



Rethinking Disaster Recovery

A Hurricane Katrina Retrospective



Edited by JEANNIE HAUBERT

Chapter Thirteen

Learning from Disaster

Post-Katrina New Orleans as a Sociological Classroom

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Ten years after Katrina, the recovery of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast is popularly understood as slow and incomplete. In an attempt to understand persistent inequalities in post-Katrina New Orleans, and to hopefully contribute to the city's ongoing rebuilding efforts, I took my class of students from Mount Royal University in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, to New Orleans in May 2013 to learn about both Hurricane Katrina and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill disaster. The course focused specifically on recovery efforts and incorporated a service-learning as its main pedagogical approach.

The initiative also had a secondary motivation though; I am a former New Orleanian who experienced Hurricane Katrina. As a graduate student at Tulane University in 2005, the institutional dislocation wrought by Katrina scattered my colleagues and I to far corners of the continent. Yet even today, teaching at a university in Canada, I remain committed to the city's recovery and very much consider myself a New Orleanian (when people ask me where I am from, I say "I live in Calgary; home is New Orleans"). As a former New Orleanian I believe strongly that my teaching can be a tool to aid in the city's recovery. Yet after introducing what I believe is currently the only sociology of disaster course in Canada, I quickly became disillusioned that our classroom conversations seemed so sterile, sanitized, and so far removed from the everyday lived experience in disaster-affected locales such as New Orleans. So, I decided to embark with my class upon what is perhaps the only disaster field course taught within the social sciences. This chapter documents our

experiences, using student reflections, and in doing so, shares some important insights into the recovery of New Orleans nearly a decade after Katrina.

SERVICE-LEARNING IN THE POST-KATRINA CONTEXT

Service-learning is “a form of experiential education where learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection as students work with others through a process of applying what they are learning to community problems and, at the same time, reflecting upon their experience as they seek to achieve real objectives for the community and deeper understanding and skills for themselves” (Eyler and Giles 1999). The literature demonstrates that field courses are one of the most effective ways to achieve such learning outcomes, particularly for environmentally focused content (Alagona and Simon 2010) and in international contexts (Mitussis and Sheehan 2013).

Service-learning connects explicitly to recent calls for social justice-oriented education (Bush and Little 2009) as well as older, more established calls for emancipatory education (Freire [1970] 2007). According to Bush and Little, “connecting our students to the lived experiences of those involved in contemporary social justice activism and social movements is a core task of public sociology” (2009, 13). As such, service-learning explicitly seeks to cultivate social responsibility, embraces the active and participatory student (rather than the passive recipient of knowledge), and welcomes learning through both objectivity and subjectivity (Howard 1998, 25). As Jacoby (2006) argues, we “must enable [students] to develop not just the values and commitment but also the knowledge, skills, and efficacy to address the complex web of social issues that underlie the need for the service they provide” (31).

Service-learning is applied to many contexts including poverty and issues affecting inner-city communities (Webster 2007), international development (Bringle et al. 2011), teacher education (Baise 2002), economics (McGoldrick 1998), and environmental chemistry (Draper 2004), but it has rarely, if ever, been applied to disaster education. Yet, few locations require outside service as much as New Orleans, and the ability of students to immerse themselves in the region’s recovery, I hoped, would help them to develop critical yet scholarly insights into that recovery

OBSERVATIONS OF POST-KATRINA NEW ORLEANS

Heading into this trip, I knew that we would be seeing a city that has not been able to completely rebuild since the flood, but I don’t think I really understood what we would see. Seeing destroyed homes in neighborhood after neighborhood that are still standing, boarded-up, with greenery growing out of the chimney, with roofs caving in, and all of the current construction projects.

Every time we would see these homes I would have to remind myself that it has been eight years. . . . I knew we would see this, but I don't think I really knew. —Student journal entry

Before departing for New Orleans, the class met for several pre-departure logistical meetings, spending approximately twelve hours in the classroom learning about the history and culture of New Orleans, critically examining research findings on Hurricane Katrina and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, learning about environmental justice and coastal erosion issues that affect the region, and finally, discussing some common findings from the disaster social science literature. We also viewed Spike Lee's excellent film "If God Is Willing and 'Da Creek Don't Rise" (Lee 2010), which focuses less on the Katrina disaster and more on the arduous and politically charged task of rebuilding a city so devastated by disaster. Students also completed a pre-departure paper asking them to discuss their expectations of the experience in the context of their readings in other courses. This approach forced students to use their existing academic knowledge base in order to develop their expectations. While on the ground, students completed daily journaling activities reflecting upon their experiences. Those journaling activities resulted in a final paper which students submitted after their return home. That final paper asked students to connect theories and concepts from other courses to what they experienced while on the ground in New Orleans. It required them to focus on five areas in which they learned lessons about: 1) The overall experience; 2) Social inequalities; 3) New Orleans and the Gulf Coast; 4) Disaster; and 5) Service-Learning. The reflections used below are drawn from two main sources: 1) Student journals written for the purpose of the course and 2) Student final papers. The use of student writing is done with consent of the students and with ethics board approval. All data are treated in a confidential fashion.

UNEQUAL GEOGRAPHIES

The first day of the field course commenced with a driving tour of New Orleans and southeastern Louisiana. The driving tour took students to Uptown/Garden District, Lower Ninth Ward (including the "Brad Pitt Village," of new homes constructed by the Make It Right Foundation), the 17th Street Canal levee breach (the largest levee breach, responsible for flooding much of the city), the Mississippi River levee, Lake Ponchartrain, and a pumping station. Upon leaving the city, we drove across the Lake Ponchartrain Causeway to St. Tammany Parish, visited the wetlands near Manchac, Louisiana, and the Bonnet Carre Spillway. These visits helped students to appreciate the monumental feat of engineering that it takes to keep a city dry that largely sits below sea level.

After seeing the Central Business District, French Quarter, Magazine Street, and St. Charles Avenue, some students remarked that the city did not look as bad as they had expected (i.e., there were no apparent signs of hurricane or flood damage). Yet as we drove through heavily damaged parts of eastern New Orleans, including St. Roch and the Lower Ninth Ward, the tone changed noticeably. Quietness and a sense of disbelief filled our vehicle as the group took in the myriad flooded and abandoned houses, foundations long missing a home, and derelict cars not touched since 2005. The stark contrast between the ante-bellum mansions and boutiques of uptown and the languishing remains of the Lower Ninth Ward were clearly puzzling to a group from a place lacking these severe inequalities.

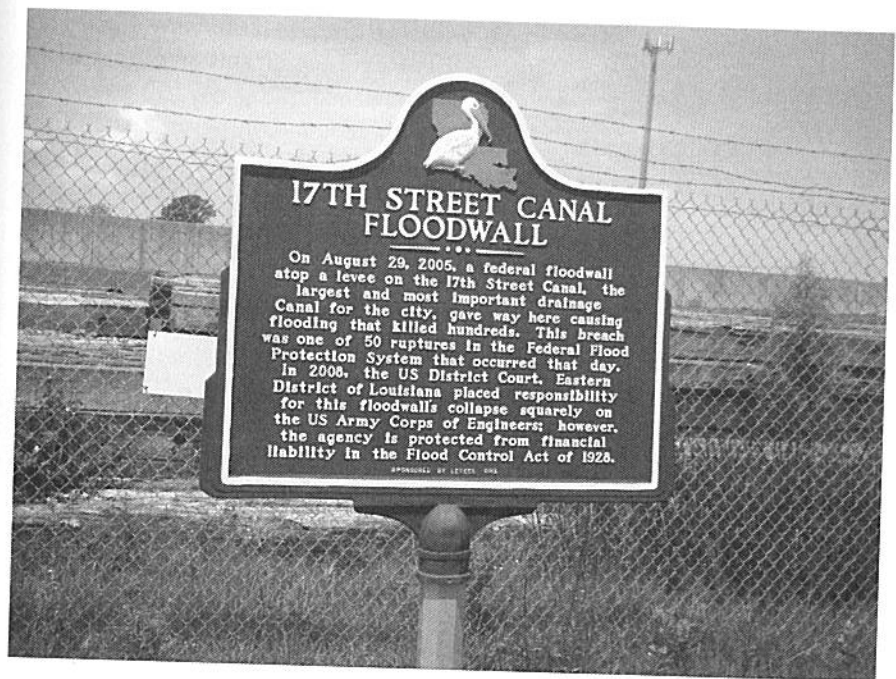
Relatedly, my students noticed the unique residential development patterns of the city. One student commented that “there was a very obvious physical division between spaces occupied by different classes. . . . Generally in cities one can see a gradual change in landscape, driving over blocks things start to shift but I have never seen such a drastic, immediate change.” Other students noticed the unevenness with regard to those neighborhoods affected by flooding (i.e., the Lower Ninth Ward) and those neighborhoods untouched by flooding (i.e., the Garden District). One student remarked that it was striking “In certain neighbourhoods [i.e., Uptown] . . . people could choose to ignore what happened” because such neighborhoods were nearly untouched by Katrina. This unevenness connects to pre-disaster differences in both economic and social capital (Elliott et al. 2010) and has lasted well beyond the initial recovery, making New Orleans today a whiter, older, and higher-income city than it was pre-Katrina, as younger, African American, and lower-income residents were disproportionately unable to return (Groen and Polivka 2020). In other words, though New Orleans neighborhoods demonstrated high levels of economic inequality, a product of strict racial segregation and political neglect, Katrina further exacerbated these preexisting inequalities. More broadly, students were intrigued by the residential development patterns, whereby wealthier neighborhoods occupied higher, less vulnerable land (see Campanella 2002). Another student remarked that “In essence, property size and the neighbourhood in which a house was located in New Orleans was a true indication of the social class which they belonged to. My perception of inequality was challenged, [in discovering] the importance that was associated to the [elevation] of a neighbourhood.”

Students were particularly struck by the engineering required to keep New Orleans dry (see Colten 2006). After visiting the Lower Ninth Ward, the 17th Street Canal levee breach, a pumping station, and the Mississippi River levee, most felt a sense of disbelief in the continued inadequacy of the flood protection system. One student felt that “Even though [the levees are] quite high, the levees don’t seem as imposing as I was expecting them to. I think the width [of the floodwalls on the canals] makes them seem . . . less

[imposing]. . . . The walls in New Orleans did not inspire . . . faith from me.” Another commented “I have little faith partly because it was reconstructed by the same Army Corps of Engineers who failed in their earlier construction.” These concerns echo local residents’ continuing worries that the flood protection system may not withstand future hurricanes (Lam et al. 2012).

PACE OF RECOVERY

Perhaps most notably, my class was struck by the slow pace of recovery in neighborhoods such as the Lower Ninth Ward (see Chamlee-Wright and Storr 2009; Finch, Emrich, and Cutter 2010). Research indicates that this pace was slowed considerably by the privatization of recovery programs, which systematically advantaged wealthier households while denying assistance to lower-income households (Adams 2013). As Gotham and Greenberg (2014) note, the Louisiana Recovery Authority (LRA) (modeled after the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation in New York) handled much post-Katrina assistance, and entrusted the private sector with distributing the funding. LRA’s contracted firm, ICF International, “incorrectly calculated



May 2013—17th Street Canal in New Orleans. Photo by volume contributor Timothy J. Haney.

grant awards, [used] bogus calculations to appraise pre-storm home values, [demonstrated] slow progress in awarding grants to needy homeowners, [mismanaged] a program to help mom-and-pop landlords repair damaged rentals, and [utilized] demeaning antifraud rules that required applicants to be fingerprinted before they received funds.”

In this privatized relief system, some might say that New Orleanians fell through the cracks. However, as Adams (2013, 121) says, that analogy “is a handy way of making it seem as if the system works for almost everyone and that those whom it did not work for are either the minority who *found* the cracks in the system or were themselves to blame because they *fell through* the cracks instead of avoiding them.” The end result of these delays, of course, is the nearly complete inability for residents of New Orleans’s poorer neighborhoods to return and rebuild. This inability continues to manifest itself visually if one visits neighborhoods such as the Lower Ninth Ward. One of my students remarked that “Driving through the Lower Ninth Ward, it was absolutely amazing to see all of the empty lots and so many houses that are still so dilapidated. I found myself noticing all of the current con-



May 2013—Dilapidated housing in the Ninth Ward. Photo by volume contributor Timothy J. Haney.

struction projects happening and realizing this is a sight we should have seen eight months post-disaster, not eight years!”

DISASTER TOURISM

We worried that driving through the Lower Ninth Ward and other devastated neighborhoods in our van, clearly labeled “Big Easy Limos” may mark us as disaster tourists. As Recuber (2013) points out, disaster can be pornographic in the sense that viewing the pain and anguish of others can result in pleasure for the viewer (evidenced by films such as “Twister” and TV series such as “It Could Happen Tomorrow”). This is a particularly sensitive issue in New Orleans with the recent popularity of “devastation tours” (Pezzullo 2009), whereby companies offer bus tours through devastated neighborhoods, often drawing the ire of residents who wish to retain privacy. One viral post-Katrina image featured a sign in front of a devastated house that read “Tourists—shame on you. Paying to see my pain. 1,600+ died here.” Even nearly a decade later, these images created a feeling of uneasiness as we toured the city; we hoped that our purpose was nobler—to learn primarily by serving the city—but would locals realize that? Many of the students commented about this tension, with remarks such as “Even a week and a half into this trip I worry that we are upsetting people, driving around in our New Orleans Limos bus looking as touristy as humanly possible.” Yet I was reassured that our group considered this possibility and I suspect that many traditional tourists do not consider the ways in which these tours may objectify local residents. At the very least, we seemed more reflexive than run-of-the-mill tourists; perhaps a testament to my ability, as a former New Orleansian, to appropriately prime them.

To understand the New Orleans that most tourists see, the class spent a great deal of time wandering the French Quarter. We also embarked on a swamp tour and a dinner jazz cruise, common activities for tourists visiting the region. On the dinner cruise, one student considered the differential relationships that tourists and locals maintain with nearby bodies of water, commenting that:

It was being on the river that also got me thinking about the dynamics of the river itself. The people of New Orleans and North America depend on this river for imports, transportation, livelihood, and a source of food, and at the same time, it is something that creates so much fear in people at the thought of a hurricane coming. Yet there we were [on the dinner jazz cruise] using this river for our *entertainment*. (emphasis added)

Students felt as though this tension between water as a source of entertainment and as a potential threat was something not usually considered by

visitors to the area. After seeing other parts of the city, however, students were quick to “realize that what most tourists see is not . . . the reality of New Orleans. They only see one side.” This observation connects directly to arguments by local researchers that “political and economic elites and powerful organizations model disasters as a form of amusement where tragic events are abstracted from the reality of human loss and suffering, and transformed into images that viewers passively consume” (Gotham 2007, 95). Yet as Gotham (2007) also points out, the spectacle of Hurricane Katrina also cannot help but reveal important contradictions related to the U.S. government’s failure to properly handle the initial response or long-term recovery. In that sense, tourism both shelters visitors from the material disparities in post-Katrina New Orleans (by providing a standardized, sanitized, commercialized experience typified by the French Quarter) while also almost necessarily revealing these political and economic inequalities to many visitors. Still, the remainder of our experiences in New Orleans sought to specifically highlight the parts of New Orleans and disaster recovery that most tourists do not see.

UNDERSTANDING KATRINA’S LIVED EXPERIENCE

As a former New Orleanian, I worried that my class, having not experienced Katrina firsthand, would view their visit as solely an academic exercise instead of a profound human tragedy with lingering consequences. After all, the literature suggests that to *understand* disaster, one must also *experience* disaster. Erikson’s (1976, 11) classic book *Everything in Its Path* documents how he, as an outsider, struggled to comprehend what a flood-affected community had experienced. He wrote that the people of Buffalo Creek, West Virginia (following a devastating flood) were “so wounded in spirit that they almost constituted a different culture, as though the language we shared in common was simply not sufficient to overcome the enormous gap in experience that separated us.” More recently, Marks (2008) wrote in the context of Hurricane Katrina that, “It was clear to me that words, no matter how descriptive or genuinely expressed, were not sufficient to ‘tell the story.’ They were like a small two-dimensional photograph or post-card of the Grand Canyon which can never convey the majesty and full ambiance of that place” (14). Therefore, although it is possible to read research on disaster recovery (i.e., Vale and Campanella 2005; Pais and Elliott 2008; Aldrich 2012) and this work is valuable to our understanding, the richest learning experiences will logically take place on the ground, amidst the recovery, thus providing students with firsthand experience.

Although my students were outsiders to the region who had learned about Katrina only through the literature and media, being on the ground in New

Orleans helped them to immediately notice the severity and immediacy of the storm's lived experience. Students discussed new perspectives on common arguments they had heard about Katrina, particularly discourses that blame local residents for not evacuating in advance of the storm. Although research demonstrates how lower-income individuals struggled to evacuate from Hurricane Katrina as it approached (Haney et al. 2007; Litt 2008), working and spending time in the Lower Ninth Ward helped students to appreciate why that may have been the case. According to one student, "Feeling the isolation of being in the Lower Ninth Ward, it became really clear how hard it would be to go anywhere without resources. Before the storm, where would you go and how would you get there? If you didn't own a vehicle and no one in your social network was able to help you with a ride, it would be difficult [to evacuate]." As a neighborhood nearly surrounded by water (the Lower Ninth Ward and its neighbor, Holy Cross, are bordered on three sides by the Industrial Canal, the Mississippi River, and the Intracoastal Waterway), the isolation and marginalization experienced by residents of this neighborhood must be felt firsthand and likely cannot be fully understood by simply reading accounts of the neighborhood's history (i.e., Landphair 1999).

Students also felt as though the experience helped them to understand the emotionality and enormity of these catastrophic events such as Katrina, in ways that textbooks never could. As the student remarked earlier in the chapter ("I knew we would see this, but I don't think I really knew"), there is an epistemic chasm between *knowing* and *understanding* that feminist researchers have pointed out for decades (see Smith 1987). One can have knowledge about a phenomenon in a detached, purportedly objective way, but truly understanding that phenomenon in a way that connects directly to emotion and human experience is a very distinct process; although students knew empirically, even before their arrival, that the disaster recovery in New Orleans had been slow, it took visiting the region to fully understand the lived experience of this slow and unequal recovery.

Students also noticed "just how much [Katrina brought] people together. Yes it [caused] major damage, hurt and pain, but the one good thing that can come out of it is the amount of love and support" that it fostered. Despite their dismay at the slow recovery, students were also pleasantly surprised by the resilience of the people and local culture, despite both recent disasters and despite many everyday pressing social problems. In particular, one student said "I think there was an expectation of there being a sort of sadness or anger among the people but that was just completely wrong." They noticed a level of engagement in local issues quite atypical in other cities, with one student remarking that "overall, the city seems to have a level of civic engagement that I have never seen before." Echoing common sentiments in the literature, that disasters uncover existing social dynamics that were previous-

ly concealed (Tierney 2007), a student concluded that “I have learned that times of disaster tend to unveil and magnify social problems lurking just beneath the surface of everyday life.”

Our second and third days were largely occupied by a lecture series (that we helped to organize), hosted by Xavier University of Louisiana, a historically black college heavily damaged by Hurricane Katrina. The series brought in six of the leading disaster researchers in North America to speak about various aspects of Hurricane Katrina or the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. For the students, hearing the speakers discuss issues such as disaster-induced migration, ethnographic research in a devastated middle-class black neighborhood, and the patriarchal practices of relief organizations, helped them to understand many of the issues facing post-Katrina New Orleans. Perhaps most importantly, as all of the speakers had ties to New Orleans, it helped them realize the emotionality involved in conducting research on one’s city following such devastation as well as the difficulties in conducting research both *on* and *in* a disaster recovery (see Haney and Elliott 2013).

Our group was privileged to welcome a number of guest speakers, including Farrah Gafford Cambrice of Xavier University. Her talk was particularly useful for understanding how difficult it is to both do research on and to live within post-Katrina New Orleans. At one point during her talk, for instance, she broke out into tears. In discussing how she considered dropping her Katrina research, but ultimately came back to the work, she remarked powerfully that “I’m back with Katrina—we didn’t break up for very long” (Gafford 2013a; see also Gafford 2013b). This speaker (and all of the speakers) conveyed enormous love for the city that our group came to appreciate. As one student pointed out, “[Dr. Gafford] ignited my sociological passions and reminded me of the reasons why I love sociology in the first place.” In scanning the audience, many of the students began to cry, as did I. These signs of emotion felt oddly out of place in an academic setting. As Barber (2007) argues, emotions are carefully managed in academic environments, so much so that it is difficult to perform academic and disaster survivor at the same time. Beyond that, the emotionality of the event revealed that the “recovery” in New Orleans is a thin veneer, residing directly atop lingering trauma (Oltenu et al. 2011) and a continued disruption of daily patterns and routines which residents find emotionally troubling (Hawkins and Maurer 2011) but that visitors may not fully understand.

These sentiments were echoed in my students’ papers, with one student commenting that living through a disaster in your city “makes being objective and unattached to the research more difficult.” This student comment echoes Haney and Barber (2013), who argue that researchers who are themselves affected by a disaster live a “double consciousness” while trying to cope with the disaster and also meet the expectations of colleagues, reviewers, and journal editors—individuals who quite often did not experience the

disaster firsthand yet demand detached objectivity. We learned that so many scholars in New Orleans struggle to be the detached observers that their profession often demands while, at the same time, viewing the continuing struggles of their neighbors, coworkers, and friends.

The group was also struck by the ways in which Katrina, even a decade later, continues to permeate the consciousness of local residents, the news media, and political climate, with one student remarking that “I was unprepared for the extent to which New Orleanians incorporated Katrina into their understanding of their lives.” All of these observations about the lived experience of post-Katrina New Orleans are observations that can only be gleaned from firsthand, on-the-ground experience and are much harder to grasp without immersion in the city.

LINGERING EFFECTS OF THE DEEPWATER HORIZON OIL SPILL

The field course also involved a day-trip to Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana, a region of the state affected by Hurricane Katrina (2005), the Deepwater Horizon oil spill (2010), and Hurricane Isaac (2012). While we were visiting Plaquemines Parish, we listened to guest lectures from several local people. One of the local families even invited us into their home to talk about the oil spill. People we spoke with discussed the worsening health effects of the oil spill, which included children with breathing problems, rashes, and cancers—potentially related to either the oil spill or the use of chemical dispersants such as Corexit (see Anderson et al. 2011). Hearing about these health effects, while meeting the very same people experiencing them, proved emotionally very powerful for the group. Families in the area discussed wanting to leave, but not being able to sell their homes. At the same time, their usual livelihoods (fishing, shrimping, etc.) were becoming harder and harder as fish populations were in steep decline (though for some, such as shrimpers, the decline started even before Katrina due to a “pink tsunami” of cheap farmed shrimp from Asia that depressed world prices—see Harrison 2012).

Local people said many interesting things such as referring to their region as a “sacrifice zone,” or a region in which the health of local people and environmental sustainability are sacrificed for profit or economic growth (see Lerner 2010). They also argued powerfully that the region is not recovering from an oil spill, but still living in an oil spill. Some locals even referred to the “accidental activism” in which they are forced to engage. In other words, although an individual may not conceive of themselves as an activist nor want that sort of public role, compelling circumstances often require activism if one is to protect their home, family, or community. Women, in particular, framed their activism in terms of family obligations, engaging in what Bell (2013) calls “activist mothering”—a discursive positioning of one’s activism

primarily in terms of one's responsibility to the family. This type of activism is a particularly effective strategy, as it is difficult for opponents to construct competing discourses that better capture public sympathies. All of these dynamics were quite salient at the time of our visit; only after our visit was BP forced to pay for some of the medical problems associated with the spill and its cleanup (McGill 2014).

Talking about these issues was very traumatic for some members of our group, and perhaps made worse in cases where we discussed them in someone's home and watched their children playing. On the bus ride back to New Orleans, some students wept. One later wrote, "It disrupts me to my core." Another remarked that, "After meeting with [the people of Plaquemines Parish], I was in a pretty dark place. I imagined I would be confronting contradictions in this place, but I never imagined it would be *so* hard. The unfairness of it all is weighing heavily on my mind" (emphasis in original).

Finally, our time in Plaquemines Parish forced my students to question the quality of media coverage they receive. We know that media coverage of disasters tends to be ephemeral and tends to focus on spectacularized imagery, rather than the experiences of everyday people (Gotham 2007), often focusing on images of social disorder rather than grassroots efforts to care for one another (Tierney et al. 2006). Most of the students arrived in southeastern Louisiana with little idea that people in Plaquemines Parish were becoming ill from the oil spill and use of dispersants (despite empirical evidence; see D'Andrea and Reddy 2013). Therefore, the experience made them ask new questions about the ongoing health, financial, and social issues confronted by victims of the oil spill and other disasters such as September 11.

Students ultimately hoped that the people of the region would be successful in their ongoing legal action against BP, but harbored some doubt. One student remarked in her final course paper that "unfortunately [they] may not win, but as Rachel Luft [Luft 2013] alluded in her guest lecture . . . sometimes it's just as important that you fight."

POLITICAL ECONOMY OF KATRINA RECOVERY

For two days during the field course, we partnered with a local non-profit, the Urban Conservancy, on their StayLocal! campaign, focused on helping locally owned businesses thrive in the post-Katrina business climate. The experience helped students appreciate "the importance of supporting the local economy. I definitely plan on shopping more local than I was before within my own city." Another student took a similar lesson away, saying "something like \$0.75 out of every dollar remains in the community. This is incredibly important in this region, because another thing that kept coming up on this trip is the discussion of [Louisiana] basically being a colony rather

than a state. [Brinkley (2006, 32) calls it a “colony rather than a capital”]. Resources and money continually get stripped from the area without anything being reinvested.”

For about the last decade, scholars have written about disaster capitalism, or the tendency for disasters to spawn not only opportunity, but also opportunism. In the most popular iteration of this argument, Klein (2007) finds that political and economic elites maintain plans for neoliberal reforms (privatization, austerity measures, etc.) that may normally be politically unfeasible. Then, when a disaster or crisis strikes, they are able to usher in these changes while locals are otherwise occupied. In the context of hurricanes, Pais and Elliott (2008) examine how elites use disasters to generate income, often through real estate (re)development, a process that pushes lower-income and more socially vulnerable residents into more disaster prone locations. My students noticed some of these opportunistic tendencies in post-Katrina New Orleans; one student reflected that “It would seem that disaster capitalism was responsible for the turnaround in many places in New Orleans and was empowered by the administration; one such example was Freret Street. [A local] on this street explained that one ‘white guy’ had a vision for the entire street and bought up all the property.” Therefore, the experience helped students to better understand the politics and economic inequalities at play during a protracted disaster recovery such as Hurricane Katrina’s.

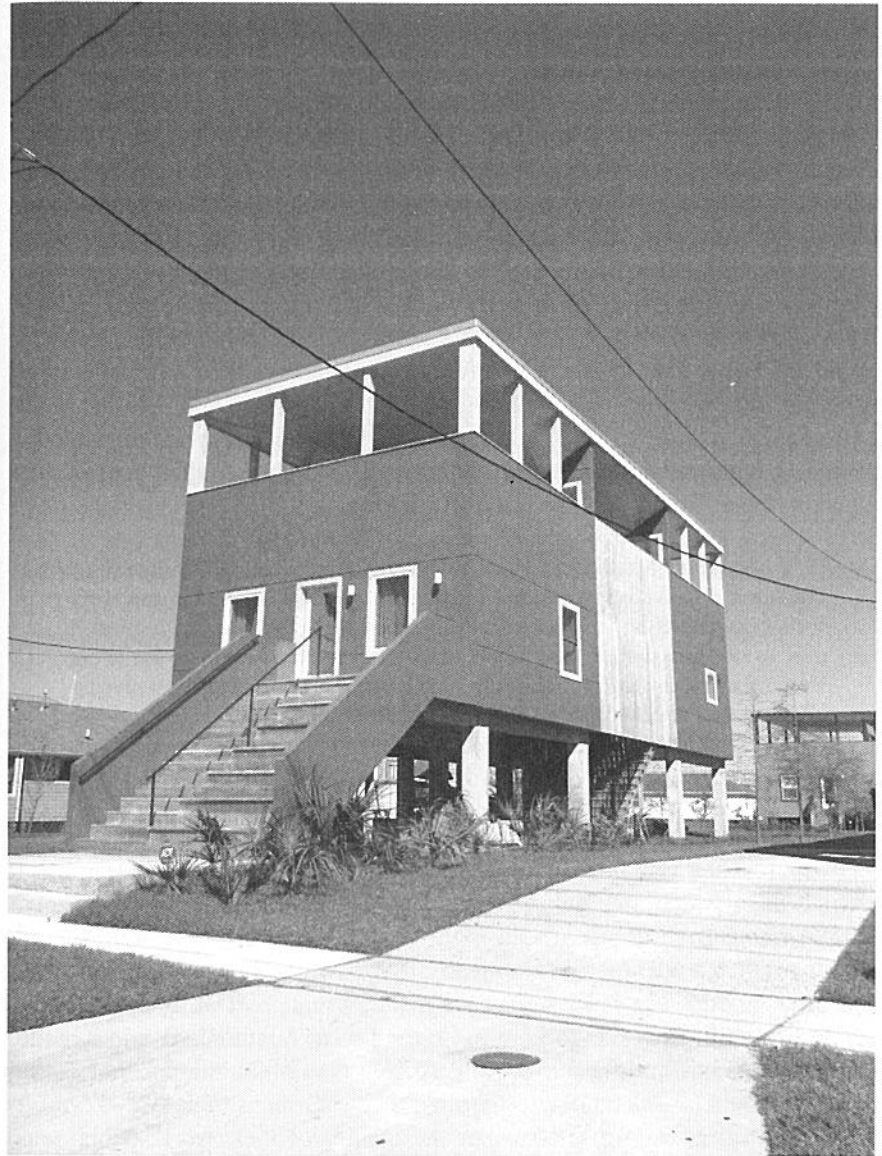
After having been familiarized with Klein’s (2007) work on the political economy of disaster recovery, as well as work by others, many students found the political and demographic changes particularly problematic. Despite not being familiar with New Orleans prior to Katrina, my students seemed to understand and appreciate the processes of gentrification that were occurring, predominantly through the replacement of public housing projects with private housing arrangements (Arena 2012). Through seeing public housing projects turned into posh condominiums, one student remarked “we talked before we left about how things get done after disasters that people have wanted done all along but finally now have a chance to do, but it took going to New Orleans and seeing it to realize how true that is.” Another student noticed the tony, natural-foods supermarkets, and other boutique shops and wondered, “[Are government officials] trying to just replace [displaced black people] with young modern white folks?” This astute observation dovetails with empirical findings that New Orleans’s neighborhoods are recovering unevenly (Elliott et al. 2009) often through aid programs that undervalued homes in predominantly African American neighborhoods, thus preventing many lower-income black residents from returning and rebuilding (Adams 2013, 38–39). Students wondered about the ethics of this post-disaster decision-making process, with one student saying “Decisions like those [closing public housing projects and Charity Hospital] are made immediately

after a disaster because no one is around to fight it or propose other ideas; it is sneaky and immoral, but nonetheless it happens.”

One of our group’s guest speakers was Pamela Jenkins of the University of New Orleans. She led the students in a brilliant philosophical discussion of what exactly constitutes “help” following a disaster (Jenkins 2013). One student remarked that “she said something that had a deep impact: people impose what help is. All these agencies went into New Orleans thinking they knew what was best and never really asked what [New Orelanians] wanted, for example a sense of community.” Following Katrina, international organizations descended upon New Orleans, imposing their vision of the city’s needs without asking locals about how to best rebuild their city (Jenkins 2013; Jenkins, Gremillion, and Nowell 2010, 7–10). One example that often arises is that of Brad Pitt’s “Make It Right Foundation,” which has built approximately eighty homes in the Lower Ninth Ward. Many of these eco-friendly homes utilize space-age architectural designs in a city that prides itself on its history. For instance, “Many residents of the MIR houses have expressed some difficulty in relating to their new house. Some have stated that they would have preferred for their new house to look more like their ‘old’ house. This familiarity bias on the part of returnees presumably is grounded in a wish for things to return to how they were before August 2005” (Verderber 2010), not surprising given the tendency for those affected by disaster to seek a return of their ontological security, or their security of surroundings and familiar routines (Hawkins and Maurer 2011). Further, “while the MIR project undeniably expresses a deeply grounded concern for social re-engagement, it also boldly, and at least equally, operates as a purveyor of a clear-cut top-down—some would say elitist—environmental and esthetic agenda” (Verderber 2010). This failure to ask returning residents about their desires and their envisioned community highlights Jenkins’s (2013) point about top-down “help,” while illuminating to visitors such as ourselves how outside organizations are transforming New Orleans. Responding to these realizations, students expressed surprise that agencies failed to first connect to like-minded local organizations. It also prompted them to consider how they, as outsiders, can best aid in the recovery process.

RECONSTRUCTING THE LOWER NINTH WARD

Following all of the knowledge that we had taken from New Orleans, I felt it important that we give something material and concrete back to the community. As such, I arranged for us to spend a week working with the local chapter of Habitat for Humanity, building a house in the Lower Ninth Ward. Each day that we worked, temperatures hovered around 95°F/35°C, extreme heat for Canadian students accustomed to a very mild summer. During that



May 2013—House from “Brad Pitt Village” stands as an example of newly constructed housing in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans. Photo by volume contributor Timothy J. Haney.

week, students were struck with the level of devastation in the Lower Ninth Ward. As one student noticed, "To stand beside our Habitat house on Tricou [Street] and realize that there had been 12 feet of water submerging the place where I was standing was unreal."

Although students reflect on this experience below, it is worth first mentioning that building the house helped them appreciate the very hard work of disaster recovery. Hurricane Katrina damaged or destroyed an estimated 130,000 homes in New Orleans alone (GNOCDC 2013a). We spent a week of very difficult labor and finished only the siding and painting of one house. This realization helped them see the sheer magnitude of the work that must take place in rebuilding the Lower Ninth Ward, not to mention the greater New Orleans area. It takes billions of dollars and millions of volunteer hours to make a small dent in that work. As one student remarked, "It made all of us realize that we were only building one part of a house, and that this is the type of work it takes to build thousands. . . . [It] would be more difficult for people living anywhere else [to] understand." Another student felt discouraged by the difficulty of the work itself, saying:

I knew it was going to be hard work and it definitely was, especially in the heat and sun and I was happy it ended when it did. Near the end some of us were feeling frustrated and I know personally when I get frustrated with a task I need to step back from it otherwise it will only get worse. However, due to our circumstances, it was a weird idea to want to stop working and almost give up knowing that you are volunteering and building a home for someone. . . . We were very fortunate to be able to help in these efforts but near the end it was taking a toll on me physically.

The students soon realized that disaster recovery is not cheap nor easy nor immediate. They saw how many empty lots remained, and the task at hand seemed daunting. It also helped them develop rebuttals for comments they hear at home such as "It's been eight years! Why isn't New Orleans all rebuilt yet?" A student wrote eloquently that "I worked so hard during those four days, and I saw what progress we made in that short of time, but I also saw how many empty lots there were in the Lower Ninth Ward, and it made me appreciate how hard it is to rebuild a city. . . . I cannot imagine how many people it would take to completely [re]build New Orleans."

Many students commented about the quality of their work, which was often lacking as inexperienced home-builders. One student wondered "what would it feel like to have a bunch of strangers building a house for you? I would be concerned that the future costs of fixing the problems would be expensive and overwhelming" due to the work of inexperienced builders. As such, they wondered about the best way for outsiders to help in disaster recovery: to donate money so that high-quality work can be performed by professionals? Or to travel to the location and provide needed and cheaper

(though admittedly lower quality) labor? Which approach provides the most just, humane disaster recovery?

Despite this nagging question, most of the students also felt a sense of accomplishment. One "became really attached to the house. I'm happy someone will call this place home and I hope it stands against future hurricane threats." Most of the students, of course, considered in their writings the very real possibility that it may not survive these future events.

One of the immediate realizations upon commencing work on the house in the Lower Ninth Ward was the difficulty of the labor. According to one student:

This was the most difficult work any of us have done in a long time, especially in the heat and humidity. It made me realize that the only way of rebuilding NOLA was mainly through community service if locals were having insurance problems, ownership problems, and lack of funds available. I realized how important it was that we participate in service-learning while we were in NOLA, it was the least we could do considering how much NOLA had given to us.

Another student was particularly pleased with her or his hard work, saying "If I would have told myself what I did the last four days even a week ago I wouldn't have believed myself."

TAKING NEW ORLEANS HOME

Students in my class felt that spending time learning and serving in New Orleans changed the way they thought about catastrophic events, about sociological issues, and about their own lives. Upon return home students possessed a new lens through which they filtered comments they heard about disaster and about New Orleans. One student remarked that:

[My hair stylist] asked me how New Orleans was seeing how "they had that storm or something." I suppose I should not be surprised by her comment but again, it reminded me that most people have forgotten about Katrina, and simply view New Orleans as a place to get drunk and party. The people I met there were so much more than that, the culture was so rich, and the city had a certain magical feeling to it that makes my heart cringe when I heard comments like the ones I hear these last few weeks.

Reflections such as this reveal how students had become sensitized about issues related to disaster and more critical about offhand comments that misunderstood or downplayed the significance of the event.

Many students remarked that they would seek out organizations in their home community doing work similar to New Orleans Area Habitat for Hu-

manity. One said that “participating in this field school has motivated me to volunteer more of my time to this organization and to contribute to community service projects in my own backyard” while another said “I feel really inspired to pursue working with Habitat in Calgary and plan to get involved with them this summer.” These connections are particularly inspiring and appropriate given that many communities in Southern Alberta, including our home community of Calgary, were inundated by flooding in June 2013, only a month after the group returned from New Orleans. This event is now considered the costliest disaster in Canadian history (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation 2013). As a result, many communities in Alberta desperately need precisely the sort of work that students learned how to do while we visited New Orleans.

Most importantly, visiting and serving New Orleans helped the students to see their home community in a new way. In particular, it helped them understand the dynamics of oil production in their home province and country in a more critical light. Many students connected the experience to their own lives in Alberta, home to a well-known but empirically debated cancer cluster in the town of Fort Chipewyan, Alberta, a First Nations community downstream from the tar-sands (Kelly et al. 2009). One student remarked, “I feel guilt in not knowing more of the environmental and social effects of the oil sands, which I am largely complicit in.” That same student continued, commenting that, “Given what I have learned about the importance of local service, I want to become engaged in policy and social change in Alberta regarding the oil sands and the resulting health effects felt by those disproportionately affected through environmental racism.” A different student remarked that she or he wants “to be involved within my own province’s oil industry and to be aware about the realities of the industry. . . . In this way, I see myself approaching my life differently because I want to be more involved with environmental justice in my region.”

As a former New Orleanian, comments like these help me to better see and articulate the enduring legacy of Katrina; though surely Katrina will be remembered for its devastation and dislocation, over the longer-term, the disaster may be remembered for rekindling an interest in environmental inequalities and motivating a new generation of young people concerned with issues of social and environmental justice. By traveling to the region, immersing themselves in the city (albeit to greatly varying degrees), and seeing the slow pace of recovery, students from around North America return home newly sensitized and highly motivated. If this pattern continues I have confidence that Katrina’s enduring legacy will be this new generation of thinkers, activists, and global citizens.

It is my hope that more members of the Katrina diaspora return “home,” bringing with them their students, coworkers, and friends. At the start of our work in New Orleans, I wondered: How can instructors and researchers

working in post-Katrina New Orleans be sure that they are contributing in a way that is ethical and sensitive to local concerns? As one of my students since pointed out, "I think that service must always take the knowledge and understanding of locals above those of the understandings brought into an area by those wanting to do service," an approach that has not always been applied in post-Katrina New Orleans, even by those who come with good intentions. In other words, those from outside the region must actively work to involve community members in activities and decision-making processes, continually asking them about their needs and wants.

It is inspiring to see so many survivor scholars, many contributing to this volume, continuing to do work that benefits New Orleans and its people. Although many local academics have since left New Orleans and now live elsewhere, we each continue to contribute to the city's rebuilding through our teaching, our research, and our service to the community. As part of a large and enduring diaspora (Weber and Peek 2012), I know that we each feel committed to ensuring the city's future as a safer, more prosperous, and more sustainable place to live, work, and play.

“disaster world,” Dr. Greene often volunteers with relief agencies to assist with rebuilding post-disaster, while concurrently engaging in fieldwork to learn more about the social, political, and economic impacts of disasters on vulnerable populations.

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