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To cite this article: Darwin BondGraham (2007) The New Orleans that Race Built: Racism, Disaster, and Urban Spatial Relationships, *Souls*, 9:1, 4-18, DOI: [10.1080/10999940701224874](https://doi.org/10.1080/10999940701224874)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999940701224874>



Published online: 29 Mar 2007.



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Higher Ground

The New Orleans that Race Built

Racism, Disaster, and Urban Spatial Relationships



Darwin BondGraham

The Katrina catastrophe served to consolidate many long-term trends in the Gulf Coast region, particularly in New Orleans. Among these are a massive demographic shift following World War II that confined poor Black Americans within the older city boundaries, a changing economy marked by deindustrialization of the city and transfers of employment and resources to the suburbs, the decline of the welfare state which had supported many of the structurally unemployed/underemployed until relatively recently, the rise of a tourism economy, and the automation of particularly key industries such as shipping, refining, and chemical manufacturing. The disaster was structured by these long-term socio-economic transformations and consolidated through a punctuated moment of continuity called hurricane Katrina. In this sense, Hurricane Katrina merely brought the situation up to speed. Throughout this essay I explore some of these transformations while also touching on the politics of reconstruction; a Shumpeterian process whereby local economic elites are seeking to make an opportunity of the destruction by monopolizing the planning process and rebuilding the cityscape in a fashion more amenable to the accumulation of capital. Equally powerful and related are the gentrifying forces at work in New Orleans. The city has also become the wellspring for a powerful number of social movements seeking racial and economic justice, however. While we can trace these trends back across time and place in New Orleans, and while we can say that Katrina “exposed” or “brought to the surface” much of the structural racism operating in our society, the future of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast is by no means determined.

Keywords: disaster, Hurricane Katrina New Orleans, place, racism, space

Far down Desire St. off of St. Claude Avenue, the main thoroughfare through the 9th Ward of New Orleans, Jackie stands outside her home on an unusually cold December

day eating a hot lunch provided by Common Ground, a mutual aid organization formed immediately after Katrina struck. The entire contents of her house are piling up on the sidewalk beside her. All of the electronics—television, radio, fan, lamps, VCR, and a pair of heavy electric metal-framed medical beds—are sitting in one stack by the bumper of a wrecked Oldsmobile with four flat tires. Carpeting dragged from her house is sitting in another humungous mound. The largest stack of waterlogged belongings consists of miscellaneous furnishings—clothing, books, CDs, drapes, toys, and kitchen utensils. In a few hours a new pile will rise beside all of this; the mold infested drywall and plaster that must be torn from her home's interior, floor to ceiling.

Inside of Jackie's house there are multiple brownish-yellow lines about two, three, five, and seven feet up on all the walls. Each line marks a level at which the toxic floodwaters settled for several days. The flooding took weeks to subside completely. On its way down it settled at many different levels for extended periods of time leaving graduated marks. The whole building smells of mold and mud. A crew of students from California (of which the author was a member of) has been helping Jackie gut her house for several days. They don protective suits, respirators, goggles, and gloves. The entire house interior needs to be bleached and dried out before reconstruction can start, before Jackie can think about moving back in. In the front room of her home she's collected a dozen porcelain sculptures, keepsakes, and as many photographs and personal papers as she's been able to salvage. They're all coated in the same powdery brown film.

A haunting reminder of the floods that overtook New Orleans sits beached in her side yard. Constructed from a refrigerator, empty barrel, several ice chests, and fastened together with metal straps and nails, the improvised boat probably could have seated four to five adults and several children. A wide piece of scrap lumber about four feet long, a paddle, lies inside of it.

Jackie's neighborhood is dead quiet. The twin holly bushes that used to shine bright green with red berries on each side of the stairs up to the front porch are dead and withered. What's left of the lawn is a brown shaggy mass of dead blades. Jackie's lived here a long time. She says the neighborhood has had more than its fair share of troubles in recent times, but that it's a good place. In spite of the bleak pictures painted by demographic statistics, press reports, and sociological works that condemn communities like this as oppressive slums caused purely by spatial concentration and segregation of a poor, predominantly Black population, community cohesion and people's attachment to place has been profoundly powerful in the 9th Ward (and New Orleans in general). William Falk's research on "family and belonging in a southern black community," articulates the transcendent power of place for those who dwell in geographies like the 9th Ward, a power that appears capable of nullifying the negativity of oppression and that provides hope, happiness, and a collective means to struggle for those who live there. According to Falk:

The real way in which one is related to the place is what matters. Thus, for a supposedly "poor" place [. . .] the real testament of faith for local people is: this is where I live. This is where my history is grounded. My biography is here. I know everyone here, at least everyone who matters the most to me. Here, me and mine are left to ourselves. I may not know much that matters to some other people, but I know well this place and my place in it. It is a place consisting of memories good and bad, but all of them are mine, things that cannot be bought or taken away from me. I am quite literally grounded in this place. It is in me; I am in it.¹

Although it is poor, segregated, scorned by outsiders, criminalized, redlined, over-policed, and now finally flooded to Noahic proportions, New Orleans remains an



“Boys Room Wall, Chalmette, LA” 2005 © 2005 David Julian

assemblage of terrains imbued with so much meaning, nesting so much struggle and power, history and community. That residents of the 9th Ward like Jackie are returning to rebuild, even without pledges from city leaders that their neighborhood will be provided with sewerage, gas, and electricity is a testament to the power of place.

But will New Orleans be bought now? Will portions of it be taken away from those who have called it home for so long? Land grab is on the tip of every poor New Orleanian’s tongue. Will community be taken away from those neighborhoods least able to protect themselves, or those areas most heavily targeted for sacrifice and redevelopment?

According to Jackie, “[the 9th Ward] used to be a very white neighborhood when my family first moved in. There were a lot of white families and some elderly folks. My family was probably the first black one to move in on this particular block. Soon after it became all black.” Her description matches the basic dynamics that sustain racial segregation; non-white urban migration and concentration, spillover into accessible and marginalized neighborhoods, reactionary white flight from many of these integrating areas, and the consequent social-urban ecological decline that results from environmental racism and neglect.² The 9th Ward, where Jackie has lived most of her life, started out as a neighborhood of white-ethnic immigrants and a large number of Black families, all working class. The modest homes with ample backyard space, wide streets fit for automobiles, numerous churches, and small corner shops, was the American dream for many. The properties were cheap and prone to minor flooding during a hard rain, but nothing catastrophic, as long as the levees held. The Federal government, state of Louisiana, the city and levee boards mostly upheld this promise through the 20th century. The city certainly experienced floods, but nothing on the scale of Katrina. The worst were hurricanes Betsy and Camille, but these were not catastrophic by any means.

Many older residents of the 9th Ward have memories of Betsy, when their homes were flooded and they had to evacuate. New Orleans City Council member Oliver Thomas, who Douglas Brinkley interviewed for his book about Katrina, recalled that, “as a child, the scariest thing in my life was Hurricane Betsy.”³ Even though Betsy flooded parts of New Orleans, it wasn’t anything approaching catastrophic. In the 1960s, it was in everyone’s interest to make sure the levees held because back then much more than just the poor could be washed away. Industry, shipping, the growing tourism trade, and the workforce that these economic activities required meant that the levees and other infrastructure were supported in kind.⁴

By the 1960s, the 9th Ward was fast becoming a segregated Black ghetto. By the time Hurricane Betsy flooded parts of the city in several feet of water, the 9th Ward and many of the most vulnerable neighborhoods had become virtually all Black.⁵ In 1965, when President Johnson wandered into a church in the 9th Ward days after Hurricane Betsy, ankle deep in water, he announced “this is your President, I’m here to help you!” However, he saw only Black faces staring back at him from the damp flashlight illuminated interior. Days later he would write in his diary that the shelter he visited was a “mass of human suffering,” and “most of those inside were negro.”⁶ The differential impact that Betsy had on New Orleans’ Blacks made a lasting impression, but ultimately served as little incentive for future investments in the area’s infrastructure—to say nothing about redressing the environmental racism that was creating vast regions of vulnerability in and around New Orleans (and beyond). Indeed, global economic restructuring and the concomitant decline of the welfare state would soon lead to the opposite outcome; less social investment would be made in New Orleans’ infrastructure. This combined with racial residential segregation is part of the cause of the Katrina catastrophe.

One precipitating event that set segregation into full swing in New Orleans was the integration of local schools. New Orleans schools were some of the first in the Deep South to be opened up by civil rights activists. After McDonogh #19 on St. Claude Avenue in the Lower 9th Ward was integrated, many of the remaining white residents fled the city believing that if living around Blacks wasn’t bad enough, having one’s child attend school alongside them was the final straw. McDonogh #19 is now known as Louis Armstrong Elementary. Like other schools across the nation that were desegregated, many in New Orleans took on the names of prominent Black political leaders and artists. One can only imagine what Armstrong would think of this.

The school’s original namesake came from John McDonogh, a wealthy local slave owner and businessman who made a point of educating his slaves and financing a recolonization society that transported black New Orleanians to the newly established nation of Liberia. On his deathbed he willed enough money to open dozens of schools in the greater New Orleans area. Some still bear his name. Most were the sites of civil rights struggles aimed at integration. William Frantz Elementary is in the same neighborhood that Jackie lives in. It was here in 1960 that six-year-old Ruby Bridges and her mother drove to school one morning. They were greeted by an angry mob of parents. Up until that date the school had been reserved for whites only.⁷ It wasn’t long till the school, and the neighborhood became nearly all Black.⁸ Many of the McDonogh High schools went through the same process (although some of them were open to Blacks much earlier). That McDonogh’s name is so prominent in the greater New Orleans educational system tells us something about education and racial inequality in Louisiana. The man worked his slaves in order to build up real estate around the city and Algiers, and some of these properties would be turned into schools for slaves, the emancipated, and the poor.⁹

McDonogh was a peculiar but also typical benevolent white patriarch in the Louisiana slavocracy. Leighton Ciravolo, a sympathetic biographer of McDonogh describes his fatherly ante bellum style in the following terms:

McDonogh, being a deliberate thinker, realized that people work best when there is hope ahead. This continuous labor builds up a work ethic. He in fact treated his slaves more as student than like the property they were considered legally. The philosophy involved is a modern, fundamental idea of proper education: if students see prospects in their lives, they will develop self-esteem and will become energetic, useful members of society.¹⁰

McDonogh's efforts to "better" Afro-Americans was in no small part a means toward his re-colonization plans—sending slaves back to Africa. Re-colonization was an early attempt by some white Americans to "balance" the races and distribute them to their proper spatial locations. In the first half of the 19th century this meant sending emancipated Blacks to found Liberia, a nation where Black men and women could live better lives, according to men like McDonogh. It would right the wrong, the wrong not necessarily being slavery, rather it being the mixing of races in the New World. The proper place for Blacks was ultimately viewed as Africa, far from the North American continent, which according to the McDonogh's of the nation was destined to become a white civilization.

This notion of relocating Blacks to places where they will supposedly be better off—regardless of what Black communities might think for themselves—is a thread that runs throughout the history of race relations in the United States. Although spatial notions of the proper places for certain races took particular forms in New Orleans, somewhat complicated by the city's truly unique history and traditions, the city was by no means an exception.

Exactly where this proper place for the Black population was supposed to be would change dramatically after the Civil War and through the Jim Crow era, and again with the coming of World Wars I and II. Re-colonization schemes would eventually be abandoned, maps of the Atlantic were shelved for maps of the city and the spatial fix began take a more purely localized geographical form. Blacks were here to stay, so other means of geographically managing race relations would need to be sought. In white dominated New Orleans, a city unique for its always having had a large slave and free Black population, this would mean living with slaves and mulattos, free and bound, manumission and re-colonization plans, violent pogroms, marginalization into the "bottom of the bowl," and eventually a localized spatial division of the races in a hyper-segregated pattern whereby race and class correlates to topographical elevation. Residential and other localized types of segregation of some sort or another was always a reality, but by the 20th century it became the only spatial division of races that mattered.

Patterns of racial segregation and spatial location in the socio-political ecology of New Orleans were by no means crafted through a logical process of intentional outcomes. There was no committee or organization seeing to it that race was manifested in space. The process was much more convoluted. Many actions were intentional, hostile, or outright violent. But many more were subtle, subconscious and assumed.

Peirce Lewis describes New Orleans from the Civil War almost until the early 1960s as having a regime of racial segregation defined by its micro-spatial ordering. Prior to the Civil Rights movement and the end of legally sanctioned segregation, Blacks and whites lived much closer to one another. Residential segregation was ordered in a complex patchwork in which clusters of predominantly Black blocks would be encapsulated within super-blocks. On the main avenues and outer fringes of these super-blocks lived whites and more affluent citizens. According to Lewis, "such patches of black population by no stretch of the imagination can be called "ghettos" [...] these Negro neighborhoods of New Orleans were quite small and multinucleated, with fuzzy boundaries."¹¹ This peculiar residential pattern was due in part to the custom of building slave and servant quarters

in back of the master's house. Jim Crow segregation in New Orleans adopted this spatial design and there was very little pressure to change it until the Black freedom movement of the 1960s.

As Blacks began to challenge the norms and laws of Jim Crow in the middle of the 20th century, multinucleated segregation began to give way to large contiguous areas within the city populated by Blacks at rates approaching eighty to ninety percent. These areas consolidated the Black population most intensely in the lowest, most vulnerable, and marginalized portions of the city.

For New Orleans, like much of the southern United States, the “proper” spatial-racial regime was a problem of enormous proportions for the dominant class and working class whites who sought to separate themselves from Blacks; a problem that had to be continually reworked as the region developed from a plantation economy to sharecropping and shipping, and finally industrial production, transport, and tourism economy. To earlier New Orleanians, miscegenation had been identified as the most pernicious effect of an improper proximity amongst the races, but so too were rebellion, maroonage, crime, and loss of morality associated with spatial concentrations of Blacks. What had always made New Orleans' problems of racial geography even more intractable for the ruling planter class was the relative abundance of free Blacks and mulattos from early on. Later, racial geographies would be rearticulated to deal with the changing economic and political circumstances of Blacks and whites in the city.

One way of understanding the Katrina catastrophe is that it is the product of the latest racial geographic regime in the Gulf Coast, one not all that different from the immediate past, but certainly very extreme in the degree to which non-whites and the poor have found themselves relegated to extremely vulnerable positions within the socio-political ecology (and with very few resources to deal with this vulnerability). Hurricane Katrina's effects were structured by the spatial reordering of New Orleans since the mid-20th century that came about directly through racial segregation, and its consequences are being played out under the new politics of race—a politics in which racial hierarchies and inequalities are being rearticulated and fashioned in novel ways that mask the racist causes and consequences.¹²

From the 1950s on, white New Orleanians moved out of the city limits east into St. Bernard Parish or west into Jefferson Parish, just outside the city limits separating themselves from the 9th Ward and other increasingly Black neighborhoods. Many whites migrated east, just a mile or two into St. Bernard Parish separating their new homes from the old with a set of railroad tracks, a military reserve, and an ample sized patch of green space. Many more moved into Jefferson Parish to the west. The push and pull forces that motivated white flight were many. They included racist yearnings for a segregated society that was being fundamentally challenged, but also economic forces and technological breakthroughs that made suburbanization possible. St. Bernard Parish became a destination that promised secure jobs, a large affordable home, and distance from the ever-darkening “chocolate city.”

Beyond city limits in the Parish, St. Claude Avenue becomes the St. Bernard Highway, and Claiborne Avenue becomes Judge Perez Drive. The homes in St. Bernard are much newer than those in the 9th Ward. Many of them are two stories tall and almost every last one is made of sturdy brick. The houses in the 9th Ward are mostly small wood framed structures. In St. Bernard, the yards are larger and the streets twist and turn in the curvaceous fashion that is a hallmark of the modern suburban development. The trees are taller, and one can presume that, before the floods, the grass was greener on this side. St. Bernard Parish was flooded just as deep and long as the neighboring 9th Ward. Only the area's sturdier infrastructure kept it from taking as bad of a beating from the winds and rain. That and the fact that the worst effect of flooding was only felt in the Lower 9th Ward

where levee failure created a wall of rushing water that leveled several square blocks, picked up and moved homes and cars, and crushed anything in its path.

Arabi and Chalmette, the first two towns in St. Bernard adjacent to the 9th Ward were ninety-six and ninety-two percent white before Katrina hit. Both towns have a poverty rate below the national average of twelve percent. Homes in Arabi are valued at a median of \$77,000 with comparable houses in Chalmette worth about \$10,000 more (for the New Orleans metro region this is very high). In New Orleans' 9th Ward, thirty-six percent of Jackie's neighbors live below the poverty line. Some blocks have astronomical rates of impoverishment with more than half of all residents living in poverty. The 9th Ward is virtually all Black today except for the southern section around the edge of the French Quarter, which is not coincidentally on higher ground and separated from the rest of the ward by St. Claude Avenue. Home values are much lower in the 9th Ward even though ownership rates are incredibly high.¹³ This is spatial segregation on the local-level, and it is characteristic of the larger pattern that can be discerned at the city-wide level.

For the first half of the 18th century, St. Bernard Parish (and ostensibly all of Louisiana) was a French colony. Planters established themselves on the high ground near the banks of the Mississippi and used African slaves to raise sugarcane and indigo in the rich soils deposited over several millennia of delta building. The natural levees up and down river from New Orleans were developed in the same manner. Thus, New Orleans began and thrived as a port city surrounded by vast plantations.¹⁴ (Even today the region's most important economic activity takes place on "plantations" outside the city—many of the Port of Southern Louisiana's facilities are named after the properties that used exist there; bulk goods are shipped from Angelina Plantation, Hope Plantation, Goldmine Plantation, and so forth. Some of the refineries and chemical plants along the "cancer alley" corridor are also located on industrial lots still called plantations.)

The slave-based economy flourished through thirty years of Spanish rule, the second brief French dominion, and through American control until the Civil War. All the while, New Orleans expanded rapidly, becoming the largest southern city (the sixth largest in the U.S.) by 1860. After the war many emancipated slaves left the rural parishes of Louisiana for New Orleans. Others stayed as sharecroppers and small farm owners alongside Spanish and German immigrants and the propertied upper class. Until the end of World War II, St. Bernard remained a rural backwater—its total population a mere 7,000 according to the 1940 Census. In 1950 its population exploded. Several large factories including an aluminum works, a sugar refinery and an oil refinery provided an economic base for the working class population that moved in. The majority of this growth took place right on the edge of New Orleans' city limits. Builders provided spacious homes for the new suburbanites. State policies and practices within the real-estate and banking industries promoted racial segregation at the expense of non-whites. Blacks were kept out via norms and laws.

By 1970, more than 50,000 people lived in St. Bernard Parish, most of them closer toward the New Orleans end. White families moved into the new residential developments finding employment in the factories that were moving out of New Orleans. Jefferson Parish, on the opposite side of the city, underwent a similar pattern of development. Both parishes experienced rapid economic and population growth. Non-whites, meanwhile, were restricted inside the city limits of New Orleans, unable to gain employment in the booming exurban industries or purchase a home in the rapidly expanding (and financially appreciating) suburban neighborhoods. These new dynamic places were not theirs to enter. They were forced to rely on whatever they could manage within the city limits. This was the consolidation of the new spatial regime of race that jelled after World War II and solidified after the 1960s. As industries left and investments dwindled, times became tougher for those working class and poor populations restricted geographically (and by

non-spatial means, of course). Redlining was rampant. Property values in Black neighborhoods stagnated, jobs became increasingly scarce, and major redevelopment projects, like the I-10 freeway, cut through the social fabrics of these communities laying waste to business districts and cultural centers like the Claiborne neutral grounds.

Left with the 9th Ward and other formerly mixed working class districts, many poor Black New Orleanians were able to purchase their homes, build surprisingly vibrant communities, and some degree of wealth, all in spite of their situation. However, the overall costs outweighed the benefits. White racism was rearticulated in new forms during and after the Civil Rights Movement. Across much of America, geographical segregation that created powerfully different life chances became a paramount means of maintaining the racial hierarchy that had previously been constructed through other less spatially deterministic forms. In New Orleans this created an especially vulnerable poor Black population, but also much vulnerability amongst middle class Blacks and whites who by fleeing the inner city settled on swamp lands no more fit for habitation than the 9th Ward or the “bottom of the bowl.”¹⁵ The socio-political ecology resulting from the push for racial integration and reactionary suburbanization (propelled by the white population’s possessive investment in whiteness¹⁶ that promised a maintenance of privilege in the suburbs) built a cityscape under sea level, surrounded on one side by a maelstrom for a river, lakes to the north, and rapidly disappearing marshes to the south and south-east. In 1965, Hurricane Betsy exposed the harm wrought by this regime of racial segregation and disaccumulation structured into the geography of greater New Orleans. Betsy was a preview. Katrina, a disaster of far larger magnitude, has irrefutably affirmed this point.¹⁷

As of September of 2006, Jackie’s house sits quietly on Desire Street, gutted, its former contents hauled away, but little more progress has been made on it. Her neighbors are filtering back in slowly, many of them just to survey the damage and salvage a few belongings. The street is mostly deserted, however. Most inhabitants of the 9th Ward have few savings to spend on reconstruction. Few of them have flood insurance. What wealth they had was literally embodied in their homes. Now it’s in no condition to use as any kind of equity. Other streets have more activity. Some are bustling with trucks, hammers, generators, and crews of men and women gutting interiors and fixing rooftops. The 9th Ward’s pace of reconstruction has been slow, but it appears to be on track. More and more lights can be seen flickering in windows at night. Many families have returned and parked trailers in their yards. Children roam the streets on bicycles making occasional forays out to Claiborne Avenue to the Family Dollar Store to buy candy and soda.

Once, New Orleans was named the “Crescent City” because it was literally shaped like a slender moon. Following a big bend in the Mississippi, most of the houses, businesses, churches, and schools were built on the high ground closest to the riverbank. Then it waxed in size, filling in the low lying areas east and west, bounded only by Lake Pontchartrain above. The way things are going politically, it looks as though New Orleans might once again become the Crescent City in shape as well as name. Half of the city’s population may never be able to return. Many of their homes, businesses, and places of worship might be leveled and turned into parks, or more expensive housing. Residents now refer to the wealthy parts of town that compose the bright edge of this crescent as the “sliver by the river.” To carry the lunar metaphor even further, one can imagine the New Orleans that existed pre-Katrina as a crescent moon, a crescent only because of its black core. The city’s Black majority has long been the core of its cultural and economic vitality. But this core is unseen, like the shaded side of the real crescent moon. Politically speaking, many Black and poor residents, returned or otherwise, believe that the city’s powerful want to tear out this Black core, but keep its cultural products—music, food, language, history and art. It will be the aesthetic sort of crescent moon, a crescent without a shaded core, the convex portion will be punched out, and sitting from it perched on the bottom lip of



“Local Mardi Gras Band” © Chester Higgins

the hook-shaped moon will be the representation of that Black-Creole, selling the city, selling voodoo, sin, gumbo, and the blues to the world at large.

The politics of rebuilding New Orleans are incredibly complex, but not without precedent. Major disasters throughout American history have more often than not been followed by intense political jockeying amongst economic and political elites in order to retain or wrest control of local and regional government from one another. Redevelopment schemes have always emphasized the various and competing spatial interests of different groups cut along lines of class, race, ethnicity, and gender. Capital has often responded to widespread destruction in a Shumpeterian fashion by taking advantage of the liquidation of finances, firms, and the physical landscape to refashion whole new designs for locally based accumulation. Social movements in the forms of place-based mobilizations, racial coalitions, and labor organizations have arisen to meet the innumerable challenges facing different populations after disaster events.

Early on, the most powerful lobby in post-Katrina New Orleans was Mayor Nagin’s Bring New Orleans Back Commission (BNOB). Composed mostly of local business elites (real-estate developers in particular) with a vested interest in growth machine politics,¹⁸ the Commission also seated prominent artists, several Black businessmen, and a few putative community leaders. Its vision for the future of New Orleans promotes the city’s “culture” and music, improving government effectiveness, and radically reshaping the urban landscape and overall footprint. Although the BNOB Commission has disintegrated due to lack of funding or political stability, its vision for New Orleans represents the thinking of city elites, real estate developers, many powerful civic leaders, and large portions of the middle and upper-classes (predominantly whites).

Early in 2006, several commission members publicly affirmed the right of all neighborhoods to be rebuilt on several occasions, but the Commission made no commitments to provide resources for residents to do so. BNOB leader Joseph Canizaro even happens to be the chairman of the Urban Land Institute, a think tank that advised the city in Katrina’s wake that many neighborhoods like the 9th Ward should definitely not be rebuilt. Apparently, the Commission has not held any recent public meetings or moved

forward with any of its proposals. But this does not necessarily mean that its vision is not being pushed forward by the new official planning process or through the haphazard reconstruction efforts underway.

According to the *Times-Picayune*, as of July 2006, the city has only managed to craft a “plan to create a plan to rebuild New Orleans.”¹⁹ This latest official framework for reconstruction, called the Unified New Orleans Neighborhood Plan, is described as, “a single comprehensive land-use planning process, which will coordinate the recovery of more than 70 distinct neighborhoods.”²⁰ So far so good, but the plan appears short on substance, despite being funded to the sum of \$4.5 million from the Rockefeller Foundation and Greater New Orleans Foundation. The Louisiana Recovery Authority has decided to throw its weight behind this scheme making it the current front runner among planning schemes. Mayor Nagin and other officials have said that any planning already conducted by third parties will be incorporated into this master plan for the city, giving those neighborhoods that have used private resources to rebuild a further lead in the chaotic process.

Initially the BNOB Commission proposed giving neighborhoods a window of one year to rebuild, and that if at the end of that timeframe a community has failed to show its “viability,” it will be demolished, entirely re-planned, and redeveloped. As of July, 2006 it is not clear whether this mandate is being upheld. Nagin was forced to distance himself from this proposal after multiple communities voiced their opposition to it. If this idea is adopted in some form or another, exactly who will define progress, and what will be considered a neighborhood “comeback” are subjective determinations that remain to be seen. As of today, it appears that the massive public outcry (coming from diverse quarters of the city) defeated this point on the wish list of large scale real estate capital.

Walking through the streets of New Orleans it’s hard to tell what the storm wrought and what neglected conditions were already present. Much of the city had already been slummed by racist real estate practices and the realities of poverty. Current planning policies are heavily weighted toward those neighborhoods inhabited by more affluent residents and those not hit as hard by the storm where organizing a community recovery effort will occur smoothly or will not be needed at all.

The BNOB Commission’s final report, released on January 11th, spells out the Commission’s ambitious plans in detail.²¹ Its proposals are worth studying because they represent a wish list for the city’s power elites and will carry weight regardless of the fact that BNOB has been all but disbanded.

Their recommendations for rebuilding embrace many of the design philosophies that can be found in new urbanism, a school of thought within the professions of urban planning and architecture that emphasizes the aesthetics of city life (without its harsh realities). To rebuild the city’s neighborhoods, they state that reconstruction must be “built on neighborhood history and culture; respectful of historic block patterns, architecture, and landscape; mixed income communities with a diversity of housing types; parks and open space connected to a city-wide system; city-wide accessibility through transit; neighborhood centers that provide a high quality of daily life.” It all sounds very appealing, but it’s premature to assume that the actual reconstruction process will abide by these principles in any equitable shape or manner. Statements such as this also tend to avoid issues of race or economic justice by using language such as “culture,” “diversity,” and “mixed-income” solutions.

The Commission’s report is laden with empty appeals to the disadvantaged alongside benign sounding code words for demolition and gentrification. Some are probably there only to appease the gods of ecological sustainability and justice—while other recommendations actually mean what they say and will be carried out in the fullest. The BNOB Commission’s plans, as well as the other efforts that will influence the Unified New Orleans Neighborhood Plan must all be synthesized by city authorities before they can unlock the funds currently held by the Louisiana Recovery Authority.

Residents across the city responded with outrage and suspicion to the officials' early plans, especially Nagin's comments about issuing a moratorium on building permits in sections of the city like the 9th Ward. (Nagin later withdrew this idea and allowed building to commence.) One aspect of the BNOB Commission's thinking that may be incorporated into the final planning (explicitly or tacitly) is its identification of four "opportunities for neighborhood rebuilding" based on location and the extent of resulting damage from the hurricane and floods. "Immediate opportunity areas" are those that sustained little or no damage and can be improved without further debate. Their future is assured. Not surprisingly, these areas mostly cover the Uptown, Garden District, French Quarter, Bywater along the Mississippi, and northernmost portions of the Lakeview and Gentilly communities—affluent and predominantly white neighborhoods. True to their label, residents in these neighborhoods immediately began repairing their homes. Contractor vehicles can be spotted on every street. Power tools are buzzing and hammers are pounding away at homes that suffered mostly minor wind damage, fallen trees, or leaky roofs.²² Planning in these zones of the city is somewhat redundant because of the minor damage they sustained and the overabundance of resources at the disposal of residents and other property owners.

The second major classification for neighborhoods is termed "infill development areas." The Commission recommends that these areas be consolidated under public and private ownership, that development plans be drafted, and proposals solicited from demolition and construction firms. The areas in question would probably be consolidated under the auspices of some sort of redevelopment agency. (The BNOB Commission proposed the creation of a Crescent City Redevelopment Corporation [CCRC], which would sell land back to private developers.) Again, not surprisingly, neighborhoods deemed "infill development areas" are predominantly Black and poor sections of the city. They include large swaths of the 9th Ward, Bywater, Gentilly, Mid-City, Tremé and Central City, and the McDonogh, Whitney, and Fischer neighborhoods across the river in the Algiers district. Under the Unified New Orleans Neighborhood Plan, the mechanism by which large tracts of land are seized and redeveloped by real estate capitalists is likely to take a different form, but some means of consolidating properties is in the works.

The BNOB Commission was also asked to look ahead and create an overall vision for the kind of city they'd like to see. Among the more novel proposals is one to build a network of high-speed light rail commuter lines linking New Orleans with its suburbs—Jefferson, St. Bernard, St. Tammany Parish, and the Slidell region. Most critical studies of rapid transit around the nation have concluded that the benefits of such a system will primarily go to those on the ends of the lines—the suburban bedroom communities, and the Central Business District. Those in the middle, the neighborhoods the rail lines will cut through, will see very little utility in such a system.²³ The benefits to the real estate lobby and large employers concentrated in the downtown area could be immense as parcel values for office and retail developments would likely multiply in value, and a light rail system would guarantee a white-collar professional suburban workforce. Whether neighborhoods like the 9th Ward or the Tremé live to see this future is an open question. Whether these neighborhoods will retain the communities—the residents, families, and local businesses that give them their culture and traditions—is even more uncertain.

Even though it's a pipedream, the regional rail system gives some insight into the larger goals of the interest groups originally behind the BNOB Commission and now at work in other organizations and agencies, or behind the scenes as private actors work to influence the Unified New Orleans Neighborhood Plan. The New Orleans they envision is a global city, surrounded by an affluent suburban professional workforce. The central business district will be the center of the region. Its office towers will fill every morning with professionals and white-collar workers from outlying areas. It will be an information

economy instead of what New Orleans has been: a working class city with a large population of supernumeraries (the structurally unemployed). Much of the city will become parkland. The metropolitan region's population will shrink by half. Families will also move back into the central city districts. On top of what remains, redevelopment will create neighborhoods in the architectural style of the past. It will attempt to recapture the sense of community lost in the past half century by deindustrialization and suburbanization. Condos will fill in the old warehouses, the racially cleansed housing projects like Lafitte, and the new towers built upon old barren blocks. Townhouses will parallel city streets just beyond the downtown. The streets will be sanitized for the newcomers. In some respects, Census Data confirms that New Orleans had already begun to move in this direction.

This vision for New Orleans is motivated in part by a desire among exurbanites to return to the city and rediscover its magic. New Orleans, like many cities, is being seen as an appealing place to live. But sadly, it's a desire that will be fulfilled only in the displacement of those who currently reside in central cities, those who were abandoned in the Tremé and the 9th Ward decades ago. In New Orleans it's a return that will be made possible by exploiting a disaster. In other cities it's simply called gentrification. But in post-Katrina New Orleans it will be called "logical," the "return of nature," "opportunity," and "market forces." Or, in the now infamous words of Rep. Richard Baker, "God did it."²⁴

The disaster that hit New Orleans in the form of a hurricane and flood wasn't a freak event. It wasn't a break with the normal, so much as it was a punctuated moment of continuity in the *longue durée* of this city. Katrina is business as usual, packed into an exclamation point. The eradication of poorer neighborhoods like the 9th Ward has long been a dream amongst many of New Orleans' more affluent and privileged.

One of the primary ways racism and socio-economic exploitation works is along spatial lines. Racialized and poor populations are related to by the dominant society most concretely in terms of geographical proximity. The different regimes of rule that subjugate poor and non-white communities must calibrate a proper spatial distribution of populations. Post-Katrina New Orleans appears to be unfolding toward a new type of spatial ordering unlike anything New Orleans has known in the past. There are like-minded people in every American city who just want the ghettos or the "wrong side of the tracks" to disappear, and they don't care how or where they go, so long as it's somewhere else. It's what helped create the conditions for this latest disaster in New Orleans. But other complex factors (economic, cultural, and happenstance) push and pull on the demographic order.

This peculiar American creed of racism and cruel indifference toward the poor characterizes much of our urban history. It was there when plantations spread along the banks of the Mississippi and slashed into the delta swamps. It didn't end with the Civil War, or the Civil Rights Movement. It raged in 1866 when ex-confederates and police officers massacred Black and white radical Republicans at their New Orleans convention (which was also fundamentally a struggle over who would rebuild New Orleans and how it would be rebuilt following a civic disaster of another sorts). It was there when public housing went awry and when the I-10 highway destroyed the Claiborne neutral grounds. It was there when white parents pulled their kids out of integrating schools and fled to St. Bernard and Jefferson Parishes. What floats to the top now in this time of uncertainty and indecision is a desire that many have for a new, New Orleans. Leaving the city a half-century ago was a privilege made possible largely along lines of race. But leaving the city took its toll on the spirits of many. The desire for an urban way of life always remained in the hearts of some suburbanites. That sort of magical urban place was calling. Coming back to the city after Katrina is the new privilege. The Bring New Orleans Back Commission articulated the first statement of this vision. As the process progresses and takes a new

form we still find that there is little or no room in this vision for the 9th Ward and neighborhoods like it. There is certainly no room for public housing like the St. Bernard projects. The Department of Housing and Urban Development has now called for its demolition along with the Lafitte, C.J. Peete, and B.W. Cooper Homes.²⁵

After a jazz benefit concert for the reconstruction of New Orleans, poet Amiri Baraka explained that, “what Bush wants, is to make New Orleans like his mother—shriveled and colorless.”²⁶ Whether or not Bush wants this, the city has certainly shrunk in numbers. Without a serious federal commitment, far beyond what has been allocated to date, and without strident activism at all levels to ensure that federal funds and policies are administered fairly, any effort to rebuild the city will end in an outcome that can only be characterized as racial cleansing and the eradication of the poor. (We are already seeing this in the year since, but we are also seeing diverse social movement activity.) This is the other side to the politics of rebuilding New Orleans. It’s the grassroots response. It’s agitating, organizing, rallying, documenting, building, cleaning, and speaking out. For every speech that Nagin gives, for every new official planning scheme announced, there are a thousand volunteer work crews helping to revive shell-shocked neighborhoods. For every visit Bush makes to the Gulf Coast, there are thousands of college students, activists, former residents, and citizens making the trip to the Big Easy to provide assistance to indigenously led groups like Common Ground, the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund, C3, United Front for Affordable Housing, Survivor’s Village, and others.

Back on Desire Street in the 9th Ward, Jackie’s house stands empty. It’s September, the peak of a new hurricane season. The house’s insides are completely gutted. If she can muster up the money to install new drywall and carpeting, fix the holes in the roof, and to buy the bare necessities of life like a bed and kitchenware, she could move back in before long. If she does she might be alone. However, judging from the activity on her street in the past few months she’ll probably be moving back in alongside some neighbors. Every other day, more and more residents are coming home. Many are still just stopping by to survey the scene, but quite a few are breaking out their tools and putting good old fashioned sweat equity back into their humble houses. Whether or not they can make enough of a difference and help to rekindle the shattered social bonds and a sense of community is uncertain, but the future relies upon it. Not for some city official to measure and deem a “viable comeback” or for some state sanctioned planner to dispose wonderful new plans upon them.²⁷ The point here, if you ask many people, is to rebuild the community so that it can resist the inevitable attempts that the powerful will make to destroy it, attempts that always seem to be made when a “natural” disaster provides an alibi.

Notes

1. Falk, William S, *Rooted in Place: Family and Belonging in a Southern Black Community*, Rutgers University Press, 2004.

2. Social scientists have been reconsidering the dynamics of racial succession in neighborhoods, noting that ecological approaches that focus entirely on spatial variables like the number of Black residents on a block, or the particular patterns of Black residence in relation to whites, and so forth, are inadequate to explain how it is that certain neighborhoods become all white, or non-white (for instance, see—Gotham, Kevin Fox. “Beyond Invasion and Succession: School Segregation, Real Estate Blockbusting, and the Political Economy of Neighborhood Racial Transition.” *City & Community*, 2002, 1, 1, Mar., 83–111). Nevertheless, the decline of black neighborhoods like the 9th Ward are due to structural racism in American society, no matter how complex it is.

3. Brinkley, Douglass, *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast*, Harper Collins, 2006, 45.

4. Additionally, the legitimacy—however shaky—of the welfare state during this era (and up until at least the 1980s) meant that social investments and social consumption protecting places like the 9th Ward from catastrophic flooding were uncontroversial and ensured. The levees were funded, and so were welfare programs for

the growing population of dislocated workers (supernumeraries) pushed out of work by rapidly transforming monopoly sector industries, most of whom were Black Americans who lived in places like the 9th. See James O'Connor's *Fiscal Crisis of the State* for a detailed theoretical treatment of how this political-economy that sustained social investment/consumption in levees, city services, and welfare (broadly defined) is inevitably outpaced by a fiscal crisis that leads to cutbacks, the sort of which weakened New Orleans infrastructure and put much of its population in a position of critical vulnerability. O'Connor, James. *Fiscal Crisis of the State*. St. Martin's Press, 1973.

5. For a more historical treatment of environmental racism in New Orleans (particularly the segregation of poor Blacks into the "bottom of the bowl" and the back-swamps, see—Colten, Craig E. *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature*. Louisiana State University Press, 2005. And also, Lewis, Peirce F. *New Orleans: The Making of An Urban Landscape*. Cambridge: Ballinger Publishing Company, 1976.

6. Quoted in Remnick, David, "High Water: How Presidents and Citizens React to Disaster," *The New Yorker*. October 3, 2005.

7. Bridges, Ruby, *Through My Eyes: Articles and Interviews Compiled and Edited by Margo Lundell*, New York: Scholastic Press, 1999.

8. Inger, Morton, *Politics and Reality in an American City: the New Orleans School Crisis of 1960*, New York, Center for Urban Education, 1969.

9. As of July, 2006 many of the public schools in New Orleans remain closed. In their place have sprouted up dozens of charter schools. Prior to Katrina the New Orleans public school system resembled many other inner city districts; it was chronically under-funded and highly segregated. Bill Quigly, lawyer and professor at Loyola University of New Orleans says that, "[p]ublic education in New Orleans is mostly demolished and what remains is being privatized. The city is now the nation's laboratory for charter schools—publicly funded schools run by private bodies. Before Katrina the local elected school board had control over 115 schools—they now control four. The majority of the remaining schools are now charters. The metro area public schools will get \$213 million less next school year in state money because tens of thousands of public school students were displaced last year." Quigly, Bill. "Ten Months After Katrina: Gutting New Orleans." *Dissident Voice*. July 1, 2006. <http://www.dissidentvoice.org/>

10. Ciravolo, G. Leighton, *The Legacy of John McDonogh*, Lafayette, LA: The Center for Louisiana Studies, 2002.

11. Lewis, Peirce F, *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape*, Cambridge: Ballinger Publishing Company, 1976.

12. Winant, Howard, *The New Politics of Race: Globalism, Difference, Justice*, University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

13. US Census, www.census.gov

14. Thomas Ingersoll describes New Orleans as an urban core surrounded by rural plantations, a situation of such proximity and almost conflicting roles that the city became a microcosm of America as a whole torn between rural and urban life, slavery and wage labor, industrialism of the factory, and the plantation. Ingersoll, *Thomas N. Mammon and Manon in Early New Orleans: The First Slave Society in the Deep South 1718–1819*. University of Tennessee Press, 1999.

15. The "bottom of the bowl" refers to some of the lowest lying grounds in the city—literally in the center of New Orleans, far below sea level.

16. George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998.

17. Note that I am not arguing Katrina was a greater disaster because of the storm's characteristics. Rather, Katrina was a greater disaster in the sense that the disaster was the sum of several parts, both natural (the storm) and social (the political system, economic structure, race relations, poverty rate, condition of infrastructure, etc.).

18. Logan, John and Harvey Molotch, *Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987.

19. *Times-Picayune*, "Nagin sets guidelines to plan rebuilding," Wednesday, July 5, 2006. http://www.nola.com/newslogs/breaking/index.ssf?/mtlogs/nola_localbreakingnews/archives/2006_07_05.html

20. Saulny, Susan, "New Orleans Sets a Way to Plan Its Rebuilding," *New York Times*. Thursday, July 6, 2006.

21. Wallace Roberts & Todd, LLC, "Action Plan for New Orleans: The New American City," Bring New Orleans Back Commission, Urban Planning Committee, January 11, 2006.

22. As I write this piece I sit on the porch of a double shotgun home in the Faubourg-Marigny neighborhood. I moved in a week ago. According to my neighbor who is a longtime resident, the flood waters only covered the street by a few inches. The worst damage in this section of the city was to walls and roofs from the wind.

23. See Rodriguez, Joseph A. "Rapid Transit and Community Power: West Oakland Residents Confront BART." *Antipode* 31:2, 1999. Rodriguez summarizes some of the literature critical of BART's claims that it would benefit low-income communities along its lines and also describes the Black community's political

opposition to various aspects of the BART project including its overall purpose, impacts on Black business districts, and union racism that locked out non-whites from high paying construction and operation jobs.

24. Baker's words, first reported by the *Wall Street Journal* were, "We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did." *Washington Wire, Wall Street Journal*, September 9, 2005.

25. Filosa, Gwen, "HUD demolition plan protested: Residents say they're being shut out of city," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*. Friday, June 16, 2006.

26. Blumenfeld, Larry, "America's new jazz museum! (No poor black people allowed)," *Salon.com*. <http://dir.salon.com/story/ent/feature/2005/10/12/jazz/index.html>. Accessed on July 7, 2006.

27. However, one planning/architectural firm working on the 9th Ward through the New Orleans Neighborhood Rebuilding Plan is Stull and Lee, an African American firm with experience in designing racially conscious architecture that is sensitive to poverty and economic development in places like West Palm Beach, Florida for instance. The official planning process may not be all that bad for the 9th Ward after all. See Stull and Lee Inc. "A Community Vision for the Future of the Lower Ninth Ward: Presentation of Initial Sketch Plan Alternatives." June 17, 2006. <http://www.nolanrp.com/index.php>. Accessed on July 6, 2006.