of resistance within the community, I used scholarly literature on historical race relations, the civil rights movement, school desegregation, and New Orleans' historical geography. This provided the background to an analysis that is anchored in the theoretical concepts of race and resistance, place attachment, and social memory. I recognize that social memory scholars tend to distinguish between "history" and "memory" (as in the work of Pierre Nora: see above). This is certainly a point of consideration within my study; I believe it is pertinent to bring to light both the objective retelling of events ("history") as well as demonstrate how the Lower Ninth Ward community has drawn upon a collective narrative of resistance for survival in a post-Katrina context.

My methods have followed those of prominent historical and cultural geographers as well as anthropologists well-versed in New Orleans' complexities. For instance, historical geographer Craig E. Colten tends to use a mixture of archival documents as well as secondary (interpretative) sources in his analyses. Dydia DeLyser, cultural geographer, uses both archival sources and qualitative methods such as surveys and informal interviews. Anthropologist Helen Regis has used participant observation and interviews within her work on New Orleans second-line parades and social aid and

pleasure clubs, as well as other ethnographic techniques. I hope that the aforementioned research tactics can help me address my most basic research questions: how did the campaign to re-open the Dr. Martin Luther King Charter School encourage the return of the community?, how is this campaign part of a larger history of resistance campaigns within the community? and what role (if any) does place attachment play in encouraging the renewal of the Lower Ninth Ward?

It is my hope that this study will lead to a greater understanding, both in academia and more generally, of why Ninth Ward residents were so determined to return to their precarious landscape even as outside voices decried residential re-development in the area. By exploring these reasons as well as the historical precedents of activism in the community, scholars and the public can garner a greater appreciation of why Ninth Ward residents would choose to return home. Furthermore, community perspectives are integral from a policy perspective and in the interest of rebuilding in a safe, proactive, and inclusive manner. By better understanding “What is the story the Lower Ninth Ward tells itself?” scholars, officials, and policy makers alike can ensure that community voices are heard in the rebuilding process.

2. Social Memory, Resistance, and Place Attachment

“[B]ehind the display of knowledge and the representation of experience, behind the facts, emotions, and images with which memory seems to be filled, there is only ourselves.”⁵⁸

Historians have summarized the concept of social memory as the “community’s collective values, beliefs, and practices as expressed through the creation and retention of particular narratives about the past.”⁵⁹ This literature review first will consider the early players in social memory studies and its origins in psychology and sociology. I use this as a springboard to examine how recent geographical scholarship has used social memory (often referred to interchangeably as “collective memory”) in diverse ways to produce analyses that often upset dominant narratives of a culture or group’s history. Recently, scholars have cast light on how the process of memorialization can lend legitimacy to a certain version of the past, one that often excludes the experiences of subaltern groups and instead reflects the values and priorities of dominant social groups.⁶⁰ Consequently, subaltern groups have created their own alternative repository of social memories, one that is no less valuable (and, indeed, is often more nuanced) than mainstream discourses. These subaltern discourses often intersect and call into question the legitimacy of dominant narratives, such as the undercurrents of suspicion, informed by previous injustices, within the Ninth Ward community that officials intentionally breached the levees during hurricanes Betsy and Katrina. Thus, I also look to scholarship on resistance theory to better tease out the relationship between resistance tactics and social memory. Debates about the use of memory often align with discussions of power struggles, questions of domination, and examinations of who holds access to a community’s socio-political

⁵⁸ James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 201.

⁵⁹ Jenea Tallentire, “Strategies of Memory: History, Social Memory, and the Community,” *Histoire Sociale: Social History* 34, no.67 (2001): 197.

⁶⁰ Owen J. Dwyer and Derek H. Alderman, “Memorial Landscapes: Analytic Questions and Metaphors,” *GeoJournal* 73 (2008): 167. See also: Dydia DeLyster, “Ramona Memories: Fiction, Tourist Practices, and Placing the Past in Southern California,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 93, no.4 (2003): 886-908 and Shirley Thompson, “‘Ah Toucouteu, ye conin vous’: History and Memory in Creole New Orleans,” *American Quarterly* 53, no.2 (2001): 232-266.

resources.⁶¹ Correspondingly, many scholars agree that landscapes of social memory are inherently political.⁶²

In this review, I wish to consider a variety of subthemes within social memory studies and suggest how they could elucidate the lived, memorial, and spiritual aspects of the residents of New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward. These themes will include how social memory becomes evident in tangible and intangible landscapes and how oppressed groups draw on a reservoir of collective narratives of resistance for survival, particularly when faced with a catastrophic event such as Hurricane Katrina. In order to understand how geographers can use social memory as analytical tool, its origins and founding scholars first bear consideration. Through a nuanced examination of the concept's historiography, I hope to garner an appreciation of its trajectory as well as evaluate how social memory paradigms can be applied in fruitful fashions.

2.1 Origins, Contributions, and Debate

Most contemporary usages of the term "social memory" can be traced to the work of Maurice Halbwachs.⁶³ Halbwachs' groundbreaking book, entitled *On Collective Memory* and re-published posthumously in 1992 (parts were previously published in 1941 and 1952 in French) presented collective memory as a *socially constructed notion*.⁶⁴ He argues that while it is individuals who remember, they draw on a specific group context, whether it is social class, family, or trade union, to

⁶¹ Steven Hoelscher and Derek H. Alderman, "Memory and Place: Geographies of a Critical Scholarship," *Social and Cultural Geography* 5, no.3 (2004): 349.

⁶² Dwyer and Alderman, "Memorial landscapes," 176. See also: Reuben Rose-Redwood and Derek Alderman, "Collective Memory and the Politics of Urban Space: An Introduction," *GeoJournal* 73 (2008): 161. See also: Tallentire, "Strategies of Memory."

⁶³ Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, "Social Memory Studies: From 'Collective Memory' to Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices," *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 106.

⁶⁴ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 22.

remember elements of the past.⁶⁵ In this book, Halbwachs expands and clarifies some of philosopher and mentor Emile Durkheim's ideas. Durkheim described "collective effervescence" around ceremonies such as festivals and dances, whereas Halbwachs sought to explain what binds people together in the *everyday*, arguing that collective memory feeds the voids between these "effervescent" periods and the quotidian.⁶⁶ One of *On Collective Memory's* most prominent themes is that memory is not benign, but is a tool used in the active reconstruction of the past in an image that corresponds with the needs of the present.⁶⁷ As such, various societal groups can revise their past at any moment. Halbwachs also shows how our collective wish to introduce greater coherence into our shared narratives distorts past events: "Society from time to time obligates [that] people not just reproduce in thought previous events of their lives, but also to touch them up... we give them a prestige that reality did not possess."⁶⁸

Halbwachs' book, argues Barbie Zelizer in "Reading the Past Against the Grain: The Shape of Memory Studies," helped inaugurate the late twentieth-century flurry of interest in social memory studies. She suggests that this new paradigm of memory as a social experience conceived in a shared consciousness challenged traditional historical scholarship that assumes a "true" and "authentic" record of past events.⁶⁹ Sociologists Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, who penned "Social Memory Studies: From 'Collective Memory' to Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices," point to other explanations for the flourishing of public interest in memory over the past two decades, such as the rise of multiculturalism and the fall of communism. However, they state that the most significant influences are the lingering aspects of 1960s-1970s political culture which identified historiography as a source of cultural domination, challenged the conceptual roots of a linear

⁶⁵ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 34.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶⁹ Barbie Zelizer, "Reading the Past against the Grain: The Shape of Memory Studies," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12, no.2 (1995): 217.

portrayal of history and “truth,” and reflected a renewed interest in class-based theories of memory contestation and popular memory.⁷⁰

The next work of critical import to the field is James Fentress and Chris Wickham’s book, *Social Memory*. The title itself is a challenge to Halbwachs’ fundamental notion that memory is mostly, if not only, collective and structured by group identities. Fentress and Wickham believe that this collectivized focus has neglected the importance of *individual consciousness*.⁷¹ This book is explicitly concerned with public and social aspects of memory, including commemoration and the formal re-creation of the past, which are prominent themes in the field also elucidated by other scholars.⁷² For their part, Fentress and Wickham credit a recent burgeoning of memory studies to a revitalized interest in oral history which began in the 1970s and continues in the present.

In their chapter, “Ordering and Transmission of Social Memory,” the authors examine the evolution of the written text, *Le Chanson de Roland*, which originated likely in the eleventh century, survived countless revisions, and endured to the present day. Ultimately, the tale is neither a story of a “real” event nor one simply “invented” by a poet, thus epitomizing the hybridization evident in social memory. In their chapter “Class and Group Memories in Western Societies,” Fentress and Wickham use a concrete example to demonstrate how different versions of the past help to construct social identities.⁷³ The authors show how heroic imagery of a radical worker culture has persisted through the appropriation of the memory of police violence in a British 1926 General Strike. Although workers commonly discussed memories of police violence and resulting fatalities, no one actually died that day.⁷⁴ Popular memory has somehow conflated the violence of an earlier strike in another region with what occurred in 1926. As such, one of the founding elements in the

⁷⁰ Olick and Robbins, “Social Memory Studies,” 108.

⁷¹ Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, ix.

⁷² Paul Connerton, *How societies remember* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁷³ Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, 89.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

miners' identity was an event that never happened. Ultimately, whether the past is actually "true" is of little consequence; all that matters is that, at some level, it is believed to be so.

Some scholars, such as sociologists Olick and Robbins, instead view French historian Pierre Nora as the true heir to Halbwachs' legacy.⁷⁵ Editor of a massive seven-volume tome, he focused on *lieux de memoire* (places/sites of memory) which he called "the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists."⁷⁶ His aim was to catalogue all of these places of memory in French society. He centered his analysis around three principles (the Republic, the Nation, and "Les Frances," the ordering of which represents a historical progression from unity to uncertainty to multiplicity) in describing how France was previously supported by memory and is now a mere "memory trace."⁷⁷ This profound transformation of national identity, Nora states, warranted a change in the way the French looked at their past.⁷⁸ Some scholars, such as Shirley Thompson, view his work as a source of liberation from the hegemonic narratives of "traditional" history and extol his attention to how meaning changes and evolves over time.⁷⁹ Others more explicitly draw connections between his work and how popular practices inscribe popular history onto places of memory that make popular historical consciousness more concrete. According to Nora, a *lieu de memoire* might be a book or a time period, a heroic figure or legendary event, or even a place or an idea.⁸⁰ This inclusive approach allows for a re-examination of black American history, placing willingness to remember at the fore. Helen Regis notes how the usage of *lieux de memoire* assigns validity to working-class practices of memory that are not recognized in the formal realm of history. She states, "Whereas wealthy capitalists may be memorialized in endowed buildings,

⁷⁵ Olick and Robbins, "Social Memory Studies," 121.

⁷⁶ Cited in Emmanuel David, "Cultural Trauma, Memory, and Gendered Collective Action: The Case of *Women and the Storm* Following Hurricane Katrina," *NWSA Journal* 20, no.3 (2008): 152.

⁷⁷ Olick and Robbins, "Social Memory Studies," 121.

⁷⁸ Pierre Nora, *Rethinking France: Les Lieux de Memoire. Volume 1: the State* Translated by Mary Trouille. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

⁷⁹ Thompson, "Ah Toucouteou, ye conin vous," 234.

⁸⁰ Robert O'Meally and Genevieve Fabre, "Introduction," in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, eds. Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Meally (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 7.

working-class people in New Orleans are more likely to be remembered in hand-drawn signs, T-shirts, and libations,” as well as parades.⁸¹

2.2 Geographers and Social Memory

For geographers, the field of social memory has spawned a rich array of literature. One of the most salient ways that geographers have approached social memory is through an examination of the subtle power that monuments and memorials play in normalizing a certain version of the past and creating a seemingly unified identity. An early work in this vein is David Lowenthal’s “Past Time, Present Place: Landscape and Memory” (1975), in which the author uses examples such as portable symbols of the past (place naming), commemorative and funeral rites, and artifacts to demonstrate how “buffeted by change, we retain traces of our past to be sure of our enduring identity.”⁸² In his sections *the altered past* and *the invented past*, he describes how the past is made intelligible in light of the present and how, just as individuals invent new private pasts, nations create collective histories.⁸³

The examination of memorials as sites of public memory remains a prominent area of interest for today’s generation of geographers. Some consider how public monuments are connected to the process of negotiation of national identity⁸⁴ while others have shown how “localized territorial struggles over the meanings of the built environment often reflect larger social (and power) disputes about who has the authority to create, define, interpret, and represent collective pasts through

⁸¹ Helen A. Regis, “Blackness and the Politics of Memory in the New Orleans Second Line,” *American Ethnologist* 28, no.4 (2001): 762.

⁸² David Lowenthal, “Past Time, Present Place: Landscape and Memory,” *Geographical Review* 65, no.1 (1975): 9.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 28, 33.

⁸⁴ Nuala Johnson, “Cast in Stone: Monuments, Geography, and Nationalism,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 13 (1995): 51–65.

place.”⁸⁵ More recently, alternative understandings of social memory and cultural landscapes have sought to, for example, upset traditional vernacular-monumental landscape distinctions⁸⁶ and “read” atypical landscapes such as those transformed by insurgency and civil war.⁸⁷ Intertwiningly, geographers have considered how memorial and monumental landscapes can be sites of contestation and dissidence, which has particular salience for the Ninth Ward community’s post-Katrina commemorative efforts. In the context of this thesis, I would also suggest that by considering post-Hurricane Katrina public writing and informal memorials both as a socio-political commentary *and a lieu de memoire*, these sites can have emancipatory potential for the marginalized Lower Ninth Ward community. These material expressions of loss and lamentation also serve as a powerful tool for the community to create alternative discourses that ascribe value to their experience outside of the mainstream realm.

Dydia DeLyser’s article “Ramona Memories: Fiction, Tourist Practices, and Placing the Past in Southern California” emphasizes the transformative nature of tourist practices in shaping and re-working the region’s social memory,⁸⁸ what was later called the “packaging of memorial landscapes through performance.”⁸⁹ She shows how visitors interwove the story of Ramona – the fictional half-Native, half-Scottish heroine of the Helen Hunt Jackson’s book of the same title – into their most meaningful life events, carving out a place for her in communal narrative of a past. In so doing, DeLyser argues, Ramona’s influence has moved beyond simply “mistaking the fake for the real” to a place of prominence in the cultural landscape and social memory of Southern California.⁹⁰ Steven

⁸⁵ Karen E. Till, “Staging the Past: Landscape Designs, Cultural Identity and *Erinnerungspolitik* at Berlin’s *Neue Wache*,” *Ecumene* 6, no.3 (1999): 254.

⁸⁶ Paul Stangl, “The Vernacular and the Monumental: Memory and Landscape in Post-War Berlin,” *GeoJournal* 73 (2008): 245-253.

⁸⁷ Micheal K. Steinberg and Matthew J. Taylor, “Public Memory and Power in Guatemala’s Postconflict Landscape,” *The Geographical Review* 93, no.4 (2003): 449-468.

⁸⁸ Dydia DeLyser, “Ramona Memories: Fiction, Tourist Practices, and Placing the Past in Southern California,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 93, no.4 (2003): 886.

⁸⁹ Dwyer and Alderman, “Memorial Landscapes,” 174.

⁹⁰ DeLyser, “Ramona Memories,” 890, 903.

Hoelscher's "Making Place, Making Race: Performances of Whiteness in the Jim Crow South," also uses performance as a lens to explore how societies remember through rituals, festivals, pageants, and other ceremonies.⁹¹ These geographical works provide us with powerful examples of how social memory moves beyond the realm of theory to an embodied practice that has the potential to exclude or, conversely, to legitimize a past for present purposes. The following section will draw upon the African American experience in New Orleans, and in the Lower Ninth Ward specifically, to contextually, historically, and geographically situate these processes.

2.3 New Orleans: Social Memory and Resistance

As New Orleans rose to iconic status after Hurricane Katrina, onlookers struggled to reconcile the city's devil-may-care jovial reputation with the devastation and despair on plain display. However, for scholars who had long been studying the city's sociocultural and racial dynamics, the unsavory aspects that Hurricane Katrina exposed were of little surprise. Indeed, the primary producers of New Orleans' renowned "sensual commodities" (such as Creole cuisine and jazz music) were the low-income African American citizens who often lived on society's margins.⁹² Not coincidentally, a significant body of literature describes the interconnections between the lived experiences of the city's economic- and racially-marginalized with the powerful social memories, and attendant memory practices, which serve as their source of strength and activism.

The paradigms of subalternity and resistance provide a compelling lens through which to consider the Lower Ninth Ward residents' struggles to reclaim their home after Hurricane Katrina. Subalternity, or subaltern studies, developed out of the 1970s postcolonial discourse. Scholars

⁹¹ Steven Hoelscher, "Making Place, Making Race: Performances of Whiteness in the Jim Crow South," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 93, no.3 (2003): 661.

⁹² Regis, "Blackness and the Politics of Memory," 754.

often look to Edward Said's foundational text *Orientalism* as the inauguration of the field of postcolonial studies, in which Said posits that Western ideas of the Orient were not only "created" but actively maintained through a relationship of power and domination. Similarly, he shows how writings in the imperialist tradition are not politically or historically innocent, but rife with hegemonic narratives that defined Oriental peoples as "the Other." Orientalism, as Said defines it, is a real and identifiable element of imperialism that incorporates lexicography, history, biology, economic theory, and literature to define the Other in contrast to European culture.⁹³

The field of postcolonial studies evaluates Western texts as colonial discourse as well as provides an outlet for the voices of those marginalized by colonialism.⁹⁴ These "spaces of resistance" are the focus of subaltern studies, which is often seen as a subset of postcolonial studies even though subaltern scholars do not limit themselves to the postcolonial world. This fluidity of scope and scale is precisely why subaltern studies can help provide an alternative viewpoint to the dominant themes of oppression and marginalization characterizing the Lower Ninth Ward's past and present.

Any discussion of resistance theory would be incomplete if it did not touch upon the works of James C. Scott, who penned *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. Based on his fieldwork from 1978-1980 in a small Malaysian village he calls "Sedaka," he focuses on everyday forms of resistance such as evasion and underproduction, which, "reinforced by a venerable popular culture of resistance and multiplied many thousand-fold, may, in the end, make an utter shambles of the policies dreamed up by their would-be superiors in the capital."⁹⁵ Scott provides a bottom-up analysis of the Malaysian peasantry's resistance to increasing labor demands and decreasing wage-earning opportunities under the new system of double-cropping instituted in 1972. He describes the

⁹³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978 [1994]), 3, 5, 6, 55, 219.

⁹⁴ Malini Johar Schueller, "Postcolonial American Studies," *American Literary History* 16, no. 1 (2004): 162.

⁹⁵ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University, 1985), xvii.

quodidian forms of resistance that center on the material nexus of class struggle, such as the allocation of land, labor, taxes, and rent.⁹⁶ However, he also demonstrates that the conflict between rich and poor is not merely over material concerns, but also over ideological authority and conflicts in meaning and values.⁹⁷ He takes issue with Gramsci's notion that the elites control the "ideological sectors" of society and thus create a symbolic hegemony that prevents oppressed classes from "thinking their way free."⁹⁸ By contrast, Scott critically examines the peasants' legends, jokes, language, and rituals to show that they did not passively accept the elite's social order. In a related way, the Lower Ninth Ward residents rebuffed the restrictions imposed by the city's socio-economic stratification, carving out a place-specific system of meaning (pride in home ownership, cultural activities, and a strong community support system) that also rejected the ideological authority or infallibility of city officials/outsideers.

By putting the experience of human agents at the center of class conflict analysis, Scott's work revolutionized how scholars approach ostensibly-trivial aspects of resistance such as passive noncompliance and sabotage. Scott turns on its head the traditional studies of resistance, which had focused on formalized protest movements and revolutions and presented the peasantry in anonymous statistical terms. In so doing, he provides a provocative lens through which to examine how people resist oppression. Of particular relevance to resistance tactics within the African American community, Scott draws comparisons between the peasants of Sedaka and American slaves, in that their resistance efforts were not often openly defiant but nonetheless significant.⁹⁹ These practices rarely called into question the institution of slavery *per se*, but tactics of foot dragging, false compliance, theft, and, most importantly, cultural resistance, served to undermine the masters' regime while feigning public compliance. This concept of cultural resistance has great

⁹⁶ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 33.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, xvii, 38.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

resonance for Lower Ninth Ward residents, who for decades have created their own narratives that valued their culturally-specific practices such as second line parading. In the slave quarters of the antebellum South, a prominent subculture challenged the official dogma on slavery and inferiority, emphasizing freedom and equality through Old Testament religious texts and justifying resistance acts such as pilfering, flight, and shirking duties.¹⁰⁰

A burgeoning in the field of resistance studies followed Scott's work and continues within geographical scholarship to this day. James S. Duncan's postcolonial work emphasizes the resistance strategies of nineteenth-century Ceylonese coffee workers, showing how workers contested the dominant regime by minimizing their labor output, feigning sickness, stealing to fill their quota, as well as using open tactics such as desertion and insubordination.¹⁰¹ Resistance theories have also been applied to more contemporary themes, such as neoliberalism and regional identity formation.¹⁰² In "Sides of the Same Coin?" Coping and Resistance among Jamaican Data-Entry Operators," Beverly Mullings describes how the purportedly "difficult" nature of Jamaican information-processing operators should be attributed to everyday forms of resistance against transnational corporations rather than lack of skill or work ethic. David Jansson uses paradigms of "internal Orientalism" to describe the divergent and antagonistic relationship between the imagined spaces of "the South" and "America."¹⁰³ He also posits that although African Americans have been excluded from these imagined cultural and ancestral spaces of the South, they claim ownership of "Southern" identity as resistance to the racialization of internal Orientalism.

Recently, Steve Pile and Michael Keith outline how resistance has distinct spatialities, complicating the traditional dominance/resistance binary. For example, although resistance seeks to

¹⁰⁰ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 329.

¹⁰¹ James S. Duncan, "Embodying Colonialism? Domination and Resistance in Nineteenth-Century Ceylonese Coffee Plantations," *Journal of Historical Geography* 28, no. 3 (2002): 317, 326-328.

¹⁰² Beverly Mullings, "Sides of the Same Coin?: Coping and Resistance among Jamaican Data-Entry Operators," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 89, no. 2 (1999): 290-291.

¹⁰³ David Jansson, "Racialization and 'Southern' Identities of Resistance: A Psychogeography of Internal Orientalism in the United States," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 100, no.1 (2010): 203.

cast off the yoke of the oppressor, even within the interior world of those “resisting” there remains a series of hegemonic norms and values.¹⁰⁴ And so it is within the Lower Ninth Ward community. While they constitute a fairly cohesive force of resistance – defined by a shared history and geography— to paint the community’s members as an unwavering united force would be misleading, as internal class and ideological divisions persist. This corresponds well with another point Pile and Keith make by way of a case study, which is that while political identity (in terms of resistance) is most effective when it is singular, this is not always feasible.¹⁰⁵ They also describe how acts of resistance need not be large-scale or coordinated, as in the Ninth Warders’ school re-opening campaign, but can range from

foot-dragging to walking, from sit-ins to outings, from chaining oneself up in treetops to dancing the night away, from parody to passing, from bombs to hoaxes, from graffiti tags on New York trains to stealing pens from employers, from not voting to releasing laboratory animals, from mugging yuppies to buying shares, from cheating to dropping out¹⁰⁶

essentially undermining the everyday exercise of power. Since the community’s movement to re-open MLK took place within a bounded and contested physical space, it makes sense to think of the Lower Ninth Ward as a space of resistance—while simultaneously appreciating that the dispersed nature of the community’s post-Katrina diaspora results in a more fluid geography of resistance. In terms of this campaign, “resistance may take place as a reaction against unfairness and injustice, as a desire to survive intolerable conditions, but it may also involve a sense of remembering and dreaming of something better. If there is a beaten track.... then resistance will stray from the track, find new ways, elaborate new spatialities, new futures.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Steve Pile, “Introduction: Opposition, Political Identities and Spaces of Resistance,” in *Geographies of Resistance*, ed. Steve Pile and Michael Keith. (London: Routledge, 1997), 4.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

A provocative parallel can be drawn between outsiders' characterizations of the Lower Ninth Ward and the ideologies of the colonial system, in which colonizers defined the subordinate population (usually in fantastical or exotic terms) and then denigrated them on the basis of these characteristics. In seeking to rebuke and resist outsiders' negative portrayals of the Ninth Ward, participants in traditional community practices such as second-lining "create new meanings out of imposed meanings [and] re-work and divert space to other ends."¹⁰⁸

In *The Power of Identity*, Manuel Castells describes the process of identity formation from a sociological perspective.¹⁰⁹ One type of identity building, *identity for resistance*, brings particular weight to the African American construction of identity. This building of a defensive identity, in this case in terms of ethnicity, is multifaceted and fractured along class lines among black Americans. For instance, Castells contends that middle-class African Americans have "invented" an African American identity that revives the themes of the past and insulates middle-class black children from the plight of their poorer, inner-city counterparts. At the same time, those who live in the "ghettos" (to use Castells' term) have reconstructed their identity based on exclusion and discrimination. Elements of this emergent culture include schools as contested terrain, gang-based social organization, and the normalization of violence.¹¹⁰ This identity is vastly divergent from that of middle class African-America, resulting in a gradual loss of collectiveness and primary bonds. The ongoing fragmentation of African American identity, particularly during a time when individuals of color still meet stubborn resistance to full integration in a society that is not yet open and multiracial, exacerbates this loss of communality. This conceptualization of *identity for resistance* lends insight to the Lower Ninth Ward, overwhelmingly of lower socioeconomic status, in which residents have built a defensive identity as a counterpoint to those who seek to disparage their community.

¹⁰⁸ Pile, "Introduction: Opposition, Political Identities and Spaces of Resistance," 16.

¹⁰⁹ Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity: Second Edition* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 9.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

Pre-Katrina scholarship such as work by Helen Regis, Rachel Breunlin, and Shirley Thompson examined the political and emancipatory potential of social memory in creating alternative historical narratives and in acting as a wellspring of resistance for the community. Anthropological studies have highlighted how inequality and racial oppression, particularly of the city's African American population, have facilitated strong networks of activism and resistance. All draw on Nora's theoretical framework of *lieux de memoire* to better elaborate how popular history can be inscribed on the landscape through everyday practices. In Helen Regis' "Blackness and the Politics of Memory in the New Orleans Second Line," the black community's memory practices, such as public funerals, memorials, and second line parades, constitute political commentary and a reclamation of urban space.¹¹¹ Second line parades originated in the freedom dances of slave society and at once constitute a "rhythm, dance step, [and] a performance tradition."¹¹² Tactics of memory second liners employ (signs, t-shirts) are always-evolving; though they may seem transient to others they figure largely in the collective memories of participants, helping to preserve linkages and build solidarity.

This work foreshadows some of the themes discussed in "Putting the Ninth Ward on the Map: Race, Place, and Transformation in Desire, New Orleans," which Regis and Rachel Breunlin published after Hurricane Katrina. In this article, the authors explicitly address how collective memory has shaped political discourse in the newly altered city.¹¹³ They describe how, shortly after the flood, conspiracy theories of a government-mandated attempt to transform the city from majority-black to a white elite enclave abounded. These were mainly informed by the social memory of exclusionary and discriminatory episodes of the city's difficult history.¹¹⁴ Through the creation of

¹¹¹ Regis, "Blackness and the Politics of Memory," 754, 756.

¹¹² Rachel Breunlin and Helen A. Regis, "Putting the Ninth Ward on the Map: Race, Place, and Transformation in Desire, New Orleans," *American Anthropologist* 108, no.4 (2006): 746.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 759.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 760. See also: Joyce Marie Jackson, "Declaration of Taking Twice: The Fazendeville Community of the Lower Ninth Ward," *American Anthropologist* 108, no.4 (2006): 765-780.

a subaltern mainstream, the participants resisted the prevailing stereotypes and dismal statistics by which others would frequently define their community. Their activism is evident through the development of individual and social identities that are mostly invisible to mainstream society but have historical and cultural significance within the community and within the parading tradition. After Katrina, second-line parades took on a specific type of political activism, one that called for the return of people to and the re-establishment of the Ninth Ward. This effort was driven by the collective memory of what they believed defined their city.¹¹⁵ Significantly, these second-line traditions are said to derive from slaves' freedom dances, creating vital linkages between past struggles for freedom and the contemporary challenges of the city's black working-class people. Regis and Breunlin underscore the role that the social and pleasure clubs have in self-determination and resistance to structures of power post-Katrina: "Despite the obstacles of time and distance... residents who participate in the tradition through second lines are parading as a route back to the city and to each other."¹¹⁶

Shirley Thompson's work " 'Ah Toucoutou, ye conin vous': History and Memory in New Orleans," uses the lens of *lieux de memoire* to tell the story of a Creole woman who aspired to whiteness, but whose suspected African descent was mocked by a neighbor and later confirmed in court. Over the course of decades, the tale assumed the stuff of legend within the social memory of the city, epitomized by the creation of the song "Toucoutou" that gained popularity throughout the rest of the country.¹¹⁷ Thompson argues that the "Toucoutou affair" complicates the conventional Creole of color history and that by viewing it simultaneously as an historical occurrence *and a lieu de memoire* one can better understand the unofficial collective memory of problematic events in the group's past. Concentrating on these "sites of memory" can help scholars of African American

¹¹⁵ Breunlin and Regis, "Putting the Ninth Ward on the Map," 758.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 758.

¹¹⁷ Thompson, "'Ah Toucoutou, ye conin vous,'" 233.

history gain access to the archive not contained in traditional sources, access narratives excluded from simple “historical” retellings, and challenge exclusionary historical practices.¹¹⁸ Historian Scott Hancock’s chapter in *Slavery, Resistance, Freedom* discusses how oral tradition acts as a memory building tool for African American communities, allowing for the creation of a narrative that countered their erasure from dominant histories.¹¹⁹

Just as we have scaled down to consider the localized experiences of how the New Orleans black community, it is worth considering this group within the context of African American collective memory more generally. The book *“To Love the Wind and the Rain”: African Americans and Environmental History* has a pertinent chapter entitled “Turpentine Negro” that considers the historical relationship that African Americans had with land and labor in contemporary context.¹²⁰ The authors argue that the African Americans’ present-day reluctance to visit wildland recreation areas or participate in woodland-based activities can be traced to their collective memory of land-based labor. Postbellum black turpentine workers’ experiences often paralleled those of slavery. As such, in the present day wilderness continues to be seen as a backdrop of oppression and is problematized for this group due to historic lack of access or right to land.¹²¹ In “Blacks in the Postbellum South: Unique Homelands,” author Charles S. Aiken also emphasizes the formative role that the collective memory of slavery has had on the black community’s identity. He argues that, for the majority of blacks who now live in urban areas, the southern plantation regions occupy a sort of

¹¹⁸ Thompson, ““Ah Toucoutou, ye conin vous,”” 234, 236.

¹¹⁹ Scott Hancock, ““Tradition Informs Us’: African Americans’ Construction of Memory in the Antebellum North,” in *Slavery, Resistance, Freedom* Edited by Gabor Boritt and Scott Hancock. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹²⁰ Cassandra Y. Johnson and Josh McDaniel, “Turpentine Negro,” in *“To Love the Wind and the Rain”: African Americans and Environmental History*, ed. Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll. (Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 51.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 53, 55.

remembered homeland, one that is characterized by nostalgia and the process of actively forgetting this history's more painful aspects.¹²²

It is also instructive to consider broader historical trends of activism evident within New Orleans' African American and other minority communities. For example, after Hurricane Betsy's destruction and devastating flooding near the Industrial Canal in 1965, a group of citizens filed a lawsuit against the U.S. government and alleged that "negligent construction" of the Mississippi River- Gulf Outlet (MR-GO) caused significant property damage.¹²³ Significantly, this group consisted of Isleno residents (originally descended from the Canary Islanders) and other groups such as Italian immigrants. Later in the century, African American neighborhood opposition to the Agricultural Street Landfill attracted the attention of national and international environmental and advocacy organizations such as Greenpeace. The Agricultural Street Landfill was located in a part of the Ninth Ward that had transitioned from predominately-white during the mid-twentieth century to overwhelming black by the 1980s.¹²⁴ After the closure of the dump in 1965, local officials decided to use the adjacent municipally-owned land to erect low-income public-housing developments (Press Park and Gordon Plaza), single family homes, and later to construct an elementary school. To residents and observers, the siting of these developments in lower-income black communities became enmeshed in the burgeoning environmental justice movement, which posited that disamenities such as factories or refuse sites are disproportionately located to close proximity to communities of color. In 1993, residents and neighborhood activists filed a class-action lawsuit seeking damages for health problems, property devaluations, and relocation costs.¹²⁵ It is clear that

¹²² Charles S. Aiken, "Blacks in the Plantation South: Unique Homelands," in *Homelands: A Geography of Culture and Place Across America*, ed. Richard L. Nostrand and Lawrence E. Estaville. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

¹²³ Craig E. Colten, *Perilous Place, Powerful Storms: Hurricane Protection in Coastal Louisiana* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009).

¹²⁴ Craig E. Colten. *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 113.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 124.

recent post-Katrina activist campaigns, such as the struggle to re-open MLK, are intimately connected to larger trends of resistance against structures of power.

Joyce Marie Jackson's "The Declaration of Taking Twice: The Fazendeville Community of the Lower Ninth Ward," outlines the Ninth Ward Fazendeville community's mid-century campaign to retain their land in the face of government incursion.¹²⁶ Jean Pierre Fazende, a freedman of color, sold parcels of land to newly emancipated black settlers after the Civil War, creating the community of Fazendeville. Forty to fifty families resided there into the 1960s and it became a small-but-vibrant independent community that had three churches, a school, benevolent societies, and various groceries. Then, in 1962, the government invoked eminent domain to seize the community's land in order to create a federal park honoring the sesquicentennial anniversary of the Battle of New Orleans. Given the politically-and racially-charged conflicts of the mid-century South, most residents viewed the seizure attempts as discriminatory and disenfranchising. They retained a lawyer and held out for greater compensation than had been originally offered; it was Fazendeville's way of "bracing against power."¹²⁷ Although the government succeeded in its seizure of property and creation of a federal memorial in its place, this struggle against structures of control shaped and continues to influence the culture of resistance in the Ninth Ward. In her article, Joyce Jackson explicitly links these struggles to post-Katrina rebuilding efforts, exemplifies both ideologies of resistance as well as the nature of residents' attachment to place.

Better elucidating the relationship between social memory and resistance is critical to understanding the political culture of New Orleans' African American communities before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina. This chapter has traced the major developments in the field of memory studies and discuss how various scholars have used these paradigms to understand the social,

¹²⁶ Joyce Marie Jackson, "The Declaration of Taking Twice: The Fazendeville Community of the Lower Ninth Ward," *American Anthropologist* 108, no.4 (2006), 772.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 768.

cultural, and political dynamics of collective remembrance. In particular, this section has considered how a group's social memory and memory practices, in this case the Lower Ninth Ward community of New Orleans, can be used as tools of resistance.

2.4 Place Attachment

“Place, at a basic level, is space invested with meaning in the context of power.”¹²⁸

One of the most fundamental goals of humanistic geography is to achieve a better understanding of place and its centrality to identity and to everyday life. Scholars seek to answer: how do we experience our world and how do we ascribe meaning to places?¹²⁹ What does place mean to a community or to an individual, and how do landscapes evoke attachment? After Hurricane Katrina, citizens, academics, and outsiders alike questioned what it would mean to lose one of America's most unique metropolises to storm surge and fierce winds. Popular literature called upon the lyrics of the classic song “Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?” to capture the sentiments of loss, displacement, and disillusionment that many felt.¹³⁰ As the city struggled to rebuild, it became clear that attachment to place would play a profound role in communities' efforts to reclaim their space in a radically altered metropolitan landscape. The Lower Ninth Ward, now regarded as the reluctant icon for the failure of recovery efforts and the persistence of racism and marginalization in American society, is at the fore of the controversy over citizens' desire and right to return to vulnerable landscapes. Vehement conflicts emerged when Mayor Ray Nagin's recovery committee suggested that the lower-lying areas be partially converted to

¹²⁸ Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 12.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹³⁰ Chin Music Press, [*Do You Know What it Means to Miss New Orleans? : A Collection of Stories & Essays Set in the Big Easy*](#). (Seattle : Chin Music Press, 2008).

parkland, that no building permits should be issued in heavily flooded areas, and that neighborhoods with insufficient population be consolidated.¹³¹ Residents felt that their profound sense of belonging and emotional ties with their home were not considered in the process. Core concepts from geography and related fields can greatly aid in understanding the community's attachment to a seemingly ordinary, and, to outsiders, less-than-desirable, landscape. By examining the residents' fight to return and rebuild through the lens of place attachment, it is possible to garner a greater understanding of why the landscape of the Lower Ninth Ward has been so meaningful to its residents in terms of culture and identity formation. In this chapter I will begin by tracing the historical origins of "place attachment" and cultural landscape studies within the field of geography. I will then highlight how contemporary scholars have used these concepts and suggest how I can draw upon this body of work to clarify processes of place attachment within the Lower Ninth Ward.

A number of volumes provide invaluable insight into the development of attachment to place and landscape as fields of inquiry within geography. Tim Cresswell's handbook *Place: A Short Introduction* provides an excellent overview of the evolution of these sub-fields.¹³² In the second chapter, he provides a useful summary of traditional geographic approaches to landscape and place and traces these intellectual developments through time. He highlights how Richard Hartshorne's contributions to chorological studies and Vidal de la Blanche's *genres de vie* of particular places formed the intellectual underpinnings of modern-day approaches to landscape study.¹³³ Early works in cultural geography, such as the volume *Readings in Cultural Geography* (1962) give culture an explanatory power that countered Ellen Semple and Ellsworth Huntington's earlier paradigms of

¹³¹ Wallace Roberts, and Todd, LLC, "Action Plan for New Orleans: The New American City." New Orleans. Prepared by Bring Back New Orleans Commission, Urban Planning Committee, January 2006. <http://www.bringneworleansback.org/Portals/BringNewOrleansBack/Resources/Urban%20Planning%20Final%20Report.pdf>. (accessed July 29, 2009).

¹³² Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction*, 7.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

environmental determinism.¹³⁴ Geographer Carl Sauer was at the front of the movement to reject simplistic environmental determinism and identify the role of cultural groups in modifying their natural habitats.¹³⁵

In his article, “Attachment to Ordinary Landscape” from the anthology *Place Attachment*, author Robert R. Riley argues that some geographers, such as J.B. Jackson, came to view landscape as a cultural artifact, molded by a particular group’s culture and creating affective bonds rich in regional identity.¹³⁶ In the 1960s, David Lowenthal and Hugh Prince discuss affection for landscape in the context of the English countryside and describe desirable landscape characteristics which are shared, they propose, on a nation-wide scale. By the 1970s, renowned geographers such as Edward Relph and Yi-Fu Tuan exemplified the distinctly philosophical bent that place and landscape studies had adopted. Cresswell argues that to these scholars it was not so much the *place itself* that warranted attention but “place as an idea, concept, and way of being-in-the-world.”¹³⁷ Relph’s 1976 work *Place and Placelessness* argued for a distinction of “place” from concepts of meaning and area, stating that “space is full of significance, and the landscape, rather than being comprised of physical and geological features, is a record of mythical history.”¹³⁸ He offers a humanistic approach that countered paradigms of rigorousness and “objectivity” that dominated geography and environmental studies at this time. He seeks to elucidate a greater appreciation for the subtleties and nuances of our everyday “lived-world” and explore the psychological links between people and the

¹³⁴ Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction*, 16-17. See also Phillip L. Wagner and Marvin W. Mikesell, *Readings in Cultural Geography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹³⁶ Robert B. Wiley, “Attachment to the Ordinary Landscape,” In *Place Attachment*, eds. Irwin Altman and Setha M. Low (New York: Plenum Press, 1992), 16.

¹³⁷ Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction*, 20.

¹³⁸ Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion Limited, 1976), 15.

places in which they live.¹³⁹ The “placenessness” he describes reflects a weakening of identity to places due to mass culture and increased mobility.¹⁴⁰

Yi-Fu Tuan is often considered the father of geographical understandings of place attachment although his insights have had a profound influence on scholars in a multiplicity of fields. One of his most famous works, *Topophilia*, sought to explain the emotional ties and affective bonds between people and place. He describes how responses to the environment can range from fleeting sensations, such as pleasurable reactions to aesthetic beauty, to deep-seated emotional ties to a place that is “home” and is the locus of memories.¹⁴¹ Tuan states that an understanding of ourselves is essential to understanding environmental values and human attitudes to nature. His work traces environmental attitudes and images of place throughout history and shows how they are reflective of broader concepts such as “value” and “belonging.”¹⁴²

In the decades that followed Tuan and Relph’s works, cultural geography adopted Marxist, feminist, and post-structuralist perspectives. This left little room for the seemingly-antiquated notions of “place,” which were increasingly criticized for being essentialist.¹⁴³ Place, critical geographers argued, was a social construction, founded on exclusion and repression. Nor was “place” an exclusively positive experience that connotes feelings of belonging; feminist geographers cite the domestic realm as a “place” that was stifling and oppressive. However, Cresswell argues that the incorporation of the fields of social theory and cultural studies into geography reconciled “place” and critical geographical analysis: “By taking space and place seriously, it was argued, we can provide another tool to demystify and understand the forces that effect and manipulate our everyday

¹³⁹ Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, preface.

¹⁴⁰ Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction*, 44-45.

¹⁴¹ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes and Values* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1974), 93.

¹⁴² Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction*, 20.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 26.

lives.”¹⁴⁴ The notion of “place” now has a significant role in contemporary critical human geography. It is a powerful way to understand human-environmental interactions as well as what consequences these relationships have for cultural identity and sense of place.

Another fundamental aspect of place attachment studies concerns communities’ affections for “ordinary” landscapes. This concept of *cultural landscape studies* has been a profound one within geography and is based on the premise that everyday landscapes have value and that landscapes are broadly reflective of culture. The anthology *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays*, edited by Donald Meinig and with contributions from geographers such as J.B. Jackson, Peirce Lewis, and David Lowenthal, remains a landmark text in understanding how landscape can be a clue to culture.¹⁴⁵ In the chapter “The Beholding Eye,” Meinig encourages the reader to regard their everyday landscape through various lenses, such as landscape as habitat, landscape as system, and landscape as problem. Landscape as history and landscape as place are two particularly useful frameworks to examine place attachment. “Age and Artifact: Dilemmas of Appreciation” by David Lowenthal explains how monuments affect our awareness of the past and alter its meaning and significance for subsequent generations.¹⁴⁶ This volume is useful in understanding the importance of cultural landscapes to place attachment, as “our human landscape is our unwitting autobiography, reflecting our tastes, our values, our aspirations, and even our fears, in tangible, visible form.”¹⁴⁷ A newer volume edited by Paul Groth and Todd W. Bressi called *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes* offers more recent case studies that interpret rural and urban landscapes and clarify their cultural

¹⁴⁴ Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction*, 27.

¹⁴⁵ J.B. Jackson, “The Order of a Landscape: Reason and Religion in Newtonian America,” In *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays*, ed. Donald W. Meinig (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 153-163., and Peirce F. Lewis, “Axioms for Reading the Landscape: Some Guides to the American Scene,” In *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays*, ed. Donald W. Meinig (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 11-32., and David Lowenthal, “Age and Artifact: Dilemmas of Appreciation,” In *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays*, ed. by Donald W. Meinig (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 103-128.

¹⁴⁶ Lowenthal, “Age and Artifact: Dilemmas of Appreciation,” 124.

¹⁴⁷ Lewis, “Axioms for Reading the Landscape,” 12.

significance.¹⁴⁸ Dolores Hayden's chapter "Urban Landscape History: The Sense of Place and the Politics of Space" explores the life of everyday buildings, the construction of counter-spaces, and the importance of race to territorial histories.¹⁴⁹ Other chapters elaborate themes such as the importance of sacred ground, the future of vernacular architecture, and the visual character of landscapes.

It is through the lens of place attachment that I approach the cultural landscape of the Ninth Ward in my attempts to better understand the rootedness inherent in the community's determination to return and rebuild. David Hummon's chapter in *Place Attachment*, "Community Attachment- Local Sentiment and Sense of Place," outlines the salience of emotional investment in place. He proposes that community attachment must be understood in terms of *processes*, which may include long-term residence and local social involvement. Both of these processes are prominent aspects of Lower Ninth Ward culture, as articulated in Joyce Jackson's work "Declaration of Taking Twice: The Fazendeville Community of the Lower Ninth Ward."¹⁵⁰ This small community near the Ninth Ward formed after the Civil War but was disbanded in 1964 to create a government monument to the Battle of New Orleans, which was fought on its lands. Newly emancipated slaves initially settled the community, and their identities were intertwined with and invested in its landscape due to the immense pride of home ownership. The informal yet powerful networks of social relations and benevolent societies sustained the community against outside interference and contributed to a culture of resistance in a time of heightened discrimination.¹⁵¹ After Fazendeville became defunct, community members still retained their identity as villagers and highly value a local war monument, which they have transformed to serve their own meanings and notions of belonging.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ Paul Groth and Todd W. Bressi, eds., *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

¹⁴⁹ Dolores Hayden, "Urban Landscape History: The Sense of Place and the Politics of Space," In *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes*, eds. Paul Groth and Todd W. Bressi (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 119, 123, 129.

¹⁵⁰ Jackson, "Declaration of Taking Twice,"): 765-780.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 767, 772.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 772.

To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History provides an excellent historical background to understanding blacks' attachments to their landscapes. This work adds a spatial component to already-established themes in African-American historiography such as ethnicity, gender, and race relations.¹⁵³ The chapter "Slavery and the Origins of African American Environmentalism" demonstrates how environmental values and attitudes to place within the black community are intimately bound up with a long history of slavery – an institution that is rooted agriculture and the landscape. Other chapters, such as "Slave Hunting and Fishing in the Antebellum South" harmonize the themes of attachment to natural landscape and resistance to oppression by showing how slaves and freed people used supplementary activities such as hunting and fishing to challenge a hierarchy in which white elites had social, spatial and economic power.¹⁵⁴ This volume also recognizes that black history is inherently space-focused because of the nature of physical segregation and the limited public spaces through which African-Americans were historically permitted to move.¹⁵⁵ After the abolishment of officially-sanctioned segregation, the maintenance of black-white dichotomous spaces, particularly in the urban-suburban realm, would have potent impacts on the development African American culture, education and economic opportunities, and place attachment.

Setha M. Low's "Symbolic Ties that Bind," provides a useful framework through which to examine the Lower Ninth Ward citizens' sense of home and attachment to place. Although it is not explicitly geographical, it can be adapted to geographical paradigms. She proposes that there are six processes of culturally-based place attachments: 1) genealogical bonding through history and family,

¹⁵³ Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll, eds., *To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 8.

¹⁵⁴ Scott Giltner, "Slave Hunting and Fishing in the Antebellum South," in *To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History*, eds. Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 21-22.

¹⁵⁵ Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll, "African American Environmental History: An Introduction," in *To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History*, eds. Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 1.

2) linkage through loss of land or destruction, 3) economic ties through ownership, inheritance and politics, 4) cosmological bonding through spiritual or mythical relationships, 5) linkage through religious or secular pilgrimage and secular cultural events, and 6) narrative ties through storytelling and place naming.¹⁵⁶ I will outline how each contributes to a more rigorous analysis of identification with place in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward.

A number of recent geographical works underscore the significance of place to the development and maintenance of individual and community identity, particularly in the midst of disjunction and trauma. Christopher Airriess, author of "Creating Vietnamese Landscapes and Place in New Orleans"¹⁵⁷ and contributor to "Resilient History and the Rebuilding of Community: The Vietnamese American Community in New Orleans East" shows how the Vietnamese-American identity in New Orleans is rooted in a particular history and collective memory that also constitutes political resources.¹⁵⁸ This group largely settled in the eastern part of the metropolis in the 1970s and over time established themselves as stakeholders in their local neighborhood and city. The transformation of their physical environment, which consisted of the re-creation of important Vietnamese cultural landscapes, was a physical manifestation of their attachment to place.¹⁵⁹ Post-Katrina reconstruction and rebuilding efforts were eased by a distinct social and spatial organization whose pre-existing leadership structure allowed the local church to keep track of now-scattered community members. This shared identity, history, and place attachment resulted in extraordinarily high return rates and the rapid reconstitution of the community.

¹⁵⁶ Setha M. Low, "Symbolic Ties that Bind: Place Attachment in the Plaza," in *Place Attachment*, eds. Irwin Altman and Setha M. Low (New York: Plenum Press, 1992), 166.

¹⁵⁷ Christopher Airriess, "Creating Vietnamese Landscapes and Place in New Orleans," in *Geographical Identities of Ethnic America: Race, Space and Place*, eds. Kate A. Berry and Martha L. Henderson (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2002), 228.

¹⁵⁸ Karen J. Leong, Christopher A. Airriess, Wei Li et al. "Resilient History and the Rebuilding of Community: The Vietnamese American Community in New Orleans East," *The Journal of American History* 94, no.3 (2007): 770.

¹⁵⁹ Airriess, "Creating Vietnamese Landscapes," 228-229.

The article “Place Attachment and Environmental Change in Coastal Louisiana” provides a fascinating look into the individual and communal mindset of the Grand Isle, Dulac, Chauvin, and Cocodrie communities of southeastern Louisiana, all of which suffered significant damage from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. David Burley, Pam Jenkins, and Shirley Laska sought to better understand how these primarily Cajun residents felt about place given the slow and rapid onset of coastal land loss.¹⁶⁰ They discover that the fragility of the landscape profoundly shaped the coastal areas: “Their identity, their dialect, the challenges of living where they live, the work and pleasure that stems from living in this place, the changing landscape, the unique environment... all form a symbiotic relationship.”¹⁶¹ The authors posit that although other communities boast powerful attachments to landscape, the Acadian coastal communities’ sentiments are accentuated by the “ongoing traumatic event” of land loss and the constant precariousness of their physical environment.¹⁶² This would be a valuable comparison to draw with Lower Ninth Ward residents, who live with the knowledge of the fragility of structural mitigation efforts and the reality that their community could be destroyed by a well-placed hurricane. Furthermore, both of these groups have historically felt the consequences of discrimination and exile from a homeland. Residents in both of these distinct regions seem to fix themselves to place, in spite of or perhaps because of the enduring possibility of its loss.¹⁶³

Identity and loss are powerful themes traced in the article, “Ordinary and Extraordinary Trauma: Race, Indigeneity, and Hurricane Katrina in Tunica-Biloxi History.”¹⁶⁴ The Tunica-Biloxi natives of Louisiana, another historically marginalized group, also experienced Hurricane Katrina within the context of race, poverty and power. This article illuminates the linkages between the

¹⁶⁰ David Burley, Pam Jenkins, Shirley Laska et al. “Place Attachment and Environmental Change in Coastal Louisiana,” *Organization and Environment* 20 (2007): 347-348.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 357.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 361.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 360.

¹⁶⁴ Brian Klopotek, Brenda Lintinger and John Barry, “Ordinary and Extraordinary Trauma: Race, Indigeneity, and Hurricane Katrina in Tunica-Biloxi History,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 32, no.2 (2008): 57-58.

vulnerabilities of people of color and the rootedness of their cultures to specific places.¹⁶⁵ The authors note that the Tunica-Biloxi homeland has profound spiritual and emotional meaning for the community members that, like the “sense of home” many New Orleanians feel, cannot be replicated in another location.¹⁶⁶ Many of the Tunica-Biloxi Hurricane Katrina survivors felt hopelessly out of place without their ancestral tribe and their kin network. In fact, the hurricane actually led some families who had been living off the reservation in New Orleans to reclaim their status and the importance of their Indian heritage and move back “home.” This study offers a useful examination of the connections between minority communities and their emotional bonds to landscapes.

In “Continuity and Decline in Anthracite Towns of Pennsylvania,” Ben Marsh provides a moving account of the importance of place to Pennsylvania’s mining communities during and after the height of coal mining industry. He states that, to these northeastern Pennsylvanians, “place is not separable from its past or its promise.”¹⁶⁷ Two different aspects of landscape exist: the physical support that the land provides and the intangible rewards it brings.¹⁶⁸ The land has long been exhausted of means but it is still rich with meaning for its residents, who go to unusual lengths to remain in the area and often show stubborn optimism for revival despite a degraded natural landscape, a dearth of economic activity, and a disturbing demographic exodus. To the community, historical continuity of place and rootedness dominate the individual identity and collective memory: as Marsh explains, “Place is, in part, the story a town tells itself.”¹⁶⁹ This study provides a parallel to some of the social processes occurring in the Ninth Ward, in which the residents are determined to return and rebuild even in the face of economic and environmental uncertainty.

¹⁶⁵ Klopotek, Lintinger, and Barry, “Ordinary and Extraordinary Trauma,” 72.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁶⁷ Ben Marsh, “Continuity and Decline in the Anthracite Towns of Pennsylvania,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 77, no.3 (1987): 337-352.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 337.

¹⁶⁹ Marsh, “Continuity and Decline,” 337-338.

Studying place and interpreting landscapes are part of a powerful cultural and historical tradition in geography. This literature review highlighted the landmark texts as well as contemporary studies that should better elucidate the processes of place attachment apparent in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward. Themes of attachment to vernacular landscapes, reverence of sacred material culture, and importance of place-based narratives are prominent elements of this African American community's identity and determination to return to their community post-Katrina. By appreciating what "place" and belonging means to residents we can better understand their profound desire to rebuild the home that they value so much.

3. Historical Geography of New Orleans's Lower Ninth Ward

New Orleans's Lower Ninth Ward became an unwitting icon of the tragedies that Hurricane Katrina wrought when the storm struck in August 2005. Since then, the community has garnered considerable attention from both the public and academia as the “poster child” of racial inequities and poverty that, it seems, existed long before Katrina but had remained relatively shrouded from mainstream society.¹⁷⁰ The scenes of families trapped on rooftops, clinging to trees, or paddling through the murky water were arguably the most compelling images of the disaster. Newscasters such as Wolf Blitzer were aghast at the disparities in evacuation and recovery, stating clumsily, “These people are so poor, and so black.”¹⁷¹ During a now-infamous Hurricane Relief telecast, rapper Kanye West deviated from the script, stating, “America is set up to help the poor, the black people, the less well-off as slow as possible... George Bush doesn't care about black people.”¹⁷² All eyes, it seemed, were on New Orleans and in particular on its poor and minority communities. Popular magazines questioned: how did we let this happen, and who is to blame? *Newsweek* addressed these concerns in their issue entitled, “The Other America: An Enduring Shame,”¹⁷³ while *Time* asked its readers to consider “The City Tourists Never Knew.”¹⁷⁴

However, for scholars who had long been studying the city's sociocultural and racial dynamics the unsavory aspects that Hurricane Katrina exposed were of little surprise. If one wound their way from the dizziness of the French Quarter beyond Esplanade Avenue or towards Central

¹⁷⁰ Ari Kelman, “America's Underclass Exposed,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, September 12, 2005. See also Alan Berube and Martha Ross, “Helping D.C.'s Lower Ninth Wards,” *The Brookings Institute*, July 27, 2009.

¹⁷¹ Camilla Stivers, “So Poor and So Black: Hurricane Katrina, Public Administration, and the Issue of Race,” *Public Administration Review* Special Issue (2007): 1.

¹⁷² Lisa de Moraes, “Kanye West's Torrent of Criticism, Live on NBC,” *The Washington Post*, Sept. 3, 2005. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/03/AR2005090300165.html> (accessed September 2010)

¹⁷³ Jonathan Alter, “The Other America: An Enduring Shame,” *Newsweek*, Sept. 19, 2005. <http://www.newsweek.com/2005/09/18/the-other-america.html> (accessed September 2010)

¹⁷⁴ Sonja Steptoe, “The City Tourists Never Knew,” *Time*, May 10, 2006. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1101568,00.html> (accessed September 2010)

City, the realities of the city would become apparent: vast numbers of the city's predominantly African American population lived in poverty, some in historic shotgun houses that now resembled shanties. High crime rates, poor educational prospects, and social and physical isolation reigned. African American residents comprised 67 percent of the city's population yet made up 84 percent of those living below the poverty line.¹⁷⁵ In a country and region so hardened by a divisive racial past, New Orleans was no exception. However, as this study will reveal, while acknowledging the existence of social and economic problems, many Ninth Ward residents rejected the dismal statistics by which others defined their community.¹⁷⁶ Instead they pointed to a vibrant history of self-reliance facilitated by local social aid and benevolent societies, pride in generations of homeownership, and the rich cultural traditions of second-line parades and the Mardi Gras Indians. Interviewees described the pre-Katrina Ninth Ward landscape as that of a village, where each resident looked out for his or her neighbor. This loyalty, bred in part by physical isolation and discrimination, has created a community whose resistance has become an integral part of its identity.

Before focusing our attention on the Lower Ninth Ward specifically, it is imperative to consider the city's historical geography to understand how racial and class dynamics have informed the spatial patterns evident on the eve of Katrina. A number of pre- and post-Katrina publications explore historical processes and their implications for the present cityscape. Peirce F. Lewis describes New Orleans' two main patterns of segregation. One short-lived type Lewis identifies was the concentration of the poorest blacks in whatever marginal lands they could find, particularly shacks along the *battures* – the river-side, flood-prone area near the artificial levees. Of more enduring significance was the so-called “salt and pepper” pattern, not uncommon in Southern metropolises of the period. Slaves (and, after emancipation, domestic workers), often lived on their

¹⁷⁵ Bruce Katz, “Concentrated Poverty in New Orleans and Other American Cities,” The Brookings Institute. August 4, 2006. www.brookings.edu. (Accessed July 24, 2009).

¹⁷⁶ Juliette Landphair, “The Forgotten People of New Orleans’: Community, Vulnerability, and the Lower Ninth Ward,” *The Journal of American History* 94, no. 3 (2007): 838.

master's or employer's property or in adjacent alleys. The grid developed so that the slaveholder-occupied boulevards interrupted rows of black-occupied streets. This close residential proximity did not necessarily imply prolonged interaction among the different races; as Lewis states, although they may have played together as children, whites did not associate socially with blacks.¹⁷⁷

Although this residential co-existence was not uncommon in Southern metropolises of the period, the city was unique in its three-tiered racial hierarchy. To this day color consciousness remains a prominent feature of the city's culture, and light-skinned Creole leadership has become a lasting pattern on its political landscape.¹⁷⁸ It would be well-placed to insert a brief note on the fluid meaning of *creole*. As historian Gwendolyn Midlo Hall describes it, the word *creole* in its current American usage typically refers to the people and culture of lower Louisiana.¹⁷⁹ However, within the broader Americas it has historically had a different connotation, suggesting a person of non-American ancestry who was born in the "New World," whether African or European. Within Louisiana during the eighteenth century, these Creoles were originally locally-born people of at least partial African descent and the term was used to distinguish American-born slaves from African-born slaves. However, on the heels of the "scientific" racism prevalent in the nineteenth century, the term underwent a redefinition—this time to mean exclusively white, denying the racial openness of Louisiana's history as well as the racially-mixed nature of many New Orleans' Creoles. As Midlo Hall defines it, by the end of that century the mixed-race Creoles "defined *creole* to mean racially mixed, enforced endogamous marriage among their own group, and distinguished themselves and looked

¹⁷⁷ Peirce F. Lewis, *New Orleans: The Making of Urban Landscape* (Santa Fe: The Center for American Places, 2003 [1976]), 50-51.

¹⁷⁸ Arnold R. Hirsch, "Fade to Black: Hurricane Katrina and the Disappearance of Creole New Orleans," *The Journal of American History* 94, no. 3 (2007): 754-755.

¹⁷⁹ Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 157.

down upon blacks and Anglo-Afroamericans, though their disdain stemmed from cultural as well as racial distinctions.”¹⁸⁰

Indeed, both the French and Spanish regimes that had governed the colony had had fluid conceptions of race, epitomized by practice of *placage* within the city, which was essentially a formalized mistress relationship between a white man and a free woman of color. Sumpter notes that the period between 1813 and 1830 constituted the “Golden Age” for free people of color, as an influx of immigrants and Americans caused white and black Creoles to unite in defence of their culture, giving them a degree of social and political power.¹⁸¹ However, an 1836 division of the city into three separate municipalities enhanced ethnic separatism. With the increasing Americanization of the former colony, the passage of laws that required social and spatial segregation of the races resulted in a more rigid dipartite racial structure.

Segregation along racial lines continued to intensify in the mid-1800s as the New Orleans’ population of free blacks began to swell. Segregation was wholly applied and legally enforced: blacks could not ride a streetcar or patronize white restaurants or bars, and contact between the races, particularly between black men and white women, was not tolerated. With the collapse of the old regime in the 1860s some gains were made for racial equality chiefly accomplished through a vocal protest against streetcar segregation in 1866. But by 1877, the Democrats who came to power effectively restored the “color line” and re-established the rank of African Americans in the lowest echelons of society.¹⁸²

The entrenchment of the “separate but equal” doctrine in 1890 as a result of the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* case represented a critical turning point in the struggle of African-Americans for equality,

¹⁸⁰ Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 158.

¹⁸¹ Amy R. Sumpter, “Segregation of the Free People of Color and the Construction of Race in Antebellum New Orleans,” *Southeastern Geographer* 48, no.1 (2008): 22.

¹⁸² Roger A. Fischer, “Racial Segregation in Ante Bellum New Orleans,” *The American Historical Review* 74, no.3 (1969): 931, 937.

effectively ensuring that this population was “visibly subordinated” in every dimension of public life.¹⁸³ Another landmark was the 1917 introduction of a durable pump to facilitate the drainage of New Orleans’ backswamps.¹⁸⁴ These marginal areas became home to the city’s lower classes, mainly new immigrants and racial minorities. After the first phase of drainage, the upper classes moved into the higher-ground lakefront side of Lake Pontchartrain while the blacks settled into the newly-accessible low-lying areas, where the street pattern and housing concentration were undesirable to whites.

Increasing residential segregation was one of the most prominent parallel trends during this period, essentially constituting a long-term reversal of earlier patterns of residential co-mingling. Restrictive government policies as well as private-sector housing discrimination drove this racial clustering. Colten and Lewis both describe how the tracts drained near the lakefront in the 1920s were closed to blacks through city ordinances and racial deed covenants. As a result the African American population continued to expand towards the newly drained margins of the backswamps, and “the neutralization of topography and distance, along with legally sanctioned racial polarization, helped disaggregate the [city’s] historically intermixed racial geography.”¹⁸⁵ Not only were African Americans virtually excluded from drained territory in the higher regions, but the lower areas were correspondingly underserved by sewer service. By 1926, the differential between typhoid rates for blacks (42/100,000) and whites (13/100,000) indicated the persistence of substandard sanitary conditions.¹⁸⁶ Although these public works programs ostensibly existed to serve all parts of the city irrespective of race, in reality the black community was of very low priority.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸³ Fischer, “Racial Segregation,” 937.

¹⁸⁴ Craig E. Colten, *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 92.

¹⁸⁵ Richard Campanella, “An Ethnic Geography of New Orleans,” *The Journal of American History* 94, no.3 (2007): 709-710.

¹⁸⁶ Craig E. Colten, “Basin Street Blues: Drainage and Environmental Equity in New Orleans, 1890-1930.” *Journal of Historical Geography* 28, no.2 (2002): 249- 250.

¹⁸⁷ Lewis, *New Orleans*, 67 and Colten, “Basin Street Blues,” 253.

Beginning with New Deal programs and the opportunities presented by the Housing Act of 1937, New Orleans undertook to build public housing projects on a large scale.¹⁸⁸ The new housing units, which were fully segregated and opened in 1940, also provided the patterns of racial concentration further momentum. The local public housing authorities (PHAs) owned and operated the public housing program, with the federal government financing the majority of capital costs.¹⁸⁹ While contemporaries lauded these attractive and well-constructed housing units, home to both black and white residents, the later-constructed housing was both geographically isolated and plagued by sewage and drainage problems.¹⁹⁰ The local government also retained decision-making powers regarding the *location* of these public housing units, which, in the context of New Orleans, significantly impacted the long-term residential patterns of the black and white communities. In 1940, six projects opened in New Orleans: four for blacks and two for whites. Coinciding with the economic upturn spawned by World War II, a sense of optimism reigned as thousands of migrants flooded the city, drawn by war-time industry. Unsurprisingly, a housing shortage developed, and blacks bore the brunt of the squeeze. With the passage of the Housing Act of 1949, the government-assisted housing program mandated that priority be given to the extreme poor. However, since local governments retained the power to site these developments, they were habitually constructed in the least desirable areas of town, having the cumulative effect of concentrating poverty and promoting physical isolation.

As World War II came to a close, the “projects” became increasingly black. White tenants, who often could find accommodations in pleasant new subdivisions and obtain a federal mortgage, moved out of the white government housing with increasing frequency. As jobs offered by the new

¹⁸⁸ Martha Mahoney, “Law and Racial Geography: Public Housing and the Economy in New Orleans,” *Stanford Law Review* 42, no. 5 (1990): 1268.

¹⁸⁹ Michael H. Schill and Susan M. Wachter, “The Spatial Bias of Federal Housing Law and Policy: Concentrated Poverty in Urban America,” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 143, no. 5 (1995): 1291.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1277.

industrial parks followed the white citizenry to the suburbs, black unemployment grew. While whites appeared to treat the segregated projects as a stopover on the way to the private market, it became clear that African Americans within the city had far less residential and employment mobility.¹⁹¹ As such, the legal regime of segregation, with its attendant discriminatory federal financing and the disenfranchisement of black citizens, played just as much of a role in carving New Orleans' racial landscape as private development did.

By the time of the 1940 census, the first year in which tract information was available, African Americans were largely concentrated in the easternmost portions of the city, as well as the low-lying sections towards Lake Pontchartrain, such as Pontchartrain Park. In the bottom of the bowl created by the city's natural levees, the percentage of African American residents hovered near 50 percent.¹⁹² As Lewis describes it, by mid-century the old backswamp "ghettos" had begun to merge into the "superghetto" pattern more characteristic of northern cities.¹⁹³ With the end of wartime building controls in the late 1940s, New Orleans experienced a suburban explosion. From 1950 to 1975, metropolitan New Orleans almost doubled in size.¹⁹⁴ Correspondingly, from 1950 to 2000, the city's white population declined by two thirds of the total.¹⁹⁵ When the landmark decision in *Brown vs. the Board of Education* integrated public schools in 1954, the white community's response to the impending "mixing," particularly within the working-class Ninth Ward, was swift and virulent.¹⁹⁶ The desegregation of the housing projects during this period further concentrated tens of thousands of the city's poorest blacks into these subsidized communities, as black residents swelled the ranks of the formerly-white housing units.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹¹ Schill and Wachter, "The Spatial Bias of Federal Housing Law and Policy," 1283.

¹⁹² Colten, *An Unnatural Metropolis*, 104.

¹⁹³ Lewis, *New Orleans*, 52.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁹⁶ Richard Campanella, *Geographies of New Orleans: Urban Fabrics Before the Storm*, (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 2006), 375.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 307-308.

The construction of the Mississippi River bridges (1958 and 1988), the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway (1956), and the Interstate 10/610 (1966-1971) helped to facilitate white flight, allowing accessibility to the more remote residential areas – with often little pause given to the ongoing threat of hurricanes and storm surges in these reclaimed swamplands.¹⁹⁸ Between 1960 and 2000, new developments such as those in St. Bernard Parish, Jefferson Parish, and St. Tammany Parish saw an influx of white New Orleanians by the tens of thousands.¹⁹⁹ As white citizens increasingly left the city, drawn by less congestion, a lower cost of living, and largely unintegrated schools, the quality of the education and infrastructure within the city’s core plummeted. By the century’s close, New Orleans’ racial geography had transitioned from a largely intermixed pattern to one of marked bifurcation along racial lines, one in which the inequality between rich and poor was as extreme as at any time since the legal abolishment of slavery.²⁰⁰ As Lewis explains, “New Orleans had been converted from a white city with black enclaves, to a black city with white enclaves—mostly upper class.”²⁰¹ In the Ninth Ward, subject to chronic official neglect since the community’s inception, the consequences of this population shift have been particularly pronounced.

3.1 The Lower Ninth Ward

And what of the Ninth Ward, which Campanella presents as the epitome of the city’s racial transformation? A former cypress swamp first labelled the “Ninth Ward” during an 1852 city consolidation and voting district designation, by the late 1800s the area’s population had swelled to over 17,000.²⁰² Originally the area had a rurality not present in New Orleans proper; indeed,

¹⁹⁸ Lewis, *New Orleans*, 81-82.

¹⁹⁹ Campanella, *Geographies of New Orleans*, 307.

²⁰⁰ Lewis, *New Orleans*, 128.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 177.

²⁰² Landphair, “The Forgotten People of New Orleans,” 839.

residents harvested wood from nearby cypress trees for the materials necessary to construct the classic one-storey shotgun houses. Its earliest residents, those who settled on the river side (in what is now Holy Cross), were mainly of European or Creole origin, while those who moved into the “back of town” (north of St. Claude) were mostly black and of the working-class. Those who settled into the northern part of the ward, which was largely undeveloped into the 1920s-1930s, were black Creoles with a history long intertwined with the city’s complex racial heritage, while others were the descendents of largely-rural immigrants.²⁰³ Already, a self-reliant communal culture had taken hold, one which boasted benevolent societies, mutual aid organizations, families, and churches as sources of financial, social, and spiritual strength.

The five-and-one-half-mile Industrial Canal, constructed between 1918 and 1923, bisected the Ninth Ward while significantly altering its landscape and diminishing the bucolic feel of earlier days. It also reinforced in physical terms the sense of detachment that many residents felt. In today’s terms, the community is geographically defined as follows: The Lower Ninth Ward, the area eastward of the Industrial Canal, consists of two neighborhoods: Holy Cross and the Lower Ninth Ward. Holy Cross is bounded on the west by the Industrial Canal, the south by the Mississippi River, the east by the St. Bernard Parish line, and the north by St. Claude Avenue. The Lower Ninth Ward is bordered by the Industrial Canal on its west side, the Southern Railway railroad and Florida Avenue to its north, the St. Bernard Parish line to the east, and St. Claude Avenue to the south.²⁰⁴ See Figure 1 for a map placing the Lower Ninth Ward within New Orleans. Figures 2 and 3 demonstrate the rural nature of the area mid-century, while Figure 4 shows the current site of the

²⁰³ Richard Campanella, “Urban Transformation in the Lower Ninth Ward,” in ed. Kristin Feireiss, *Architecture in Times of Need*, (Munich: Prestel, 2009), 75-76. See also: Rachel Breunlin and Ronald W. Lewis, *The House of Dance and Feathers* (New Orleans: UNO Press, 2009), 32-33.

²⁰⁴ Joyce M. Jackson, “Declaration of Taking Twice: The Fazendeville Community of the Lower Ninth Ward,” *American Anthropologist* 108, no.4 (2006): 774.

Dr. Martin Luther King Charter School. Figure 5 shows the extent of Hurricane Betsy's damage to the Lower Ninth Ward.

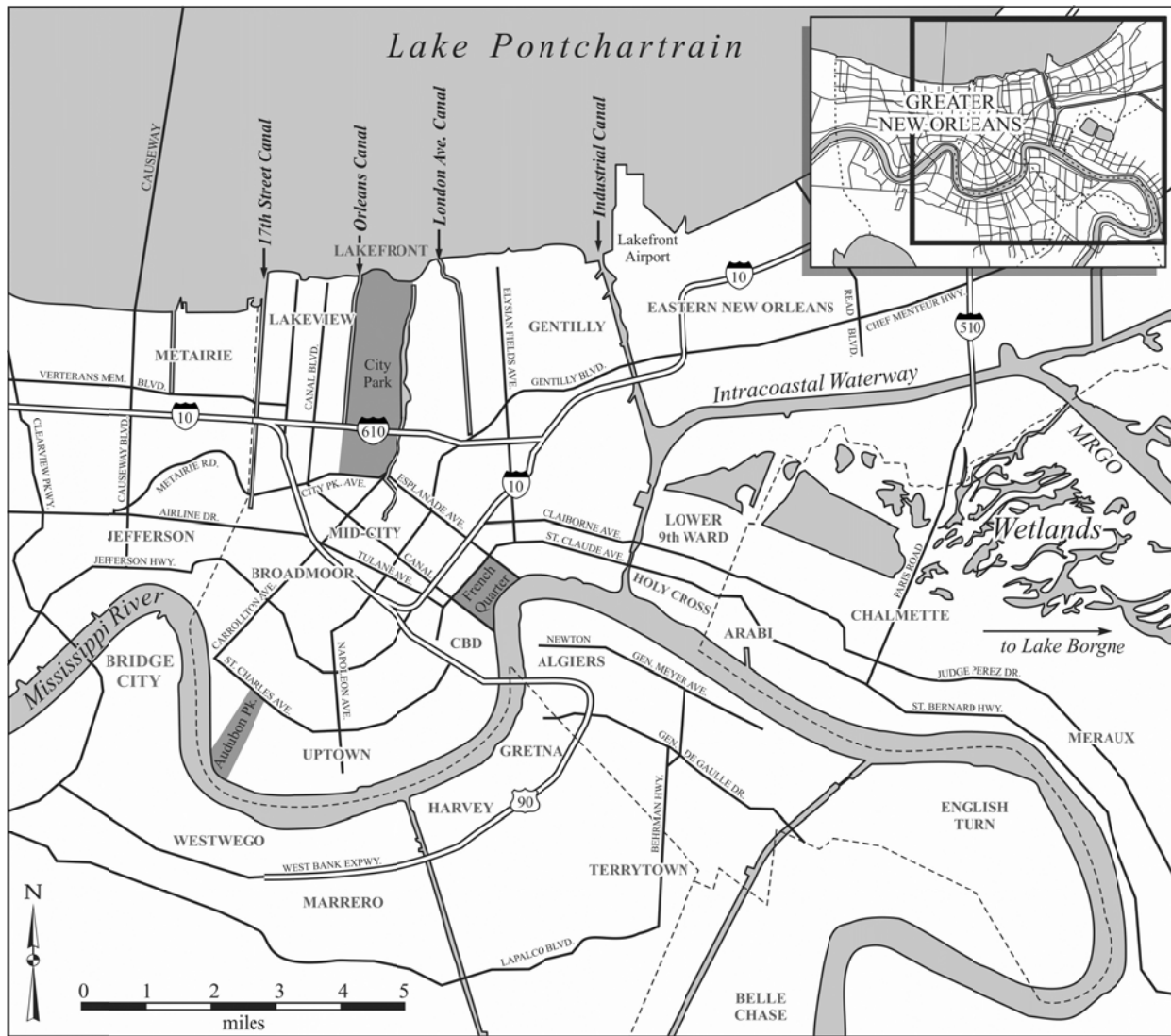


Figure 1.

The Ninth Ward's Location in the New Orleans Metropolitan Area.

Cartography by Mary Lee Eggart.

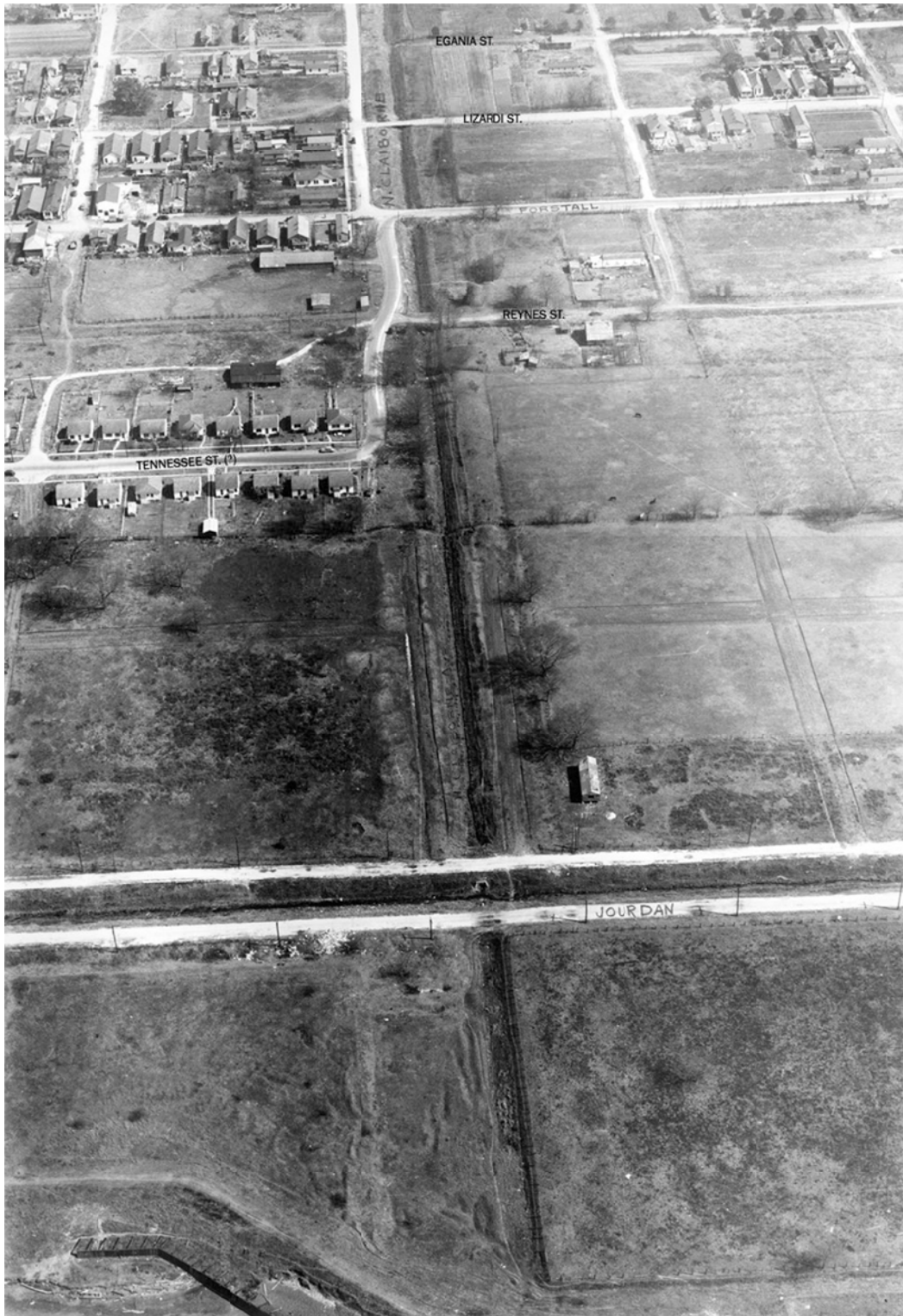


Fig. 2

An Aerial View of The Lower Ninth Ward, 1949.

Photo Courtesy of Louisiana Division/City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.



Fig. 3

An Aerial View of The Lower Ninth Ward, 1949.

Photo Courtesy of Louisiana Division/City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.



Fig. 4

North Claiborne Avenue at Caffin Avenue, showing the Macarty School (current site of Dr. Martin Luther King Charter School), Circa late 1950s.

Photo Courtesy of Louisiana Division/City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.



Fig. 5

Iconic Photo of Post-Hurricane Betsy Damage in the Lower Ninth Ward, 1965.
Photo courtesy of NOAA.

From 1927-1949, the main residential development in the area consisted of single and two-family structures and had begun to grow into the area northward of St. Claude Avenue.²⁰⁵ A 1952 map of existing land uses patterns reveals that the vast majority of the neighborhood was either vacant land or less than 50 percent developed.²⁰⁶ A 1953-1954 city report shows a burgeoning of newly approved subdivisions in the area,²⁰⁷ and by 1965 considerable development had occurred in the area north of Claiborne Avenue and east of Caffin Avenue.²⁰⁸

During this period, conditions in the neighborhood had become a rallying point for community activists. In a 1955 Lower Ninth Ward Civic and Improvement League petition to their councilman and the mayor, the complainants stated that, “Specifically, we refer to poor housing and overcrowded condition of our schools; the disease-breeding septic tanks, cess pools, outdoor toilets, stagnant water in the gutters; the flooded and muddy streets; the uncollected trash... and the foul odors in the air.”²⁰⁹ Upon receipt of the petition and subsequent research into the grievances, the skeptical councilman noted, “It is almost unbelievable that some of the things listed in your complaint do exist.”²¹⁰ Another pressing concern for one of the League’s founders, Wilfred S. Aubert, was the prevalence of substandard conditions at the Ninth Ward’s black schools. This petition exemplifies the proud history of activism within the community; Aubert inaugurated the crusade for better schools and worked with the NAACP to file a suit alleging that the inferiority of education for blacks violated the separate-but-equal doctrine.²¹¹ New Orleans’ public schools officially became the first in Louisiana to desegregate in November 1960 with the integration of McDonough 19 and William J. Frantz, both located in the Ninth Ward. The year 1960 also marked

²⁰⁵ New Orleans City Planning Commission, “New Orleans Land Use Plan: Present and Future,” 1976, 104.

²⁰⁶ Harland Bartholomew and Associates. “The Master Plan for New Orleans, Chapter 6 A Preliminary Report: Land Use & Zoning,” The City Planning and Zoning Commission. Plate 2. (St. Louis, Missouri, 1952).

²⁰⁷ City Planning Commission. “Report on Planning: January 1, 1953- July 1, 1954,” New Orleans, 1954.

²⁰⁸ New Orleans City Planning Commission, “New Orleans Land Use Plan: Present and Future,” 1980, 104.

²⁰⁹ “Help Promised by Councilmen,” *The Times-Picayune*, November 9, 1955.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹¹ Juliette Landphair, “Sewerage, Sidewalks, and Schools: The New Orleans Ninth Ward and Public School Desegregation,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 40, no.1 (1999): 46.

the peak in the area's population; 33,000 resided in the Lower Ninth Ward during this period, to decline to under 20,000 by the century's end.²¹²

In 1965, the devastation wrought by Hurricane Betsy permanently altered this working-class community. On September 9, the storm made landfall near Grand Isle, Louisiana, and came up the Mississippi River with maximum winds of almost 135 miles per hour. Storm surge overtopped and breached levees along the Industrial Canal along with the back levees of Chalmette, the Lower Ninth Ward's neighbor to the east. Canals designed for drainage permitted the storm surge to flow into the city, causing extensive flooding in both the Lower Ninth Ward and Chalmette, as well as the Upper Ninth Ward areas of Bywater and Gentilly²¹³ (see Figure 5). While the Lower Ninth Ward and St. Bernard Parish were inundated with six to twelve feet of water, much of the rest of the city suffered minimal damage.²¹⁴ Rumors of a deliberate levee cut were the subject of a handbill and telephone campaign in the days following Betsy, and a related report suggested the Mayor Victor Hugo Schiro had reversed drainage pumps to spare his own neighborhood, Lake Vista, from flooding.²¹⁵ The talk of an intentional breach reached such a crescendo that the NAACP's Washington Bureau felt obligated to contact the New Orleans chapter's president to confirm there was no basis to the rumors that "the levees were dynamited so the areas of white residence would be relieved by flooding colored areas, and that relief is going primarily to whites."²¹⁶ Indeed, parts of the levee were breached after the storm to allow the water to drain out of the heavily-flooded areas.

In the social (or collective) memory of Ninth Warders, residents view Betsy as the catalyst that drove remaining white residents into St. Bernard Parish and the new suburban tracts, as well as

²¹² Richard Campanella, "Urban Transformation in the Lower Ninth Ward," 77.

²¹³ Craig E. Colten, *Perilous Place, Powerful Storms: Hurricane Protection in Coastal Louisiana* (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 35-36.

²¹⁴ Landphair, "The Forgotten People of New Orleans," 841.

²¹⁵ Edward F. Haas, "'Don't Believe Any False Rumors...': Mayor Victor H. Schiro, Hurricane Betsy, and Urban Myths," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 45, no.4 (2004): 465.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 466.

crystallized the long-standing municipal neglect of the area.²¹⁷ Given that during the 1927 flood federal officials ordered the dynamiting of a levee 20 miles south of New Orleans to spare the city from rising water—in the process destroying the residences and livelihoods of St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parish residents—it does not seem so farfetched that Ninth Warders would look upon the levee breach with distrust. Rumors of a calculated levee sabotage endured in the community’s consciousness and informed post-Katrina suspicions that the Lower Ninth Ward had been deliberately targeted for destruction to spare the wealthy, white Uptown area from inundation.²¹⁸ Historian Ari Kelman notes that dismissing these “conspiracy theories” out of hand devalues the historical experiences of racial oppression within the city that have generated the community members’ suspicions, as well of the deeper story of exclusionary settlement patterns.

Despite the attention given the community during Betsy, by 1967 little seems to have improved in terms of municipal services. A New Orleans City Planning Commission Document that year notes that the area has no police stations and that both fire stations were housed in substandard buildings. The report states that “no permanent library facility exists in the area and is greatly needed,” and that 90 percent of the area is more than three quarters of a mile from a library. Perhaps the most jarring statistic highlights physical infrastructure inequities: nearly a half century after sewerage innovations revolutionized the cityscape, 40 percent of the streets were in need of reconstruction and 80 percent lacked subsurface drainage.²¹⁹ This discrepancy is marked when considering that other nearby neighborhoods, such as Bywater, show figures in the range of 5 percent and 35 percent, respectively.²²⁰ The juxtaposition is most stark, however, when comparing

²¹⁷ Landphair, “The Forgotten People of New Orleans,” 841.

²¹⁸ Ari Kelman, “Even Paranoids Have Enemies: Rumors of Levee Sabotage in New Orleans’s Lower 9th Ward,” *Journal of Urban History* 35, no. 5 (2009): 632.

²¹⁹ New Orleans City Planning Commission, “Land Use Needs and Resources,” 1967, 102. The report states that, “Nearly all the streets in the area north of St. Claude Ave. Lack subsurface drainage. This deficiency is one of the prime contributors to blight and requires extensive improvements.”

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

areas on the opposite end of the socio-economic spectrum: In Lakeview's case, 8 percent of streets required reconstruction and a mere 2 percent lacked subsurface drainage.²²¹

By 1976, the racial composition of the neighborhood had undergone a striking transition. City planning documents noted that nonwhite residency in the Holy Cross/ Lower Ninth Ward District rose steadily during the 1960s and had reached 80 percent, one of the city's highest percentages.²²² The authors note that this District bucks the citywide trend of sharp declines in owner and/or rented occupied units, instead showing a high degree of owner occupancy across races. The report states that the "area has generally average to below average city income levels with elements of strong home ownership, but is in need of major public physical improvements such as better streets and sidewalks."²²³ A 1976 Land Use Plan, prepared by the New Orleans City Planning Commission, states that less than 1 percent of the land in the area is devoted to parks and playgrounds.²²⁴ Tellingly, the results of a Citizens Attitude Survey compiled in 1979 outlining the top three needs of individual neighborhoods reveal that basic demands of the community members were still not being met. Nearly 93 percent cited "street improvements" as the area's most pressing issue, followed by "youth programs" (85 percent) and "public education improvements" (83 and a half percent).

An examination of newspaper articles and government documents beginning in the mid-1990s until the eve of Katrina sheds light on a community displaying the consequences of poverty and protracted socio-economic inequality. In 1993, the area's infant mortality rate of 26/1000 was higher than the city's overall rate, which was already among the worst in the nation, and more than double the national rate.²²⁵ During the same period the area had high unemployment and poverty

²²¹ New Orleans City Planning Commission, "Land Use Needs and Resources," 1967, 71.

²²² Ibid., 105.

²²³ Ibid., 106.

²²⁴ Ibid., 2.

²²⁵ Rhonda Nabonne, "Poor Will Get Prenatal Help; Lower 9th Ward is One Target," *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, January 23, 1993.

rates (19 percent and 44 percent, respectively) and distressing educational statistics which showed that 22 percent of the area's residents had less than a ninth-grade education.²²⁶ Additionally, a 1996 neighborhood survey showed an elevated incidence of blighted and abandoned properties,²²⁷ leading *The Times-Picayune* to characterize the area as a “virtual dumping ground.” The article highlighted the efforts of a former resident who spearheaded an aggressive cleanup after having returned from school in Iowa to find his former community littered with trash, overgrown weeds, and discarded car parts.²²⁸ Three years later, a candidate for a State senate seat met the ire of community members when he compared the Lower 9th Ward to both a “jungle” and a “Third World country.”²²⁹ By 2001, amid the intensive planning process for the expansion of the Industrial Canal lock, residents expressed fears that their community was a “forgotten stepchild” to be further cut off during the drawn-out lock upgrades: “They say their once-proud neighborhoods have become playgrounds for lawbreakers, where drivers can use the main thoroughfares as drag strips and drug dealers can hawk their wares without fear of police intervention.”²³⁰

Elevated violent crime rates, particularly murders and drug-related offenses, were a pressing concern for law enforcement and for residents of the Ninth Ward. In 2003 a *Times-Picayune* special report highlighted police efforts to stamp out violent crime through the regulation of trivial infractions, an attempt to impede the “cycle of violence.” The 5th district's police force, whose jurisdiction includes all of the Ninth Ward, instituted such controversial moves as proactive patrols and the dismantling of unauthorized block parties and second-line parades. These efforts decreased crime in many categories, but violent crimes such as armed robbery and murder remained unabated: of the 149 murders in New Orleans in the first half of 2003, forty-two had been in the 5th district.

²²⁶ g.c.r & associates, “Needs Assessment and Second Three-Year Mitigation Plan, FY 2002-2004: Industrial Canal Lock Replacement Project,” (New Orleans: 2001), 15.

²²⁷ Ibid., 25. The survey showed 363 abandoned housing structures and 464 more with major structural damage.

²²⁸ Coleman Warner, “Holding His Ground- Native Coordinates Cleanup,” *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, April 11, 1996.

²²⁹ Susan Finch, “Candidates Argue Over State of 9th Ward,” *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, Nov. 18, 1999.

²³⁰ Natalie Pompilio, “9th Ward Residents Make a Stand: They Want More Police Presence,” *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, July 17, 2001.

Police also commented that the deterioration in the residents' quality of life, the prevalence of properties in state of abandonment or disrepair, and the fear of retaliation if victims came forward all contributed to a "culture of lawlessness" within the area.²³¹

Despite these troubling statistics, many residents took issue with how the media and outsiders portrayed their area, which they viewed as a proud working-class community rich in a distinctive culture. Post-Katrina, they also resented its mis-categorization in terms of topography: while it was certainly the most thoroughly devastated area during the hurricane, it was hardly the lowest-lying. Indeed, at its lowest grade (four feet below sea level), the neighborhood was still three to four feet above the lowest parts of Gentilly and Lakeview, and eight feet higher than the lowest topographical zones in New Orleans East.²³² Residents often speak of a profound sense of community attachment, a commitment to educational prospects, and a meaningful historic and cultural identity that characterized their neighborhood. Interviewees partly blamed the decaying condition of the area's housing stock and the increased crime on an influx of new residents, who moved into deceased relatives' houses or replaced upwardly-mobile residents who left for more affluent parts of town, such as New Orleans East. This turnover, they attest, changed the fabric and character of the community, since the new, usually younger, renters did not take the same care that homeowners did in maintaining their houses and yards.²³³ Furthermore, some lifelong residents felt that the newcomers' attitudes and conduct were incongruent with the proud history of the area, which boasted home ownership rates that were consistently 10 percent higher than the parish average from 1970- 2000.

A decade-by-decade analysis reveals that in 1970, the census tracts comprising the Lower Ninth Ward had home ownership rates of 50 percent, compared to the Orleans Parish average of 38

²³¹ Tara Young, "Murder Beat," *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, July 13, 2003.

²³² Campanella, "Urban Transformation in the Lower Ninth Ward," 77.

²³³ Willie Calhoun, interview by Alexandra Giancarlo, New Orleans, June 17, 2010, transcript on file with author.

percent.²³⁴ In 1980, the figures were 47 percent and 36 percent respectively.²³⁵ By 1990, 59 percent of Lower Ninth Ward residents were homeowners, while 47 percent of Orleans Parish residents owned their homes.²³⁶ Of the last such information available before Katrina, the 2000 census revealed that the ratio held steady with 59 percent of Lower Ninth Warders owning their homes compared to a parish average of 47 percent.²³⁷ That year's census also showed that Louisiana had the highest nativity rate in the nation: 79 percent of persons living in the state were born there, indicating the strong ties that Katrina survivors have with their community of origin.²³⁸ Within the Lower Ninth Ward specifically, the data are even more revealing: the 2000 Census showed that in 42.6 percent of the Lower Ninth Ward's owner-occupied housing units, the householder moved into that residence in 1969 or earlier, compared to only 19.2 percent for Orleans Parish as a whole.²³⁹ The house-proud Ninth Ward typified an enduring sense of place attachment and a strong sense of community cohesiveness.

²³⁴ General Demographic Trends for Metropolitan Areas, Louisiana, 1960-1970 (1970 U.S. Census of Population and Housing). U.S. Department of Commerce/Bureau of the Census.

²³⁵ General Housing Characteristics, Louisiana, 1980-1990 and Summary Population and Housing Characteristics, 1980-1990, U.S. Department of Commerce/Bureau of the Census.

²³⁶ 1990 Summary Tape File 1, U.S. Census Bureau.

http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DatasetMainPageServlet?_program=DEC&_tabId=DEC2&_submenuId=datasets_1&_lang=en&_ts=317784446471 (accessed October 2010).

²³⁷ Census 2000 Summary File 1- 100 Percent Data, U.S. Census Bureau,

http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DatasetMainPageServlet?_program=DEC&_tabId=DEC1&_submenuId=datasets_1&_lang=en&_ts=317784511676, (accessed October 2010).

²³⁸ Audrey Singer and Katharine M. Donato, "In Katrina's Wake, Who Will Return?" The Brookings Institute. July 24, 2009, http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2005/0927demographics_singer.aspx, (accessed February 2010).

²³⁹ Census 2000 Summary File 3- Sample Data, U.S. Census Bureau.

http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DatasetMainPageServlet?_lang=en&_ts=317785204992&_ds_name=DEC_2000_SF3_U&_program= (accessed November 2010).

4. Activism, Environmental Justice, and the Lower Ninth Ward: An Historical Perspective

“Nobody, it seems, wanted a lock in their backyard.”²⁴⁰

“Cancel it before you spend [the money] and pave the streets down here. We don’t want the expansion of the Industrial Canal...we don’t want it down here.”²⁴¹

This chapter explores a little-discussed Ninth Ward activist campaign that exemplifies community resistance to potentially disruptive government practices. It also constitutes a prominent early example of an environmental justice campaign and provides an important context for the community’s movement to re-open MLK. In the 1950s and the 1960s, the Army Corps of Engineers advised the expansion of navigational waterways within the New Orleans area to allow for increased shipping traffic and larger vessels. Originally, officials recommended Violet, a rural community south of the city in Sr. Bernard Parish and adjacent to wetlands, as the preferred site for an enlarged lock connecting the Mississippi River to the city’s navigational channels.²⁴² However, local voices strenuously opposed this option, as did environmentalists who were concerned about the resultant impacts on wetland ecology.²⁴³ Upon President Jimmy Carter’s mandate, the federal government eliminated the Violet site from consideration in 1976 and turned to the existing Inner Harbor Navigational Canal (known locally as the Industrial Canal) as an alternative. See Figure 6 for a indication of the proximity of the nearby neighborhoods to the Industrial Canal, indicating the potentially wide-reaching effects of the proposed lock changes. Residents of the potentially affected neighborhoods, including Holy Cross, Bywater, and the Lower Ninth Ward, were outraged that they were not invited to participate in the process and created an organization called Coalition to Save the

²⁴⁰ Peirce F. Lewis, *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape* (Santa Fe: The Center for American Places, [1973] 2003), 76.

²⁴¹ Joyce Davis Robinson, “Canal Ship Lock Opposed,” *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, May 3, 1978.

²⁴² Mickey Lauria and Michael J. Soll, “Communicative Action, Power, and Misinformation in a Site Selection Process,” *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 15 (1996): 203-204.

²⁴³ *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, “Violet Site Shelved; Canal Solution Seen,” May 9, 1977, and *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*. “St. Bernard Issue One of Lives and Livelihoods,” May 10, 1977.

Ninth Ward.²⁴⁴ Their main concerns centered on potential street damage, adverse environmental impacts, relocation of families, and traffic bottlenecks.²⁴⁵

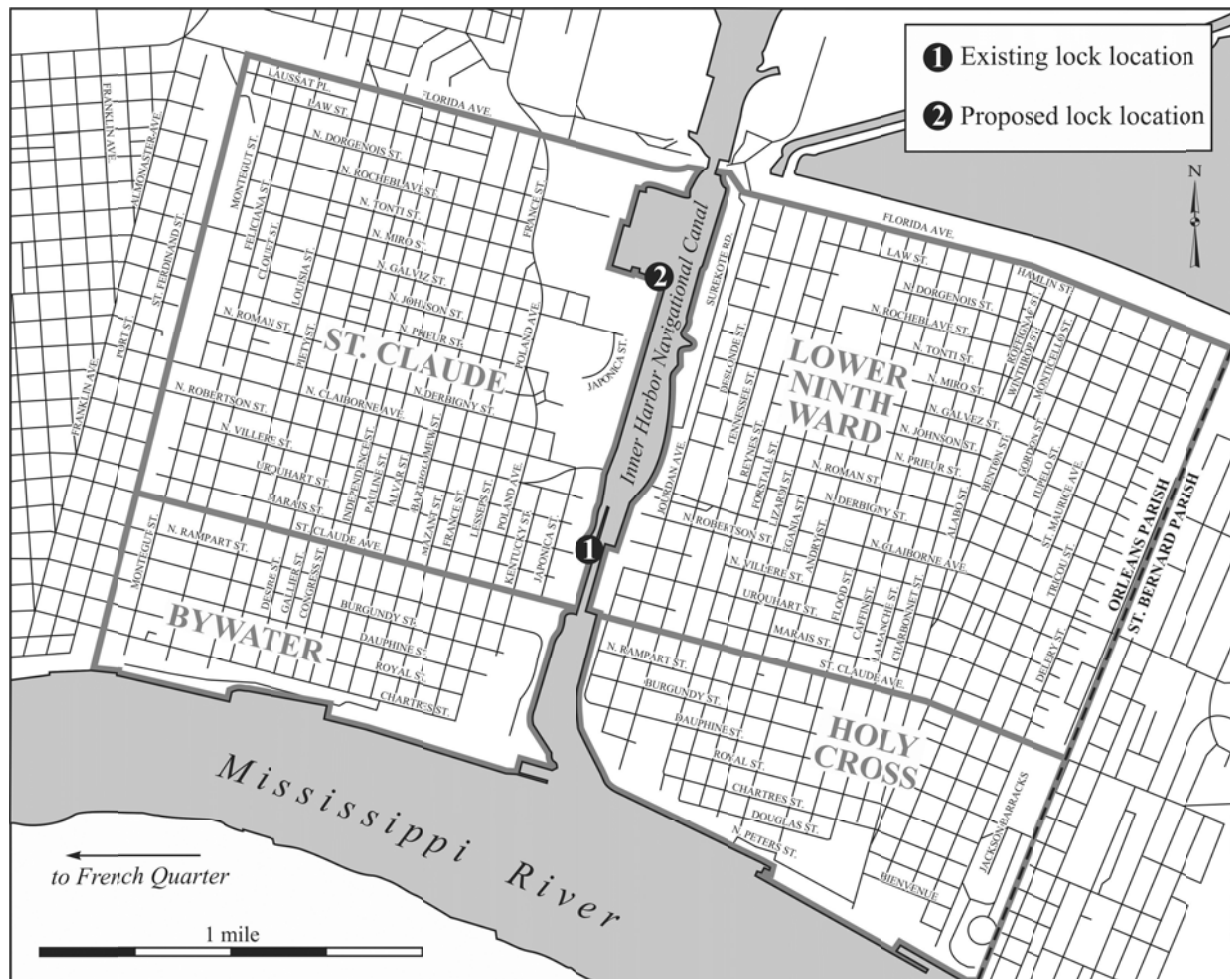


Fig. 6

The Current Industrial Canal Lock and the Proposed Lock Changes.
Cartography by Mary Lee Eggart.

²⁴⁴ *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, "9th Ward Group Will Combat Canal Expansion," February 6, 1979.

²⁴⁵ *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, "Fight Canal Expansion, Group Told," February 15, 1979.

This section uses newspaper analyses, official feasibility reports, and supporting scholarly research on environmental equity to show how this Ninth Ward residents' environmental justice campaign intersects a broader and ongoing culture of resistance within the community. Early resistance efforts included the creation of social aid and pleasure clubs for self-reliance, as well as a legal campaign against government seizure of private property through eminent domain; later, community members undertook a landmark campaign to re-open the Dr. Martin Luther King Charter School after Hurricane Katrina. Further, I analyze these events within the geographic relationship between race and locally unwanted land uses. Although the language of environmental justice was not explicitly used at the time, carving a place for this campaign within the community's historical narrative of resistance and within environmental justice scholarship lends credence to these early efforts and allows marginalized voices to be heard.

In this section, I ask: how was the selection of this community for the Industrial Canal lock expansion perceived as an environmental *in*justice? How did the early protests draw upon discourses of civil (or equal) rights to legitimize their claims? Finally, how and when did the movement begin to openly use the language of environmental justice? I begin with an historical overview of the Industrial Canal, followed by some of the foundational (and locally- relevant) environmental justice scholarship. From here, I move to an in-depth analysis of the Ninth Ward residents' fight to halt the expansion of the canal lock within their community.

4.1 Historical Overview

Historically, the importance of the Port of New Orleans to the city cannot be overstated. Peirce Lewis describes how the city went to great lengths to preserve the health of the port, as exemplified by significant reconstruction and expansion at the turn of the twentieth century to

include cotton warehouses and coal and bulk storage facilities.²⁴⁶ The state legislature passed Act No. 244 in July 1914, which authorized the Port Commission of New Orleans to build the Industrial Canal. The Board of Commissioners of the Port of New Orleans (known colloquially as the Dock Board) received the right to expropriate any property necessary for its construction.²⁴⁷ Ideologies of privatism and discourses of growth and modernization lent support to their efforts to fundamentally re-engineer the city's urban landscape.²⁴⁸

Originally envisioned as a barge canal, its proponents soon determined that an "industrial basin" could better stimulate an industrial or manufacturing revival within the metropolis.²⁴⁹ However, when delays prevented its construction within the anticipated three-month period, Governor Luther E. Hall dismissed the original Board of Commissioners and appointed a new board. These administrative setbacks resulted in an abandonment of the canal project until the midst of World War I, when the need for a fixed-level canal to facilitate ship-building factories again pushed the Industrial Canal project to the fore. A group of New Orleans' civic leaders formed a "Shipbuilding Committee" that boasted the most prominent of the city's social and political aristocracy, including bankers, businessmen, and the mayor. The Board of Commissioners approved the project on February 15, 1918, funded by local taxation and a significant financial commitment from the New Orleans Public Belt Railroad.

Completion of the canal was originally set for January 1920, but escalating costs and engineering revisions (which included deepening the original design to 30 feet to accommodate loaded ocean-going vessels) delayed the dedication until May 2, 1921. The completion of the project involved the erection of four steel bridges designed to service both rail and vehicular traffic. The

²⁴⁶ Lewis, *New Orleans*, 61, 62.

²⁴⁷ R. Christopher Goodwin and Associates, Inc., "Evaluation of the National Register Eligibility of the Inner Harbor Navigational Canal Lock in Orleans Parish, Louisiana," (New Orleans: United States Army Corps of Engineers, 1987), 90.

²⁴⁸ Brian Lloyd Azcona, "The Razing Tide of the Port of New Orleans: Power, Ideology, Economic Growth and the Destruction of Community," *Social Thought and Research* 27 (2006): 78.

²⁴⁹ Goodwin, "Evaluation of the National Register Eligibility of the Inner Harbor Navigational Canal Lock," 91.

construction of the lock was an engineering feat in itself: it had to be uniquely designed to accommodate the instance of high water at either end of the lock (due to the possibility that if the river was at an extremely low stage and strong winds pushed waters through the Rigolets, the lake end water level could be higher than the river end's level).²⁵⁰ All in all, the dimensions of the lock were 640 feet in length, 75 feet in width, and 30 feet deep, with a control house located at its north end.²⁵¹ Significant dredging efforts finally connected the Industrial Canal to the Mississippi River on January 29, 1923, forever altering the city's geography through the bisection of the Ninth Ward. Dignitaries from near and far, including Governor John M. Parker and Senator Joseph E. Ransdell, celebrated the Inner Harbor Navigational Canal's dedication with a historic steamer passage through the channel, flanked by bands, cannon salutes, and fireworks. An "aura of gaiety"²⁵² and optimism prevailed.

As the twentieth century progressed, changes in shipping technology rather rapidly rendered many of these designs obsolete.²⁵³ This obsolescence was particularly troublesome for the port city because, mid-century, New Orleans depended more heavily on income from overseas maritime commerce than any other port of comparable size in the eastern United States.²⁵⁴ A dearth of manufacturing industry meant that the transshipment of goods, not the shipment of locally-produced goods, comprised most of the Port of New Orleans' revenue. Given the relatively small manufacturing base and considerable dependence on tourism, the city faced challenges to its continued prosperity. In the 1960s, the rise of the interstate highway system facilitated significant strides in land transportation which jeopardized New Orleans' second-rank position among American ports, but it was technological advancements in shipping which posed the biggest threat.

²⁵⁰ Goodwin, "Evaluation of the National Register Eligibility of the Inner Harbor Navigational Canal Lock," 95.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 111.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 119.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

As Lewis describes, first, container vessels and later, barge-carrying ships, necessitated major changes to the port. Container ships' gain an edge over other vessels through their speed and infrequent port stops, thus intrinsically favoring the best-equipped and most efficient ports. As Lewis outlines, "For New Orleans, then, the message was clear: if the port was to retain its dominance of a mid-continental hinterland and justify its self-styled title of 'Centroport, USA,' it would have to build container facilities, and do it before some other enterprising Gulf port had seized the lead."²⁵⁵ Fortunately, most of these problems were technological in nature and could theoretically be remedied with clever re-engineering of the city's port and waterway system. Unfortunately, this task was a daunting one.

As a result of these ongoing concerns, in the 1960s New Orleans endeavored to drastically change the port organization, and thus the economic and physical geography, of the city. The Dock Board had decided that their best approach was to "wipe the slate clean" and construct an entirely new Port of New Orleans at the junction of the Industrial Canal with the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway.²⁵⁶ The location seemed ideal because of its proximity to transportation facilities: railways, Interstate 10, and the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet Canal (MR-GO) were all nearby. However, the advantages of shipping through the MR-GO would be for naught if several days were lost during the passage through the Inner Harbor Canal lock, a period of delay that was common at the time. An Army Corps of Engineers Proposal stated that it would cost approximately \$358 million to expand the existing lock facilities but only \$200 million to build a brand new lock and connecting canal to be tentatively located downriver at Violet, a village in St. Bernard Parish.²⁵⁷ However, when outraged citizens and environmentalists alike decried its construction at this location, the Army Corps of

²⁵⁵ Lewis, *New Orleans*, 73.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 74-75.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

Engineers in 1976 turned its attention back to enlarging the lock at the original Ninth Ward site (see Fig.1). And this is, in a sense, where our story truly begins.

4.2 Environmental Justice: Its Origins and Applications

Using an environmental justice framework to describe the Ninth Warders' Industrial Canal Lock expansion protests, especially those that occurred during the earlier years of the 1970s and 1980s, warrants an overview of the movement's relevant scholarship and foundational legislature. The term *environmental racism* was coined in 1982 by then-head of United Church of Christ's Commission on Racial Justice Benjamin Chavis as "the deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic waste facilities, the official sanctioning of the presense [sic] of life threatening poisons and pollutants in communities of color, and the history of excluding people of color from leadership of the environmental movement."²⁵⁸ The 1987 publication of two studies, most notably a United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice report, helped solidify the movement and create a foundation of empirical support for activists' claims.²⁵⁹ Later, the preferred term became *environmental equity* or *environmental justice*, which represented a fundamental shift in approach; within this framework, the focus shifted to how injustice results from institutional or policy decisions. As a result, many activists felt that the term environmental racism was too restrictive to encompass the broader nature of the more recent movement, which emphasized procedural injustices and increasingly rejected divisions between the natural/environmental and the social/racial.²⁶⁰ This section considers prominent early examples of environmental justice campaigns and landmark events with the aim of identifying parallels with the Ninth Warders' efforts to counter locally-

²⁵⁸ Susan L. Cutter, "Race, Class and Environmental Justice," *Progress in Human Geography* 19, no.1 (1995): 112.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

²⁶⁰ Julie Sze, "Toxic Soup Redux: Why Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice Matter After Katrina," Jan. 1, 2006. <http://understandingkatrina.ssrc.org/Sze/> (accessed April 2009).

undesirable land uses. It then moves to examine campaigns which have local relevance to the Louisiana context and notes emerging trends within the field.

The events at Love Canal, while not usually considered within the frame of environmental justice, provide a provocative jumping-off point for a discussion of race and industrial waste. In the late 1800s, entrepreneur William T. Love attempted to realize a grand scheme of building a canal which connected the Niagara River to Lake Ontario, hoping to create a navigable route and furnish electricity for the Niagara Falls region.²⁶¹ However, his plan faltered when his investors pulled out amid the Great Panic of 1893, costing untold sums as well as the lives of the workers who had already perished in pursuit of his dream. The Love Canal was abandoned, leaving a mile-long, ten-to-forty foot deep unfinished section of the canal as a lasting physical imprint of his scheme. By the 1940s, local employer Hooker Chemical Company began to dispose of its industrial wastes in the old Love Canal, dumping at least 21,000 tons of chemicals until it sold the land to the Niagara Falls School Board for \$1 in 1953.²⁶²

A local school opened in 1955 and the neighborhood expanded. The area's bucolic feel, largely provided by the nearby unfinished canal that doubled as a summer swimming and fishing hole or a makeshift winter skating rink, attracted young families to the community. Locals described the neighborhood in idyllic terms, identifying the abundance of trees and grass and a "pervasive sense of community" as primary reasons for relocating there.²⁶³ However, the area rose to infamy in the late 1970s, drawing national and international attention after it was revealed that children born near the canal suffered a disproportionate rate of mental retardation and physical deformities. After a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) analysis sampled soil, air, and water within the

²⁶¹ Elizabeth D. Blum, *Love Canal Revisited: Race, Class, and Gender in Environmental Activism* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 2008), 20.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 24.

neighborhood and showed evidence of additional chemical contamination, residents began to agitate for compensated relocation under the auspices of the Love Canal Homeowners Association.²⁶⁴

In her re-examination of the gendered, racial, and class components of the Love Canal story, Blum demonstrates how activists used a wide variety of rhetoric to achieve their goals, including aesthetic/spiritual, economic, health-related, and racial/ethnic justice frames.²⁶⁵ Indeed, feeling marginalized from the Love Canal Homeowners Association, African American renters formed a group called the Concerned Love Canal Renters Association in 1978, empowered by the support of their local NAACP chapter. For the African American community at Love Canal, their environmental activism was framed within a commitment to the values of the civil rights movement and within the enduring struggle against racism and classism.²⁶⁶ Important parallels can be drawn with the Ninth Ward's anti-Industrial Canal lock expansion campaign, in which residents called upon their status as taxpaying citizens and drew attention to their status as a majority-black neighborhood to demand unbiased treatment under the law.²⁶⁷

A second case study of Warren County, North Carolina, of what most scholars consider the nascence of the environmental justice movement proper, provides an integral analysis of the transformations of American environmental practice propelled by the environmental justice movement.²⁶⁸ In *Transforming Environmentalism: Warren County, PCBs, and the Origins of Environmental Justice*, Eileen McGurty outlines how this early example of activism at Warren County diverged from “just another demonstration against a landfill”²⁶⁹ because of the protestors' allegations of environmental racism. In 1978, the state of North Carolina devised a plan to construct a landfill in Warren County, a rural area of predominately poor and majority African American citizens. The

²⁶⁴ Blum, *Love Canal Revisited*, 25-26.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

²⁶⁷ Sandra Barbier, “Industrial Canal ‘Lies’ Blasted,” *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, August 3, 1978.

²⁶⁸ Eileen McGurty, *Transforming Environmentalism: Warren County, PCBs, and the Origins of Environmental Justice* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 5.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

state hoped to use this location to dispose of polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB)-contaminated liquid that had been illegally dumped on the shoulders of publicly-owned roadways. Community members vigorously protested the decision to locate the landfill in this area, citing concerns of groundwater contamination and the effects that the stigma of hazardous waste may have on the already economically-depressed area.²⁷⁰ Activists stated that the site had been chosen because, “The community was politically and economically unempowered. That was the reason for the siting. They took advantage of poor people of color.”²⁷¹ The residents launched an exhaustive, but ultimately unsuccessful, legal campaign against North Carolina and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. When this failed, citizens utilized collective action techniques and attracted extensive support from national civil rights leaders, leading to significant disruption and delay of the 1982 construction of the landfill. Eventually, due to an environmental crisis that jeopardized earlier containment efforts, in 2003 the state began to destroy the PCBs in the landfill. In the eyes of the protestors, it was a bittersweet end to a long-fought campaign against environmental injustice.

According to McGurty, the fight at Warren County signalled a decisive change in and crystallization of the environmental justice movement.²⁷² She suggests that through the environmental justice “label,” protestors now had an official name for the practices in which they had been engaged for years under the terminology of “community organizing” or “neighborhood development.” Furthermore, this community’s campaign transformed the purportedly self-interested nature of Not In My Backyard (NIMBY) complaints into a broader, virulent criticism of hazardous waste policy. The activists’ chances for success had been significantly improved through collaboration with civil rights leaders who were well-versed in the nuances of social protest. These citizens’ demands for full participation in the decision-making process and their forcing of the state’s

²⁷⁰ McGurty, *Transforming Environmentalism*, 1, 4.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 7.

hand on the issue have distinct parallels with the Ninth Ward community's efforts to halt the expansion of the Industrial Canal lock during the same period.

Next, to garner a more context-specific analysis of the Ninth Ward activists' efforts, the scholarship of state-based environmental justice campaigns will be taken into account. Barbara Allen argues that the 150-mile stretch of the lower Mississippi River from New Orleans to Baton Rouge, home to more than 150 petrochemical plants, is also one of the birth sites of the environmental justice movement.²⁷³ Transportation advantages, favorable political treatment, and a plethora of unskilled labor initially attracted oil companies to the region at the turn of the twentieth century. During the nationwide economic downturn of the Great Depression, the area actually experienced significant growth in petroleum processing and chemical production.²⁷⁴ By the 1960s, Louisiana's "chemical corridor" became even more amenable to investment, facilitated by a tax reduction on natural gas and a political climate that minimized the consequences of pollution.²⁷⁵

In 1964, the small town of Geismar became the center of controversy when the petrochemical industry targeted it for development. Mobil, MonoChem, Morton, and BASF all bought riverfront property within the area, attracted by a state government package that promised no local property taxes, stabilization of waterfront protection by the Army Corps, new state highways, and a "no politics attitude from the governor's office."²⁷⁶ Disquietude about industrial pollution did not emerge until nearly a decade later when a young truck driver died from exposure to noxious fumes at an open-disposal pit. The state attorney general hired Willie Fontenot, an environmental outreach specialist, who would, for the next twenty-seven years, help citizens take a more active role in the environmental regulatory processes that affected their lives. With Fontenot's

²⁷³ Barbara L. Allen, "Cradle of a Revolution? The Industrial Transformation of Louisiana's Lower Mississippi River," *Technology and Culture* 47 (2006): 112.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 114.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

guidance, small African American communities came forward to fight against the “poisoning” of their communities. This activity, according to Allen, signified the beginning of the environmental justice movement within the state and galvanized national attention around these issues. It was also during this period that the region acquired the nickname “Cancer Alley.”²⁷⁷

Another significant example of an environmental justice campaign within this region centers on the town of Convent, near which the Japanese chemical giant Shintech requested to build a \$700 million polyvinyl-chloride plant in 1996. Consideration of the political context of their application is critical, as only two years earlier President Bill Clinton issued Executive Order 12898 which stated that “each federal agency shall make achieving environmental justice part of its mission by identifying and addressing, as appropriate, disproportionately high and adverse affects of its programs, policies, and activities on minority and low-income populations.”²⁷⁸ Both Allen and Revathi I. Hines outline the tremendous impact that the Shintech campaign had on the broader environmental justice movement, given that it was the first to explicitly test the Civil Rights Act for environmental justice purposes in court. The Convent community was 81 percent black and overwhelmingly poor, and protestors used the language of environmental racism and discrimination to substantiate their claims, as well as rallies, demonstrations, and public forums to draw attention to their cause. Two years after the filing of the environmental justice complaints, Shintech abandoned plans to build in the Convent area and re-located to a smaller and more remote facility upriver.²⁷⁹ Charles Flanagan has also critically examined the Shintech movement’s official discourse in terms of social theory, challenging the “[privileging] of abstract space and [asserting] social space as the focus of mapping and analysis.”²⁸⁰ In so doing, he refuses an analysis that naturalizes industrial space and

²⁷⁷ Barbara L. Allen, “Cradle of a Revolution?” 116.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.

²⁷⁹ Revathi I. Hines, “African Americans’ Struggle for Environmental Justice and the Case of the Shintech Plant: Lessons Learned from a War Waged,” *Journal of Black Studies* 31, no.6 (2001): 787.

²⁸⁰ Charles Flanagan, “Mapping the Other Truth in the Shintech Case: Emancipatory Mapping for Environmental Justice in South Louisiana,” LSU Dissertation, (2005), 91.

created community-oriented maps which emphasized the real-life consequences of the proposed Shintech facility.

Another contextually-relevant study of the same time period is the conflict that arose over New Orleans' Agricultural Street Landfill, as outlined in Craig E. Colten's *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature*. The Agricultural Street Landfill was located in a part of the Ninth Ward that had transitioned from predominately-white during the early twentieth century to overwhelming black by the 1980s.²⁸¹ After the closure of a dump in 1965, local officials decided to use the adjacent municipally-owned land to erect low-income public-housing developments and, later, to construct an elementary school. In 1993, residents and neighborhood activists filed a class-action lawsuit seeking damages for health problems, property devaluations, and relocation costs.²⁸² This struggle soon became enmeshed in the larger context of environmental justice debates, which charged that African Americans and other minorities bear a disproportionate burden in the placement of pollution-emitting facilities and other disamenities.²⁸³

Before moving to a discussion of the events at the Industrial Canal, let us turn to an exploration of new trends in environmental justice literature and examine how they might offer a fruitful analysis of the Ninth Warders' campaign. Geographer Laura Pulido considers the concept of environmental justice in a larger context that also includes structural racism and white privilege. She feels that the paradigm of environmental racism treats racism as a singular hostile and discriminatory act without appreciating the structural and enduring nature of prejudice and white privilege.²⁸⁴ In "Parks and People: An Environmental Justice Inquiry in Baltimore, Maryland," Christopher Boone and others describe how a legacy of white privilege has resulted in an uneven distribution of park

²⁸¹ Colten, *An Unnatural Metropolis*, 113.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 124.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 114.

²⁸⁴ Laura Pulido, "Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90, no.1 (2000): 532.

acreage between the white and black communities within the city. Their conclusions also advance environmental justice scholarship by focusing on parks (as an urban *amenity*) as an environmental justice issue rather than the traditional emphasis on disamenities such as hazardous waste sites or pollution-generating facilities.²⁸⁵ Other scholarship has further explored the relationship between the geography of race and environmental justice, such as Craig Colten's influential study of Progressive Era drainage and sewerage reforms within New Orleans. He inverts the usual environmental equity inquiry by examining "inequity by design"—in essence, by identifying gaps in the city's new public sanitation program that may have coordinated with residential patterns of minority citizens.²⁸⁶ These broader frameworks linking amenities and race have important applications to the Ninth Wards' protest of the lock expansion within their community.

4.3 The Ninth Ward and the Expansion of the Industrial Canal Lock

The Lower Ninth Ward has risen to iconic status in the post-Hurricane Katrina era. Despite negative media portrayals, this majority-black community of low socio-economic standing has a long history of resistance and activism.²⁸⁷ Their fight against the Army Corps of Engineers' attempts to expand the Industrial Canal lock is a pertinent precursor to, and contemporary of, the community's defiant movement to re-open their school. In this section I will examine how the selection of this community for the lock expansion became perceived as an environmental *injustice* and explore how early protests drew upon discourses of civil (or equal) rights to substantiate their claims. Later, I will

²⁸⁵ Pulido, "Rethinking Environmental Racism," 783.

²⁸⁶ Craig E. Colten, "Basin Street Blues: Drainage and Environmental Equity in New Orleans, 1890-1930," *Journal of Historical Geography* 28, no.2 (2002): 238-239.

²⁸⁷ Joyce Marie Jackson, "Declaration of Taking Twice: The Fazendeville Community of the Lower Ninth Ward," *American Anthropologist* 108, no.4 (2006): 765-780.

describe how, in a post-Katrina context, the movement began to draw upon the language of environmental justice to legitimize and publicize the campaign.

The first archival evidence of trouble brewing for the Ninth Ward comes in 1977, when *Times-Picayune* columnist Bill Mongelluzzo penned a four-part series on the abandonment of the Violet site and the Army Corps of Engineers' search for an alternative location to construct a new lock. Residents of St. Bernard Parish, home to the proposed Violet site, had been up in arms because of the perceived environmental, economic, and social impacts on their community. Furthermore, they already felt that they were "stuck with" the Mississippi River- Gulf Outlet (MR-GO), a deep-water canal that cut a path through the Parish connecting the Mississippi River and the Gulf. Critics pointed out that it had already caused significant saltwater intrusion into their marshland, led to catastrophic land loss due to erosion, and was popularly believed to have exacerbated Hurricane Betsy's effects in 1965.²⁸⁸ Scholars later deemed it a "monstrous environmental and economic failure."²⁸⁹ Thus, the community breathed a collective sigh of relief when, in 1976, President Carter officially opposed the Violet Lock and the federal government eliminated the site because of the negative impact on local wetlands.²⁹⁰ At the conclusion of his series, Mongelluzzo states that the newest plan for the Industrial Canal site allowed for a decrease in the number of displaced people and relocation of affected persons within the same neighborhood to maintain social cohesion. All in all, he suggests that "this means that the Port of New Orleans could get its lock, St. Bernard can save its wetlands, and a peaceful coexistence may be reached."²⁹¹

²⁸⁸ *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, "Violet Site Shelved; Canal Solution Seen," May 9, 1977, and *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, "St. Bernard Issue One of Lives and Livelihoods," May 10, 1977.

²⁸⁹ William R. Freudenburg, Robert Gramling, Shirley Laska, and Kai T. Erikson, *Catastrophe in the Making: The Engineering of Katrina and the Disasters of Tomorrow* (Washington: Island Press/Shearwater Books, 2009), 145.

²⁹⁰ Lauria, "Communicative Action, Power, and Misinformation," 204.

²⁹¹ Bill Mongelluzzo, "Violet Site Shelved; Canal Solution Seen," *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, May 9, 1977.

Despite this optimistic outlook and a May 21, 1977 editorial that suggested, “Lock Dispute Resolved,”²⁹² for the newly-affected Ninth Ward community the situation did not appear so rosy. Inklings of discontent bubbled to the surface in August of that year, when 250 irritated residents confronted city port and Army Corps of Engineers officials outside the offices of the Lower Ninth Ward Improvement Association.²⁹³ Residents spoke to their rights as citizens, taxpayers, and even on a basic human level, arguing, “Why should a microscopic organism be given priority over a human being?” and “There is nothing in St. Bernard but the swamps but because the people in St. Bernard Parish don’t want it, you decide to bring it back to Orleans Parish. Well, we don’t want it either.” Even at this early stage, the chairman of the Lower Ninth Ward Improvement Association indicated his intention to “go to Washington, D.C. and fight you,” if the officials maintained their intransigence.²⁹⁴ As was also evidenced in the African American struggles at Love Canal, black community leaders in the Ninth Ward recognized their political power in a post-civil rights era and were prepared to exercise their legal rights.

The following year, a sense of urgency is evident in the *Times-Picayune*’s discussion of the canal controversy: “Corps Urged to Hurry Up With Ship Lock,” (February 3rd), “US Corps May Shorten Ship Lock Study Period,” (February 9th), “Funds OK’d to Clear Path for New Lock,” (April 15th). By April 25th, soil boring testing had already begun in order to determine what type of structures could be constructed in the area. A Corps spokesman stated that their plan aimed for zero displacement of residents as a result of the lock itself but minor displacement due to the approaches of the bridges or tunnels that will span the canal.²⁹⁵ Alarmed with the pace of the proceedings and their exclusion from these decision-making processes, public hearings soon turned into shouting matches that saw more than two-thirds of attendees storm from the meeting room. One

²⁹² Ed Tunstall, “Lock Dispute Resolved: editorial,” *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, May 21, 1977.

²⁹³ Lovell Beaulieu, “9th Warders Protest Lock Plan,” *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, August 9, 1977.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁵ Bill Mongelluzzo, “Soil Borings Begin for New Shiplock,” *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, April 25, 1978.

homeowner spoke to the frustration that the city's unequal treatment of the community was part of a larger pattern of neglect: "Cancel it before you spend the \$2 million and pave the streets down here."²⁹⁶

When a House subcommittee authorized \$94 billion in startup funding for the project in September 1978, state representatives and community members were blindsided. Representative Thomas Jasper, who viewed this allocation of funds as an indication that officials had completed the "feasibility study" stage and were planning to move ahead with the project, stated that, "I've been deceived and the community has been deceived."²⁹⁷ At this stage, the agitated community members and their representatives begin to speak to the perceived racial undertones of the siting of the expansion of the Industrial Canal Lock within their community. Although he does not explicitly use the term "environmental injustice," Jasper echoes this sentiment when stating that the locational decision was made because the area is "90% black."²⁹⁸ Further, he expressed anger that the Steering Committee for a New Ship Lock omitted fellow state Representative Johnny Jackson and admitted that he feared rumors that the project will create a "Ninth Ward marina" may be true. This overarching theme that their community may be pushed out due to enterprising officials has been echoed in a post-Katrina context, when residents feared their community could be seized as prized land for commercial development.²⁹⁹ For their part, the *Times-Picayune* editorial board supported the position that the location of the lock expansion within the Ninth Ward community was not due to a discriminatory or ulterior motive, merely facilitated by "the geographical fact that they are there."³⁰⁰ What this perspective omits, of course, is recognition of historical factors that inexorably shaped the city's racial geography.

²⁹⁶ Joyce Davis Robinson, "Canal Ship Lock Opposed," *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, May 3, 1978.

²⁹⁷ Sandra Barbier, "Industrial Canal 'Lies' Blasted," *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, August 3, 1978.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁹ Steven Martin, interviewed by Alexandra Giancarlo, April 6, 2009. Transcript on file with author.

³⁰⁰ Ed Tunstall, "Looking at the Lock: editorial," *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, August 11, 1978.

By February 1979, angry community members and disparate activist groups had consolidated their efforts into a group called the Coalition to Save the Ninth Ward. At a press conference, the coalition expressed its opposition to “any current or future plans to expand the Industrial Canal that do not allow neighborhood people the right to determine the future of their neighborhood.”³⁰¹ A representative stated that the group had already collected nearly a thousand signatures indicating opposition to the expansion of the lock within their community. Less than two weeks later, the group held a public rally encouraging citizens to contact their legislators to fight the Army Corps of Engineers’ Plan. A panel of speakers addressed concerned residents and outlined several problems associated with the canal’s expansion, including the relocation of families, traffic jams during construction, damage to streets, and environmental dangers associated with increased industry in the area. In May of the same year, residents participated in an interrogation panel and expressed fears that profit motives would eclipse their needs and rights: “It is our people who are being moved. It is our people who will suffer. If the shipping company is going to make millions of dollars in our own backyard, then we want to get something out of this canal.”³⁰² The usage of “our people” is significant, implying a communal experience of injustice.

By 1990, armed with the realization that they would not be able to proceed with their plan with little to no input from the affected community, the Port and the Corps determined to “go back to square one.”³⁰³ They opened an information office on Caffin Avenue in the Lower Ninth Ward in the fall of 1994 to act as a sounding board for residents and to hold public hearings on the lock project. A *Times-Picayune* editorial on the subject concluded that it was a “good model for how to resolve conflict between peoples and progress.”³⁰⁴ Despite this positive outlook, a 1995 follow-up article suggests that the community’s concerns were far from assuaged. At an open forum at the

³⁰¹ *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, “9th Ward Group Will Combat Canal Expansion,” February 6, 1979.

³⁰² David Crosby, “Irate Citizens Question Officials,” *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, May 29, 1979.

³⁰³ *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, “Unlocking Ninth Ward Worry: editorial,” September 4, 1994.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

Jackson Barracks Military Museum, residents expressed their ire, empathetically denouncing the plan as well as the “mitigation money” that would be used to improve police and firefighting services, provide residents with job training, and upgrade physical infrastructure and park spaces. As City Councilwoman Ellen Hazeur-Distance stated, “A lot of the things you’re talking about, we’re doing anyway. I’m trying to understand, what is the benefit to the community. We don’t own the ships that are going to be using that lock.” One resident invoked the broader context of longstanding socio-economic disparities within the city to hearty applause: “You are being asked to pay for a superhighway for the rich and the super rich to get richer.”³⁰⁵

Congress authorized a Community Impact Mitigation Plan in 1996, one which emphasized the aforementioned infrastructural improvements, job training, and enhanced police protection for the community.³⁰⁶ Congress approved an appropriation measure in October 1998 allowing construction to begin. At this time, the Corps offered specific projections, including twenty-four months of noise-intensive pile-driving at the lock site, the prospect of chronic traffic snarls, and anticipated loss of income for small businesses near the canal, all of which they planned to counter with a \$33 million mitigation plan.³⁰⁷ These projections lent the project’s opponents a renewed urgency. Holy Cross Neighborhood Association President John Koefler stated that, “This project will be the destruction of our community,” and likened the Ninth Ward to Treme, a vibrant African American community that suffered an unprecedented decline after the 1960s construction of Interstate 10 over its main thoroughfare. Although opposition to the lock’s expansion remained fierce, a sense of beleaguement also became evident in the residents’ response to the project:

³⁰⁵ Coleman Warner, “Lock Plan Blasted,” *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, January 11, 1995.

³⁰⁶ U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, “Project Fact Sheet: Inner Harbor Navigational Canal Lock Replacement,” (US Army Corps of Engineers: New Orleans District, no date).
<http://www.mvn.usace.army.mil/pd/projectsList/projectdata/108785/107.pdf> (accessed April 2010).

³⁰⁷ Coleman Warner, “Residents Fighting Mad Over Canal Lock Project; Neighborhoods to Lobby Congress, Maybe Sue,” *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, October 2, 1998. *Holy Cross et al. v. United States Army Corps of Engineers*, No. 03-370, (U.S. District Ct. E. Dist. LA 2006).

“We’re this tiny little pocket, and it’s been neglected for a long time. Some people don’t even know we exist.”³⁰⁸

In 1999, Congress approved the project as a “Construction New-Start” at an estimated cost of \$764 million. Shortly thereafter, construction was completed for demolition and environmental restoration of adjacent abandoned industrial sites that would be home to the new lock, and the Corps purchased real estate from the port of New Orleans in December 2002. The Community-Based Mitigation Committee conducted a second Three-Year Mitigation Plan between August 2000 and June 2001 in attempts to better address the broader needs of the community, including business development and safety concerns.³⁰⁹ However, the following year (2003) the Gulf Restoration Network, in conjunction with the Holy Cross Neighborhood Association and the Louisiana Environmental Action Network, sued the Army Corps of Engineers, alleging that their 1997 Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) did not adequately examine potential environmental destruction (*Holy Cross et al. vs. United States Army Corps of Engineers*). Their main allegations contended that the project’s dredging would endanger Lake Pontchartrain and its environs due to the release of hazardous-waste contaminated materials into the ecosystem. The plaintiffs also charged that the EIS insufficiently examined the project’s effects on the safety, wellbeing, and economy of the adjacent communities.³¹⁰ In August of 2004 the court granted the Corps’ motion to stay proceedings so that the Corps could conduct further soil testing.³¹¹ The court granted several extensions of the stay, including an extension following Hurricane Katrina, which struck in August of 2005 and irrevocably altered the city as well as brought a new meaning to environmental justice within the Ninth Ward.

³⁰⁸ Coleman Warner, “Residents Fighting Mad Over Canal Lock Project; Neighborhoods to Lobby Congress, Maybe Sue.”

³⁰⁹ g.c.r & associates, “Needs Assessment and Second Three-Year Mitigation Plan, FY 2002-2004: Industrial Canal Lock Replacement Project,” (New Orleans: 2001), #

³¹⁰ “New Orleans: the People’s Port: A New Vision for the Inner Harbor,” Online blog of Citizens Against the Widening of the Industrial Canal. February 16, 2009, <http://thepeoplesport.wordpress.com/> (accessed May 2010).

³¹¹ *Holy Cross et al. vs. United States Army Corps of Engineers*, [2006] No. 03-370.

In light of Katrina, the court enjoined the Corps from going forward until it complied with NEPA and suggested that the project may no longer be a priority in the post-disaster context. Concomitantly, community backlash had risen precipitously post-Katrina. To worsen matters, by late 2008 the cost of expanding the lock had ballooned from \$770 million in 2003 to \$1.3 billion.³¹² What's more, the estimated economic benefits had significantly decreased due to the following two factors. First, the closure of the MR-GO, the route through which many of the larger ships would have used to reach the canal, negated the expected profits from deep-draft shipping. Another factor was the population decrease in the area since Katrina, which meant that earlier calculations of economic benefits—which had included increased commerce on both sides of the canal due to the fact that the new bridges would have to open less often to accommodate ship traffic—no longer held. Critics also called into question the methods that the Army Corps of Engineers had used to calculate the project's cost-benefit ratio; the report relied on today's lower interest rates, not the original interest rates used in the 1998 calculations, to obtain a return rate of \$1.57 per dollar spent.³¹³

Further concerns arose with the Corps' proposed chemical containment plan. It planned to contain hazardous chemicals or heavy metals found in dirt within a disposal cell in the wetlands area just north of the Lower Ninth Ward, to which the Citizens Against the Widening of the Industrial Canal's President stated that, "[The Corps] have spent their time on the lock structure itself, but have not dealt with the very serious issues of public safety and off-the-chart costs to the environment, adjacent neighborhoods, and the taxpayer."³¹⁴ A January 2009 letter submitted to the Army Corps of Engineers regarding the proposed lock project and its supplemental Environmental Impact Statement allows a glimpse into the increasingly radicalized fight against the lock expansion.

³¹² Mark Schleifstein, "Industrial Canal Lock Price Tag Now Estimated at \$1.3 billion," *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, October 15, 2008.

³¹³ *Ibid.*

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Signed by nearly two-dozen community organizations and posted on the Citizens Against the Widening of the Industrial Canal's blog, in a post-Katrina context the complainants draw on the language of environmental justice to bolster their argument: "The neighborhoods adjacent to the Industrial Canal are overwhelmingly African-American, and would be exposed to a disproportionate level of increased contaminants as a result of the Industrial Lock expansion. These citizens have already felt the brunt of environmental justice issues when the Corps's engineering failed and cost over a thousand lives when Hurricane Katrina's storm surge hit." From here, the activists outlined potentially detrimental impacts on already-stressed community, including air and noise pollution.³¹⁵

A regular contributor to the website, Joshua Lewis, also draws upon the discourse of environmental injustice in an older post: "For years, we have been cleaning up the messes that the Corps has created....We need 21st century flood protection and coastal restoration, not a continuation of 20th century injustices. For these reasons, and many more, the Industrial Canal Replacement Lock Project should be deauthorized."³¹⁶ In January 2010, the canal's opponents prepared another legal challenge on behalf of the Holy Cross Neighborhood Association, the Gulf Restoration Network, Louisiana Environmental Action Network, the Sierra Club, and Citizens Against the Widening of the Industrial Canal. On June 10, 2010, these organizations filed a federal lawsuit contending that, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act, the least environmentally damaging option would be a shallow-water lock of 900 feet long, 110 feet wide, and 22 feet deep. These specifications are considerably smaller-scale than the Corps' most recent plans, which call for the upgraded lock to be 1,200 feet long, 110 feet wide, and 36 feet in depth. The suit alleges that the Corps selected the deeper lock alternative despite the agency's acknowledgement that

³¹⁵ "New Orleans: the People's Port: A New Vision for the Inner Harbor," Online blog of Citizens Against the Widening of the Industrial Canal. February 16, 2009, <http://thepeoplesport.wordpress.com/> (accessed May 2010).

³¹⁶ Ibid.

the more expensive option would not enhance the project's economic benefits.³¹⁷ And so the fight continues.

4.4 Conclusions

This chapter has demonstrated that the Ninth Ward's fight against the Inner Harbor Navigational Canal expansion constitutes a prominent early example of an environmental justice campaign. Although the term "environmental justice" was not in use during its early stages, encapsulating the community's efforts within a broader historical narrative of resistance lends value and significance to this ongoing movement. In the early decades of their campaign, protestors used the language of civil (or equal) rights, which has distinct parallels to the Love Canal movement. As time passed, and particularly within a post-Katrina context, the Ninth Ward activists drew openly on themes of environmental justice to attract urgency and legitimacy to their claims. Furthermore, by calling on themes of citizenship and using civil rights language and tactics, this movement is an important precursor to, and contemporary of, the Lower Ninth Ward residents' campaign to re-open their community school.

³¹⁷ Mark Schleifstein, "Shallower Alternative Urged for 9th Ward Lock Project; Several Groups Press Suit Against Corps," *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, June 18, 2010.

5. Education in New Orleans and the Dr. Martin Luther King Charter School Re-Opening Campaign

Only when the South endured defeat in the Civil War did public education for blacks tentatively take hold—in strictly segregated and unequal institutions.³¹⁸ After Reconstruction the prevailing ideologies of white supremacy dictated continued racial separation in schools as well as limited education for blacks to the first five grades.³¹⁹ Educational opportunities were a far cry from the “separate but equal” mandate. As a result black communities habitually raised their own money for schools and until 1940 more money for black public education came from charities than from the state government. In Louisiana what was termed “educational separation” in practice meant educational inequality, a point that Liva Baker underscores in her book *The Second Battle of New Orleans: The Hundred-Year Struggle to Integrate the Schools*. In 1944-1945, Louisiana spent 561 percent more money per white student in school property than per black child. What the statistics cannot show, Baker asserts, is the psychological damage inflicted upon black students who were meant to remember their supposed inferiority. She describes the famed author Richard Wright’s experience growing up in Jackson, Mississippi, at the turn of the twentieth century:

“What grade are you in in school?” a white woman asked him. “Seventh, ma’am,” Wright replied. “Then why are you going to school?” she persisted. “Well, I want to be a writer,” he mumbled... “You’ll never be a writer,” his antagonist declared. “Who on earth put such ideas into your nigger head?”³²⁰

Black students who were products of this educational environment later attested to Louisiana’s failure to meet the needs of its minority population: “I remember not being able to use the ‘white library.’ ... I had to steal from the ‘white library’ and hide the books, just to have the

³¹⁸ Carl L. Bankston III and Stephen J. Caldas, *A Troubled Dream: The Promise and Failure of School Desegregation in Louisiana* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002), 24.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

³²⁰ Liva Baker, *The Second Battle of New Orleans: The Hundred-Year Struggle to Integrate the Schools* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), 144.

opportunity to read new material,” “The black schools basically received the left overs [sic] from the white schools.”³²¹ Bankston and Caldas drive this point home vividly in *A Troubled Dream: The Promise and Failure of School Desegregation in Louisiana*, showing how the differential investment in the black and white educational systems produced both immediate and longer-reaching disadvantages for African American students. Lewis describes how in New Orleans the black schools were deliberately neglected, resulting in generations of African American citizens for whom no tradition of “schooling experience” could take hold.³²² As such, while it is disturbing that the state of Louisiana in 1950 spent \$147.15 on instructional services for white pupils but only \$95.80 on black pupils, perhaps more pernicious is the legacy of under-educated and ill-prepared teachers who instructed subsequent generations of black youth.³²³ Bankston and Caldas indicate a marked gap between black and white instructors in terms of measurable academic skill in the 1960s, demonstrating how a segregated school system that produced less prepared teachers helped create a cycle of disadvantage within Louisiana’s African American population. Fundamentally, they assert, “The dream of integration was a dream of breaking down the walls of segregation that surrounded young black Louisianans on all sides and of dissolving a historically imposed caste system.”³²⁴

The Ninth Ward came to the fore of the schooling controversy during this decade, when the systematic denial of education for blacks and critics of this inequality collided.³²⁵ For years, the NAACP had filed equalization suits that did not attack the separate-but-equal doctrine directly but aimed to equalize educational facilities as one of many first steps towards the ultimate goal of desegregation.³²⁶ Daniel Byrd, a colleague of A.P. Tureaud’s, filed a petition in May 1946, focusing

³²¹ Bankston and Caldas, *A Troubled Dream*, 32-33.

³²² Peirce F. Lewis, *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape* (Santa Fe: The Center for American Places, [1973] 2003), 130.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

³²⁵ Mary Lee Muller, “New Orleans Public School Desegregation,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 17, no.1 (1976): 71.

³²⁶ Baker, *The Second Battle of New Orleans*, 148.

on the “glaring” inequalities that characterized black educational facilities within the city.³²⁷ Byrd alleged blatant academic discrimination within New Orleans, citing the “platoon” system (the practice of holding two sessions per day to alleviate overcrowding), out-of-date classroom materials, and a dearth of vocational instruction as markers of the inferiority of African American schools. No community was more representative of these deficiencies or more needful of a resolution than the Ninth Ward. After the passage of nearly two years from the submission of this petition, the board had still not taken any substantive action on the allegations.

The Ninth Ward Civic and Improvement League, founded in 1945, had firmly fastened itself to the cause of improving the standard of living within its community, which had long been neglected by city officials. This neglect and physical isolation had bred a fiercely independent spirit of resistance among early residents, who banded together in the formation of church auxiliaries and mutual aid and benevolent associations. Despite this self-reliant mentality, Ninth Ward residents resented their ongoing exclusion from city infrastructural provisions. As such, the League’s complaints focused on the periodic street flooding, inadequate sewerage and resultant cesspools, and dilapidated schools and housing that were all-too-common in the area. The most pressing concern for one of the League’s founders, Wilfred S. Aubert, was the prevalence of substandard conditions at the Ninth Ward’s black schools.

Macarty School, which opened in 1861 and which two of his children attended, was over 240 percent occupied in 1950 compared to an occupancy rate of approximately 100 percent at the white elementary schools in the area.³²⁸ The lunchroom, designed to feed 150 children, now held 800 and doubled as a third-grade classroom; storage space for files was scarce, and the physical education

³²⁷ Baker, *The Second Battle of New Orleans*, 149.

³²⁸ Juliette Landphair, “Sewerage, Sidewalks, and Schools: The New Orleans Ninth Ward and Public School Desegregation,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 40, no.1 (1999): 45.

classes had to make do without changing rooms.³²⁹ A probe by the *Louisiana Weekly* even noted that “it rains in some of the rooms in bad weather.”³³⁰ In Aubert, Tureaud and Byrd had found a plaintiff who was willing to challenge the separate-but-equal status quo, and in 1948 *Aubert vs. The Orleans Parish School Board* argued that black students “had the right and the privilege of receiving instruction in courses of study including the use of modern and sanitary schools and school facilities, such as are provided by the defendants for white children.”³³¹ By 1950 the case was still caught up in legal bureaucracy and its initial goals no longer met the standard for an increasingly radicalizing NAACP, which had decided that the time had come to challenge the constitutionality of segregation itself. Busloads of Ninth Ward residents were on hand to witness Tureaud submit his petition to the flabbergasted Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB). After waiting a year with no reply to his petition, Tureaud filed the case of *Earl Benjamin Bush vs. Orleans Parish School Board* as a direct challenge to the constitutionality of ongoing separation of races within the city’s schools.³³² As *Bush* made its way through the legal system, the Supreme Court concurrently announced its landmark ruling in *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education*, which stated that separate educational facilities violated principles of equality. With the stroke of a pen, the OPSB’s legal defence was rendered null.

After a protracted legal battle between local authorities and federal officials, New Orleans public schools officially became the first in Louisiana to desegregate in November 1960 with the integration of McDonough No. 19 and William J. Frantz Elementary, both located in the Ninth Ward.³³³ The road to this moment had been fraught with conflict, spurred by the New Orleans officials’ adamant refusal to comply with federal judge Skelly Wright’s order to prepare for

³²⁹ Baker, *The Second Battle of New Orleans*, 172.

³³⁰ Landphair, “Sewerage, Sidewalks, and Schools,” 45.

³³¹ On September 20, 1947, Aubert signed a form requesting that “the New Orleans branch of the NAACP take necessary steps even to the extent of securing counsel to represent me to bring about ‘just and equitable relief’ for his children from the platoon system.” See Landphair, 47.

³³² Baker, 173. Oliver Bush, whose eldest son Benjamin lent his name to the petition, was the president of the Macarty Parent-Teachers Association.

³³³ Muller, “New Orleans Public School Desegregation,” 87.

integration. Additionally, the majority of the city's white community was in an uproar over the threat that such integration would pose to the existing racial order. Disheartened by the slow pace of change within the city and the board's refusal to concede that integration was inevitable, Wright imposed the first-ever court-ordered integration plan in May 1960.³³⁴ Indeed, New Orleanians—of all races—have a long history of resistance to federal authority and to outsiders legislating their affairs; one may call to mind the virulent Creole response to the influx of Americans after the Louisiana Purchase as an example.³³⁵

In this case, the proponents of segregation responded vigorously. During the summer of 1960, the state legislature debated abandoning the public school system entirely, an action which had not yet been prohibited by the courts. By the end of August, however, the court struck down just that proposition, as well enjoined state officials from interfering with the New Orleans board's integration plans and ordered Governor Jimmie Davis to relinquish control over the schools.³³⁶ The board proposed its own integration plan based on a "pupil placement" law and Wright extended his original deadline by ten weeks to allow time for full compliance. As that November day approached, the school board used extreme measures to delay obedience to Wright's order. On the eve of November 14, 1960, the date designated for integration, the legislature declared the following day a "school holiday" to which Wright quickly responded by enjoining Governor Davis and the entire legislature.³³⁷ In his address, Wright spoke to the futility of advocating school closure as well as to the need to bridge the racial chasm:

We are attempting to proceed, as reasonable and lawful men, governed by the finest governmental code devised by humans, to solve a question that has plagued our nation since its founding.... Future generations will recall that the year 1960 was the year when

³³⁴ Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 235.

³³⁵ Lewis, *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape*, 43-44.

³³⁶ *Ibid*, 238.

³³⁷ Bill Billiter, "U.S. Judge Enjoins Legislature: No Interferences in Schools, Order," *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)* November 14, 1960.

Louisianans were called upon to face up to the greatest challenge that will ever confront us during your lifetime and mine. It could be our finest hour.³³⁸

An analysis of *The Times-Picayune's* coverage of these landmark events reveals both their magnitude and their divisiveness. Although the November 15, 1960 headline reads “Desegregation of Public Schools is Carried Out Without Violence,” this portrayal belies the contentious and threatening environment the desegregating children and their families confronted. Five hundred to 600 protestors gathered at William T. Frantz Elementary in advance of Ruby Bridges’ first day of classes at the institution. The burden of integration at the school fell solely on the tiny girl’s shoulders, chosen as one of the five to desegregate the schools through the vigorous, and some argued discriminatory, pupil placement process that eliminated 132 other applicants.³³⁹ Her mother, Lucille, had been one of eight children born to Mississippi sharecroppers in the 1930s. Later, she recalled how fervently she had wished to be able to attend school as she watched the school bus pass her house to pick up white children farther down the lane.³⁴⁰ That memory, and her conviction that her children would be better educated in a desegregated institution, steadied her against the jeers that she and her daughter faced. The morning of November 15th, amid songs and shouts of protests, a group of local high schoolers began to chant, “Two, four, six, eight. We don’t want to integrate.” Some in the crowd produced small Confederate flags and took to singing, “Glory, glory segregation; the South will rise again.”³⁴¹ As the day progressed, white mothers came to withdraw their students from Frantz to the cheers of onlookers, leaving very few children when the bell rung to signal the end of classes.

At McDonough No. 19, located only three blocks from the arch-segregationist Leander Perez’s political territory, three black students desegregated the institution within what was a

³³⁸ *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*. “Text of Address by Gov. Davis,” November 14, 1960.

³³⁹ Muller, “New Orleans Public School Desegregation,” 84.

³⁴⁰ Baker, *The Second Battle of New Orleans*, 396.

³⁴¹ Fritz Harsdorff, “Desegregation of Public Schools Is Carried Out Without Violence,” *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, November 15, 1960.

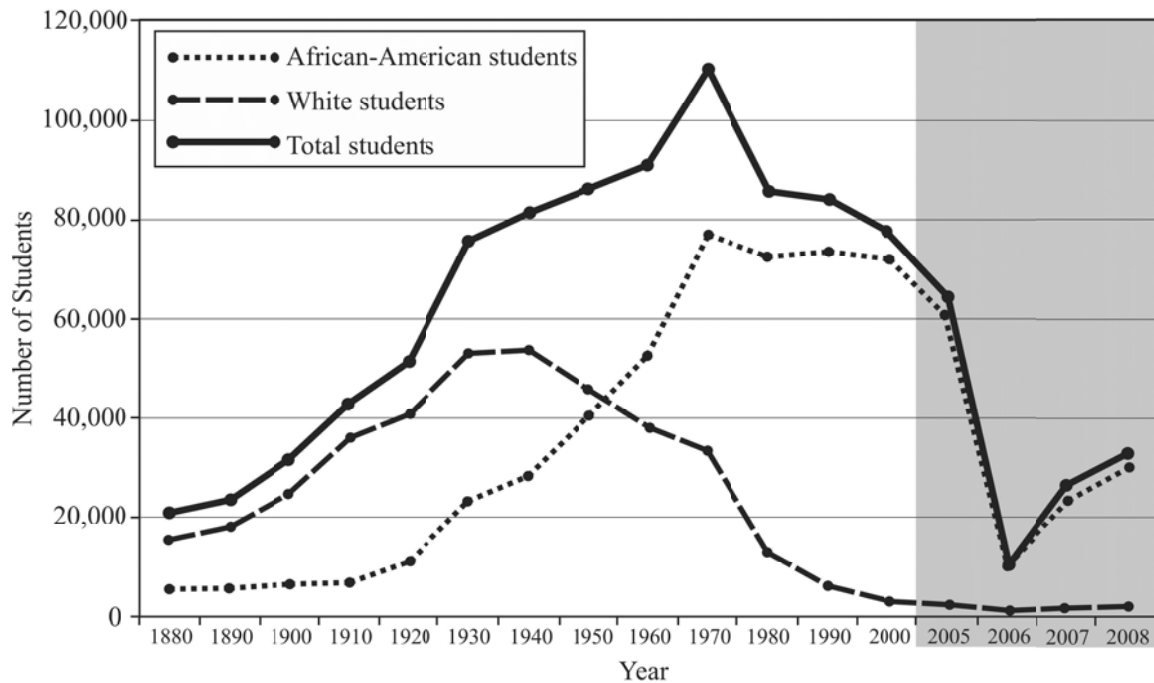
considerably more hostile environment. A protest group of approximately 1000 cheered the subsequent withdrawal of the school's white students, and a crowd from Francis T. Nicholls High School brandished KKK paraphernalia as well as defamatory and discriminatory signs, much to the delight of the hearty crowds.³⁴² That day, 5000 white citizens attended a Citizens' Council meeting in which Perez urged, "Don't wait for your daughters to be raped by these Congolese. Don't wait until the burr-heads are forced into your schools. Do something about it now!"³⁴³

As a direct result of integrationist policies, over the course of the next half century the public school enrollment underwent a drastic transformation (see Figure 7 for a visual representation of these changes). In 1968, almost a decade after the integration decree, there were still only twenty-five white students enrolled in the city's predominately black schools. At the opening of the 1970s the New Orleans school board began to more actively integrate the school system, yet by the end of the decade the percentage of all public school students who were black went from 68 percent to 79 percent in the district.³⁴⁴ When the city's schools were officially declared desegregated in 1978, more than 83 percent of its students were black. As a corresponding trend, the percentage of all whites who attended school outside of Orleans Parish in the majority-white suburban areas grew continuously during this period. In sum, from the inception of court-ordered integration to the mid-1990s, the percentage of all public school students who were black increased in almost perfect synchronicity with the growing number of white students who attended school outside the New Orleans' district limits. As a result of disinvestment and decades of segregation, by the late 1990s the New Orleans public school system was in crisis, the details and consequences of which will be explored in the following section.

³⁴² Walter Goldstein, "Police- Guarded Negro Pupils Jeered," *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, November 15, 1960.

³⁴³ Landphair, "Sewerage, Sidewalks, and Schools," 59.

³⁴⁴ Bankston and Caldas, *A Troubled Dream*, 63.



Source: DeVore & Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools*, LDE student enrollment data

Fig. 7

New Orleans School Enrollment, 1880-2008, After *The State of Public Education in New Orleans*, The Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University, 2008. Graphic by Mary Lee Eggart.

5.1. The School System to the Eve of Katrina

In a sense, the floundering New Orleans Public Schools (NOPS) both reflected and exacerbated the generational poverty that hindered its economically-disadvantaged and mostly African American student population.³⁴⁵ Pre-Katrina, New Orleans was widely known as one of the worst-performing public schools systems in the nation, graduating only 56 percent of its high-school

³⁴⁵ The Center for Community Change, "Dismantling a Community," Washington, 2006, http://www.soros.org/resources/articles_publications/publications/dismantling_20061026 (accessed August 25, 2010), 4.

students.³⁴⁶ Its students struggled with badly trained teachers, corrupt officials, and substandard campuses. On the last state-wide achievement test before Katrina, 74 percent of eighth-graders failed to demonstrate “basic” skills in English/Language Arts, and 70 percent scored *below* the “basic” level in math.³⁴⁷ A revolving door of superintendents and fiscal mismanagement so severe that in 2004 the FBI established a task force inside district headquarters indicated the magnitude of the problem. The dilapidated school structures were visible symbols of neglect, and a large percentage of its teachers were uncertified. As one member of the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) intimated, “It was a district that was warehousing students—absolutely warehousing them. We were morally, academically, and financially bankrupt.”³⁴⁸

In a city tinged by the inequalities of its past, the legacy of the city’s racial geography had enduring consequences on its educational system. From 1995 to 2005, public school enrollment in Orleans Parish (the Parish that encompasses the city of New Orleans) decreased 25 percent. As a result of whites and middle-class blacks leaving the public system for private educational opportunities, the composition of the public schools did not reflect the overall demography of New Orleans. In 2005, statistics showed that in a city that was 65 percent African American, 94 percent of NOPS enrollees were black.³⁴⁹ On the 2004-2005 Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) standardized test, New Orleans’ white students scored more than fifty points higher than black students in the English and math sections³⁵⁰ (see Figure 8 for performance differentials). This racial disparity was twice as large as the state average. In Louisiana, 44 percent of poor children reside in communities of concentrated poverty, and neighborhood schools reflect the structural

³⁴⁶ The Boston Consulting Group, “The State of Public Education in New Orleans”, June 2007, <http://www.coweninstitute.com/our-work/applied-research/state-of-public-education-report-in-new-orleans/> (Accessed April 2009), 7.

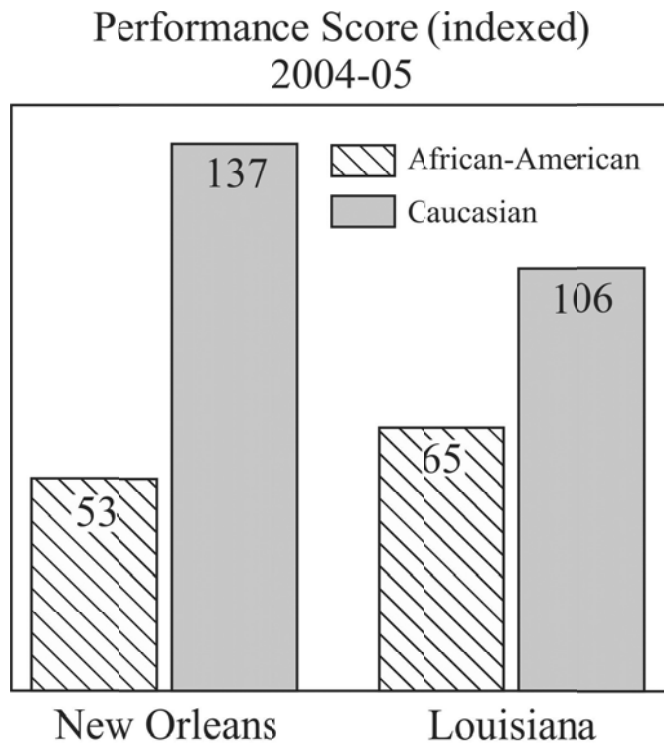
³⁴⁷ Ibid., 8.

³⁴⁸ Joel Rubin, “New Orleans Schools Charter a New Course,” *LA Times*, June 04, 2006. <http://articles.latimes.com/2006/jun/04/nation/na-schools4> (accessed April 2009).

³⁴⁹ The Boston Consulting Group, “The State of Public Education in New Orleans”, 8.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 8.

results of a weak tax base.³⁵¹ African Americans are over-represented (in terms of their percentage in the overall population) in these areas. High concentrations of poverty lead to a diminished tax base and decreased investment in education, leaving students, and particularly students of color, ill-prepared for transitions into adulthood and to the working world. Within New Orleans the public school system did little to alter the legacy of racial inequality upon which the city was built, and in many ways reinforced long-standing disparities along color lines.



Source: Louisiana Department of Education Accountability Report
GPS Student Performance Scores, 2004-05.

Fig. 8

Performance Scores by Race On the 2004-2005 Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) Standardized Test, After *The State of Public Education in New Orleans*, The Greater New Orleans Education Foundation, Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiative, and The New Orleans City Council Education Committee, 2007.

Graphic by Mary Lee Eggart.

³⁵¹ M. Jayne Fleener and Jerry Willis, "Post-Katrina Educational Contexts: Breaking the Rules," in *The Children Hurricane Katrina Left Behind*, ed. Sharon P. Robinson and M. Christopher Brown (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 106.

5.2 Post-Katrina: A School System Transformed

Three months after Katrina, Louisiana invoked Act 35, expanding the state's power to intervene in failing school districts.³⁵² And intervene it did: the state deemed that 112 (out of 128) failing schools within the state were to be managed by the state-run Recovery School District (RSD). Within New Orleans, the district's post-Katrina collapse dissolved the local teachers' union and any former powers of the school board.³⁵³ The district terminated all 7500 former employees, and hired principals and teachers on one-year contracts that favored incentive and accountability over seniority. Those who worked in the old system had to re-apply for jobs and undergo a rigorous evaluative process which included testing and interviews.

Upheaval and reinvention have become a way of life within post-Katrina New Orleans, and its educational system is no exception. The former single-district model (the Orleans Parish School Board, or OPSB) split into a two-district model, with the RSD operating twenty-two schools after Katrina and the OPSB administering five. However, the most radical change has come from the unparalleled growth in the number of charter schools. Charter schools are independently operated public schools that are free from many regulations which govern regular public schools but are still supported by taxes. Some charters belong to national networks, local networks, or are completely independently operated, like Dr. Martin Luther King Charter for Science and Technology. In the months following Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, re-opening schools as charters expedited the process in a period when little centralized assistance was available. Additionally, charters were able to access a special \$209 million grant earmarked specifically for this purpose.³⁵⁴ In New Orleans, a powerful alliance of non-profits has emerged to recruit and train new charter operators;

³⁵² The Boston Consulting Group, "The State of Public Education in New Orleans," 10.

³⁵³ Greg Troppo, "In New Orleans Schools, It's like Starting Over," *USA Today*, June 7, 2007, http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2007-06-06-new-orleans-schools_N.htm (accessed April 2009).

³⁵⁴ The Boston Consulting Group, "The State of Public Education in New Orleans", 11.

philanthropic organizations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation provided significant financial support. Charters are a foundational aspect of this new school system: they now number thirty-one, operating within New Orleans under various mandates: the RSD operates seventeen, the OPSB runs twelve, and BESE directly administers two. Fifty-three percent of public schools are now charters, making New Orleans the most “chartered” city in the nation.³⁵⁵

The transformation of New Orleans’ school system was so total that within many quarters it was considered a “radical experiment in reform.”³⁵⁶ Educators and policy-makers alike have looked upon the experiment as an opportunity to innovate, remold, and to prove that “at-risk” children in an historically troubled city can achieve a high level of success. Hurricane Katrina struck at a particularly crucial moment in the nation’s educational reform movement, which had been testing different intensive teaching methods with varying degrees of success. Paul Vallas, the new superintendent of the RSD, had a broad vision for the future of the system, including extended school days to keep students out of trouble and themed arts and science academies. He also envisioned that charter schools would expand their presence in the district, eventually comprising 75 to 90 percent of the city’s schools.³⁵⁷ According to Vallas’ partner Paul Pastorek, the ultimate and perhaps elusive goal is to re-integrate the public school system, enticing the return of the city’s white children through higher-achieving, safer, and more specialized schools. However, not all subscribe to this optimistic view of a fundamentally transformed school system.

For critics of the charter movement, the complete re-organization of New Orleans’ educational system is a vision that disparages the public sector and overvalues privatization, one led

³⁵⁵ The Boston Consulting Group, “The State of Public Education in New Orleans”, 11.

³⁵⁶ Paul Tough, “A Teachable Moment,” *New York Times*, August 17, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/17/magazine/17NewOrleans-t.html> (Accessed April 2009).

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

by outsiders eager to capitalize on disaster.³⁵⁸ While the majority of students, teachers, and administrators may have agreed that the pre-Katrina public school system was irrevocably broken, it should be noted that many of the district's teachers re-committed themselves year after year to working in the city's most troubled schools. At Frederick Douglass High School in the Ninth Ward socially active teachers had created Students at the Center in 1996, an elective creative writing course that emphasizes education for community development and peer teaching.³⁵⁹ This program and others were proud examples of success in an otherwise-downward spiraling school system, and their supporters were among the most outspoken critics of the post-Katrina charter school movement. Indeed, as Leigh Dingerson points out in *Keeping the Promise: the Debate over Charter Schools*, MLK's Principal Dr. Doris Hicks had been reticent to adopt the charter school model but had done so because there was no federal money available to re-open traditional schools.³⁶⁰

While the dissolution of the former neighborhood school model meant that parents could ostensibly choose schools for their children thus allowing them more autonomy over their child's education, this reconfiguring of the educational landscape also meant that some were left behind. Furthermore, since an outside organization, the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, handled the screening and evaluation of the charter proposals, community groups wishing to re-open their local school were disadvantaged in the process. Former neighborhood schools did not guarantee returning neighborhood students a space, and the lack of institutional oversight meant there was no assurance that schools were opening in proximity to where returning families were living. In the harried months of fall 2005, beleaguered parents struggled to make sense of the changes Katrina had wrought on their city's educational landscape. Parents, particularly those who

³⁵⁸ Ralph Adamo, "Squeezing Public Education: History and Ideology Gang Up on New Orleans," *Dissent*. (2007): 51. See also Maria Alexander. "Reinventing a Broken Wheel? The Fight to Reclaim Public Education in New Orleans," *Social Policy* Spring/Summer 2007.

³⁵⁹ The Center for Community Change, "Dismantling a Community," 4.

³⁶⁰ Leigh Dingerson, "Unlovely: How the Market is Failing the Children of New Orleans," in *Keeping the Promise? The Debate Over Charter Schools*, ed. Leigh Dingerson, Barbara Miner, Bob Peterson, and Stephanie Walters. (Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools, Ltd., 2008), 22.

were late in returning and without access to transportation, found themselves unable to navigate a new system that required school-by-school registration. Getting their child back into a public school was a complicated process and particularly frustrating for those who parented disabled or troubled students, as some of these new schools discouraged registration by those they deemed “high-risk.”³⁶¹

Another problem, dissenters argue, is that unlike traditional public schools, charter schools are not required to admit anyone above their stated enrollment capacity. Fundamentally, proponents of traditional public schools state that the new market-driven structure perpetuates long-standing socio-economic disparities within the city. They fear that those families with the most means will place their child in the chartered system, whose schools have the leverage to obtain considerable external financial support, while the Recovery School District will become a “dumping ground”—unable to compete with (or replicate) the programs or prestige of their better-funded cousins. In the words of one state official, post-Katrina New Orleans presented a “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reinvent public education.”³⁶² To others, it was not a reinvention but a dismantling: an “educational land-grab” that privileged individualism to the detriment of the collective good.³⁶³

5.3 Dr. Martin Luther King Charter for Science and Technology: Its History and Its Struggle

Pre-Katrina, the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary for Science and Technology (MLK) was a standout in the Lower Ninth Ward community. It boasted a modern building, constructed in 1995 to replace the “crumbling and dingy” Alfred Lawless Elementary which had been an educational mainstay in the community for forty-one years.³⁶⁴ With a price tag of \$8 million, the new school came complete with a piano studio, special math and science labs, ample playground space,

³⁶¹ Dingerson, “Unlovely: How the Market is Failing the Children of New Orleans,” 24.

³⁶² Waldman, “Reading, Writing, Resurrection.”

³⁶³ The Center for Community Change, “Dismantling a Community,” 1-2.

³⁶⁴ Bettina Benoit, “Lawless Elementary to Ring Final Dismissal Bell,” *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, May 24, 1995.

and an attached public library. Despite the overwhelming socio-economic disadvantage of its students and families (96 percent of King's 715 students qualified for a free or reduced-price lunch) it had the highest performance score of any school with a similar profile and enrolment numbers.³⁶⁵ The school's mission was to motivate its students, called "The Explorers," to confront and transcend the poverty and history of neglect evident in the Lower Ninth Ward. Martin Luther King Jr. III, a guest speaker at the school's dedication in January 1996, stated that, "You think about the inordinate amount of wealth in this city and then the deep poverty. All you've got to do is drive through these streets to see how far we black folks are behind."³⁶⁶ As a provocative parallel to the rebuilding of the school post-Katrina, many of the community leaders in attendance at the original dedication ceremony saw the opening of the school as a rallying point for the revival of the community.

When the levee burst, inundating the Lower Ninth Ward's landscape with over 20 feet of water, the school stood no chance of escaping the flooding and destruction. See Figures 9 and 10 for an example of Katrina's devastating impact as well as indications of a determination to rebuild; see Figure 11 for an idea of how close the school was located to the levee breaches. Indeed, the catastrophe that overwhelmed the area left thirty adults and children affiliated with the school dead. Symbolically and materially, a year later few signs of life were evident in a community with such a vibrant history. There was a sense, according to residents, that outside interests did not want the Lower Ninth Ward re-populated; as school board liaison Steven Martin explained, "(Officials) saw it as an opportunity to take prized land near the river and to develop the area. There was a deliberate effort [by city officials and commercial interests] for residents not to rebuild and to keep the school closed. If you rebuild the school then the neighborhood would follow, and they did not want that to

³⁶⁵ Amy Waldman, "Reading, Writing, Resurrection." *The Atlantic*, Jan-Feb 2007, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/01/reading-writing-resurrection/5560/> (accessed April 2009)

³⁶⁶ Mark Schleifstein, "Martin Luther King's Son Laments Disparities in N.O.: New Elementary School for Technology Dedicated," *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, January 22, 1996.

happen.”³⁶⁷ Principal Dr. Doris Hicks, savvy to the larger context governing race and rebuilding in New Orleans, knew that neither the city nor the state would take great pains to re-open a school in an empty neighborhood; furthermore, she suspected that there would be a lack of urgency when it came to facilities for children of color.³⁶⁸ However, given the importance of education to the community, she also knew that the neighborhood would never return without the school. As a result, she and Mr. Martin began drafting a charter, never suspecting that their campaign would galvanize hundreds from around the country and would thrust the community’s rebuilding efforts onto national headlines.



Fig. 9

The Lower Ninth Ward with Levee Breach Site in Distance; 3.5 Years Post-Katrina.
Photo by Alexandra Giancarlo.

³⁶⁷ Steven Martin, interviewed by Alexandra Giancarlo, April 6, 2009, transcript on file with author.

³⁶⁸ Waldman, “Reading, Writing, Resurrection.”



Fig. 10

The Lower Ninth Ward; 5 Years Post-Katrina.
Photo by Alexandra Giancarlo.

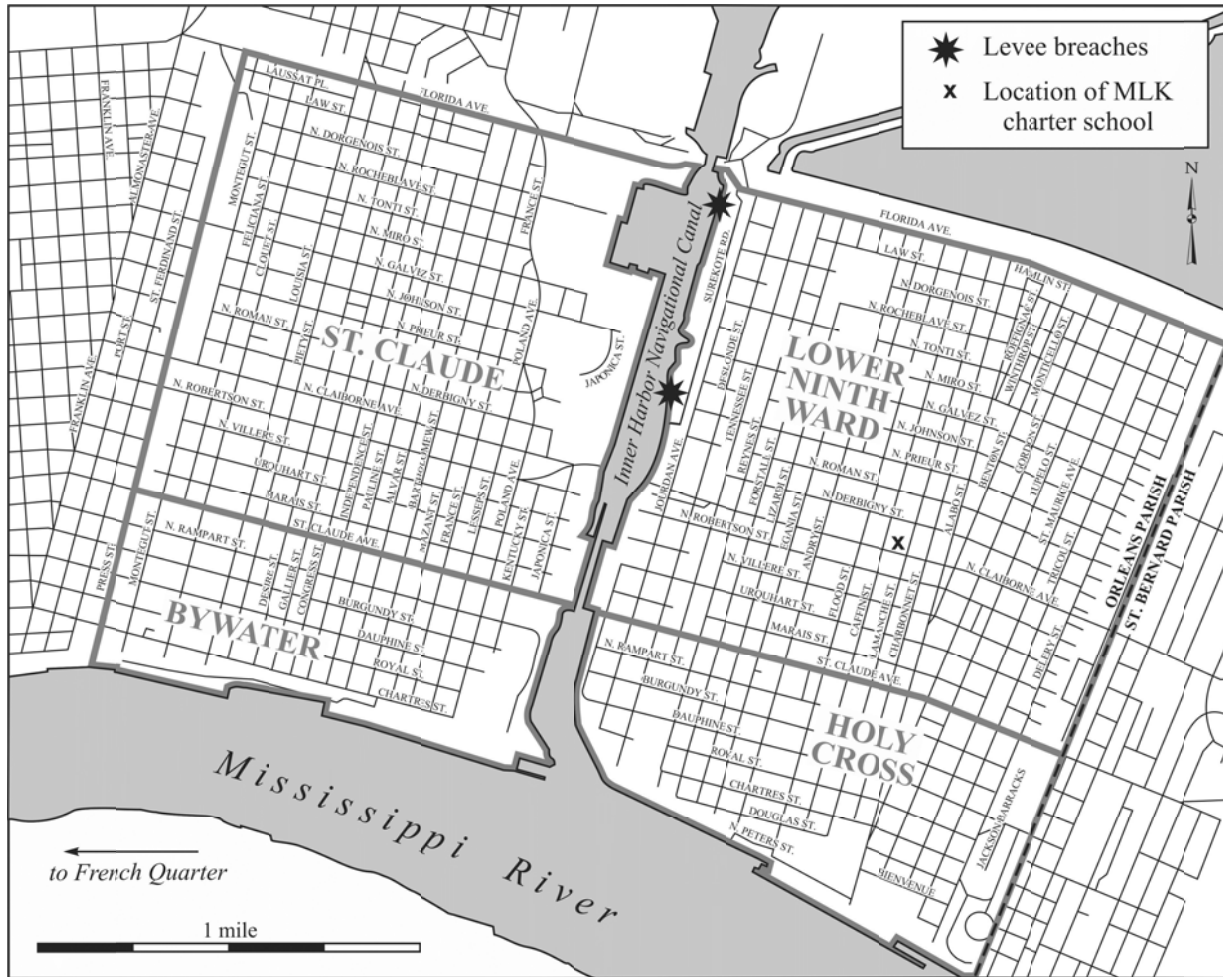


Fig. 11

The location of Dr. Martin Luther King Charter School in reference to the levee breaches caused by Hurricane Katrina.

Cartography by Mary Lee Eggart.

When Dr. Hicks and the other staff approached the school board shortly after the storm, they were informed that a team had examined the school and concluded that it would take three to five years to repair the damage and re-open it at the cost of millions of dollars.³⁶⁹ Common Ground, a grassroots activist organization that sprang up in the Ninth Ward after Hurricane Katrina, helped

³⁶⁹ Daniela Rible, "First School in Lower Ninth Ward Reopened," *New American Media*, August 30, 2007, http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=e2087542f23e43a61f695551259e3911 (Accessed April 2009).

commission a private engineering firm from Colorado to come to MLK and evaluate the structure. It stated that the building was structurally sound and had only suffered water damage; it estimated that it would cost in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, not millions, to repair, and that the renovations could be completed in ten to eleven months.³⁷⁰ To many, these conclusions reinforced suspicions that the state's sluggish response and refusal to expedite the re-opening were by design and not by chance. The community members were outraged and were anxious to see MLK regain its former standing. The campaign to re-open the school stirred both the returned citizens and the Lower Ninth Ward diaspora; indeed, once evacuated families learned of the plans to re-open the school, they were more determined than ever to return to their community.³⁷¹

The momentum of the crusade was not limited to the Ninth Ward's residents; it inspired others, nationally and internationally, to get involved. In March of 2006, Common Ground experienced a Spring Break volunteer onslaught. Over 200 volunteers participated in workshops led by former civil rights' leaders, including representatives from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and their national president Charles Steele, which outlined the principles of non-violent direct action.³⁷² On March 16, approximately 300 returned residents and volunteers broke in and spent all day and night cleaning the school. The following day New Orleans' police arrived, threatening to shut down the efforts and arrest volunteers and residents who were involved. The participants agreed that their message had been sent and they dispersed, awaiting the school board meeting that was to be held the following Monday. Over the weekend, Common Ground had engaged in talks with then-superintendent Robin Jarvis, who later penned a resolution to city council affirming that volunteers and residents could enter and clean the school in attempts to open it

³⁷⁰ Sakura Kone', interviewed by Alexandra Giancarlo, March 30, 2009, transcript on file with author.

³⁷¹ Steven Martin, interviewed by Alexandra Giancarlo, April 6, 2009, transcript on file with author.

³⁷² Sakura Kone', interviewed by Alexandra Giancarlo, March 30, 2009, transcript on file with author.

sooner than the original three-to-five year timeline.³⁷³ The community's diaspora, returned residents, and well-intentioned outsiders had all banded together in a common cause of resistance.

While the original site was cleaned, two other concurrent campaigns became the focus of the principal and her board. The first was a media blitz that let the community and still-evacuated residents know that the school would be re-opening in the fall of 2006. They launched a website, put up flyers, and bought radio spots. They contacted all the displaced teachers, who were as far-flung as Virginia and Washington, D.C., and ensured that they had the funds to re-hire every pre-Katrina instructor.³⁷⁴ Secondly, Dr. Hicks and her team set about finding a temporary site for MLK, a challenge that would later come to define their campaign. The principal, teachers, and residents settled on another older facility, Charles J. Colton Middle School, after visiting numerous sites and weighing their options.

As opening day neared, however, the necessary repairs to make the school habitable had not yet been completed. Frustrations began to boil over, and the local and national civil-rights establishment rallied to the school's side. After numerous delays for opening dates, Dr. Hicks, teachers, parents, and representatives from the SCLC went to the rundown site and staged a protest, holding classes on the front lawn.³⁷⁵ A civil rights rally was soon under way, and the group marched to the Recovery School District headquarters where they demanded a meeting with superintendent Jarvis. After a negotiation session, Jarvis made a better-equipped provisional school available to the protesters: Edgar P. Harney in Central City. Officials from MLK agreed to change the school's start date to September 18, 2006 at the alternate site, and the RSD re-affirmed its commitment to re-opening King's Lower Ninth Ward campus by the following June.³⁷⁶ Finally, on June 10th, 2007, the

³⁷³ Ribble, "First School in Lower Ninth Ward Reopened."

³⁷⁴ Steven Martin, interviewed by Alexandra Giancarlo, April 6, 2009, transcript on file with author.

³⁷⁵ Siona LaFrance, "Recovery School District Charters Experience Delays," State of Louisiana Department of Education, Recovery School District. Press Release. Sept. 5, 2006.

³⁷⁶ Siona LaFrance, "MLK Charter School to Open Sept. 18," State of Louisiana Department of Education, Recovery School District. Press Release. Sept. 11, 2006.

school held its rededication ceremony on its original site on Caffin Street in the Lower Ninth Ward. Speakers, dancing guests, and a brass band entertained a jubilant crowd of nearly 1000 well-wishers who had come out to celebrate the rebirth of the school and, in a way, the figurative renewal of their community.

The Dr. Martin Luther King Charter School was the first (and, so far, the only) school to re-open in the Lower Ninth Ward since Hurricane Katrina. Before the storm, it exclusively served neighborhood students; now, although three-quarters of King's former families have returned to the school, less than one-third live in the community. Despite the far-flung nature of the post-Katrina diaspora—some families formerly within walking distance commute from as far as LaPlace, a distance of about 25 miles – the school maintains its former intimacy, connected by a common history, loyalty, and culture.³⁷⁷ It has played host to a bevy of famous visitors, including journalist Tavis Smiley, director Spike Lee, and President Barack Obama. During his visit to the school in October 2009, Obama called it “an inspiration for this city,” and encouraged its students to “work hard in school and treat each other with respect... There’s no reason why you can’t be a doctor or a lawyer. There’s no reason why you can’t be the Secretary of Education or a principal of a school. There’s no reason why you can’t be a congressman or a senator- maybe you can be the President of the United States.”³⁷⁸

5.4 Social Memory and Place Attachment: On the Ground in the Lower Ninth Ward

“The family way of life, or that term that ‘it takes a village to raise a child,’ that was our way of life. You know, it [isn’t] like you didn’t know who this child was or who that person’s grandchild was, because they were there. This wasn’t a transitional community.”³⁷⁹

³⁷⁷ Sarah Carr, “Good Neighbors,” *The Times-Picayune*, October 21, 2008.

³⁷⁸ *The Louisiana Weekly*, “Obama tells New Orleans he’s just getting started,” October 19, 2009. <http://www.louisianaweekly.com/news.php?viewStory=1921> (Accessed August 2010).

³⁷⁹ Interview with Ronald Lewis, June 2, 2010, transcript on file with author.

A powerful current within the Ninth Ward community, particularly in a post-Katrina context, centers on the profound nature of place attachment that residents have expressed. Ninth Warders have eloquently described how their landscape evokes attachment and the role that this relationship has in residents' efforts to reclaim their community and re-open the community's school. This section initially draws upon Setha M. Low's framework of cultural place attachment and then moves to a specific analysis of how this relates to social memory and resistance within the Lower Ninth Ward.³⁸⁰

The first element, genealogy, treats history as written on the landscape; within the Ninth Ward, scars of past storms are still highly visible, as are the vestiges of historical discrimination embodied in formerly segregated schools and other public establishments. Place names, such as the Dr. Martin Luther King Charter School, also invoke the deep sense of historical recognition. Community members bought the land and built the houses in the area with help from neighbors, friends, and relatives who were all invested the goals of self betterment and community development.³⁸¹ Additionally, houses often passed from generation to generation, adding to familial connections embodied in landscape. The second process, linkage through loss of land or destruction, is particularly pertinent in post-Katrina New Orleans. This displacement from or loss of community can occur in many ways. Scholars have examined how Acadian coastal residents have an especial bond with their landscape, one that is accentuated by their region's ecological fragility and by coastal land loss, creating an "ongoing traumatic event" that heightens residents' awareness of their attachment.³⁸² For Ninth Ward residents, the joy of returning home is tempered by parallel sentiments of foreboding and of the recognition that their community could again be devastated by

³⁸⁰ Setha M. Low, "Symbolic Ties that Bind: Place Attachment in the Plaza," in *Place Attachment*, ed. Irwin Altman and Setha M. Low (New York: Plenum Press, 1992), 166-175.

³⁸¹ Joyce Marie Jackson, "Declaration of Taking Twice: The Fazendeville Community of the Lower Ninth Ward," *American Anthropologist* 108, no.4 (2006): 774.

³⁸² David Burley, Pam Jenkins, Shirley Laska et al. "Place Attachment and Environmental Change in Coastal Louisiana," *Organization and Environment* 20 (2007): 361.

a hurricane, especially given the adverse impacts of climate change and the ongoing process of subsidence within the city. However, as Breunlin and Regis note, “Among spirit families forged in response to structural violence— indeed, as in all African diaspora communities intimately familiar with displacement—reconnecting in the face of large and small disasters is nothing new.”³⁸³ Breunlin and Regis argue that participation in culturally- and historically-significant public performances have helped displaced Ninth Warders re-form vital social networks in the aftermath of the destruction of their homes.

The third element, economic place attachment, has been described as a more “utilitarian relationship,”³⁸⁴ but one that is rooted in legitimacy of place, particularly regarding ownership of land in the Lower Ninth Ward. The fourth, cosmology, includes the moral and mythological dimensions of place attachment and posits that certain spaces and lands are sacred to communities. Within the Lower Ninth Ward, one may look upon the Battle Ground Baptist Church, which was a rallying point for the former Fazendeville community, as a sacred space.³⁸⁵ The fifth element of place attachment, pilgrimage, brings to mind the celebratory events of the African American community’s vibrant second line parading tradition; to anthropologists, participation in these communal traditions is likened to entering the neighborhood’s spirit family.³⁸⁶ Regis also describes how, despite the transient nature of these celebrations, these experiences figure prominently in the collective memory of participants. The act of returning to the community to commemorate Katrina’s anniversary constitutes both a pilgrimage and a homecoming. The final process of place attachment, narrative, is a salient form of cultural expression within the Lower Ninth Ward community and informs how locals understand their ancestors’ ties to place as precursors to their present challenges to return and

³⁸³ Rachel Breunlin and Helen A. Regis, “Putting the Ninth Ward on the Map: Race, Place and Transformation in Desire, New Orleans,” *American Anthropologist* 108, no.4 (2006): 761.

³⁸⁴ Low, “Symbolic Ties That Bind,” 170.

³⁸⁵ Jackson, “Declaration of Taking Twice,” 776.

³⁸⁶ Breunlin and Regis, “Putting the Ninth Ward on the Map,” 746.

rebuild. Narratives speak to the collective memory of the community; the Ninth Ward's folkloric discourses often center on perceived past injustices committed by the government, such as land seizure and the purported purposeful destruction of levees during Hurricane Betsy.³⁸⁷ By using Low's conceptual framework and tailoring it to the Lower Ninth Ward specifically, one may better grasp this community's profound desire for continuity of place amid dislocation and uncertainty.

Earlier, this study considered how scholars have addressed the intersections between social memory, resistance, and place attachment. In *The Power of Identity*, Castells introduces the concept of *identity for resistance*, which describes how subordinate or marginalized groups create their own defensive identity based upon their exclusion from mainstream society. Regis' work elaborates this concept through her discussion of the Ninth Ward second line parading tradition and related practices such as public funerals and memorials, which solidify communal and individual identities that have profound significance for participants, even those that may be disparaged by outsiders.

An intertwining of these concepts reveals the Ninth Ward as a space of resistance, fed by social memories which form an alternate, but equally significant, discourse to the community's official "history." Often times these narratives call into question the legitimacy of dominant discourses; indeed, this independent historical culture of resistance played a strong role in the community's determination to re-open the MLK Charter School. Anonymous respondent #1, who had lived in the Ninth Ward for thirty to forty years and faced considerable bureaucratic and logistical roadblocks to returning to the community post-Katrina, stated that the city's reluctance to allow the Lower Ninth Ward to be rebuilt, and more specifically the MLK school to be re-opened, stemmed from racism. She believes that whites did not want the school re-opened because they did not want the community back. When asked if she knew of any precedents, the respondent stated that her mother had told her to keep her property and not sell it to anyone, because officials had

³⁸⁷ Breunlin and Regis, "Putting the Ninth Ward on the Map," 759-760.

long been trying to seize the land from “poor folk.”³⁸⁸ Scholars have noted the importance of the passing down of oral histories within African American communities, asserting that this tradition maintains crucial narratives that would be erased from mainstream history.³⁸⁹

Other interviewees expressed these sentiments primarily by calling upon the community’s collective memory of Hurricane Betsy. They discussed how these lingering suspicions resulted in an incongruity between the officially-mandated history of Katrina and what the community members felt *really* happened during the chaotic early-morning hours of August 29, 2005. At the aforementioned unveiling of the Master Plan within the Ninth Ward, the introductory speaker described the linkages between the injustices the community underwent after Hurricane Katrina and what else residents have “suffered along the way.” She included Hurricane Betsy, the potential expansion of the Industrial Canal port, and the fight to close the MR-GO as prominent precursors to their post-Katrina struggles.³⁹⁰ Another interviewee, originally from New Orleans and who returned after Katrina to work as MLK’s art teacher, stated unequivocally that “[Katrina] was meant to disrupt; they did it with Betsy, where they blew up the levee to save the French Quarter. They really don’t like the Lower Ninth Ward because of uppity black people.”³⁹¹ These examples verbalize the undercurrent of resistance within the community, not only in materials expressions (protests and the like), but through oral history traditions and *cultural* resistance. This is akin to that which James Scott described in terms of black Americans challenging the official dogma during the slavery period; they did not passively accept the elite’s social order.

³⁸⁸ Interview with anonymous respondent #1, April 9, 2010, transcript on file with author.

³⁸⁹ Scott Hancock, “Tradition Informs Us’: African Americans’ Construction of Memory in the Antebellum North,” in *Slavery, Resistance, Freedom*, ed. Gabor Boritt and Scott Hancock. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

³⁹⁰ Master Plan Meeting: The Lower Ninth Ward.

³⁹¹ Interview with Amelie Prescott, July 10, 2010, transcript on file with author.

Jacquelyn Hughes Mooney, a New Orleanian by birth who spent her childhood in the Lower Ninth Ward and has returned to the city in hopes of purchasing her family's property, takes a different perspective. She acknowledges the inklings of suspicion, stating that

I am quite sure you have heard the rumors about the explosives blowing up the levee... actually, what those people heard were the winds were so high that the barges and ships lost their mooring and were banging...who in their right mind would be going down there in the middle of the storm and setting the dynamite to blow up that levee?...but some people are still clinging to that lie.³⁹²

However, she also expressed that “there is enough things going on to give some legitimacy to that. So it would make you suspicious.... If it turns out to be true, God help them all.”³⁹³ Mooney also disclosed the prevalent and enduring nature of racial prejudice within New Orleans and the nation more broadly, describing the “subtle, everyday, chip-at-you forms of racism” she and her ancestors faced. Further, she acknowledges Katrina's racialized aspects and reiterates her community's resolve to return, in spite of outsiders' designs on the area: “There is a very clear determination that we are not going to let people come in and tear that property up and sell it as commercial property. That was one of the earlier rumors.”³⁹⁴ It is through these very types of memory practices, both historically and presently, that Ninth Ward residents have been able to fashion their working-class community as a space of resistance. This subaltern mainstream, as elucidated by Regis and Breunlin, buoyed the community during its campaign to reclaim contested terrain and fused its resistance identity during the aftermath of Katrina.

Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan has also discussed how humans can have deep-seated emotional ties to a place that they consider home. When asked what the Lower Ninth Ward means to her, Hughes Mooney states: “I don't know if there's a word to describe it. It's just that it's home...I know the first time I saw it after the storm and the last time I saw it. I still haven't found any words for it yet. I just

³⁹² Interview with Jacquelyn Hughes Mooney, July 10, 2010, transcript on file with author.

³⁹³ Ibid.

³⁹⁴ Ibid. She also stated, “The level of racism and sexism is extremely deep and very virulent here. It's not for the faint of heart.”

haven't. It's home. And you can smell it, you can taste it, everything about it, it's home."³⁹⁵ Ronald Lewis, curator and owner of The House of Dance and Feathers, a Ninth Ward museum that artfully documents and preserves the community's cultural and social traditions, stated that the Lower Ninth Ward is "everything. It's everything. When I was living in Thibodaux, Louisiana, after Katrina, I just had that burning fire to come back home. To be on the street that I spent my entire life on."³⁹⁶

Another interviewee, Robert Green, famed for being among the very first to return to the community after losing both his granddaughter and mother during the storm, described how "I knew everyone on Tennessee Street. My mother moved into this house in 1967... We all grew up in a community that was more like a village. 'It takes a village to raise a child.' We used to sleep with our windows open. Everyone down here owns their own houses. You have in your house people that raise you to respect other people."³⁹⁷

Indeed, Dr. Hicks invoked the language of "home" during the school's rededication ceremony on August 13th, 2007: "When we think about home we think about so many different issues. One, the physical structure within where one lives. Another is a dwelling place together with family...another, an environment offering security. We are glad to be home and indeed this is a homecoming." Echoing these sentiments, Reverend Willie Calhoun—one of the leaders of the Lower Ninth Ward School Development Group, a nonprofit aiming to rebuild the neighborhood's public schools—stated that

It's my life. It's where I grew up. This is where I chose to stay. I *chose* to live here. It wasn't forced. A lot of people go back to saying about how poor this area was, or whatever. However, when I grew up here I didn't understand what poor was...So to me that community gave me a moral and ethical value system...To me this was a proud area.³⁹⁸

³⁹⁵ Interview with Jacquelyn Hughes Mooney, July 10, 2010, transcript on file with author.

³⁹⁶ Interview with Ronald Lewis, June 2, 2010, transcript on file with author. See also Rachel Breunlin and Ronald W. Lewis, *The House of Dance and Feathers* (New Orleans: UNO Press, 2009).

³⁹⁷ Interview with Robert Green, April 9, 2010, transcript on file with author.

³⁹⁸ Interview with Reverend Willie Calhoun, June 17, 2010, transcript on file with author.

In a poetic turn, Hughes Mooney describes how her family's home faced the home plate of Lawless Elementary School's baseball diamond as a child:

In fact, one of the fondest memories, because you could hear the shout all the way down the block, is that after supper they turned the park lights on, and you could hear the cheer go up in the neighborhood...And everybody would go running across the street. And [literally] our house faced home plate. And that's how I was able to find our home [after Katrina]. Ironically in Katrina home plate stayed there...with all that water.³⁹⁹

One of the most common ways that interviewees expressed their connections to home was through self-identification as a homeowner and a linkage of this status to longer-term trends of higher-than-average home ownership levels within the community. Calhoun states that “I don’t recall anyone in the area that I live in that did not own their own property. So one of the significant parts of being culturally connected was the fact that we were all homeowners. We didn’t actually have a Homeowners Association per se, but this community took pride in home ownership.”⁴⁰⁰ Anonymous respondent #1 immediately identified herself as a “homeowner and taxpayer” at the outset of our interview, invoking her rights as a citizen—perhaps to counter prevailing stereotypes of the area’s residents. Hughes Mooney also describes the neighborhood as “house-proud,” stating that on the eve of Katrina the Lower Ninth Ward boasted the highest home ownership rate in the country. Lewis also describes how nearly 70 percent of residents owned their homes. While my analysis of census data did not confirm home ownership rates of that magnitude, these interviews illustrate that within the social memory of the community home ownership is paramount. Given the humble roots of many of the neighborhood’s original residents and the oppressive racial climate that they faced, the achievement of owning one’s home was a point of considerable pride. Lewis outlines how his mother left a sugarcane plantation when she was 13 years old and set out to New Orleans for a new life, which allowed

³⁹⁹ Interview with Jacquelyn Hughes Mooney, July 10, 2010, transcript on file with author.

⁴⁰⁰ Interview with Reverend Willie Calhoun, June 17, 2010, transcript on file with author.

him and his family to “live the American dream.”⁴⁰¹ Similarly, Calhoun relates that his parents, like many other black families moving to the city from rural Mississippi or Louisiana, came to this community to be able to own their own land. And although place attachment typically transcends basic material linkages to the landscape, the physical elements of the community may also hold significance: “People usually want their roots right where they’re at. I said...I want that land. That’s my family’s soil right there. And I want that land.”⁴⁰²

Interviewees also indicated that another prominent aspect of the community’s resistance identity is its insularity from mainstream society, facilitated in physical terms by the Industrial Canal and in non-material terms by socio-economic isolation. Critics often referred to this isolation as a precipitating factor in the high levels of crime, unemployment, and purported lawlessness that characterized the area before Katrina. However, Lewis describes how “[There is] a lot of misinformation and misconceptions about the Lower Ninth Ward. That canal divided us from the rest of the world. So many stories were made up about our community. But in truth it was a blue-collar community.”⁴⁰³ Many respondents asserted that this isolation was not altogether negative. Indeed, isolation as *protection* emerges as a theme; protection, in particular, from the virulent racism and regime of segregation that awaited them on the west side of the canal and in St. Bernard Parish to the east. Hughes Mooney explains that, pre-Civil Rights Act, one of the upsides to segregation was that everything was self-contained: “The teachers, the principals, the lawyers, the doctors, the undertakers, the postal worker...everything we needed was right there....If I had to recall something that was the most dominant, is that we did not have to deal with segregation and racism and everything, because we were insulated.”⁴⁰⁴ Lewis compares his community to an island and highlights the irony of the Lower Ninth Ward’s isolated nature: “On

⁴⁰¹ Interview with Ronald Lewis, June 2, 2010, transcript on file with author.

⁴⁰² Interview with Jacquelyn Hughes Mooney, July 10, 2010, transcript on file with author.

⁴⁰³ Interview with Ronald Lewis, June 2, 2010, transcript on file with author.

⁴⁰⁴ Interview with Jacquelyn Hughes Mooney, July 10, 2010, transcript on file with author.

the other side of the fence people would say, ‘don’t go to the Ninth Ward’—it was like our community was taboo. But at the same time, they used to come pick up our mothers and elderly out of the neighborhood to go do the cleaning in the big houses [across the Industrial Canal] and do the day’s work. But, socially, it was unacceptable.”⁴⁰⁵ Hughes Mooney also touches upon this theme, describing how “our parents had to cross the Industrial Canal and go and work in the main part of the city, but... none of us as children were aware of what our parents had to endure when they crossed over. But that was a silver lining to segregation.”⁴⁰⁶

Lewis highlights how his community’s independent spirit and its self-identification as a “battleground” and a site of resistance did little to endear itself to city officials, who were counting on the neighborhood’s acquiescence to the Bring New Orleans Back Commission’s “smaller footprint” plan that partly reconfigured their community as green space. In the aftermath, Lewis states, the city deserted the Lower Ninth Ward; yet, this is not is not unequivocally negative, because “that’s what we have been doing since we’ve been a community.”⁴⁰⁷ In this sense, Lewis refigures the community’s isolation as autonomy and as a central factor in its independence and its resilience. Newcomers to the area also characterize this isolation in positive terms. As the librarian of the Lower Ninth Ward New Orleans Public Library branch describes, “For me [the isolation] is one of the things I like. I get the best of both worlds. It’s almost like urban living but living in the country... it’s far enough away to be separated from the French Quarter and a lot of the noise of the city.”⁴⁰⁸

In reference to the hard-won fight to re-open the MLK Charter School, interviewees almost universally pointed to this campaign as one of the main factors encouraging the return and rebirth of the community. Lewis describes the movement as a “bloody battle” and stated that

⁴⁰⁵ Interview with Ronald Lewis, June 2, 2010, transcript on file with author.

⁴⁰⁶ Interview with Jacquelyn Hughes Mooney, July 10, 2010, transcript on file with author.

⁴⁰⁷ Interview with Interview with Ronald Lewis, June 2, 2010, transcript on file with author.

⁴⁰⁸ Interview with Linda Gieslic, June 17, 2010, transcript on file with author.

the school constitutes a “beacon light of hope” within the Lower Ninth Ward community. When asked if she felt that the re-opening of the school played a role in re-establishing the community, one teacher at MLK stated that the school helps to provide a safe haven for the children “where they know people will care for them, at least for six hours out of the day.”⁴⁰⁹ Shantell Victor, a young mother who moved into the community from the Seventh Ward after Katrina, indicates that “it’s a great school and it’s bringing people back home,” and that, in terms of her adopted community, “you can basically say it’s home now.”⁴¹⁰

As for outsider perspectives, one respondent affiliated with the school who lived in New Orleans East when Katrina hit indicated that the school did *not* play a role in the return of the community because, in terms of sheer numbers, “I don’t see the community rebounding.” She also states that when she looks out at the neighborhoods surrounding the school she sees “Hopelessness... nothing. You see some nice houses around here.... but I think it’s a waste.... You have three houses on the block, and you have twenty with nothing... it looks worse than a battle zone.”⁴¹¹ Although this perspective is clearly in the minority, it reflects a broader critique of the sluggish pace of recovery efforts, as well strikes at an underlying chord of futility that other interviewees expressed. Despite her optimistic outlook, Hughes Mooney describes the harsh reality of a community lost: “I [had] wanted to get the concrete slab that was our steps, because that’s all that was left for us, but even that was gone. Everything is gone. There is nothing.”⁴¹²

For his part, Calhoun feels that the school constitutes one of the most significant sites of cultural connection within the community, the other two being family and church. He also links the re-establishment of educational infrastructure to the area’s rebirth as a whole: “If you don’t

⁴⁰⁹ Interview with K.G.T., May 14, 2010, transcript on file with author.

⁴¹⁰ Interview with Shantell Victor, June 17, 2010, transcript on file with author.

⁴¹¹ Interview with anonymous respondent #2, May 14, 2010, transcript on file with author.

⁴¹² Interview with Jacquelyn Hughes Mooney, July 10, 2010, transcript on file with author.

take the time to put schools back then no economic development will ever happen. People will not come live in this area without schools.”⁴¹³ The belief that schools are the center of community restoration led Calhoun’s Lower 9 School Development Group to vigorously campaign for the construction of a high school on the site where Lawless Elementary-High School formerly stood.⁴¹⁴ As former Director of Board Development at the MLK Charter School unambiguously states, “The school was the most important part of the community for residents.”⁴¹⁵ See Figure 12, an informal memorial with inscriptions displayed at the school’s fifth-year Katrina commemoration ceremony, for an indication of the role that the school continues to play in the recovery of the community.

⁴¹³ Interview with Reverend Willie Calhoun, June 17, 2010, transcript on file with author.

⁴¹⁴ The Lower 9 School Development Group, “What is L9SDG?” January 16, 2010. <http://l9sdg.blogspot.com/> (Accessed June 2, 2010).

⁴¹⁵ Interview with Steven Martin, April 6, 2009, transcript on file with author.

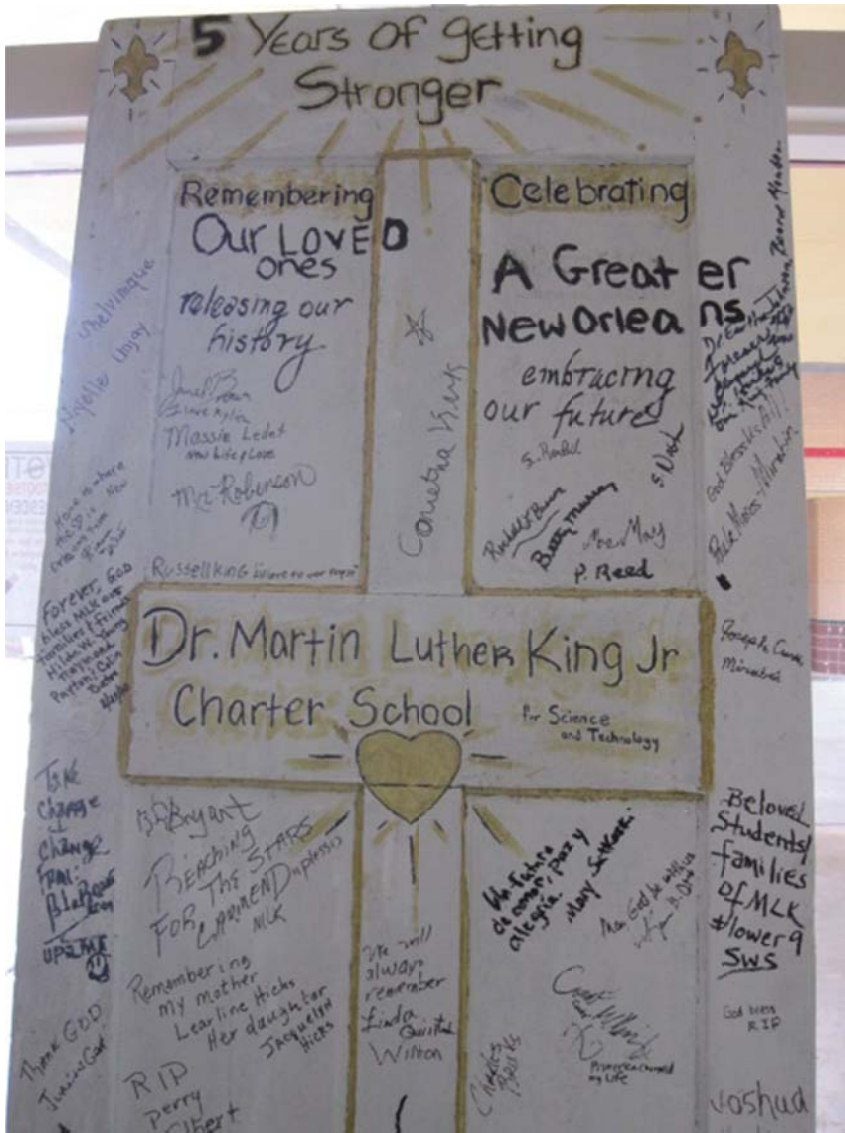


Fig. 12

The Dr. Martin Luther King Charter School's Memorial; 5 Year Anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. Photo by Alexandra Giancarlo.

6. Conclusions and Beyond

“We knew when Katrina was born, but when is she going to die? Because we are still dying from the stress of her. She is still going strong. Look around, north of Claiborne to Florida Avenue—she is still there. It is breathtaking... I would like the world to tour north of Claiborne to Florida Avenue and see we are looking at Katrina every day.”⁴¹⁶

As I sat on the front stoop of a house obliterated by Hurricane Katrina along the Mississippi Gulf Coast in February of 2006, I already had an inkling that the storm had irrevocably changed how the country and the world saw the dynamics of wealth, poverty, and race in the southern United States. I felt a similar stirring of awareness within myself. Katrina emerged as centripetal, but most profoundly a divisive, force of nature and humans, the aftermath of which is not yet close to being contained.

“What is the story that the Lower Ninth Ward tells itself?” I had started this project with a vague understanding of what the community “means” to its returned and still-displaced residents, but what emerged was far more complex and compelling than I had imagined. I am not the first, and certainly not the last, to be fascinated by this community that had been held up as model of what was “wrong” with how the nation dealt with its disenfranchised and marginalized populations. In the course of my two years of research I was surprised to hear more about what was “right” within this working-class community—influenced in part, I am sure, by the rosy nature of hindsight, but more so by a desire to counter stereotypes that had plagued the area since its inception.

It is easy to see how, aside from the definitive experience of Katrina, this community could be left out of the conventional retellings of New Orleans’ history, given its disempowered minority population living in an undesirable environment and recent reputation for crime, violence, and blight. It is my hope that this study has shown the Lower Ninth Ward in a more complex light, one

⁴¹⁶ Valeria Schexnayder, 5th Year Katrina Anniversary Commemoration Celebration, the Lower Ninth Ward, August 29, 2010.

that acknowledges its history and “story” as important and relevant. This follows in the footsteps of geographers and anthropologists who have sought to demonstrate that, while it is a truism that history is written by the victors, non-traditional or alternative histories of marginalized groups also deserve a place in academic scholarship.

Upon reflection on my methodologies, I am confident that my mixed methods approach of archival research, interviewing, and volunteering has yielded a well-rounded picture of what it was like to live in the Lower Ninth Ward before Katrina, and what role collective memories have had in facilitating the community’s post-Katrina resistance activities. I feel my final analysis would have been lacking had I taken an exclusively quantitative or qualitative approach; statistics can assist in quantifying a perceived phenomenon (such as home ownership rates over time) but only through engaging with those purportedly affected by this phenomenon can we judge its relative importance. If I had relied solely on interviews, I would have misjudged the *statistical* significance of the home ownership phenomenon, since some interviewees placed it in the range of 70 percent, well above that documented by the census takers. But by taking this high estimate and placing it in the historic context of African American economic dislocation and outright exclusion from property ownership, it is easy to understand the emotional or symbolic dimensions of these seemingly-exaggerated statistics.

Katrina destroyed the isolation that had been both a blessing and a curse to the community, splashing its most horrifying and intimate moments across television screens and newspaper headlines. Concomitant to the community’s newfound infamy was an onslaught of well-meaning volunteers and volunteer organizations that dramatically altered the fabric of the community. In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, Common Ground Relief rose to the fore in both the school’s re-opening campaign and initial activist efforts to allow citizens to return to view their damaged

properties.⁴¹⁷ Neighborhood activists also took note of a dizzying (and at times overlapping) array of volunteer groups. Five years since Katrina, a core cadre of organizations remains, such as the Lower 9th Ward Neighborhood Empowerment Network Association (NENA), the Lower 9th Ward Village, Common Ground Relief, and Make it Right. From this initial efflorescence new groups have coalesced to fill emerging needs, such as the Lower 9 School Development Group, a collective of grassroots organizations committed to the goal of “Community Restoration Through Education.”⁴¹⁸ Another lasting arrangement has been the partnership between universities and community leaders, such as the ongoing commitment of the University of Wisconsin-Madison students and faculty to wetland restoration and conservation in the Lower Ninth Ward. In fact, my first in-depth interactions with community members came through volunteering as a part of a service-learning class at LSU.

This thesis has used the concepts of place attachment and social memory (among others) to demonstrate that a proud historical culture of resistance existed within the community, one that propels it forward in a post-Katrina context while simultaneously keeping an eye towards past injustices. From the early creation of social aid and pleasure clubs and the emergence of the Mardi Gras Indians and second-line parade traditions, to the later movements to desegregate the school system and to halt the expansion of the Industrial Canal lock within the community, the campaign to re-open the Dr. Martin Luther King Charter School post-Katrina emerges as the latest effort in a long history of activism and refusal to concede to outside forces. I posit that this campaign was informed by the social memory of the Ninth Ward’s earlier struggles; it also exemplifies the nature of place attachment within the community. Upon close examination of the community, trans-historical patterns of activism emerge. For instance, Ronald Lewis, curator of The House of Dance

⁴¹⁷ Sakura Kone’, interviewed by Alexandra Giancarlo, March 30, 2009, transcript on file with author.

⁴¹⁸ “Lower 9 School Development Group,” Online blog of the Lower 9 School Development Group. <http://l9sdg.blogspot.com/>, (accessed Feb. 6, 2010).

and Feathers, helped to organize the city's transit workers' union in the 1970s as well as spearheaded social aid and pleasure club school supply giveaways.⁴¹⁹ This study has shown that by taking a long view of the Lower Ninth Ward's resistance struggles, we can complicate post-Katrina narratives that portrayed the community solely in terms of victimization.

Although the future of the school is not yet written, my research has led me to conclude that the re-opening of the school did play a prominent role in encouraging the return of the community, providing a sense of morale and cohesiveness that displaced residents desperately needed. However, given that many of the students are currently bussed in from other neighborhoods, and that some Ninth Ward children cannot attend MLK due to capacity constraints, it is clear that a full school does not necessarily guarantee the full return of the community; other factors, such as housing and employment constraints and a vastly transformed educational landscape, must be considered.

As in the residents of Louisiana's ecologically fragile coastal parishes, Lower Ninth Ward residents and the community's diaspora carry their attachment to place as part of their identity.⁴²⁰ For some survivors, for every year that passes since Katrina hope of a return dwindles. However, as one of the speakers at the 5th-year Katrina commemoration stated, "When they said I couldn't come back...it made me more determined to ... so they don't eliminate my part of the city."⁴²¹ The title of the program for the day's events called upon a similar mantra: "Bravery, Strength, Resilience, This is the Lower Nine." When asked about how the storm had affected the social and cultural aspects of the community, Ronald Lewis responded, "Katrina really made us miss what we took for granted," yet he spoke optimistically of the broader context of recovery: "Times are changing, people have

⁴¹⁹ Interview with Ronald Lewis, June 2, 2010, transcript on file with author.

⁴²⁰ David Burley, Pam Jenkins, Shirley Laska et al. "Place Attachment and Environmental Change in Coastal Louisiana," *Organization and Environment* 20 (2007): 356.

⁴²¹ Valeria Schexnayder, 5th Year Katrina Anniversary Commemoration Celebration, the Lower Ninth Ward, August 29, 2010.

new attitudes, and we [are] going to be [a] really great city in the future. It was a great city in the past but it's going to be a greater city in the future."⁴²²

These conclusions also have implications beyond the scope of this study, illustrating community resiliency in the face of natural and human-induced disasters. The Lower Ninth Warders' resistance tactics and their usage of historical narratives of struggle lent a sense of urgency and a sense of specificity to the post-Katrina campaign. However, in a sense the community's struggle is not a singular event—it is a microcosm of larger processes of resilience and resistance to disruptive events that other minority communities face. Just as the world watched as Katrina devastated one of the nation's greatest cities, so too can other neighborhoods and communities threatened by natural disasters, urban renewal, or other large-scale disruptions look to the Lower Ninth Ward as it continues its recovery process.

⁴²² Interview with Ronald Lewis, June 2, 2010, transcript on file with author.

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Appendix A: Interview Guideline Questions

- How long have you lived in the Lower Ninth Ward?
 - If it is not your place of residence or birth, what other way did you become involved in the community?
- Could you describe the cultural and social connections in your community before Hurricane Katrina?
- Did you attend public school in New Orleans? (or, perhaps, in the Ninth Ward specifically?)
 - If so, how do you look upon this experience?
 - In hindsight, were you pleased with the quality of the education you received?
- Do you remember the de-segregation of the school district?
 - If so, could you describe this experience?
- Were you displaced after Hurricane Katrina?
- If you have children, did they attend school while you were displaced?
 - Could you describe your children's experiences at their new school?
 - How did these differ from their school in New Orleans?
- Were you at all involved in the campaign to re-open the Dr. Martin Luther King Charter School?
- If so, how did the sentiment to re-open the school arise?
- Do you recall what steps were taken in the early days to re-open the school?
- Do you recall why MLK was chosen from among other schools in the area to be the focus of the movement?
- Could you describe your role in the campaign?
 - How did those who were part of the campaign meet, delegate duties, and contact the displaced faculty and students?
- What challenges did the campaign face, and how was it ultimately successful?
- In your opinion, what role did the campaign to re-open the school play in re-establishing a sense of community in the Ninth Ward?
 - Do you think it encouraged displaced students to return? If so, how?

- What other institutions have been important in encouraging the return and the renewal of the community?
- What does this community mean to you? (in what ways is it important?)
- Do you recall any other activist campaigns in the Lower Ninth Ward community? If so, please describe.

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

My name is Alexandra Giancarlo and I am an LSU Geography student undertaking this research project in completion of my Masters degree. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of my thesis on the recovery, return, and rebuilding of New Orleans. I appreciate your participation in this project because it will help gain an understanding of the rich social and cultural history of the city of New Orleans and of the city's Lower Ninth Ward in particular. The questions I will ask you are intended to aid in my understanding of the campaign to re-open the Dr. Martin Luther King Charter School as well as more general rebuilding and re-population concerns within the Ninth Ward community.

This research project has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Louisiana State University. We anticipate that each interview will take approximately 1-1 ½ hours. I do not have funds to pay you for the interview. However, you can receive a copy of the transcribed interview and copies of subsequent publications based on your interview.

We are required by state and federal regulations to explain the possible risks that you may incur by participating in this project. We do not anticipate that the interview will cause any physical risks, but it is possible that recalling sensitive or divisive issues, if there were any, may result in temporary discomfort for some people.

As part of the interview process we will be asking you to sign a release form. It states your agreement to participate in the interview; this will be signed off at the informational meeting in which the process is explained to you. The form will provide you with an opportunity to keep your identity anonymous or some of your comments confidential.

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from participation at any time. Once this project is completed, we will be glad to discuss the interview process with you and to identify areas we can strengthen. In the meantime, if you have any questions or concerns about participants' rights, please ask or contact:

Dr. Robert Mathews (225) 578-8692 or irb@lsu.edu

I have received an explanation of the study and agree to participate. I understand that my participation in this study is strictly voluntary.

Name Printed

Signature

Date

I would like my name to be used: Yes No

I would like only my initials to be used: Yes No

I would like to be known by a pseudonym: Yes No

Name Printed

Signature

Date

Mailing Address:

Phone Number:

Email:

Vita

Alexandra Louise Giancarlo was born on December 17, 1984, in Sarnia, Ontario, Canada. She attended St. Helen's Elementary School and graduated from St. Christopher Secondary School with academic honors. She also graduated with honors from the University of Guelph in Guelph, Ontario, with a bachelor's degree in international development (major) and history (minor) in 2008. While attending the University of Guelph, Giancarlo volunteered mentoring international students, worked as a Residence Assistant, and served on numerous student organization boards, including the International Development Society. She lived in Guatemala for a semester abroad program in 2005.

After volunteering along the Mississippi Gulf Coast in 2006 to help with post-Katrina reconstruction efforts, Giancarlo became inspired to pursue graduate studies in Louisiana. She was accepted into the graduate program in LSU's Department of Geography and Anthropology in January 2009 with an Evelyn Pruitt Assistantship. Giancarlo's academic work experience includes a research assistant position with the History Department at the University of Guelph and two research assistant positions at LSU: one with Dr. Craig Colten, and one with the Coastal Sustainability Studio.

Highlights of her academic achievements include being named a finalist in the paper competition at the Southwestern Association of American Geographers 2009 conference as well as receiving the 2010 Ralph Brown Award for the best master's-level paper from the Association of American Geographers' Historical Geography Specialty Group. Her first publication, a collaboration with Dr. Colten entitled "Losing Resilience on the Gulf Coast: Hurricanes and Social Memory," will appear in *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development* in 2011.