Renewal and Disposability: Projects and Narratives of Development and Dispossession in the "New" New Orleans

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RENEWAL AND DISPOSABILITY: PROJECTS AND NARRATIVES OF DEVELOPMENT AND DISPOSSESSION IN THE “NEW” NEW ORLEANS

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Abstract

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by

Allison Padilla-Goodman

Advisor: Professor Robert C. Smith

When much of the physical landscape of New Orleans was destroyed with Hurricane Katrina, expedited change and a need to redefine the city’s future rushed in. The “new” New Orleans would be decisively different: it would be change-oriented, optimistic, and a leader in progressive reform movements. Discourse around post-Katrina New Orleans was focused on making New Orleans “better than before” and becoming a national leader for cutting-edge urban renewal. On-the-ground change mirrored this discourse, as the city’s institutional landscape was dismantled and reconfigured along lines of privatization and newness as the trend of “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey, 2005) blanketed the city. To create this new city, a narrative of an ideal new resident was necessary to embody this change and represent the city’s future. I refer to this ideal in this dissertation as the “Renewers” who are young, idealistic, recent college graduates working in justice-oriented professions to be a part of the movement for urban renewal that has swept New Orleans. These Renewers further and justify the narrative of reform, as they represent the ideal future of the developing city. At the same time, their narrative completely excludes the narrative of many New Orleanians who are being left behind by renewal. These residents, whom I refer to as the “Disposables” of post-Katrina New Orleans, live and function everyday amongst the ghosts of neoliberal reform as they struggle to not be defined
by what seems to be a planned dispossession of their lives. Through years of ethnographic research in public schools in New Orleans with a non-profit organization, I show the effects of urban renewal and reform on those excluded from the narrative. This has fundamentally altered the sense of place and local identity of New Orleans, as the city relies on Disposable’s cultural contributions and Renewer’s economic and social status.
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To the students at the Academy and other disappearing or dispossessed institutions in New Orleans and beyond: you have strength and you have power. I hope that you define my future New Orleans.
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CHAPTER 1

Renewal and Disposability in the “New” New Orleans

Differing Narratives of Renewal

“People are like really excited and energetic about what they want to make happen and just big dreams! I can feel that, like that energy in the city, a whole lot.”

Gerard (2009)

Gerard, a young artist from Virginia who moved to New Orleans within the past year on a whim, explains how excited he is to be living in New Orleans. As he shows me around his new multifunctional art space, he explains that unlike in his hometown in Virginia, he senses an “immense energy” towards renewal that inspires him and has him almost breathless in describing his excitement about life in New Orleans. Upon arriving to the city, he was able to immediately latch on to an inspirational project: the renovation and reconstruction of a communal commercial-residential space for artists. He and two friends luckily came across a “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity” to convert an old decrepit downtown building into a functional, cutting-edge art space. The three-story building with an outdoor space sits on the streetcar route, enabling residents of the building to stare at the stars in the backyard while hearing the clang of the streetcar bell. I completely agree with him when he describes it as having a “magical feeling.” Gerard and his partners have added to the whimsy of the space with their own personal additions, like the handmade Yellow Brick Road they have constructed in the backyard that leads to a Native American teepee for backyard camping and evening hang-outs with “cheap wine and roasting marshmallows.”
Gerard does not have a full-time job, but is able to live modestly off of his art sales and occasional street performances. He frequently refers to how inspired he is by the resilience of the people of New Orleans to rebuild from a disaster and loves to hear their Katrina stories. These stories fuel him to strive for something “bigger than himself”, as he sees being in New Orleans as a great life opportunity to be a part of a movement. He feels very welcomed in New Orleans, “in a very spiritual way,” as opportunities unfold around him regularly and he sees open spaces for his own contribution to make a difference in the city. He is proud to be a part of the movement to repopulate and reform post-Katrina New Orleans. His hope and excitement about the city join a current that forms the city’s larger narrative of renewal and optimism in the future of a reborn city.

* * * * *

The students at the Academy for Last Resorts (an alternative school for students who have been expelled from, become too old for, or failed out of a regular public school) feel like they are purposefully excluded from post-Katrina urban renewal and that they have no future in the “new” New Orleans. One day, our discussion group was talking about their school. They were energetically discussing the teachers’ lack of effort, the differences between other schools across the city, and their complete lack of learning. In the middle of the lively group discussion, two students reacted to the depressing state of New Orleans public education and showed how their sad school has made them feel hopeless and like the world wants them to fail:

Raschelle: I just don’t care anymore.

Darnell: See, you gave up. That’s what they want you to do. They want you to give up…It’s a trap. That’s all it is, a trap. Once you like it [the alternative school], it’s like “yeah I don’t wanna go to a real school.”

Darnell and Raschelle (2009)
Darnell and Raschelle are two students who feel stuck in what is left of the non-charter public school system in New Orleans. They understand that their schooling is not about academic achievement or growth at all but rather about containment. They pass most of their days at school just hanging out in the school yard, bored and uninspired. The school is crumbling, gray and lacks many basic resources for a school—blackboards, a library, glass on every window (rather than a garbage bag), etc. It looks like it has been through a disaster and acts as a constant reminder to students of what is not invested in them. This campus is the third one to house the Academy in two years, and the school has gradually consumed other alternative schools in the city that have closed. Students have been shuffled around between schools and buildings so much that many students have difficulty recounting their recent educational history when asked.

Rather than engaging in any real classroom learning, these students learn at the Academy that their hometown is being structured for their failure and everyone around them expects disposability of their future. They tell me that they want to learn things like science and literature, and instead the number one lesson that they learn in school is to watch their backs in a constantly violent environment. More than anything, they discover that they cannot escape any mistakes made earlier in life that may have landed them in an alternative school, as getting out and/or getting an education seems more unattainable every day. They understand very clearly that their despair is a “trap:” that many people in post-Katrina New Orleans would prefer for them to “give up” and either leave the city altogether or die in its violent crime. Students like Raschelle who decide to not care anymore follow their constructed path in the divided city, what they see as their “destiny.” They understand that their existence is not part of any conception of the future of their city, as they see their lives being left behind by renewal and their ability to dream extinguished.
This dissertation is about the differing narratives of urban renewal in post-Katrina New Orleans and their on-the-ground ramifications for people and institutional development. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, a narrative of an idealized future New Orleans has been actively promoted on the backs of people working hard for institutional reform and philanthropy. Anything or anyone who has not been seen as part of the ideal “new” New Orleans is excluded from the rebuilding narrative and circumscribed out of the future vision of the city. This narrative has been supported by the reality of change, where rebuilding focuses on building progressive new institutional structures despite their cost to local residents who they neglect and/or leave out. Guided by ideas of hope, resiliency and optimism, this narrative has defined who is included and excluded from rebuilding the city’s future.

Katrina: Rebounding from Unwanted Symbolism

Although New Orleans avoided the “worst-case scenario” of a direct hit from Hurricane Katrina in August of 2005, the city certainly experienced a disaster: the levees surrounding the city broke in many places, allowing the surrounding bodies of water to flood into the city. With 80% of the city underwater for at least two weeks, hundreds of thousands of people were immediately homeless, jobless, and traumatized. Over one hundred thousand were stranded in the destroyed city for several days, vividly depicted across the world on television and computer screens as they sweated, starved, and grew desperate and despairing. The majority of these people were poor and African-American, and as shown very clearly on the news for the whole world to see, the government neglected their needs.
The intensity of the tragedy motivated millions of people to invest their time, energy, and resources into helping the victims of Hurricane Katrina (Eckel, Grossman, and Milano, 2007). People world-wide were shocked by the horrific images of the event, and were stunned that this could even occur in the United States, a global superpower that prides itself on spreading democracy and assistance to those in need. Now the residents of the United States were in need, and the images of this need were detailed and unforgiving: bloated bodies floating in brackish water, stranded emaciated pets on lonely balconies, children desperate for attention on rooftops, deceased elderly hunched over in wheelchairs, swarms of people clamoring at passing cars or stampeding onto buses, body bags. The tragedy was palpable and heart-breaking.

New Orleans had become a symbol of intense hidden poverty so prevalent in the United States and of the government’s inability to care for its own. What happened during Katrina in New Orleans was a national failure and at a key political moment: the U.S. was actively engaged in the War on Terror under President Bush, a controversial ugly pursuit that necessitated almost blind confidence in American governance. The government’s response to Katrina challenged this confidence, as people world-wide furthered the questioning of American political intentions and the government’s capabilities. Especially as interest in the destroyed city was worldwide and strong, it was evident that the government and city needed to rebound, regain its confidence, and reinvent its vision to the world.

In the wake of Katrina, the energy and discourse around New Orleans conveniently turned to focus on rebuilding a city that was “better than before” (Landrieu, 2010a). Due to a web of complicated reasons including a struggling economy, a long history of racial oppression and inequality, political inaction at the state and municipal level, poorly built housing, and the low quality of public schools, pre-Katrina New Orleans was a very difficult place for low-
income residents. Poverty rates in New Orleans have long soared well above national averages: in 2000, the poverty rate in New Orleans was 28% compared to the 12% national average. Poor residents have been more geographically and racially concentrated than other cities in the U.S., making New Orleans one of the more racially segregated metropolitan areas in the nation (Hartman and Squires, 2006). The city’s unemployment rates were particularly high when Katrina hit: 50% higher than the national average (Jones-DeWeever and Hartmann, 2006). Life for low-income residents in pre-Katrina New Orleans was challenging, as people struggled daily against inequality, ineffective public institutions, and bleak prospects for progress. These problems made it very difficult for low-income residents to be resilient to a shock as big as Katrina and have made the rebuilding of their lives heightened by vulnerability and insecurity.

Much attention and financial resources were committed from all over the world to bringing New Orleans “back.” Yet, this post-Katrina city would be decisively different from its pre-Katrina misery projected worldwide during the storm: it would be progressive, optimistic and successful. An expediency of renewal would dominate the reconstruction of the city, as Katrina presented a perceived “clean slate” opportunity to create a better city than before. Post-Katrina New Orleans would strive to become a symbol of resiliency, modernity and the power of agency to supersede all structural obstacles. Urban renewal and the rebuilding of a New Orleans identity blanketed the city.

*Tragedy or Opportunity?*

Even while residents were being evacuated and the city remained under water, discussions began immediately as to how long it would take New Orleans to rebuild and if this was even possible. Projections varied, although many “experts” claimed that it would take at
least ten years for the city to be “back to normal” (Unified New Orleans Plan, 2007). Life in post-Katrina New Orleans was hard, as most residents lived without order, resources, and regular communications for many months. Nothing resembled any sort of “normal” life, and people dealt with the consistent challenges of mental and emotional traumas one after another. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) became part of the vernacular of New Orleans where the disorder was ten times more likely than for other Americans (ABC.com, 2007). Despair for many set in.

While many people were overwhelmed by the enormity of the disaster, others quickly embarked on the work of rebuilding the city. The rebuilding process has been deeply engraved with political and social biases with many different motivational stances colliding in one project. Those looking to take part in the rebuilding have included: first responders trying to rebuild their communities and livelihoods themselves from the ground up; grassroots community organizers, both local and from a far; local politicians, who are mired in the need to protect their political reputation in an unstable environment; multi-national corporations looking to profit off of the billions of dollars in contracts up for grabs; Latino migrants from abroad or from other American cities who were eager to fill the plentiful and dirty construction job opportunities; and numerous volunteers, religious groups, and non-profit organizations from all over the world who wanted to try to correct the situation in New Orleans that they viewed so horrifically from their living rooms on television. Opportunity—financial, political and moral—abounded in the destroyed, overwhelmed city.

Post-Katrina New Orleans was a “perfect storm” opportunity to push a platform of institutional reform, as Naomi Klein very accurately describes as disaster capitalism (Klein 2008). The majority of the physical landscape of New Orleans was swept away with the flood waters, leaving a physical “clean slate” for enacting new policies, redefining institutions and
creating a new vision of the city. The mindset about construction has changed, and people began thinking less about restoration and more about opportunity. Financial opportunities abound in post-Katrina New Orleans development, and it felt “as if the sky were filled with money” (Flaherty, 2010: 121). The financial opportunities are framed as for “the greater good” to reform pre-Katrina struggling institutions—like schools and medical facilities. Since many of these institutions were in bad shape before Katrina, this has been a relatively easy message to gain acceptance and reform has progressed with little critical inquiry. It has seemed that many institutions could not get worse than their pre-Katrina version—hence the image of poverty and racism depicted during the evacuation—and so any efforts to make them better have been warmly welcomed.

Yet, access to development opportunism has not been even as some people feel as if they could easily be a part of rebuilding while others are excluded from the process. An excerpt from my field notes illustrates some of this division:

Walking down the cereal aisle of the grocery store today, I overheard three African-American women, all about my age and with children in tow (like me), talking about their schools. Their conversation gets heated, and their voices raise in volume to match the emotion. They talk about which school to move their child to, and which schools have treated their children well and given them opportunity. One of them loudly exclaims in a critical tone as she gets angry about her children’s current school, “What do they really care about our children? They already got their grant!” All of the others chime in in agreement, shouting their responses over each other’s voices that it was difficult to hear. I realized that people hear the word “grant” a lot in New Orleans these days, as grants seem to run our schools, hospitals, public works projects, and were a big part of people’s evacuation experiences with FEMA and Red Cross grants. These women seemed to be angry though: they felt that a school that had not serviced their child well was getting all kinds of money that they didn’t understand or have access to. They felt powerless to keep that school accountable because the school already had received public money.

February 2011
People understand that there are opportunities around, but most feel shut out of the possibilities to participate in them. While many are able to grab hold of and participate in rebuilding, others are left behind to be powerless objects of it.

These two framings of a post-disaster city—an oppressive tragedy and an enriching opportunity—have directed the rebuilding process, both discursively and in everyday life. This has resulted in very different feelings for those living in the rebuilding city. For some people, the post-storm period has been overwhelmed by misery and surrounded by death with the accumulation of challenges that are additional to those normally associated with poverty: untreated trauma from the storm, the lack of opportunities to publicly participate in the rebuilding process, being shut out of job markets, and the destruction of many key public resources. For others, the opportunities available to make money, start new lives, or be active agents of social change inspire actors with hope and a vision of a rejuvenated rebirth of a great city. For both, narratives take on more than just a discursive role as the rebuilding of the city and people’s lives follow a strongly bifurcated path in everyday life.

*Pre-Post Hyphen*

Hurricane Katrina was certainly the seminal event in the city’s recent history. When one talks about the hurricane, the storm or Katrina in New Orleans, there seems to be a naturalized consensus that one refers to the event of Hurricane Katrina and the couple of weeks after the storm when the city was still filled with water. These events—both the natural storm and the man-made disaster—become semantically intertwined, even though most residents recognize the unnaturalness of the disaster.
The storm defines most aspects of daily life in New Orleans still today (this writing in 2012, almost seven years after the storm). Even in areas of the city that look back to normal, a day does not go by when you do not here someone make reference to the storm. The majority of the language is in terms of “pre-Katrina” and “post-Katrina” experiences. This language implies a real difference in life in the city before and after the storm, but so much so that there is very little continuity in experiences between pre- and post-Katrina New Orleans. Post-Katrina New Orleans is constructed as a completely different city than pre-Katrina New Orleans and can only be considered in this context. On the surface, this is logical and helps in defining and categorizing experiences. However, if everything is defined in terms of pre- and post- as two completely separate experiences, it is easy to frame the post-storm city as one that is completely different and built anew after the storm, not as a city that has always existed with its own history of experiences that are respected through reconstruction.

This pre-post storm hyphen is one that certainly needs to be worked (Fine, 1998). What is missing from this space in the middle created by the hyphen is an understanding of and respect for continuity of community. While the storm presented an obvious interruption of the stability of community and a shift in agenda, it did not erase a city’s history and these experiences carry into the post-Katrina city. Post-Katrina New Orleans is by no means a post-racial place (Associated Press, 2010), if such a thing even exists, nor is it a place that erases previous financial inequalities and political distrust. It is also not a place that is unaffected by pre-storm community strengths, cultural vibrancy, and social traditions. Post-Katrina New Orleans is not a new, completely different place. There is no such thing as the “new” New Orleans, as many looking to promote the city label it (and I will often nod to this discourse by using it in my writing), and the pre-post Katrina hyphen is not such a distinct, dividing one as many assume.
Post-Katrina New Orleans is overlaid on pre-Katrina’s landscape of experiences and thus includes all of these. The lack of recognition of these pre-Katrina experiences, issues, and values is perhaps at the root of irresponsible opportunism in the reconstruction process. All opportunistic actors, no matter the basis of their motivation, tend to submit to the hyphen and ignore the necessity of attending to the community’s continuity.

Renewers and Disposables

Creating a post-Katrina local urban identity has been the central part of the city’s rebuilding project. Some people in the post-disaster city are encouraged and celebrated to be a part of the “new” New Orleans for the perceived hope and optimism that they bring to the rebuilding city. These people feel welcomed and inspired by the city, as they embody a vigorous energy of renewal that is integrated into the redefining of the city’s institutional landscape. They form the model and give inertia to the process of urban renewal. Oftentimes, they deliberately and proudly represent urban renewal, outwardly claiming their contribution to the city’s future. These people who promote the renewal of New Orleans in the name of progress, change, and optimism are referred to as the “Renewers” throughout this dissertation because they are generally the fuel for the process of urban renewal. They celebrate an idea of having a fresh new start to build something great and to be a part of such an important, timely project. They create and represent an ideal “new” resident (Oza, 2006) that is used to justify progress and privatization while delineating who are those ideal residents and who are left out. They represent and fuel the wholesale reform of the public in post-Katrina New Orleans.

Simultaneously, other residents feel the weight of pre-disaster poverty coupled with the neglect of on-going hurricane-related problems like the difficulty and segregating effects of
educational transitions, a lack of mental health care, and an affordable housing crisis. As most of the city’s institutions are being recreated along lines of progressiveness and privatization, many people are forced to deal with what is left behind in the transitioning and struggling city. Many of these institutions are still experimental or have a 5-10 year plan whose results are still in question; those who are dependent on those institutions during this transitional period are the most vulnerable to losing hope in post-Katrina New Orleans. It is seen most strongly in schools, where an entire generation is being labeled as discardable in the name of progressing to a sustainable education system. Their stories of schools that appear structured to stomp out their dreams and lost childhoods rarely make the headlines, which only cover the violence that results from their in-betweenness and despair. They are not seen as part of the promotable idealized New Orleans vision and so are swept under the rug and left to disappear. Rather than forming a narrative of hope and future, their’s is a narrative of neglect and abandonment. Henry Giroux (2006) discusses the politics of disposability signified by post-Katrina New Orleans and its media coverage, as Katrina signifies “the consequence of a systemic, violent form of social engineering in which those populations in the United States marginalized by race and class are now considered disposable—that is, simply collateral damage in the construction of a neoliberal order.” I refer to these people who have been historically excluded from processes of development and who are feeling this pain exponentially in post-Katrina New Orleans as the “Disposables.”

This dissertation seeks to specifically look at how the vision of New Orleans as a symbol of renewal is experienced by these different actors as they embody differing stories of urban renewal. What effects do these narratives have on everyday life, and how does it feel to have your existence celebrated or ignored? An aspirational capacity (Appadurai, 2004) is unevenly
accessible, as Renewers thrive off of the power to dream and Disposables lose hope in their future and have trouble seeing tomorrow. The process of renewing New Orleans is not a clean participatory process, even though many interpret it to be so. As we can see from the differences between Gerard’s comments and Darnell and Raschelle’s conversation, people view their treatment in the city as very different: as welcoming and a hotbed for positive energy, or as a trap for failure that encloses them. Gerard’s excitement to be in a city with a stated purpose of re-creating itself (as established by Mayor Mitch Landrieu’s 2010 inaugural address) spills over into the streets that are filled with community organizers, artists and teachers. These people coming to New Orleans from across the nation are repopulating the city, and their presence is praised and celebrated as a sign of the post-disaster city’s success. These Renewers are justifying and amplifying the city’s narrative of renewal, and their inspiration is contagious to anyone looking to see New Orleans’ resiliency.

That narrative of renewal is also used to justify the re-segregation of post-Katrina New Orleans. In catering to hope, those who do not fit the bill are ignored and disposed of. This has important repercussions, particularly on those who are growing up and finding their life’s direction under the enclosing categorizations. Students like Darnell and Raschelle spend their days fighting off pressures to fail, lose hope, and hurt themselves and/or others. These pressures are tremendous, enveloping, and difficult to escape. Their story is not one of renewal; it is one of learning what it means to be unwanted and Disposable in their hometown. Sometimes, they are able to find outlets to engage in the often neglected struggle against renewal and dispossession, but oftentimes they are not.

This feeling has created another side of New Orleans that is not so idealistic: as people lose hope in any future and, like many of my students would say, “don’t know if they’ll be here
tomorrow,” violence and crime become an accessible alternative. People feel disposable and unwanted, pushing them to act accordingly, and see much less that is structurally offered for their future. In feeling as if everything around them wants to get rid of them, they frequently act like they are disposable and can risk their lives for nothing. Their propensity towards violence is resonating, as dealing with the city’s violent crime problem dominates local politics.

This obviously does not follow a vision of hope and idealism, and so the image of the city teeters between a new progressive ideal and a backwards city unable to grasp its problem with violence. Crime has sky-rocketed in post-Katrina New Orleans, and residents report it as their most significant concern with life in post-Katrina New Orleans (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010). Politicians and criminal justice agencies do not hesitate to discuss their fight against crime in public and have worked to create an appearance of transparency. Yet, their words do not match their actions, even as a 2011 US Department of Justice investigation into the New Orleans Police Department documents gross police misconduct and civil rights violations (United States Department of Justice, 2011). Violence becomes the frequent by-product of the bifurcated narratives and tipping point for the city’s post-disaster success. Violence arises out of the relative deprivation of hope inspired by seeing an exciting city built and knowing one’s exclusion from that vision.

Specifically in post-Katrina New Orleans, it becomes evident that an emotional stance—hope—can actually be used as a tool. It can be cultivated and encouraged, or dangled in front of a people and denied. Hope is distributable, and especially after Katrina when energies focused on rebuilding and starting anew, hope can be immensely powerful in justifying actions. In post-Katrina New Orleans, we see a city whose entire population desperately searches for and clings to hope. Some people’s hope is celebrated very publicly and creates a spirit that guides much of
the city’s future direction. Simultaneously, this hope is appropriated by politicians, the media, economic projects, and urban development plans that use it to define who that hope includes and excludes. Those excluded are denied the opportunity for hope at all and are left to drown in the disastrous conditions of a struggling destroyed city.

Many have used “hope” to justify actions. Key organizations have utilized the concept of hope—particularly the idea of constructing and maintaining hope and optimism in a city overwhelmed with destruction—as the key to validating their work and have published it in their reports, websites, and mission statements. The American Red Cross, for example, titled their report on their Hurricane Katrina response as “Bringing Help, Building Hope” and focused on the importance of their work in lifting residents’ spirits. Language of optimism and hope abounded when the city’s professional football team, the Saints, won the Superbowl in 2010 (PBS Newshour, 2010). The story was classic and one that people wanted to symbolize the city itself: an underdog team with a history of total failure, sweeping the Superbowl with courageous and bold moves, all the while uplifted by a unified and loudly supportive fan base. The Saints have been heralded as bringing a new age of hope to the city, and many have claimed the team’s successes as the key to the city’s recent progress. Reports of the five year anniversary of the storm from a variety of sources—NGO’s, media outlets, governmental reports—all focus on promoting a decisive hope in the city’s future. An overwhelming image of a hopeful post-disaster city emerges, even if the story on the ground does not fully match.

Contextualizing Reform’s Dispossession

The tragic state of New Orleans’ pre-Katrina economy—indicated by the city’s poverty rate that was more than double the national average (27.9% in New Orleans versus 12.4% in the
United States) and median household incomes well below the nation (a median of $27,133 in New Orleans versus $41,994 in the United States) (Census Bureau, 2000)—needed changing. Yet, change had been hard in a city so rooted in tradition, culture, and sense of place. There have been many moments in recent New Orleans history where the community has united against strong forces of external economic development, particularly ones that have been primary emblems of American dominance of global economic integration (like Starbucks, Walmart, and Borders Books). While New Orleanians have wanted better job opportunities, lower poverty rates, and a higher quality of life, they have not been willing to sacrifice their staunch sense of place and local character. Change had been hard in pre-Katrina New Orleans, and there had been very few success stories of reform movements having any impact in the city before the storm.

Katrina provided an opportunity to change everything as the city was being physically wiped away. In the midst of the devastation, many public figures were talking about the storm as the opportunity to change New Orleans. Louisiana Representative Richard Baker stated in The Wall Street Journal, “We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did.” President Bush made similarly incongruent comments about the opportunity arising out of tragedy and rubble. Many prominent Christian leaders spoke outwardly about Katrina being the supposed opportunity to wash the city’s sin away, and the city and country had been punished by God for stances on issues like abortion and equal rights in regards to sexuality. Arne Duncan, the Secretary of Education, said that Hurricane Katrina was “the best thing that happened to the education system in New Orleans.” His national political priorities were able to be realized in New Orleans where charter schools, school closures, and decentralized accountability have dominated the national educational landscape. New Orleans suddenly became the convenient birthplace for wholesale educational reform and the its model is now
being replicated elsewhere. Many leaders have been quick to throw around the opportunities created out of Katrina, and the push to create something better than pre-Katrina New Orleans out of the disaster.

While much of the institutional reform that took place in the immediate aftermath of Katrina had begun before the storm in a piecemeal, slower pace, Katrina became the excuse and opening to adjust the path of reform. In typical disaster capitalist fashion (Klein, 2007), Hurricane Katrina was discussed as presenting a “clean slate” opportunity—even though the landscape of New Orleans was never really “cleaned” of its history nor of its social and cultural norms—for those seeking to make profit and political gain out of reform and philanthropic movements. Enormous and swift reform took advantage of the disaster and took over the entire city landscape at once. Everything changed: schools, familiar institutions like hospitals and community centers, neighborhoods, and demographics. Pushed in the name of desperation and dire need, institutional reform quite easily took over New Orleans and created opportunity out of crisis. New Orleans was in a state of emergency, and any change was discussed as progress.

New Orleans has become the sweet example of disaster capitalism: neoliberal reform taking over with little to no resistance because of a real or created state of disaster. The privatization and directional reform was able to take over under the guise of “fixing” a problem for the greater good, and because of the rock-bottom state of the city, these reforms were seen as urgent, necessary, and a step forward. New Orleans has been discussed as the testing ground for many big reform movements. Most of these experiments have been widely celebrated, like the charter school takeover of New Orleans public education and the replacement of low-income housing developments with mixed income subdivisions surrounded by national chain commercial developments. These changes have brought a lot of positive press to the city, like
being named as one of Bloomberg’s top 12 Boomtowns in the United States (Bloomberg, 2013). New Orleans has become the national model for privatization, as other cities across the country look for other disasters to help them enact swift reform. Cities like Chicago and Detroit have recently claimed crisis to push their reform movements along the model of what happened in New Orleans.

The reform movements generate urgency and an assumed need by operating in the name of urban renewal. Spaces that were once public and easily accessible to all residents are being replaced by commercial corridors, mixed income housing complexes, and selective admissions schools. For many people in New Orleans, these are seen as “upgrades” that make the city more liveable and attractive, and this is especially true for young professionals like the Renewers. They find more spaces to enjoy life, feel safe, and find meaningful work. At the same time, others are finding that their post-Katrina landscape has become increasingly narrowed as they are excluded—either through exclusionary admissions policies, zero tolerance policing, and/or being priced out of their neighborhoods—and pushed into enclosed spaces that are labeled as disposable. This relegation of a segment of New Orleanians to that which is being left behind is a great example of what David Harvey (2005) calls “accumulation by dispossession.” An entire segment of New Orleans has been stripped of their right to the city and to ownership of cultural and social institutions as neoliberal reform and urban renewal sweep the city.

Change has become the battle cry in post-Katrina New Orleans, and renewal is celebrated as people talk about building a New Orleans that was “better than before.” Many New Orleanians are very proud of the pioneering, do-it-yourself attitude to rebuilding and reconstruction, as many people have taken rebuilding their lives into their own hands rather than waiting for another slow government response like that during the storm’s evacuation. There is
also a dominating accentuation of the optimism in the future New Orleans. An urban narrative of a progressive, hopeful city is pushed to mirror and open space for dramatic institutional reform. A “new” New Orleans is being redesigned and built after Katrina, and this ideal refashioned city is a place that can be a model for the rest of the world of the potential for urban renewal and progressive reform. This narrative, however, largely neglects and excludes anyone that does not fit that “ideal:” anyone who relies on public institutions for support; anyone who represents a preference to the old New Orleans; and anyone who is not hopeful or a part of a renewing city. This is a huge part of post-Katrina New Orleans as many spaces are not being redeveloped or are disappearing from what’s left of the “public.” This narrative of disposability is rarely recognized, and this exclusion makes those living a dispossessed livelihood feel even more ploughed over by urban renewal and excluded by reform.

There is a dominant narrative being fabricated in post-Katrina New Orleans of a new city guided by hope and optimism. With this dominant narrative, the city appears heroic and strong: a place that by its own volition has been able to rise above the rubble and become a model for the benefits of hard work, undying commitment, and progressive reform. This narrative is in direct contrast to the needy, “third world” city that was projected for the world to see during the Katrina evacuation, which called into question the United States’ ability to care for its own while it invaded and occupied the Middle East out of diplomacy and intervention. The narrative of the new New Orleans represents an image of contemporary America under the Obama administration: one that rides on a platform of hope and idealism (Bonilla-Silva, 2010).

This narrative is embodied by the “ideal” new New Orleanians that represent the desired new city. Young, professional, educated, idealistic Renewers are moving to New Orleans (or returning back to New Orleans), and represent a new era of New Orleans leadership and
demographics. These Renewers are coming to New Orleans to do good and give back to a community, and with these intentions, they embody a highly valued and covertly coopted element of neoliberal reform policy. Blanketed in the name of social justice, educational equity, and dignity of living conditions, these Renewers are helping to push neoliberal privatizing reform across the city that irresponsibly dispossesses any important segment of New Orleanians. These Renewers become the emblem of the “new” New Orleans and help recreate the city’s new place-based identity, a central step in neoliberal accumulation (Oza, 2006; Federici, 2004; Mies, 1986). The Renewer narrative even furthers the work of Renewers, who find the narrative of progress and reform exciting and attractive. They see New Orleans as a wonderland canvas for their work, and they are even further motivated by the excitement of the city’s change and their becoming the centerpiece of it. New Orleans comes to be seen as a place where they can make anything happen, and their pioneering and philanthropic attitude is celebrated as part of the “ideal” post-Katrina New Orleanian. As an ideal resident becomes defined and pushed as the emblem of the “new” New Orleans, any who do not fit that ideal are labeled disposable to the future of the city.

Disposability comes to be structured into institutions—especially in those that are left behind by renewal—as a slow violence (Nixon, 2011) is used to eliminate post-Katrina residents who use public institutions. It is seen strongly in the example of education reform, where schools are dramatically shifted around each semester as new schools open, other schools are closed, schools are merged, and schools change name and management—an almost perfect realization of what Harvey (2004) calls “moving the problem around.” Students and teachers are shoved around with this transitioning, and the school facilities and culture come to reflect this disposability. Getting a quality education in post-Katrina New Orleans comes to be seen as an
impossible fact of living in New Orleans, and Disposable youth thus feel the effects of erasures (Ayala and Galletta, 2012) on their connection to their hometown. As space is made for the Renewers to be the new “ideal” New Orleanian, the Disposables understand their being uprooted and dispossessed.

As they feel their future and hope enclosed by the structures around them, Disposables are haunted everyday by the ghosts of dispossession (Gordon, 2008). They feel the ghosts of their beloved hometown that is renewing around them and without them, and the impact of being excluded and left behind lays heavy on youth in disappearing institutions. Their reactions have ramifications across the city, even on Renewers who often work with them in schools and hospitals or are in search of a world without “their” problems of violence and poverty. Disposables lose their aspirational capacity (Appadurai, 2004) and come to see New Orleans as the root of all of their problems.

New Orleans and its strong sense of place come to be redefined along the narrative of renewal and reform. Yet, because New Orleans has been such a bastion of a localized, unique culture and economy—and because Renewers are attracted to New Orleans for its “exotic” character—the redefinition of the city had to occur in a delicate, particular strategy. Celebrating the “local” in New Orleans has thus been exaggerated since Katrina, but particular parts of the local character: doing work for the sake of “defend[ing] New Orleans,” “saving” pieces of New Orleans culture (like its musical heritage), loving heroic stories of New Orleans triumphs (like the football team winning the national championship), and the overuse of symbols of New Orleans culture and heritage (like the fleur-de-lis and brass instruments). Select pieces of the local are reified and heightened as the essence of New Orleans, and they redefine a local identity that is more accessible to Renewers. At the same time, much of this is done without the
Disposables and with more constrictions on their traditional cultural outputs. The “new” New Orleans urban narrative and identity is one that celebrates a newly defined “local” that Renewers can grab hold of and Disposables are left out of.

*Inquiry and Methodology as a Renewer*

As a local New Orleanian who was impacted by Katrina and experienced tremendous personal loss from the storm, doing research about the city’s post-storm direction has felt personally expedient. I have always felt a strong place identity myself, and when Katrina threatened the very future of that place, I became very dedicated to understanding the city’s sustainability and future. After being displaced and then going to graduate school for a couple of years, I quickly moved back home with great expectations for the city and my work in it. I have been a definite Renewer: I wanted to “give back” and be a part of rebuilding; I was filled with hope in the city’s future and was excited about the grassroots energy in residents; and I am young, educated, White, and have always felt emboldened to work against the racial segregation and inequality that felt disappointingly normalized growing up in New Orleans. I moved back to New Orleans after graduate school driven to understand the future of my hometown and the differing stories of those rebuilding it.

Ethnography seemed like the most appropriate methodology: I wanted to be immersed in the different narratives of post-Katrina New Orleans and ethnography allows for understanding how people experience those narratives (*Burawoy, 1991*). I spent several months conducting wide-angle ethnographic research in New Orleans: I attended many public meetings from a variety of groups (governmental, issue-based non-governmental, neighborhood association, etc.); I attended public cultural events; and I spent a lot of time touring the city and visiting each
neighborhood. I took extensive field notes throughout on the content, attendance, security, and surroundings. I also took many photographs of the neighborhoods and people that I later used in some of my analysis.

After about six months of doing wide-angle ethnographic research where I gave much thought to the epistemology of inquiry (Alford, 1998; Gergen and Gergen, 2008; Fine, Tuck, and Zeller-Berkman, 2007), specific issues emerged as key to the city’s narrative. In particular, education and violent crime were highly discussed issues on both a local and national level, as New Orleans has been the testing ground for mass educational reform while also having one of the nationally highest homicide rates. I decided to focus on understanding where these two issues met. I found a great solution that involved action in the community, something that was very important to me as my research was so motivated by my intent to “de-parochialize research” (Appadurai, 2006) done on my hometown. I connected with SilenceIsViolence, a highly visible and politically active non-profit organization in New Orleans that works to increase city-wide discussion about public safety.

I was hired at SilenceIsViolence as their Director of Youth Programs, and my primary project was to create in-school anti-violence themed art classes, or “Peace Clubs,” that were taught by professional artists who have had personal experiences with violence. The Peace Clubs were hosted in several of the most struggling public schools across New Orleans where we would partner with a full-time school teacher and provide content and instruction in their class once a week. In addition to creating the program, establishing agreements with schools, and hiring the artist mentors, my day-to-day role was to support the Peace Clubs and be active in the schools. I spent most of my days in nine very challenging schools: schools that had undergone significant transitions, were unstable and under resourced, and that had high levels of violence
inside the schools or students involved in violence outside of schools. The schools were chosen in collaboration with the Deputy Superintendent of the school district. The majority of students we worked with felt like they lived in a violent neighborhood (70%), knew someone in prison (90%), and had experienced the loss of a loved one to homicide (93%). The students in our schools were going through a lot, and my job was to understand their issues so that the organization could better direct their city-wide work. I spent a lot of time with the students, teachers, and school administrators, diving deeper into understanding the context for these statistics. I became a real fixture at most of the schools, whose upper-level administrators trusted me and included me in staff activities. The principals would often confide in me to learn more about their students’ experiences, and they would invite me to staff meetings and parties.

One school in particular began to really stand out as a key site for deeper investigation. This school—that I call the Academy for Last Resorts in this dissertation—really felt like the last possible place a young person could go before they were completely disposed of. It was an alternative school that sporadically received students from various other schools across the city. The Academy was extremely unstable and had undergone many transitions in the two short years I worked with them: in two years, the school had changed entire missions three times, principals three times, names twice, and campuses twice. As other alternative schools in the city were closed to make way for new charter schools, the Academy subsumed some of their students and staff. This mixture of people was never easy, and they all felt disposable in being shuffled around so much. The Academy barely was recognizable as an educational institution: there was very little teaching or learning going on, and almost everyone at the school had given up on the students (usually including the students themselves). It felt more like a holding center to keep certain students away from the renewal happening in other parts of the city. It was also a school
that felt consumed by violence: either in-school violence, with fights happening several times a day, or out-of-school violence, which Academy students were frequent actors or perpetrators of.

By the principal and counselor’s request, I eventually formed a Peace Club that I ran by myself with a select group of students at the Academy for Last Resorts. It was a discussion group, and we met at least twice a week for an hour with eight students who had diverse backgrounds but all were struggling to be separate from serious violence. We talked about a variety of topics at each meeting, but the conversations almost always ended up with the students releasing their frustrations about their school and city. I became very close with these students, and have kept up with their lives since the conclusion of my field research.

Particularly with my work as a community organizer and researcher simultaneously, this research is inspired and infused with the epistemology of participatory action research (PAR). There are many key elements of the epistemology that were central to my own methodology. First, as my research was done in conjunction with SilenceIsViolence and was to be used to inform the organization’s action plan, my work was much aligned with PAR’s call for the socially relevant and active functionality of research (Fals Borda, 1983; Reason and Bradbury, 2008). My research enabled the strengthening of the Peace Clubs program and the building of new directions in the group’s youth work. Since leaving SilenceIsViolence as an employee, I have joined their Board of Directors to help make decisions in the organization’s direction and development.

In addition, PAR stresses the importance of the reflexivity of the researcher, and openly integrating one’s stance into one’s methodology and analysis (Fine, 1998; Ayala, 2009). PAR questions ideas of insidership and outsidership in defining researcher vis-à-vis participants. While I agree that this is always an important approach, I knew that doing research in my
hometown after experiencing something as traumatic as Katrina was going to be challenging, and it was important to not bury my own experiences and analyses.

My work with SilenceIsViolence gave me an interesting positioning: I was a Renewer working with other Renewers, yet I was surrounded by Disposability and specifically focused on working against it. As a Renewer, I found that teachers, artists, and community organizers across the city were eager to network and collaborate with me and SilenceIsViolence. I spent a lot of time with different Renewers as I worked to understand their motivations, concerns for their participants, and simultaneous elation with life in New Orleans. I would be invited to many Renewer events that were always overflowing with positivity and optimism, and I enjoyed the excitement that they brought for my hometown. At the same time, I was immersed in the lives of the Disposables. Speaking to students all day about their experiences with violence was despairing. I knew many students—some whom I became very close with—who were killed or sent to prison. Seeing the effects of these events on their families, friends, and school community was difficult. I often struggled to reconcile the two worlds of renewal and disposability that I was living in.

Since the conclusion of my field research, I have been working as an upper-level administrator in a new charter school. The school definitely works to be a place of renewal: the schools’ values and mission are focused on hope and hard work, and the staff is almost entirely Renewers (many of whom are young, White, and new to New Orleans). Working in this school and concluding the writing of my findings has been very telling: although my current school looks very different from places like the Academy, I have found the trends in urban post-Katrina bifurcated narratives to be the same. Even in Renewer institutions, differences in Renewer and
Disposable understandings of post-Katrina New Orleans and vision of their future within it deviate and are divisive.

*What Follows*

The case of New Orleans is distinct for many reasons including Katrina’s timing in American overseas warfare, the election of a new president who rode on a platform of hope, the uniqueness of New Orleans’ culture and the strength of its local identity, and its international popularity as a tourist destination. However, what has happened to New Orleans could and is happening elsewhere. Privatization is sweeping nations, and the charter movement is being implemented in cities across the United States based on its “successes” in New Orleans. Disasters strike elsewhere and always have unnatural consequences: the treatment of rebuilding New Orleans follows a trend of disaster capitalism striking in when a clean slate is presented. Because of the horror internationally broadcast of the Katrina evacuation and the backwardsness of one of America’s great cities, what happens to New Orleans represents the United States’ ability to take care of its own and fix problems. The redevelopment of New Orleans is crucial to building international and homegrown trust in the United States and sets the trend for how we deal with disasters in the future. This dissertation is situated within that context and focuses on New Orleans as an important research cite for these larger issues.

This dissertation discusses the creation of a bifurcated narrative and reality of post-Katrina New Orleans and describes what that feels like and becomes to residents. In the following two chapters, I look at the setting of the stage of these narratives in discourse and on-the-ground reality. In Chapter 2, I explore the discourse of renewal and show how the city is discussed as coming back and as a model for progressive development and experimental reform.
I analyze large-level public rhetoric of the future of New Orleans by looking specifically at local media coverage of the rebuilding process and political speeches that set or describe this path. Chapter 3 then dives deeper into the effects of this discourse on the ground, as I describe the immense institutional transitions that have occurred in New Orleans. Many central institutions—public education, health care, real estate and public housing, neighborhood development, and public safety—have all been grossly redesigned and rebuilt, all following a similar path towards privatization and exclusion. These two chapters describe the dominant narrative of New Orleans emerging as a city that has been renewed despite the costs.

The next three chapters look at the micro-level effects of renewal on actors and how they fit into the “new” New Orleans. Specifically, I explore ethnographically what it feels like to be welcomed to New Orleans or labeled Disposable to its future. In Chapter 4, I look at the Renewers and how they build on the momentum for change. They ride on a bulldozing notion of progressive reform through the city’s institutional landscape, and overlap it with hope and optimism for what the city could become. This push for hope in reform excludes many, particularly in the “colorblindness” of development and building an image of the ideal New Orleanian. Renewers are excited about the “new” New Orleans and clearly imagine their futures within the seemingly ideal city. Their narrative is harnessed by public rhetoric and is used to create the vision of the city’s ideal future.

Chapters 5 and 6 analyze the structures and experiences of the Disposables. In Chapter 5, I explore a Disposable institution—the Academy for Last Resorts—and illustrate ethnographically how disposability is being structurally designed and created. In places like the Academy for Last Resorts, New Orleanians are taught to lose hope in their future in New Orleans, devalue their sense of place, and understand that they are not wanted in their hometown.
Chapter 6 looks at the effects of creating a Disposable generation. It looks at how youth at the Academy grow to believe in their own disposability and thus begin to act the part. New Orleans becomes a source of shame for Disposables, and they lose hope in their personal ability to change their lives in the oppressive structures created for them in post-Katrina New Orleans.

In Chapter 7, I look at how the consolidation of a local place-based identity has been a significant part of the city’s rebuilding project. Redefining the local in New Orleans is important because it generates momentum for setting the city’s future. The local in New Orleans has completely changed with Katrina. Now, local identity is more about renewal, reform, and privatization rather than on deeply rooted and old cultural ideals. There are stories of resistance and struggle against neoliberal impositions of defining a “new” New Orleans, and I describe some of these in this chapter. New Orleans has moved from being “third world and proud of it,” as a pre-Katrina ubiquitous slogan classifies, to a symbol of American progress and potential. I have also included a methodological appendix to explain in detail my research methodology for this dissertation. I conducted ethnographic research over several years that was inspired by the epistemology of participatory action research. My research was even further complicated by my well-integrated stance in the project—besides being from New Orleans and experiencing the storm, I also am a Renewer who was working for and with Disposables.

No matter with whom, what surfaces is a story about people who at least want to believe in the future of an unstable city. While it is obvious that the government is not investing what it should or how it should, people in New Orleans just want to believe in something. Some people’s beliefs are amplified, celebrated, eased and facilitated, while others are denied and distracted as they are labeled the troublemakers and criminals. Some are defined as part of the repopulation project and others are labeled as “disposable,” and this is a story of what those
labels feel like and manifest. While one group embraces their label—the Renewers revel in their pride in helping to bring the city back—the other group struggles against theirs, trying to not fill its shoes of being unimportant (and usually seeing little other option). This dissertation hopes to exemplify the authentic need for hope in society, and the disaster that ensues when it is manipulated.
CHAPTER 2

Discourse of a “New” New Orleans

It is time to turn tragedy into triumph. We must vow to create a better New Orleans. We are not rebuilding the city we were. We are creating the city we want to become.

Mayor Mitch Landrieu, Inaugural Address, May 3, 2010

Is New Orleans “Coming Back”? 

Since Katrina, the breeched levees, and the government’s mishandling of the evacuation process, there has been a lot of concern—both on local and national levels—as to whether New Orleans would be able to rebuild after so much tragedy. Although the city seems to have moved well beyond patronizing conversations that were popular right after the storm as to whether New Orleans should even be rebuilt after so much devastation, questions have frequently surfaced about the status of the destroyed city, particularly in the first five years or so after the storm. As a continuous New Orleans resident who has spent a significant amount of time outside of the city, I was always asked the same question by people who were interested in hearing about the city’s recovery from an insider’s perspective: do you think New Orleans is “coming back”? All of my participants—both Renewer and Disposable—also said that they were always asked this question. Yet, it is a complicated question to answer: what is “back”? And how will we ever know if or when we’ve reached it?

Thinking about the status of the rebuilding of New Orleans has been so nuanced. For some people the city feels normal and thriving, while to others it has been enveloped by continuous disasters. I asked the question “do you think New Orleans is coming back?” in all of my interviews. Their answers revealed significant division between Renewers and Disposables.
Renewers unanimously agreed that New Orleans was not only coming back, but was coming back better and more hopeful than the city’s pre-Katrina status. Disposables, on the other hand, had difficulty seeing the city’s future amidst the violence, blight, and structural exclusion and agreed that New Orleans was not coming back.

While answering questions about New Orleans’ rebuilding status is complicated, it does reveal a larger concern over the city’s future. Right after Katrina, the future of New Orleans seemed to be so precarious that people were unsure whether it could recover or not. The stability and motivation of the city were in question. To counter these concerns post-Katrina public discourse took a sharp turn to focus on projecting an image of New Orleans as successful, resilient, and with a die-hard commitment to rebuilding a “new” New Orleans. This is seen in the news media’s coverage of the rebuilding city and in politician’s promotion of renewal and the city’s strengths.

In this chapter, I will look at how New Orleans is discursively promoted as a new, changing city that is “coming back,” a discourse that is reflected on-the-ground in divisive realities. This is an analysis of a larger level of public rhetoric to understand the dominant urban narrative of the city. I will begin by explaining the importance of public discourse to look at the news media’s discussion of the city’s repopulation as the significant deciding factor of whether it is coming back or not. With a content analysis of the city’s most prominent newspaper, I will show that there are two different narratives of discourse emerging about post-Katrina New Orleans’ recovery: one of hope and one of despair. Importantly, this bifurcated narrative, is messaged differently in politics, where the focus has been on projecting a single image of New Orleans’ overwhelming and highly public success. By looking at political speeches after the storm, I will show that political rhetoric has worked to create a dominant narrative of New
Orleans as a triumphant city. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the use of a dominant narrative of a hopeful New Orleans to enact real, on-the-ground changes for an ideal post-Katrina New Orleans. The master narrative of optimistic repopulation, strong renewal, and progressive reform creates a breeding ground for institutional redesign and reform, a topic that is explored in great detail in the next chapter.

Public Rhetoric and Bringing New Orleans “Back”

There have been constant reports in the local media outlets of current population counts and investigative surveys of the city’s rebuilding progress. Residents have been inundated with messages about “how well” the city is doing, which neighborhoods are “coming back,” and who is moving from and moving back to New Orleans. These big talking points create deep concern and great hopes among those who have moved back or dream of moving back.

The city’s rebuilding status and repopulation numbers became vernacular in the city in the first few years after the storm. Every day in the newspaper, there was a new report on something that indicated the city’s rebuilding status: population numbers, neighborhood services like garbage pick-up and street lights, number of blighted properties, school enrollment numbers, number of construction permits, etc. Everyone seemed aware of “how well” the city was doing in terms of numbers, and people everywhere would talk about the implications of this for their post-Katrina lives. For example, in neighborhood and city-wide planning meetings, speakers would always cite the current city population numbers and use the statistics to justify a need for service in a specific neighborhood or a reason to question that service’s use if numbers were low.

While discussions of population numbers have been thrown at residents as ominous predictors and reflections of their everyday experiences, they also have played a large role in
determining the availability and access to basic services that facilitate their ability to reconstruct their lives in New Orleans. If a neighborhood was perceived as “coming back,” it often meant that it did “come back” as residents and businesses became eager to invest in the neighborhood. The converse was also true: neighborhoods that have been seen as struggling are rarely invested in or seen as places worth focusing on. Neighborhoods with people that are talked about as “inspiring” and revitalizing the destroyed city are neighborhoods that feel alive, with a strong pulse of commercial and residential activity. These neighborhoods have festivals, busy commercial corridors, active neighborhood association meetings and a strong representation of rebuilt homes. These neighborhoods provide access to anything residents might need (grocery stores, medical facilities, bars and coffee shops, shopping, etc.) and have very few blighted homes left. Many areas of New Orleans—Broadmoor, Lakeview, the Warehouse District, and Uptown—have seen a resurgence in their population numbers, property values, and commercial development. These areas feel renewed since Katrina and as hot spots for the city’s future. Non-ideal neighborhoods—those with people who are neglected from the rebuilding process or who are seen as too dependent on government assistance—look unappealing and unsuccessful in rebuilding. They lack access to almost everything, and some still feel like wastelands of destruction. These areas—like New Orleans East and the 7th ward—are still filled with Katrina destruction and little commercial development.

Anywhere, discourse has an important effect on ideology and the realization of that ideology (Van Dijk, 1998). In a city like post-Katrina New Orleans that has been given the opportunity to rebuild itself “from scratch” this is even more the case. As discussions ensued around the reconstruction, repopulation, and revitalization of the city and how best to pronounce and accomplish a plan, residents were scattered across the country making important decisions
about their futures. For months (and sometimes longer), pre-Katrina residents were glued to every news release, political speech, population count, safety report, and resource re-establishment. For many people, the question was “should I come back” to a post-disaster city that may take years to rebuild, which entails having to deal with less-than-convenient living conditions. Many people had the option to return or decide to start their lives again elsewhere, with ease of finding new employment, housing, and schools for their children. For many others, the question was “can I come back”—people who wanted to return, but did not have available means to do so. This included interest in schools open for their children, affordable housing, access to affordable goods, functioning public transportation, access to critical health care, and funds to establish necessities like electricity and water (which also greatly increased in price after the storm). Especially during the first year after the storm, the rate of return for Black and White residents varied tremendously (see Figure 1). Re-establishing lives occurred much more quickly for White residents, as many of the facilities and resources in majority White neighborhoods were the first to be rebuilt. Majority black neighborhoods appeared to not only take longer but were being depicted as potentially without a future. In making decisions whether to come back to New Orleans or not, the decision was much easier for White residents.

In this context, discourse from the city’s leaders and news media has been highly influential in persuading people to come back (Voorhees, Vick and Perkins, 2007). People wanted answers as to how to guide their lives, and they were concerned about their homes, their city, and their futures. Especially as many residents were perhaps living outside of the city, they wanted to hear and be told how the city was doing and what life was like. Even for those who had returned to New Orleans, messages about the city’s status have been very important: for those able to return, life was consumed by fixing one’s home and reestablishing life. It became
easy for these people to be so focused on themselves and the islands of their life that they would be oblivious as to what was happening in the rest of the city, although they wanted and needed to know if their efforts at rebuilding were worth it or were fruitless. People relied on the news, and especially the local news, for answers and updates. The media’s pivotal role in building and reproducing ideology is certainly not new (Van Dijk, 1987; Van Dijk, 1998; Henry and Tator, 2002), and it is powerful in hegemonically directing the vision of the city’s rebuilding path and how individuals may fit into it.

Figure 1: Uneven Likelihood of Returning (%)


Another aspect of the media’s role in rebuilding merits highlighting: its ability to attract new residents to the city. Many of my Renewer participants discussed the media’s role in their coming to New Orleans. They saw images of the city’s destruction on their televisions and computer screens during the storm and either felt moved to action out of empathy or curious as to the reality of the city’s situation. Many people talked about coming to New Orleans because they wanted to see the destroyed city for themselves, wanted to help fix a situation that they saw
as their country’s government fundamentally mistreating a city, wanted to be a part of something new and exciting, or even just saw Katrina as a money-making opportunity. The media had a tremendous impact on many of them coming to New Orleans in the first place and wanting to be a part of its post-Katrina rebuilding.

Media Analysis

In the first few years after the storm, *The Times Picayune* newspaper was an extremely important resource for gaining information about the city’s rebuilding status for residents and potential residents. It focused the majority of its pages and outputs on assessing the city’s rebuilding trajectory. It has recounted, reflected, assessed and guided the discourse of the city’s post-Katrina status. It is a central artifact for the discourse of the city’s rebuilding, and I argue that it has made a serious impact on defining the city’s on-the-ground rebuilding by aiding in the definition of the “new” New Orleans.

Inquiry. To understand the “coming back” discourse of this prominent media outlet in New Orleans, I conducted a content analysis of the newspaper’s articles about repopulation issues. *The Times Picayune* was the only daily newspaper in the Greater New Orleans area and had a circulation of over 200,000 daily newspapers, making it by far the dominant form of printed news in the city. Although there are several other smaller newspapers, most with a weekly or monthly distribution, *The Times Picayune* was the only daily newspaper, the only newspaper that claimed to be for everyone (i.e. not a specified audience, like the *Louisiana Weekly* that is for a mostly African-American clientele), and the only paper with a large distribution. Covering a range of topics, *The Times Picayune*’s strength was in its coverage of local issues, with the vast majority of its pages filled with local stories and only a bare minimum
(oftentimes less than one page) used for national or international news coverage. It is available online and is accessible to users for free on nola.com, the self-proclaimed website for “Everything New Orleans.” Online access is important because in the first few days after the storm, *The Times Picayune* was accessed frequently by evacuated residents, concerned loved ones, and people internationally who used it as a central source of information amidst the havoc of the storm. During this time in the second half of 2005, nola.com had its highest average page views per month at 51 million. Generally, nola.com has a large audience base, with over 43 million average page views per month in 2007 (according to the www.nola.com press kit). This wide readership and easy accessibility made *The Times Picayune* an important source in the work of building local ideology.

Besides its large distribution and prominence in the city, *The Times Picayune* also became quite prestigious since the storm and received a lot of recognition for its aggressive, in-depth coverage of post-Katrina local issues. Among other awards, it received the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of the storm and has been celebrated as a source of local news for all things related to the storm: the events of the storm, the rebuilding process, the politics, and the documentation of people’s thoughts and feelings about the storm. This recognition has given it a significant amount of power, as people worldwide now rely on it for information about the pivotal city.¹

Using Factiva, an online database that carries *The Times Picayune*, I searched all of the text and headlines of articles from all different newspaper sections for discussions of repopulation. I was looking for articles that talked about how and why New Orleans was being

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¹ Tangentially but significant to this discussion, *The Times Picayune* controversially and drastically cut its circulation in May 2012. From the primary daily newspaper from the city, it suddenly was cut to only 3 days a week. New Orleans became the largest metropolitan city without a daily newspaper representing it. *The Advocate*, the daily newspaper from nearby Baton Rouge, began delivery in New Orleans, shifted much of its issue coverage to New Orleans, and many of the journalists from the *Times Picayune* moved to *The Advocate*.  

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repopulated. I used a wildcard search term, so as to include any mention of repopulating, repopulate, repopulated, and repopulation. I limited my search to five years since the storm, so from August 29, 2005 to August 28, 2010. I purposefully chose five years as the time frame, as I expected people to still be talking about repopulation five years out. Plus, this time frame includes the election of the new mayor, Mitch Landrieu. I included all articles that had repopulation as the primary article topic as well as articles that mentioned repopulation as a by-product of the main article topic (like articles discussing the determination of resources and markets, crime and poverty, etc.). The only articles that I excluded were ones that specifically did not refer to human repopulation (the repopulation of insects, for example). All duplicates were deleted, leaving 381 total Times Picayune articles that discussed repopulation during this period.

Dissecting the messages of The Times Picayune and its manufacturing, reproduction, or reiteration of ideology does not make the newspaper an easy scapegoat for the city’s racism or overwhelmingly racist discourse. Rather, the media reflects an on-the-ground want or need that is racist, and this stance is reflected in the media’s communications. As Van Dijk (1987) and Henry and Tator (2002) support, ideologies do not come from one person or one racist outlet but are results of the stance of those in power that is continuously reproduced through these individuals and outlets. The Times Picayune is not the source of ideology in New Orleans, it is only working to reiterate an ideology that is pushed through on many levels. Even though it does not necessarily create this ideology, it does act to support it. More importantly than the newspaper’s own stance is its effects at creating social structures and influencing the actions of everyday lives through its ideological maintenance.
What does emerge from this content analysis are two very different stories of post-Katrina life. One is optimistic and promising, where repopulation is colored by residents who are able to do work themselves independently while being pushed forward by good policy, young volunteers, strong neighborhood cohesion, and people who keep moving home. The other story is not as alluring, and describes a city whose repopulation (or lack thereof) is challenged by divided communities, a dearth of public resources, and pummeled with crime. These two narratives of the discourse of repopulating New Orleans are divisive, yet they have created two vastly differing ideological perspectives about the city’s recovery. These stances have resulted in very different realities in the rebuilding city, as discussed in the next chapter.

Findings. In looking at the articles, there are two trends of perspectives of repopulation that mirror the Renewer-Disposable divide. Some articles discussed repopulation as a hopeful, optimistic project where the city was presented with an opportunity to renew itself and become something better and improved. Others discussed the post-storm processes as depressing and hopeless, where nothing seemed to function and care had been lost. These ideological stances have been embedded in the discourse of repopulation within the news source for post-Katrina rebuilding in New Orleans, and so unpacking their prevalence to better understand the overall message is important. Coding the 381 articles for these two categories, I found that there were 162 “Hope” articles and 219 “Despair” articles overall.

Although there are more Despair articles than Hope articles, simply identifying these categories and their frequency does not explain the nuances behind their use. Therefore, I created six subcategories under each category. Some of the subcategories were mirrored across both Hope and Despair as they were not necessarily directed categories: discussions of the population size (“Numbers”), post-Katrina public policy that might favor or discourage repopulation (“Good
Policy” and “Bad/Lacking Policy”), and the status of various neighborhoods’ recovery
(“Neighborhood Recovery). Other Hope categories included feeling optimistic about the city due
to outsiders and volunteers who came to New Orleans to help and are deciding to stay (“Influx of
Outsiders/Volunteers”), taking matters into one’s own hands and fighting for what one wants
(“DIY/General Fight”), and the newness of the city and push for an optimistic change
(“Change/Newness”). The other Despair categories included a focus on crime and poverty
increasing with increasing repopulation (“Crime or Poverty”), the rebuilding process as breaking
apart communities (“Break Apart Communities”), and a failing economy and lacking economic
resources (“Bad/Lack Economy”). Tables 1 and 2 provide a summary of the coding scheme and
article distribution per section of the newspaper.

Looking at the subcategories more closely reveals some interesting trends. Policy, looked at both
optimistically and pessimistically, was the most frequently discussed item among all
repopulation categories. In post-Katrina New Orleans, policy discourse in the news media carried
even greater weight than normal because displaced residents everywhere relied on The Times
Picayune’s breakdown of complicated policies and hinged their decisions of whether to move
back to the city or not based on policy discussions. People who had already moved back were
hyper-invested in the government’s decisions about rebuilding, as they could immediately see
and feel the effects of these policy initiatives on their lives and security. In this sense, it is not
surprising that Neighborhood Recovery was the second most frequently discussed topic. People
wanted to know if neighborhoods were “coming back” or not, and thus the role of the news
media in understanding and determining neighborhood recovery was key. Discourse, not people
on the ground, frequently drove neighborhoods’ ability to recover from the storm as it sets the
inertia for rebuilding or abandonment. While the news has reflected the on-the-ground reality of
rebuilding, it has also played an important role in building that reality by encouraging or discouraging certain neighborhoods to recover.

Table 1: Repopulation Articles by Category and Sub-category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
<th>Sub-Category</th>
<th>% of Category</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hope</strong></td>
<td>42.5%</td>
<td>Good Policy</td>
<td>32.7%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Influx of Outsiders/Volunteers</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Numbers</td>
<td>17.3%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>DIY, General Fight</td>
<td>17.3%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Change/Newness</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Neighborhood Recovery</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>162 cases</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
<th>Sub-Category</th>
<th>% of Category</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Despair</strong></td>
<td>57.5%</td>
<td>Bad/Lack Policy</td>
<td>26.9%</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Crime or Poverty</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Numbers</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Break Apart Communities</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bad/Lack Economy</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Neighborhood Recovery</td>
<td>26.9%</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>219 cases</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Repopulation Articles by Sub-Category and by Section of Newspaper

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Front</th>
<th>Metro</th>
<th>Living</th>
<th>Money</th>
<th>Sports</th>
<th>Editorial</th>
<th>Neighborhood</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Hope</strong></td>
<td>40.1%</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Good Policy</strong></td>
<td>50.9%</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Influx of Outsiders</strong></td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Numbers</strong></td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DIY, General Fight</strong></td>
<td>32.1%</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Change/ Newness</strong></td>
<td>44.4%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neighborhood Recovery</strong></td>
<td>43.3%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Despair</strong></td>
<td>49.3%</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bad/Lacking Policy</strong></td>
<td>50.8%</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Crime or Poverty</strong></td>
<td>46.2%</td>
<td>26.9%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Numbers</strong></td>
<td>41.7%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Break Apart Communities</strong></td>
<td>38.1%</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bad/Lack Economy</strong></td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neighborhood Recovery</strong></td>
<td>57.6%</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td>45.4%</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Population numbers have also been a highly discussed topic, seen as especially important in the context of “Are there enough people to ______?”—fill in the blank with statements like “have political representatives,” “have a sports team,” “have a school,” “have a business open,” etc. Politicians, business-owners, and other important decision-makers considered rebuilding neighborhoods based on how many people were there to access the resources (rather than providing resources that might attract residents). The rebuilding stance was very much one of only building resources if current population numbers could support them, not the approach that people would move back if resources were there. Meanwhile, many people have been deciding whether to rebuild or not based on resource availability. This is not a productive approach, and certainly not an equitable one. It acts to only encourage those who have resources independently of public support (like to pay for private school, private health care, etc.) to rebuild and repopulate, and those without resources to stay away. People who have resources at hand can endure hardship easier, and are able to move back because they do not have to worry about being reliant on lacking public resources. The newspapers’ discussion of population size pushed this stance forward and influenced the uneven repopulation.

The timing of Hope versus Despair articles is also revealing as these times generally followed the message of the larger city narrative. For both the Hope and Despair categories, the total number of articles followed the pattern of having a very high peak in early 2006 and then tapering off slowly by 2010 (see Table 3). This makes sense: for the first several months after the storm, the city really operated in “emergency” mode and actually did not even allow many people to enter most of the city for many months. It was not until several months after the storm (i.e. early 2006) that people began seriously thinking about, discussing, and acting on repopulation plans. Early 2006 was a key time as well because that is when some of the first
schools reopened after the storm. This, coupled with people’s desires to celebrate the December holidays with their families in their hometown, put many people beginning to move back to New Orleans in late December to early January. Early 2006 was also a key time in building a repopulation ideology as this is when the idea of constructing a Master Plan was first released to the public.

In looking at each category’s distribution over time, there are a few important differences. Although both the Hope and Despair articles decreased significantly after the dramatic peak in early 2006, the Hope articles decreased with a much faster slope. While people began feeling hopeful about the rebuilding process after the storm, this attitude declined quickly as people encountered the everyday difficulties of living in a post-disaster, struggling city.

Table 3: Frequency of Hope and Despair articles, 2005-2010
The Despair articles also decreased after early 2006, but much more gradually until 2008 and with a plateau in mid-2006. This plateau coincides with the re-election of Mayor Ray Nagin, a mayor who has become infamous in New Orleans for his poor management of the storm, false promises of economic revitalization, and a corrupt administration. The re-election of Mayor Nagin was criticized and many were pessimistic about the state of the city and its ability to move forward without strong political leadership. Besides this one plateau, the Despair articles continuously decreased in frequency after 2006.

The Hope articles followed a different pattern: while they decreased greatly after 2006 and never reached close to that same peak, they undulated for several years. Repopulation has been a popular topic in the rebuilding city and has been used as a key platform for pivoting political propaganda. Besides the significant peak in 2006, Hope articles also peaked at times of important political elections and nationally recognized events hosted in New Orleans. Directly following the 2008 presidential re-election of Obama, the concentration of Hope articles peaked. Obama campaigned heavily in New Orleans and rode a strong platform as being the antithesis to the Bush administration’s response to the hurricane, as he publicly declared his administration’s dedication to rebuilding New Orleans. The Hope articles also peaked when New Orleans hosted the BCS football championship game, an event that brought thousands of tourists to New Orleans and put the city in the national spotlight. This game was seen as an important revenue success for the struggling city and as a symbol for the potential and interest in the city’s future. With the big talking point of hope in the city’s future, it is understandable why the discourse surrounding a positive rebuilding image would increase at times so as to fit with political and economic agendas. The use of optimistic discourse for political gain is particularly relevant in post-Katrina New Orleans, where many extremely polemical issues arose (like the demolition of
public housing, the closing down of schools, the privatization of the public hospital, etc.). A rosy picture of the overall process was useful for building consensus and complacency.

By late 2009-early 2010, the Despair articles practically disappeared. During this same time period, the Hope articles increased. This was also a pivotal political time: the election of Mayor Mitch Landrieu. Mayor Landrieu’s election was a very important indicator for some people of post-Katrina New Orleans’ status. For the first time in three decades (since Landrieu’s father was the city’s mayor), New Orleans elected a White mayor. In a similar fashion to President Clinton, Mayor Landrieu ran his campaign with an emphasis on his connections to the African-American community and that he was “their” mayor too. His inaugural address focused on oneness and unity in the city, as he stated “We must lay down the oppressive burden and dysfunction of race and lift up, for the whole world to see, the power, the elegance and the richness of diversity” (Landrieu, 2010a). His campaign was emphasized as one of hope and moving forward after years of post-storm misery. He has pushed very hard to control the image of his candidacy as one of “renaissance,” progression, and change. The fact that Hope articles were more frequent during this period and that Despair articles subsided follows the political trend of a new mayor. Mayor Landrieu has steered the city’s post-Katrina narrative towards optimism and hope in a progressive future, and he has harnessed public discourse to push this platform to the forefront. With Landrieu, despair has fallen from the city’s public narrative and hope has taken over.

Political Rhetoric: The “New,” Changed New Orleans

Despite the two actual narratives of post-Katrina New Orleans—hopeful renewal and despairing disposability—one narrative emerges as overridingly dominant in political rhetoric:
the hopeful, optimistic Renewer narrative that portrays the city as a symbol of strength and resiliency. Although this message has been floating in New Orleans politics and media since Katrina, it became dominant and ubiquitous with the 2010 election of Mayor Landrieu. Mayor Landrieu has promoted a Renewer discourse and has explicitly discussed New Orleans as an example of American strength and modernity. Analyzing Landrieu’s key political speeches (which he proudly posts transcripts of on his webpage), his message is clear of New Orleans not only being “back” but being a trailblazing city for the country. Landrieu has played a significant role in creating the discourse that supports and celebrates Renewers in New Orleans and neglects and disappears Disposables. Here, I will trace that narrative.

Mayor Landrieu’s political narrative was a clear departure from his predecessor, Mayor Ray Nagin, who has been indicted on serious bribery charges since his mayoral term. Nagin was sometimes celebrated for his crassness especially during the desperate times of Katrina—as he famously yelled over local radio during the storm for the feds to “Get off your asses” (CNN, 2005). He also offended many with his crass insensitivity—most famously saying on Martin Luther King, Jr. day, just a few months after Katrina with people still in evacuation mode, that the city “will be chocolate at the end of the day” (CNN, 2006). Besides his frequent public rhetorical debauches, Nagin’s platform in his public speeches was always to build support and recognition for the struggling city. In his “State of the City” addresses and second term inaugural address, he focused on the challenges presented by Katrina and the strength and determination that the city was showing by rebuilding. According to Nagin, New Orleans deserved to come back because there were so many signs of progress, and the state and federal government owed much to the struggling city that had been unfairly ignored. Nagin’s New Orleans narrative was one of a city recovering and rebuilding from the immense challenges of Katrina and the
irresponsible neglect of the nation to the deserving, poor New Orleans.

Landrieu shifted this discourse, and created a new narrative that was less focused on the successes and obligations of the past and more focused on the city’s potential and exciting future. In Landrieu’s inaugural address in May 2010, his message focused on New Orleans’ opportune position for change, as he explained that many “great cities have transformed disasters into instruments of progress.” The storm was an opportunity for New Orleans to change and become better. Change was defined as the essence of New Orleans’ future, and Landrieu explained this change to be rooted in the hard work and drive of exemplar individuals. While Nagin focused much of his political spotlight on getting what the city “deserved” as reparations from the storm, Landrieu talked about the city being dependent on itself and its citizens’ contribution, with a focus on people “earning” their futures. Landrieu stressed a clear message of change with a “new” New Orleans that would be “better than before.” He reiterated this narrative consistently and emphatically in all of his appearances and speeches during his first year in office.

Landrieu talked about this change as an asset for New Orleans. Because of the city’s great need after the storm and the enormity of rebuilding all city sectors, New Orleans became a place where change has taken the form of experimentation. Especially in his first year in office, Landrieu frequently described New Orleans as the “laboratory” for nation-wide interest in reform in several widely-broadcast speeches. For example, he stated to the National Press Club in August 2010 (Landrieu, 2010c), “We are, in fact, the most immediate laboratory for innovation and change and our success or failure will be the symbol for America’s ability to accomplish great things, or not.” He described the many types of cutting-edge reform that were taking place in New Orleans, all seen as experimental, progressive, and emblematic of the future: education reform with the charter takeovers, health care reform with neighborhood health clinics, reform of
the police department in collaboration with the Department of Justice, and a stress on place-based community development. In Chapter 3, I describe and analyze each of these sectors and their post-Katrina reform path in greater detail. Mayor Landrieu made reform and experimentation a central tenet of the “new” New Orleans narrative, and his political discourse—on a local and national stage—celebrated New Orleans as a place for experimentation.

Landrieu’s discussion of New Orleans as a “laboratory” for change was with a specific objective: for New Orleans to be viewed as an exemplar American city of the nation’s progressive, successful future. As he celebrated, “New Orleans is uniquely poised to be the city that defines 21st century America” (Landrieu, 2010d). National trends towards education, health care, and urban planning reform all mirror the direction of development in New Orleans. New Orleans has become the “laboratory” for the rest of the country to implements ideas of reform and see whether they succeed or not. This question of whether or not reform is positive is rarely asked in New Orleans; rather, the narrative is one of success, change, and a celebration of the ensuing renewal. With the city’s leaders talking about New Orleans as a symbol of the future and progress of the country—rather as the hub of poverty and racism described in the news during the storm—the post-Katrina narrative feels like an exciting city that anyone would want to be a part of. Renewers are attracted to the city for its national attention and to be a part of something that feels so important.

In addition to creating a narrative of post-Katrina New Orleans as a progressive, successful city, Mayor Landrieu chose one main issue as his administration’s primary focus: violent crime. For the past few decades, New Orleans has always had a significant problem with violent crime, homicide in particular, and has had a murder rate that is exponentially higher than the national average. Since Katrina, the murder rate has been particularly alarming considering
the smaller population size, and New Orleans residents cite the city’s violence as their biggest concern (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010). Mayor Landrieu has taken an aggressive approach to violence, making it the hallmark of his campaign and term. He is constantly discussing the need and ability to address violent crime, and he usually portrays it as something easy to fix. His latest project—“Nola for Life” (an initiative by the Office of Community Engagement)—is a program that organizes resources (like jobs and recreational activities) for young, African-American men to keep them off the streets (because all Black men are now labeled as the city’s “problem”). In Landrieu’s latest State of the City address, the majority of his speech was focused on explaining this program and its ability to fix the city’s problem with violence. With dramatic language and a resilient, “can do” attitude, Landrieu made a big deal of the city’s stance on violent crime, sending a strong message to all residents that the city was doing something about this problem. Landrieu makes it seem like nothing can keep New Orleans down, and even the city’s biggest problem is an opportunity to make New Orleans better than before.

_A Tale of Two Cities? Or of One City?_

On the ground, post-Katrina New Orleans is emerging as a highly divided city. Some people’s repopulation of the city is highly encouraged and celebrated as a sign of renewal, while others are neglected and left to disappear. Particularly with Mayor Landrieu in office, New Orleans feels like a city where hard work brings change and change brings hope. Although there are two realities of post-Katrina New Orleans, discourse of the city and its future neglects the Disposables, as the overriding narrative of post-Katrina New Orleans is one of renewal: neighborhoods fixing their own situations and coming together to rebuild; outsiders coming to New Orleans to give to the city; and an overriding sense of reform and celebration of the city’s
experimentation. These messages are pushed in public rhetoric to send the world a message of a “new” New Orleans that is different from the poverty and racism projected during the storm. Rather, New Orleans emerges as a heralded example of American resiliency, hard work, and triumphant communities.

While this narrative of a successful New Orleans is inspiring, it brings great cost to many in the city who do not fit within the vision of the ideal “new” New Orleans. Those who do not represent change, do not benefit from reform, and are not emblematic of American progress are seen as not making the city “better than before” and thus disposable to the city’s future. Those who continue to feel despairing in New Orleans and do not see the city as “coming back” are not worthy of discussion anymore, particularly amidst the city’s rhetorical movement past recovery and towards renaissance. These people who do not feel bought into the dominant narrative of post-Katrina renewal—the Disposables—are those who get left behind by institutional reform and abandoned by what is left of the public as the city becomes redefined along a narrative of success.

The dominant narrative of a successful, post-Katrina renaissance has significant on-the-ground reflections. Discussions of New Orleans’ renewal and excitement over reform reinforce support for that reform and pave the way for real institutional redesign. New Orleans is being created as the potential emblem for American 21st century progress, as the city is experimentally redesigned along notions of progressive, privatized institutions (as described in detail in the next chapter). The drastic changes in all sectors of the city’s landscape are widely supported (with dissent being largely neglected or silenced) because they are seen as part of the city’s optimistic future. The narrative created through wide public rhetoric have played an important role in opening the floodgates for reform.
CHAPTER 3:

Making New Orleans “Better than Before:”
Institutional Experimentation and Reform

As the shifting political and media discourse about the “new” New Orleans collide into one dominant narrative of post-Katrina New Orleans, the on-the-ground reality of development embodies this one-sided discourse. The push towards renewal and reform is facilitated by the narrative of renaissance that blankets the city (Landrieu, 2010d), as language of reform and progress embed privatizing actions. Katrina presented a disaster capitalist’s perfect storm opportunity to push a “shock therapy” platform of completely redesigning the institutional landscape of New Orleans at once and with great efficiency (Klein, 2007). Widespread change took hold of New Orleans’ institutions at an extremely rapid pace, as the city presented the opportunity and need to recover and rebuild from the disaster. Many of these institutions had long needed updating or reforming anyways (PBS, 2005; Wales, 2012) and Katrina suddenly presented an open opportunity to enact reform quickly with little space or time for bureaucratic or political opposition. This also meant that there was not time nor space for real questioning of reform’s directionality or impact. It makes way for the Renewers to have exciting, fresh spaces to renew and for Disposables to be slowly eliminated.

Further, there is a drastic redefinition of what constitutes “the public” in post-Katrina New Orleans. Many public institutions are being privately developed and controlled while retaining the ambiguous label of “public,” and some public spaces are explicitly transitioning into private ones. The Disposables are the most adversely effected by this shift, as they are generally the most reliant on the public and with the least capacity to access alternatives to it when it fails them. In post-Katrina New Orleans, the landscape has changed with overwhelming
political support for public-private partnerships or totally privately controlled institutions. Public institutions have experienced quick erasure (Ayala and Gallette, 2012), as they have been eliminated or drastically altered to make way for the new and improved New Orleans. The erasure of schools, hospitals, and neighborhood resources causes intra- and inter-conflict for those finding their place in the rebuilding city (as discussed further in Chapter 6). There are very few wholly public arenas left in post-Katrina New Orleans, as the city becomes a model for what could become elsewhere. This privatization has created an ideal space for Renewers to renew and Disposables to disappear. The general movement for change is exactly what the Renewers look for, and New Orleans has become the city where progressive national reforms are experimented and implemented. Many Renewers come to the city because they want to be a part of educational reform, health care reform, or neighborhood revitalization, and New Orleans is the city where these are all happening with overwhelming political support. There is a current of renewal and reform that dominates the discourse of the city, making it a very exciting city for Renewers. The renewal that blankets New Orleans' institutions gives Renewers an on-the-ground, immediate space for doing what they see as inspiring work for positive change. There is much excitement around renewing institutions, especially those that were seen as in such dire need of it, and the Renewers have found a perfect fit in working to change New Orleans.

The Disposables, however, are completely shut out from the process of renewal, and the reformed institutions that result do little to create avenues for them as active, decision-making participants in the defining of their place (Harvey, 1978). Sometimes this exclusion comes from intentional institutional reform towards privatization that by design discards Disposables, as with the changed public housing landscape that has eliminated low-income housing projects. Sometimes Disposables are pushed out because the reform movement is so hospitable to
Renewers, as with the charter school movement that has diminished opportunities for native-born teachers. Other times, the exclusion is unstated and implied through institutional neglect, like with the lack of rebuilding recreational facilities and diminished commercial redevelopment in certain neighborhoods. Disposables are emerging as even more excluded from post-Katrina New Orleans than poor people were pre-Katrina as they are circumscribed out of the process of renewal. Post-Katrina New Orleans is even further racially segregated than before the storm, as the changing intentions and design of the city’s key institutions point towards uneven and biased development. The old New Orleans is disposed of in the name of urban renewal and reform, as the neoliberal path of “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey, 2005) routes Renewers to take over public institutions in New Orleans and leave Disposables neglected, excluded, and dispossessed.

Each of the city’s key institutional sectors has undergone dramatic changes that move the city closer to an ideal “new” New Orleans for Renewers, all ignited by the opportunity constructed out of Katrina. In this chapter, I will describe the narrative of change surrounding many of the key institutional reforms in post-Katrina New Orleans, all of which Mayor Landrieu (2010d) has publicly celebrated as signs of New Orleans’ success with reform: education, health care, real estate, and the criminal justice system. In each sector, I will show that the city is being structurally redesigned and rebuilt to encourage Renewers and exclude Disposables through a redefinition of these places’ public character. Methodologically, this chapter draws on ethnographic research in each sector, interview data, and analysis of secondary resources. This chapter provides key descriptions of the complementary side to the discursive narrative of idealism in post-Katrina New Orleans as discussed in Chapter 2, and shows the context that breeds the Renewer-Disposable divide and redefinition of the “new” New Orleans identity.
Redefining the “Public” of Education with the Charter School Experiment

Educational reform since Katrina is perhaps the most dramatic and significantly discussed institutional shift in New Orleans. Led by the charter school experiment that has made New Orleans a national center for education reform, the educational landscape in New Orleans has vividly changed and has become one of the most popular forums for thinking about the idealism of the post-disaster city. In this section, I will first describe the changes of the educational landscape in New Orleans and how this follows national trends. Then, I will show how New Orleans has been seen as an ideal place for the charter school experiment based on the city’s pre-Katrina education system being at the bottom of national rankings. Despite the excitement over the charter movement, the charter schools’ successes are more nuanced than are usually publicly recognized and there are important side effects to consider that are often left out of the discourse. I will raise a few of these issues as a challenge to the dominant charter narrative. I will conclude this section by showing the Renewer-Disposable divide as heightened by the changes in public education and argue that New Orleans is being created as a transitory, privatized place that furthers the segregation of the city.

Post-Katrina New Orleans has become the national testing ground for the great “charter school experiment” (Buras, 2011; Lemoine, 2011; Saulny, 2006; Rethinking Schools, 2006). City leaders seized upon Hurricane Katrina as the opportunity to reorganize the public education system into one dominated by charter schools. This large scale educational experiment resonates with the larger narrative city leaders have tried to promote in the wake of the Katrina disaster: New Orleans as a city of hope and a symbol of progressive urban renewal. I see the wholesale
conversion of New Orleans public schools into charter schools as a primary experiment in this
turnover effort, as charter schools have now “become the system” of New Orleans public
education (Osbourne, 2013). New Orleans has provided an opportunity to test a national trend
towards charter schools (The Economist, 2011) as the city’s education system was seen as
needing rebuilding from the ground up after the storm’s clean slate opportunity.

Although the city only had one charter school before Katrina, by 2012 almost all of New
Orleans public schools had been transitioned into charters with few non-charter public schools
remaining. Generally, independently run charter organizations take over failing schools, either as
a turnaround (where the charter takes over the entire non-charter at once) or as a phased charter
(where the charter takes over the failing school one grade at a time with every year). With each
year since the storm, more and more charter schools are opening and growing across the city:
although there was only 1 charter school in New Orleans before Katrina, there are now 52
charter schools in the city (and only 9 non-charter public schools). This number continues to
grow each year, as more non-charter public schools close altogether or are taken over. Now, a
strong majority of New Orleans public school students attend charter schools (see Table 4),
making it the norm in the city’s educational landscape. New Orleans now serves a greater share
of charter school students than any other school district in the country (National Alliance for
Public Charter Schools, 2011) (See Table 5). Each year, fewer and fewer students attend non-
charter public schools, and their decreasing demand helps support their disappearance.

National interest in the charter school movement is high. In addition to the Bush and
Obama administrations’ praise and promotion of charter schools that has trickled down to many
local governments (Russom, 2012), there has been much social research that celebrates charter
schools as the key to the future of education (Nathan, 1998; Bulkley and Wohlstetter, 2004; etc.).
Table 4: Public School Enrollment in New Orleans by School Type, 2006-2010

Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives, 2012.

Table 5: U.S. Communities with the Highest Percentage of Student Populations Enrolled in Charter Schools

Cowen Institute, 2012.
Interest is also high in thinking about charter schools more critically (Fabricant and Fine, 2012; Arum and Beattie, 2000; etc.), particularly from a macro systemic and public policy perspective. Some are doing micro-level research on charters that reveal some key hidden failures (Picard, 2013) based on an over-emphasis on testing, transitory teachers, and unstable student enrollment.

In New Orleans though, the narrative surrounding charter schools is overwhelmingly optimistic and celebratory. Critical discussions are rare or are outwardly silenced. Charter schools come to be seen as another sign of hope in post-Katrina New Orleans. They seem to provide a solution to another despairing element of the rebuilding city, and one that was a significant obstacle to families looking to return home after the storm. For middle class White families, high quality selective admissions charter schools are being created and provide an exciting “acceptable” public school option as an alternative to private schools, an option that barely existed for White middle class families before Katrina. Leah, for example, is a young native-born social worker who has two children who would be entering school for the first time a few years after Katrina. When she discussed any potential obstacles or concerns to their decision to move back to New Orleans after the storm, she explained, “The biggest thing I was worried about was schools. But at the same time, there were good things happening, like more charter schools coming.” After long discussion with her husband, they were planning on their kids attending the most selective charter school in the city. For parents like Leah, the charter school movement suddenly made New Orleans public schools as an attractive option for middle class families. Many African-American families have also been very excited about charter schools because they are seen to bring new opportunities for students to succeed. As charter schools push the dream of college, many lower income families are excited by charters’ messaging. As I have seen in my ethnographic research in both charter and non-charter schools, many families almost
blindly give their trust to charter schools because of their newness. They see highly celebrated examples of successful students come out of charter schools and get excited about discussions of college. For many post-Katrina parents, the charter schools were seen as a necessary and welcome alternative to a seemingly defunct public school system. Charter schools made the education system in New Orleans seem progressive and exciting.

The New Orleans public education system was seen as in dire need of reform long before Katrina provided the opportunity to do so. Many public schools had been economically and politically abandoned due to racism and poor policy decisions that brought about the demise of a system reliant on community-based schools as neighborhood epicenters. For most people in New Orleans, excitement over charter schools has been centered on the mere idea of change: a break from past perceptions of corruption and decrepitude. For many New Orleanians, the charter school system seemed like the only way to break from the past system that seemed to be broken and leading nowhere. For years, New Orleans and Louisiana ranked nationally at the bottom (usually last or second to last) for the quality of its public education (Clayson, 2010; Morgan Quitno Press). The pre-Katrina narrative of New Orleans education was certainly one dominated by disposability and in need of reform.

So, the public school system was diagnosed with needing complete overhaul. One year before Katrina, the school board was completely dismantled and divided: the State of Louisiana took over the majority of New Orleans’ schools, including all of the worst performing schools, to create the “Recovery School District.” These schools came to be managed by this new state initiative that was more sparse, but also more powerful. A handful of the better performing schools were left to be governed by the now smaller Orleans Parish School Board, which has continued to excel and give the city successful schools to celebrate around. Even the
organization of the school system in New Orleans was becoming more structurally segregated (Picard, 2013), with entire Renewer and Disposable school districts.

From many years of working inside charter and non-charter public schools and doing ethnographic research on the Renewer-Disposable divide, I learned that charter schools operate very differently from traditional public schools and have a very different feel from the inside. Structurally, charter schools in New Orleans are run with a business model of education (Fabricant and Fine, 2012). They are usually structured like corporations with a Charter Management Organization (CMO) that handles the business-side of school development. CMO’s will usually run more than one school: for example, Firstline Schools currently manages 5 schools, Algiers Charter School Association manages 8 schools, and ReNew manages 4 schools. The CMO’s are staffed by savvy people who often have MBA’s and business background and hold positions like Chief Executive Officer and Chief Operations Officer. With this structure taking over all public schools across the city, CMO’s become powerful political entities in the city and receive much attention from investors, business schools, and the media.

Inside, charter schools stress very different values and structures than non-charter public schools. The importance of hard work is consistent across all charter schools in New Orleans, and they all continuously preach the ability of individuals to rise above their contexts with hard work and a driven sense of personal agency. This message is common across charter schools in New Orleans, who preach and demonstrate individual resiliency above all. The schools have values like persistence and grit. The stories told about their students in the media are of individuals who come from very difficult home situations, but who have still managed to succeed in school and go to college (Vanacore, 2012). Data is usually posted all over the schools on students’ testing achievement, and the schools celebrate individual hard work with incentives,
awards, and public accolades to keep motivating students. For example, one charter high school posts signs around the school that say, “Will ____ make the honor roll?,” filling in individual students’ names and making their personal academic struggle public. I have never seen structural issues like poverty, racism, racial history, or unemployment talked about in New Orleans charter schools, and problems that students may have are framed in terms of personal choice. The Renewer values of optimism, hard work, and resiliency are pushed in charter schools while the context surrounding one’s ability to represent these values is ignored.

The charter school movement also operates from a premise that out-of-town, young Renewers must save New Orleans by educating its youth, and that locally-born African-Americans are not capable of doing so and are not seen as part of the future New Orleans. This was seen in the en masse firing of all New Orleans public school teachers after Katrina and the recruitment of out-of-town college graduates to fill their shoes (Ritea, 2006; Rethinking Schools, 2006); and this is seen in the current dominance of White (and low numbers of African-American) teachers and school leaders in charter schools who usually come from programs like Teach for America, TeachNOLA, or the New Teacher Project (Mincha, 2013). Teacher fast-tracking programs like Teach for America have long been criticized (Laczko-Kerr and Berliner, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 1994; etc.) for their extra-systematic processes and tendencies to put inexperienced and typically White idealistic people into teaching positions that they are grossly unprepared for. These programs tend to skew the teacher demographics, as the teachers are no longer even close to racially representative of their students. These programs push Renewers to dominate public education and challenge schools to have culturally and racially relevant education. These programs also embody the dominant narrative of post-Katrina New Orleans:
the ideal version of the new city is created by out-of-town idealist youth, no matter what local African-American employees are displaced.

Thus, charter school teachers are rarely from New Orleans, usually do not understand local culture and behaviors, and often have difficulty communicating with families or identifying with students’ cultural needs. Still, they are hailed as a potential answer to the city’s historically deprived education system. They are celebrated for energy and fresh talent. As the system becomes increasingly dominated by charter schools, long-time, native-born African-American teachers are circumscribed out of the system and Disposable students lose them as potential role models. Students see very little of themselves and their future in the adults that surround them in school.

Additionally, charter school teachers are not unionized like other public school teachers, and so the charter system undermines these unions and teachers’ ability to make demands on their behalf. The job of a charter school teacher is precarious, as most teachers have at-will employment agreements and non secure contracts. This is arranged so that teachers can be fired at will if not performing, a trend of “blame the teacher” for analyzing the problems of public education as established with No Child Left Behind. This is especially pertinent in post-Katrina New Orleans, as all public school teachers were immediately fired from their positions in the aftermath of the storm and had to fight to regain their jobs, most of whom were unsuccessful (Vanacore, 2011). As charter schools took over, the unions’ negotiating power has been completely undermined and many long-term teachers have now left the education field completely. While the plight of long-term teachers has barely been publicly discussed in New Orleans, the presence of young teachers is frequently celebrated. For example, a *Times Picayune* article from March 7, 2010 was featured on the front page of the Sunday newspaper with a giant
picture of 12 young teachers (10 of whom were White) huddled together with their hands in the middle of the circle (see Figure 2) with the headline reading, “New Orleans School Reform is Fueled by Hard-Working Young Idealists” (Carr, 2010). Articles like these herald the young teachers as the saviors of the education system of New Orleans, and the future of the city’s youth is portrayed to rely on their energy, newness, and motivation. This also implies their tenure to be short-lived, with a common trend of burnout and high teacher turnover in charter schools.

While perhaps some of the Disposable population—those lucky enough to get into one of the few good charter schools and remain in them—is benefiting from charter schools in New Orleans (and those are usually publicly discussed as trends rather than exceptions (Carr, 2013)),

Figure 2: New Orleans School Reform is Fueled by Hard-Working Young Idealists

the charter school movement and effects of quick educational reform present many challenges to Disposables and to the goal of building a more equitable school system. One of the largest issues
with the charter school system taking over public education in New Orleans is the inequality that is pervasive and heightened. It is easily seen by entering any of the few non-charter public schools that are left in New Orleans, as these schools look like clear artifacts of something left behind. With so much excitement put on charter schools, the non-charter public schools are easily ignored and purposefully overlooked. Their decrepitude provides further evidence of a need to renew the system. For example, here is an excerpt from my field notes after visiting one of the most famous and historic non-charter public high schools in New Orleans:

There is a huge sign in front of the school welcoming visitors and people driving by that says “New Orleans Master Plan Renovations of (name of the school).” But the school—I actually had to drive around the block the first time because I could not tell where was the entrance—is just awful. Really awful, and I’m not sure what other words to use to describe it. Depressing. There are no playgrounds, school yards, fields, or anything like that at all—and this is a school that is famous for its athletics. The school is crumbling and falling apart. Everything, inside and outside, is very brown and gray. Even the lighting is browned. There is nothing colorful or nice-looking at all in the school, no posters or artwork or anything. It is probably the ugliest school that I have been to. Chain link fences everywhere and surrounding all spaces. I asked the security guard in the front as I got my visitor’s pass (which they do have a very modern security and identification checking system) about that sign out front, naively hopeful about what kind of renovations they might be doing. She told me that they made the school wheelchair accessible, nothing more, and that they’ve been finished with these renovations for a couple of years now. Yet the huge sign remains and makes it seem like there are renovations going on.

April 2011

The public schools that are left behind with the charter turnover are left to deteriorate, with no real efforts made to improve their structures or educational quality. With students moving in and out of schools as they are exploited by the charter school system, the schools that are left behind have little hope for productivity or positivity. This adds fuel to the misdirected fire for educational reform, as charter schools can gain more support since non-charters are so bad.

There is even further inequality created within the charter school system itself. Many of the charter schools are considered to be the top schools in the city, and many others would
probably not even pass a basic accountability audit. Besides further segregating the education system between non-charter public, charter, parochial and private schools, there is now an added layer of segregation between the good, so-so and poor charter schools. Leah, the native-born mother of kids who was so excited about the charter school system when moving to New Orleans, had just come from the lottery event for entrance into one of the better charter schools before our interview. She was reactive:

I feel a fire in my belly right now just thinking about it. They pretend to be equal and anyone can get in, but it’s not. It’s totally intentional, the whole process. Because they want the smartest kids to get in. They pretend to be inclusive and like, “Oh, it’s for the community, it’s a charter school.” No, it’s not. It’s totally skewed towards highest achieving.

Leah experienced first-hand the inequality of the charter school system, and her excitement about this new change in the city ended in a huge let-down. Many other parents have discussed how difficult the charter schools are to navigate, with multiple deadlines that favor those with home internet access and flexible work schedules. This is especially true as many of the schools’ events (like the lottery for deciding admission) occur in the middle of a normal workday, making it difficult for working parents to be involved. The charter school movement has created an additional class of schools—public charter schools for White middle class families—that furthers the dispossession of Disposables. The charter schools operate under a mission of renewal and progress, but the system is further segregating an already deeply divided city.

Another significant issue with many of the lower achieving charter schools is rarely made public: retention. Students seem to be moving in and out of the charter schools quickly, and especially at strategic points in the school year. Many teachers and administrators, insiders from both charter and non-charter schools, have explained to me in confidence that charter schools tend to have very high enrollment at the beginning of each semester so as to claim high numbers
for their impact scores and financial accountability. Once the enrollment counts are in, however, the schools start to reassess their populations: students who are seen as potential problems, either for behavior or low test scores, are expelled (or encouraged to leave) for any minor infraction and shuffled to another school. This high turnover rate is destructive to the non-charter schools who are constantly adjusting their programs to a fluctuating population, and even more debilitating to the students who get herded from school to school. For example, Sandy, one of my participants at the Academy for Last Resorts, has been through four schools in one and a half years. It has made her completely lose hope in her education and even her future, as she often results to violence and self-destruction as she does not know how to deal with her anger in unfamiliar places.

Enrollment issues, however, are not only to blame on retention in charter schools. Student enrollment is so transitory in New Orleans, and this is primarily due to the constantly changing school landscape and the promotion of the primacy of families’ choice. All schools in New Orleans are now open enrollment, which means that students can attend any school in the city no matter where they live. Families, therefore, must choose the schools for their children. Making an educated choice is not easy, and there is evidence that school choice is “inadequate” in providing access to opportunities to public school families (Cowen Institute, 2013). Further, many schools in New Orleans are being literally disposed of: old public educational institutions in New Orleans that represent tradition and history are closed each year since Katrina. These closures have important ramifications to families and students (Ayala and Galletta, 2012), who are not consulted in the closure process and are often squeezed into marginalized spaces where they are confronted daily by their Disposable status (Kissoon, 2012). They are left to deal with their familiar and cherished institutions disappearing. At the same time, new schools with no
connection nor cultural attachment to New Orleans open each year and wow the city with their high achievement numbers. As new schools open, close, merge, and change names or missions with such frequency since Katrina, students and families have built a habit to change schools, either because one gets tired of a school, is unhappy with a specific policy, or is just curious about a new school. In the idea of school choice with the open enrollment charter school system comes a culture of transitional schooling. With each move comes lost educational time and a distancing from counselors and others who could form a meaningful relationship with students.

The charter school experiment is furthering the bifurcation of the post-Katrina New Orleans narratives of redevelopment. Those who are powerless and poor in New Orleans are seen as disposable to the experiment, and no one seems to be asking the key question: what if the experiment fails? Few people—or few people who are given any voice in the city—are openly critical of the charter school experiment, and the blanket approval and hope in the system leaves the futures of Disposables as very precarious. At the same time, the charter movement creates valiant spaces for Renewers to swoop down, make change happen, and “save” the city. However, the permanently transitory nature that is being created as the school system—and one that moves further away from truly public service—leaves New Orleans as a place with little future for Disposables.

Decentralized and Disappearing Health Care

Health care—both quality and access to it—is another significant arena of institutional change since Katrina. Changes in health care in New Orleans have had significant effects on Disposables in particular who have found their health care options disappearing, making it increasingly challenging to support their lives in the post-disaster city. Simultaneously,
Renewers find openings for inspirational, exciting work in the health care field in New Orleans with the opening of new facilities that embrace national discourse over health care reform. There have been many large scale changes in the health care landscape in post-Katrina New Orleans: the closing of the public hospital to make way for the eventual building of a large private facility; the growth of ambulatory community health clinics as primary sites of medical care; and the dismal access to mental health care. The new health care landscape in New Orleans encourages the work of Renewers at the expense of disappearing institutional access for Disposables, and results in designing a new city that has turned health care into pure business.

There is overwhelming movement towards privatization in the medical field in New Orleans and away from government involvement in health care service provision. The results of these changes are renewed facilities that are focused on being emblems of a changed city—despite the cost. Perhaps the most publicly controversial change around health care has been the decision to not reopen Charity Hospital, the city’s largest, oldest, and only public health care facility. Although it was only minimally damaged by the storm and was not flooded at all, the city decided to not reopen Charity Hospital and to rather relocate its services into a new, state-of-the-art facility several blocks away that is planned to open several years later. The controversy over Charity Hospital exhibits strongly the Renewer-Disposable divide: an old institution that represents pre-Katrina New Orleans and holds cultural significance to many residents is destroyed to make way for an exciting, progressive facility that presents enormous possibilities to developing the city. This new facility also involved demolishing twenty-seven city blocks of houses, businesses and historical buildings, many of which had been rebuilt after the storm with their owners’ sweat and labor. The new facility is estimated to take several years and $283
million to build. The new hospital will also be located in close proximity to other hospitals in the city, thus not really doing anything to address the issue of accessibility.

Until the new facility is built, residents have lost access to public health care and many people have nowhere to go when in need of medical attention. The hospital’s pre-Katrina clientele was 75% African-American and 85% low-income (Evans, 2009), many of whom remain displaced or unattended to by the hospital’s closing. Although there was a large and active campaign to keep and reopen Charity Hospital (www.savecharityhospital.org), they were finally unsuccessful and the prospects of a new medical business venture won. The private corporation replaces the public institution in the name of progress and renewal, giving the city a facility that will lead the industry and make the city a model for the country for the potential of privatizing health care.

The new facility to replace Charity Hospital is seen as the key to business growth opportunity in the city (Rudowitz, Rowland, and Shartzer, 2006). Many people talk about the new “medical corridor” that will transform an area of the city that is often perceived to be seedy and dangerous based on its proximity to the Orleans Parish Prison and courthouse. Health care provision to the city’s poor becomes an enormous money-making opportunity. Ron Joseph is a lead commercial real estate developer in New Orleans’ most prominent real estate company that handles most of the large commercial developments. He grew up in New Orleans himself, and has powerful connections to municipal government and corporate money. When I asked him what types of businesses are likely to come back after Katrina, he responded:

Biomedical. That’s a $1.4 billion industry, which will probably end up being $1.8 billion. I think that will attract young professionals in the medical field.
Building the new medical facility is seen as not only an important business venture with huge allotments of government funding, but it is also seen as an opportunity to attract “the right kind of people” to post-Katrina New Orleans: young, professional doctors.

Young physicians, especially those in medical school or completing their residency, find ample space for opportunity in post-Katrina New Orleans. There is much to look forward to for them in the biomedical corridor, and new apartment buildings that target a middle class population are springing up all over the previously poor, unattractive area of the city where the new hospital is being built. Many of the young health care workers are medical students or finishing their residency. These Renewers find New Orleans to have a needy population that they can serve, making them feel professionally fulfilled and as part of a rebuilding project that is exciting for the future of health care reform.

As the public hospital closes and private hospitals flourish, neighborhood-based community health clinics pop up all over the city (DeSalvo, 2006). These clinics were originally established as a response to Katrina and the need to get health care access to neighborhoods that were far from the hospitals. Clinics offering varying degrees of service are located throughout the city and have been hailed for their neighborhood-building potential and increasing access (Rudowitz, Rowland, and Shartzer, 2006). A young, native-born primary care physician, Paul, explained the excitement over the clinics:

There was this big push to set up a kind of system within the city that focused on primary care and providing care to folks within their own community. After the storm, let’s redefine and set it up to establish community clinics all over town. And it’s been very successful and nationally recognized for this kind of work.

Paul is very excited about the community satellite clinics in general and sees them as a step towards increasing access to preventative care. In my interviews, other health care providers remarked on excitement over the smaller clinics for their promotion of the concept of a “family
doctor,” potential to build communities’ social capital, and provision of adequate translation services to non-English speakers. The clinics have been applauded for their potential to address people’s health problems and provide care in closer proximity to where they live. The clinics are run by a variety of actors: Common Ground, a nonprofit organization; Daughters of Charity, a Catholic health clinic organization; and Tulane University, which houses one of the largest medical schools in the state and runs the majority of the clinics. These clinics are currently receiving much of their funding from State and federal grants. They are dominated by Renewer energy, and are celebrated as a sign of an optimistic future of progress in the city.

While there is much to be excited about with the community health clinics, many crucial issues also arise. First and foremost, decentralizing primary care has been coupled with a decrease in emergency, specialty and critical care services. Access to these more serious health care needs has been even more severely limited with the opening of community clinics. With a nearby clinic, it can be argued that care becomes more accessible because it is closer to home. Yet, the perimeters of that care is limited. In an enormous area of the city, there is no hospital for miles and people are left stranded and in need. This is especially true for the residents of New Orleans East—a predominantly African-American neighborhood that is the most populated in the entire city—who have to drive forty minutes to reach a hospital (see Figure 3). Many of their critical health problems worsen due to the length of the commute to receive medical attention.

Low-income residents with acute or recurring health needs have seen many challenges to their post-Katrina health care provision, and their dependency makes them even more disposable. In a survey conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, 40% of respondents said that access to adequate health care was one of their top concerns in deciding whether or not to move back (Rowland, 2007). Many people had access to adequate care during displacement and so, as one
health care worker exclaimed in an interview, “why would you move away from somewhere that had these services? Why would they move back?” Access to health care has guided many people’s ability to move back to New Orleans or not, especially for those with chronic illnesses or who were reliant on public transportation. New Orleans’ hospitals struggled to reopen after Katrina, and for about a year after the storm the state of health care in New Orleans was “unacceptably primitive” (Berggren and Curiel, 2006) as only three of the city’s nine area hospitals were open (Rowland, 2007). Also, many people were more in need of medical attention than ever. As people worked on rebuilding the city’s infrastructure, dangerous situations abounded and many people were injured or in need of attention. This was especially true for the city’s new large Latino migrant population, who present the added challenge of language access at health care facilities and who have been even more likely to need health attention due to the difficult and often unfair conditions they were working under (gutting houses, asbestos exposure,
etc.) (Browne-Dianis et al, 2006). Health care is more necessary than ever, and those without the means to pay whatever it takes to get it are reliant on few options, as rebuilding public health care has been a very low priority.

To add to the matter are the dramatic differences in the physical appearance of private hospitals in comparison with neighborhood clinics. The facilities' physical appearance clearly emphasizes differences in Disposable institutions and Renewer ones: those that are chosen as the path for the “new” New Orleans and those that neglect issues. The private hospitals under Oschner Medical Center, the large corporation that has taken over most of the health facilities in post-Katrina New Orleans, are well known for their art exhibitions, “piano in the lobby,” gardens and beautiful resources. While many of the community health clinics are designed with care and warmth, others are constructed as an extreme bare minimum. One community clinic in New Orleans East, the neighborhood with the least access to hospital care in the city, represents this extreme. An excerpt from my field notes:

This is one of the strangest places that I have been. Driving around the neighborhood surrounding the building, everything is deserted and dreary. You really feel isolated and insecure out here, as if something could happen to you and it would take days for anyone to find out. The clinic is in an old flooded out hospital building, which seems to have no prospects of being rebuilt or opening. Much of the building is in shambles and still showing remnants of Katrina’s destruction. Yet, this clinic sits on a higher floor (away from where the flood waters were) of this otherwise deserted building, as if it’s camping out with nowhere better to go. It reminds me of people who were desperately sleeping in their gutted out homes after Katrina; but this is a health care facility, a place to help people heal?! How can someone heal when they are surrounded by memories of destruction and feeling hidden and ashamed from the world?

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Many of these clinics do not convey a message of a city caring for its residents. With them and the rise of private hospitals, the health care system is furthering the re-segregation of the city.

The clinics also present an important cultural shift for residents. Charity Hospital has been a long-time institution in the city, and many residents—especially low-income residents
who rely on public institutions—understand that it has always been the place for their health care needs (Rudowitz, Rowland, and Shartzer, 2006). With Charity Hospital closing, many people in the city do not know where to go for primary care and would often unnecessarily go to the emergency room for lack of knowledge about their closest health clinic. As one native-born New Orleanian nurse explained,

Because Charity was closed, people who didn’t have insurance were having to go wherever else, and there were issues with people going to any ER in the city. University Hospital was just over-whelmed. All of their emergency services were just over-whelmed. They were over-worked and over-whelmed.

Closing Charity Hospital left people confused and feeling abandoned. Many local celebrities made public statements about the meaning of the hospital to them that have been posted on a website for the campaign to save the hospital: “I am a Charity baby,” “Where I took my first breadth of life,” and “Charity is a central part of the community. New Orleans seems to be based, in large measure, on a respect for and an understanding of the past. If you lose that, you lose a lot of what makes the city what it is” (www.savecharityhospital.org). Charity was part of the culture of New Orleans, as became even more obvious in the parades, musical performances, campaigns, and local celebrities who came out speaking at benefits and political rallies held to try to save it.

Moving to community health clinics from a central public hospital has not been a well-communicated nor well-understood process. Enacting this drastic structural change in the city’s health care structure at a time when people were already uprooted, confused and in need has made the structure very difficult to catch on to for much of the city’s neediest people.

Despite the general excitement over the health clinics and virtual blindness to their complications, the State and city are removing themselves from the financial side of running these clinics, particularly as focus shifts to building the new medical corridor (a much more lucrative project). As one health care worker explained, the State and city are “getting out of the
business of running free health clinics because it’s expensive,” as many clinics gradually close. Access becomes more and more challenging.

Access to mental health care has also reached a new point of expediency in New Orleans after the storm. Post-traumatic stress disorder (diagnosed and perceived) has been very common, and many people suffer from depression and other disaster-induced conditions (Carey, 2007). Since the storm, the people of New Orleans have had a clear need for mental health services more than ever. A study by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2012) found that adults need for mental health services, both serious and moderate, doubled after the storm, and that 44% of adolescents experienced a sudden need for mental health services after Katrina. Yet simultaneously, resources for mental health care have been drastically cut. On June 1, 2009, the State of Louisiana closed the last remaining and most significant health care facility for mental health care—the New Orleans Adolescent Hospital—that housed the majority of beds for mental health care patients in the city. The closing caught mental health care providers by surprise, who were outraged (WDSU, 2009) by the movement. As one social worker explained,

In terms of severe mental health problems, it’s a disaster. I know like hospital beds, good luck! It’s kind of like, good luck! There’s nothing we can do. I would say there is definitely a mental health crisis that is totally under the radar.

With up to 44% of the city’s population suffering some sort of mental health distress and only 133 hospital beds (Washington Times, 2009) for mental health patients left in New Orleans, the situation has felt dire. The New Orleans Police Department’s Crisis Unit has felt the overwhelming pressure of this crisis: in the short period of 12 months, they received over 1500 calls from people suffering psychological distress (Washinton Times, 2009).

Politically, there is an overwhelming push to move beyond the problems of Katrina and to focus on the positives of rebuilding, projecting an image of strength and health rather than
psychological “weakness.” Mental health is seen as crippling and needy, whereas a lack of discussion about mental health realities project a vision of a happy, progressing city. People with mental health problems are Disposable, and those in need are not part of the ideal “new” New Orleans. Renewers do not have mental health issues, are not reliant on public health care, and show a vision of being driven and optimistic—the epitome of strong, positive mental health.

Similar to public education, the government is removing much of its financial and bureaucratic obligations to keep the city’s population healthy as the privatization of health care and services takes over. At the time of this writing (2012), the new medical facility is being constructed where houses used to be, funds are pouring into its construction and promotion, many community health clinics are closing or planning to close, and public mental health care is virtually nonexistent. The problem is continuously moved around (Harvey, 2009) and unaddressed, as the privatization of health care continues to discard people and their needs and make opportunities for financial growth and population idealism. The Renewers have another reform to rally behind and find employment opportunities in while the Disposables find their access to health care and knowledge of the system displaced.

The “Sliver by the River” versus the “Pastels of Poverty”

Changes in the real estate market after Katrina were perhaps the most expected change in the city’s landscape. With 80% of the city’s housing stock under water after the storm for two weeks, almost everything needed rebuilding. The rebuilding of housing has not been even: ideal places filled with Renewers flourish and get much development attention, while Disposables are either pushed out of their places through the demolition of public housing and higher rents or their places continue to be overwhelmed with lingering hurricane destruction. Neighborhoods
and the housing market are emerging as very different from pre-Katrina (Ross, 2008) and even more divided before, with Renewers finding welcoming spaces for living and doing good and Disposables being even more excluded and disposed by renewal.

Neighborhood development has been a catch-phrase in post-Katrina New Orleans, especially as conversations around neighborhood change are so politicized. What is emerging post-Katrina is a very different vision of the overall ideal of a “neighborhood” altogether. Pre-storm, a neighborhood was associated with a neighborhood-based school, a playground and community center, a corner store selling a mixed bag of goods, and oftentimes a public housing project as the neighborhood’s centerpiece. Public spaces have been performative spaces of important cultural artifacts like Mardi Gras Indians, Second Lines, and large Mardi Gras parades. Post-Katrina, the neighborhood ideal has shifted enormously: neighborhoods are being developed as commercial corridors, making them walkable and commercially-focused. Schools are no longer neighborhood-based and much less community involved, especially as the public charter school system has taken away geographic preference from school enrollment. Public recreation spaces are geographically concentrated and missing from many of the neediest neighborhoods. Neighborhoods feel directionally developed towards a different goal than building community, as they move towards appeasing a different post-Katrina population.

An estimated 20% of the city’s housing was not destroyed by the floodwaters (Bostic and Molaison, 2006; McCarthy, 2008). This housing stock, often referred to as “the sliver by the

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2 A “second line” is a participatory parade that occurs within the neighborhoods of New Orleans. It is a tradition that stems from the traditional Jazz Funeral. Each Social Aid and Pleasure Club in New Orleans (local civic organizations), whose memberships are a majority African-American, hosts a second line each year. However, a second line is very different from a traditional parade: while there are some core parading members and at least one brass band that leads the procession, anyone and everyone is encouraged to join in the parade and walk with the members. People join the Second Line as it passes, creating an organically growing mass of marchers that increases its public presence as it goes. Second Lines also greatly differ from normal parades as they take place within neighborhoods, and usually within highly marginalized neighborhoods that may be famous for frequent violence. Second lines are a cultural form of speaking back to this violence or marginality, taking over the public spaces and declaring them, at least for that afternoon, as safe and recognized environments.
river,” sits on the highest grounds of the city and has been predominantly occupied by White Renewers. While many of these areas have always been fairly expensive, they have become even more cherished after the storm with real estate prices doubling (or more) in most of these areas (Rivlin, 2006). Many people with means choose places on higher ground, as they seem safer for people avoiding the experience of losing a home again. These areas also have significantly lower insurance costs, and people on higher ground are not required to purchase flood insurance as those in other parts of the city. These areas have developed quite rapidly since Katrina. They are thriving with beautiful houses, expensive stores, hip restaurants and bars, and neighborhood-scale grocers.

These areas have also developed commercial corridors where the majority of the businesses are locally owned and there are very few chain or big box stores. This is seen as adding value to neighborhoods and makes these neighborhoods very attractive to Renewers, who cherish the local character. Jane, the director of a nonprofit organization that is focused on the development of local businesses, is excited to see spaces emerging that are citizen-run, neighborhood-focused, and not led by large outside developers. She states, “I think we are seeing these commercial corridors through a new lens, and people are valuing those parts of this whole morphing to a more valuable walkable neighborhood.” She sees these changes occurring in specific areas of the city, and they represent ideal forms of local-led, neighborhood-scaled development. The development of more walkable neighborhoods occurs in a seemingly parallel world from the demolition of the housing projects, which involved turning walkable concentrated communities into spread out, nonintegrated and non-interactive households.

Renewer neighborhoods have rapidly developed since the storm to adapt to a new type of population: one that is young, trendy, and with disposable income. These areas are hip, exciting
and fun. They create a perfect environment for people to feel like they are a part of a community as they engage with local businesses while reaping the benefits of living in a developed neighborhood. They are perfect for attracting Renewers to the city and keeping them satisfied.

When I asked Jane about fears of gentrification with this seemingly positive direction of small business and local development, she agreed that it was a sincere concern:

Areas that are basically no longer affordable for people? Yes! I consider that stretch on Magazine Street. I definitely see that. It’s like a cupcake store, a high end t-shirt store, boutique boutique boutique boutique, and it’s really high-end stuff. Much less diverse and it’s much less useful. But that’s just one example that springs to mind, and I think there are other places. I think that’s the dynamic that we have to be careful about. New Orleans now feels like a very expensive city to me.

Neighborhoods are changing and many move towards targeting Renewers. In many neighborhoods, there are more bike lanes, coffee shops, health food stores, and other desirables for gentrified neighborhoods. There is a gradual transformation of many of the city’s neighborhoods into quaint, centralized spaces with a distinct neighborhood “feel.” Many people in New Orleans are very excited about this shift. Paul, the native-born young doctor, explained:

I’ve seen more bike lanes and people recycling and people trying to salvage stores now. I just think there’s this kind of—I don’t even know how to describe it—there’s this sense that it’s a little “cleaner” than it was before.

Paul feels much more positive and “clean” in post-Katrina New Orleans, as he sees it as a more progressive city with spaces developing around things that he is interested in. He wants to see development in New Orleans that enhances his already comfortable way of life, and these “extras” are seen as great reasons for him to be in love with his city. Neighborhoods come to feel ideal for people like Paul: “cleaner,” richer, and Whiter.

There was another important change in the real estate market that targeted the Renewer population: the rise of condominiums. Especially during the first two years after the storm, there was an intensely speculative period in the real estate market (Rivlin, 2006; Hetzler, Medina and
Overfelt, 2007). In New Orleans, real estate has always been relatively affordable and land has not been scarce. For this reason, New Orleans housing has been mostly small-scale, single or multifamily dwellings (with usually no more than 4 units). Large apartment complexes were a rarity, and people, both rich and poor, were focused on the beauty of living in small-scale community-building housing. After Katrina, however, there was a great push by many huge real estate investors to develop large upscale housing complexes, some near the new medical facility. Real estate speculation has been prevalent since the storm, as Ron Joseph explained, “You had condominiums on every corner, some for $500 a foot. None of that ever happened before [Katrina].” These condominiums were advertised for their safety, luxury, and convenience and have become popular places for young professionals to live. Many of them have tried to promote a “local” character through the use of local architectural elements; the inclusion of perks like music rooms or local restaurants as part of their complex; or using names for the complexes that follow in the post-Katrina spirit of renewal, like “The Preserve.” Many of these complexes, as one respondent explained, seem to develop around a “live-work-play” mentality, promoting a Renewer type of lifestyle as a reason to live in a shiny new apartment complex in post-Katrina New Orleans. These types of developments are designed specifically with Renewers in mind, as suddenly post-Katrina New Orleans has a new demographic for the real estate sector.

Yet, not all of New Orleans is being redeveloped for Renewers; some parts of the city are not being redeveloped at all. New Orleans still has many properties whose destruction lingers since the storm. As one young high school student from the Academy for Last Resorts explained,

Yeah, everywhere you go, you’re going to see an abandoned house or something like that somewhere. You’re going to see some dirty looking stuff. And even nowadays you could still see that little X stuff on the top of the apartments.
The “X” is the marking that the Coast Guard used during the Katrina evacuation to indicate homes that had been searched and the number of bodies they may have found left inside. Most parts of New Orleans (except for in the “sliver by the river”) still have several houses that have been unattended to since the storm, many of which still have the “X” as a mark of its Katrina memory (Moye, 2009). Many houses remain gutted and look like empty shells, and many houses have been completely demolished leaving only an empty slab on a clear field as a reminder of the home that once stood there. People who live in these neighborhoods are frequently reminded of Katrina and their neighborhood’s slow recovery by these forgotten, sad homes. In these neighborhoods, the feeling of being lost behind by development is palpable.

Blight frequents political discourse as a problem in need of attacking, as seen in the mayor’s forming a task force to specifically focus on blight. Many properties remain in a crumbling status or literally overtaken by plant-life. These blighted properties are not only individual’s homes but also include unopened schools, hospitals, businesses, recreation centers, and other institutions. Although blight has been decreasing slightly each year since Katrina, leaving currently over 48,000 blighted properties since 2010 (see Figures 4 and 5), it is still too common in all Disposable neighborhoods. Through the blight, opportunity surfaces and many developers are trying to be inserted into this process. What this opportunity will look like is still to be seen, but few community members seem to be invited to the table for discussion. Besides, the city’s process of dealing with publicly-owned blighted properties is extremely slow. With more time passing, people living amongst them grow angrier and more aware of the lack of importance given to their quality of life. As they sit and wait for decisions to be made, many of these buildings have become rodent-infested, easy places for illegal activity (especially squatting and selling drugs). They often lose their structural integrity to the growth of mold and weeds.

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inside and around the buildings. These former public institutions come to define many neighborhoods’ ambiance and dominate their ability to see beyond the events of Katrina. It is hard to move forward and think about the future when your neighborhood is dominated by abandoned houses of your neighbors and deserted public buildings.

Figure 4: Blighted Addresses or Empty Lots, as of September 2010

![Diagram showing the calculation: 43,755 + 5,105 = 48,860.]

GNOCDC 2010

Figure 5: Blighted residential properties or addresses, as of September 2010

![Graph showing the decrease in livable housing from March 2008 to September 2010.]

Due to speculation, opportunity, and the immediate decrease in livable housing, rents on the whole have increased dramatically since the storm and New Orleans has become a much...
more expensive city to live in for residents. Compared to other cities in the United States, the rents in New Orleans after Katrina are much less affordable than in most comparable cities in the U.S. (see Table 6). Although New Orleans seemed to be an affordable city before the storm, this has drastically changed post-Katrina where rent prices have skyrocketed. Almost half of the residents in New Orleans are renters, which is a much higher proportion than in other cities of comparable size (GCR Consulting Inc., 2010), and they are paying hugely inflated sums in post-Katrina New Orleans. With rents increased by several hundred dollars, affordability in New Orleans is compromised. It has become a much easier city for people with money to live in than for those who could not even afford the pre-Katrina rents (Table 7). Affordable housing is disappearing, while the cruelty of destroyed potential housing shadows over neighborhoods with blight. Disposables are gradually displaced in the rebuilding city and are edged out of liveable standards.

Table 6: Affordability Index of City Areas in the U.S.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Affordability Index</th>
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<tr>
<td>Chicago-Naperville-Joliet</td>
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<tr>
<td>Austin-Round Rock</td>
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<tr>
<td>Miami-Fort Lauderdale-Miami Beach</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boston-Cambridge-Quincy</td>
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<tr>
<td>New York-Northern New Jersey-Long Island</td>
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<td>Nashville-Davidson-Murfreesboro</td>
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<tr>
<td>Orlando-Kissimmee</td>
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<tr>
<td>Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Marietta</td>
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<td>Houston-Sugarland-Baytown</td>
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<td>New Orleans-Metairie-Kenner</td>
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GCR Consulting Inc., 2010
The lack of affordable housing options in New Orleans is pushing low-income residents out of the city. Miles is a native-born housing attorney who works for a leading non-profit organization that fights for housing equality. He was a general leader in the Renewer movement in New Orleans, and has frequently been consulted on political and municipal-wide projects. When I asked him to describe the current state of New Orleans’ housing market, he emphatically argued that “the housing market is just crazy! We are in a housing crisis in New Orleans!” There is a severe shortage of affordable housing in New Orleans right now, so much so that when the Housing Authority of New Orleans opened their voucher waitlist in September 2009, they had 90,000 individuals in need of a voucher to pay their rent. This is an enormous number of people—particularly for a city of 400,000 people—that cannot make ends meet.

To further complicate the lack of affordable housing, housing discrimination is rampant in New Orleans (Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center, 2007). Miles’ workplace
conducts frequent audits of the New Orleans’ housing scene to understand housing discrimination, and they have published and found, as Miles described:

68% race discrimination in the rental context…and 82% income discrimination. That’s pretty bad. There are a lot of active policies to try to restrict the availability of affordable housing throughout the region and that’s directly related to an interest in not having those low income residents living either in one’s neighborhood or in the region whatsoever.

Undesirable residents are pushed out of desirable neighborhoods through inflated rents and discriminatory practices. The shifting housing market and diminished public housing options have made it very difficult for low-income residents to find viable housing options and very easy for discriminatory policies to be sneaked in amidst transitions. The few options that are left constantly discriminate against Disposables, as they are shut out of the city through their struggles over finding a place to live. They get the message very clearly that they are not wanted in the renewal project.

The dominant real estate issue for Disposables in New Orleans is famously the public housing projects, which have become all the more crucial with the dramatically increased low-income rent prices and decreased availability of affordable housing. For many decades, New Orleans’ public housing market has been dominated by “the big four” housing projects: Lafitte, B.W. Cooper, St. Bernard and C.J. Peete. As has received much media attention through the first years after Katrina, the city has followed a comprehensive strategy of demolishing all of the four largest housing projects at once, sweeping the city’s public housing stock into empty fields of weeds. The housing projects have been rebuilt, but this time not as concentrated centers of public housing. Rather, they are being reconstructed as mixed-income housing complexes that include some public housing units. These mixed income housing complexes look very different from before, and discourse about them focuses on the immense “upgrade:” while before they were large, heavy-looking brick buildings that faced upon a common outdoor space, they are now
bright multifamily townhouses with New Orleans architectural elements that face on to the streets. They represent, as Ron Joseph joked about, “A HUD requirement that you use the ‘pastels of poverty.’” Surface details—like bright paint color and New Orleans architectural elements—are used to make the buildings appear more attractive. Being mixed income, they have a certain number of units devoted for Section 8 voucher holders receiving full rental assistance, a certain number of units devoted to people receiving limited government housing assistance, and a certain number of units for those paying full-price.

When one drives by these renewed housing complexes, they certainly aesthetically appear to be much improved from the past. They more closely resemble their neighborhood’s surrounding housing units, and do not appear so distinct and ominous as before. Some have talked about the construction as an upgrade for the city and their residents, giving people more “dignity.” Although they have to live in the marker of “the pastels of poverty,” they are seen to be occupying a more dignified space, one where they could theoretically find more hope in their futures.

This, however, is not the case for most of the former housing projects’ residents, who felt quite the opposite of “dignified” as their homes were razed. Despite the large-scale protests in New Orleans (Eaton, 2007), former residents had little-to-no say in the demolition or reconstruction process. Many former housing project residents were immediately homeless as there were no public housing alternatives while they waited for the new housing to be built (Gardner, Irwin and Peterson, 2009). Further, the new housing complexes that took the projects’ place have largely excluded the former housing projects’ residents from their units (Luft and Griffin, 2008). Discrimination abounds for access to public housing. Public and low-income
housing availability has shrunken to mirror efforts at discarding the Disposables from the “new” New Orleans.

For many people, this has made coming home very difficult. Most of my students at the Academy for Last Resorts described very challenging times around housing issues when they first moved back to New Orleans, especially because of the lack of available affordable housing. Many of them found their former homes—including their sense of neighborhood and social networks—destroyed with the demolishing of the housing projects. Their families often had a very difficult time finding new housing, as many of the students were forced to live with extended family until they could work out an alternative. Their dispossession has made it very difficult for them to feel like a part of the “new” New Orleans.

Mike, for example, is a student at the Academy who has moved around numerous times since the storm. He lived in a housing project with his family before the storm, and they could not move back to New Orleans because it was demolished. So, his grandmother moved their family around six times throughout the southern United States within a year, looking for their permanent home and happiness. Since returning to New Orleans, his family has moved more than ten times in less than four years. Each time they have moved due to problems making the rent, arguments with shifty landlords, nearby violence and burglaries, or changing ownership of the apartments. He has moved around so much that, according to the school social worker, Mike would officially be categorized as homeless and would be put in State custody if people knew about his family’s instability. Most of my students struggled to maintain a consistent phone number as they have moved homes so frequently, which has caused many problems for schools in keeping track of their student population. Their instability has made their lives in post-Katrina New Orleans extremely precarious and their futures uncertain.
Neighborhods’ unequal redevelopment is reflected in the dissolution of community centers in Disposable neighborhoods. The New Orleans Recreation Department has been extremely slow at reorganizing since the storm, so much so that the Mayor led a successful campaign to turn public recreation into a “public-private partnership” (WWLTV, 2010). The government has come to rely on private firms to help develop community centers and neighborhood playgrounds. This represents yet another example of the privatization of New Orleans’ institutions and the government removing itself from sectors that seem “superfluous.”

The results are very uneven development with Disposable neighborhoods lacking access to a unifying recreation institution. Before the storm the city had recreation centers in each neighborhood and public housing project that were important centers for community building. Since the storm, only four recreation centers have re-opened and they geographically exclude most people from access. Most of the other former centers still sit on ravaged lots, dilapidated and ignored, acting as reminders to nearby residents of what they cannot have. Many of the neighborhoods are trying to organize and petition for the re-opening of their recreation centers (State of the Reunion, 2010), but without political clout or municipal interest, their cause does not seem to be heard.

Further, the few recreation centers that have re-opened would not be considered, at least aesthetically, to be beacons of hope. The two most centrally located recreation centers are in Treme and the 7th Ward, two historically African-American neighborhoods. One of these centers has no windows and has bar-like structures covering much of the outside. The other is located next-door to an interstate overpass, and most visitors of the recreation center must walk through the sketchy, hidden area under the overpass to reach the building. I visited the centers several times, especially the one located in the 7th ward. An excerpt from my field notes:
The building and facilities are old and decrepit looking, although there is a lot offered at the center: sports, art, music, etc. The center’s manager explained to me though that many of the classes—like pottery and dance—that they have facilities for are not currently being offered due to a lack of funding to pay instructors. There are a lot of men hanging around: I’m here at 1:30 on a Thursday afternoon, and I’d say there are about 50 twenty something Black men here. I haven’t actually seen any women. Caddy corner from the center is a restaurant/bar, which when I came here last week with Mike, there was a big group of older men standing outside drinking, like 10-20 men. When you walk in the gym (the main part of the building), there are bright orange pieces of paper posted that say, “No guns, no sunflower seeds on the bleachers.”

This is the most popular center for recreation for much of the city’s African-American youth. It does little to give inspiration in their future in the city or optimism in their everyday lives.

The housing market in New Orleans is certainly showing at least two faces in its rebuilding process: one that is developing rapidly and vividly to support an increasingly gentrified city, and one that is dominated by demolitions and discrimination of the extremely limited low-income housing. Many post-Katrina residents are living in neighborhoods that feel even better than before. Yet, many are not. Demolishing the housing projects, being surrounded by destruction in one’s neighborhood, having difficulty finding new housing, and having little access to neighborhood resources does nothing to create an “ideal” post-Katrina New Orleans. These processes make a huge part of the city’s population more desolate than ever. While Renewers feel inspired by their great neighborhoods, housing options, and surrounding renewal project, Disposables are again excluded and pushed out of the “new” New Orleans by a lack of access to housing.

*Public Safety: Apparent Action or Planned Disposability?*
Public safety is an enormous issue in New Orleans—both before and after Katrina. For at least the past three decades, the city has had a very high rate of violent crime and this rate has not decreased after Katrina despite the smaller population. Violent crime continues to be poignant in the renewing city: since Katrina, New Orleans’ crime rate is twice the national average (Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, 2011). It is not surprising that violent crime is still such an issue, even in the “new” New Orleans,” as the creation of an excluded, rejected population sector of Disposables in post-Katrina New Orleans has left many people desperate and with no hope in their futures (see Chapter 6). Public safety is on everyone’s radar (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010), both Renewers and Disposables, and the government’s reaction and handling of violence is telling of the city’s directed narrative of renewal.

New Orleans has had a strong recent history, including the years before Katrina, of a high rate of violent crime. The small city has been the murder capital of the United States at different points in recent history, and its murder rate has soared above the national average—usually 7-10 times the national average—for the past thirty years (McLaughlin, 2012). Perhaps even more so, it has become infamous as a city with a struggling (and usually corrupt) law enforcement division, as stories of New Orleans’ police brutality, ineptitude, and corruption frequent the national news (International Business Times, 2011; NBS News, 2012, etc.). This was true before Katrina, as New Orleans was the testing ground for zero-tolerance policing policies and the inevitable brutality cases that ensued (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011; Parenti, 2000; *Times Picayune*, 2011). It has continued since Katrina, most significantly revealed in a scathing report of the New Orleans Police Department by the U.S. Department of Justice (2011) that revealed the multi-layered issues of handling public safety in New Orleans: unwarranted stops and searches; excessive and unnecessary use of force; and discriminatory policing. The current crime
scene appears especially daunting as victims and perpetrators are increasingly very young (Scharf, 2010), with over 50% of murder victims being 27 years old or younger (Welford, Bond, and Goodison, 2011). Many of these murders are seemingly avoidable if adequate intervention and political will were in place (Scharf, 2010). New Orleans has been a city where violent crime has become normative for many years now, and this has not changed with Katrina. This normalization of violence is a direct obstacle to the promotion of an ideal narrative of a progressively renewing city.

As more Renewers come to New Orleans, their retention is related to the handling of public safety. While partially their retention is such an issue because of the “peace corps mentality” (Meffert, 2009) of their jobs, public safety is also an important reason why many Renewers do not see New Orleans as their long-term home (DeBerry, 2012; McLaughlin, 2012). Everyone in New Orleans, but especially people who are part of the renewal project, is very concerned about public safety in the city: over 41% of residents are gravely concerned about public safety and 64% say they have not seen progress in public safety since Katrina (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010). Besides their own safety, Renewers are concerned about violent crime because they are in professions where they encounter it on a daily basis. Many of the new young professionals living in New Orleans are working in schools, and young students seem to be the most frequent population of homicide victims. Jeanne, for example, who has been teaching in a high school for three years in New Orleans, expressed her sadness,

At my three years at the school, we’ve buried seven kids. And they were 18, 19, 20. It just blows me away.

Many of these energetic, politically and civically engaged Renewers are having similar experiences. Those working in health care see the young victims almost daily, and those

3 Personally, I experienced a very similar situation at my time with SilencesViolence. In one particularly bloody
working in urban development or criminal justice cannot avoid worrying about it. The city of New Orleans understands that in order to cater to the Renewer population and entice them to stay, they have to appear to be addressing the city’s violent crime rate.

The city must address the issue, however, in ways that Renewers would appreciate: by appealing to their interest in community organizing and in widely publicized claims of action. Simple zero-tolerance policing is not enough, as this is not a public enough action. Rather, addressing public safety has to be widely discussed and promoted, so that the city appears to be fixing the issue of violence and appeasing Renewers to stay. The city’s administration frequently discusses the city’s violence with a take-charge attitude, and this discourse is followed by several actions on-the-ground. Some examples of strategies for this have included inviting community organizers on the police superintendent search task force, endorsing a public working group on the new jail, and widely publicizing the actions against some cases of police brutality that occurred during Katrina.

When Mayor Mitch Landrieu won the mayoral election in 2010, the dominant issue on his election platform was a plan to reform the New Orleans Police Department. The hallmark of this plan was choosing a new police superintendent, which the mayor turned into a centerpiece of local media coverage. Mayor Landrieu opened the appointment process to a committee of experts—including key community partners, groups that work with the police department, non-profit organizations that focus on violent crime (including the Executive Director of SilenceIsViolence), business owners, and university professors—to make suggestions of candidates for the position and investigate their background qualifications. Despite Landrieu promoting the process as innovative, transparent, and participatory, it was not and many

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time period, I knew seven students from different schools—all ages 15 to 18—who were killed in separate incidences in a mere four weeks. This was a trend.
committee members resigned early in the process as they understood that they were being used to claim “participation” while the process was really all smoke and mirrors (Henderson and Landis, 2010). Yet, the process still largely appealed to the Renewer narrative of a sense of community involvement in governance and an apparent push for public safety reform.

In addition to trying to reform the New Orleans Police Department, there has also been a controversial proposal to build a new, expanded jail in New Orleans to house all of the supposed criminals who seem to be overflowing from the current jail. The Sheriff proposed to build a state-of-the-art jail that would have upgraded technology systems to speed the efficiency of the intake processes, and would be a massive structure with 4300 beds for inmates (a much greater number than the current jail can handle). New Orleans currently has the highest incarceration rate in the world (Safe Streets Strong Communities, 2006), and this new jail would only magnify the city’s high incarceration numbers. Big jails with overflowing capacity intend to keep a certain part of the population permanently oppressed (Foucault, 1995), and this has happened with Disposables finding little way out of the school-to-prison pipeline. Yet for Renewers, a new jail makes the city appear to be actively addressing the public safety issue and working to reform the current culture of New Orleans.

These feelings are amplified by the constant surfacing of stories of police brutality from the storm. The widely publicized Danziger trials and other examples of police brutality against innocent people during the days after Katrina have dominated much of the city’s news—both locally and nationally. The struggles the city has had with maintaining a vision of non-corrupt policing has greatly damaged its ability to deal with violent crime and appear competent on the world stage. For those most affected by policing, public safety seems to lack improvement from

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4 The Danziger Bridge shootings occurred during Katrina, where police shot and killed two unarmed men trying to cross the bridge, and then went to great lengths to cover it up. Many officers are being tried and indicted for this case. It has been a real focus in local media and covered in national media.
reform and has only left Disposables feeling less trusting and invested in answers to the issues. Yet to Renewers, New Orleans appears to be fixing its “past” record of corrupt and inept policing.

The jail, the Police Superintendent task force, the constant press conferences about crime in New Orleans—all of these actions portray a city administration that appears to be doing something about crime. This is important, as crime is the number one concern of New Orleans residents (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010). People want to feel safe in the city that they love, and they do not want to feel spiritually brought down by the sadness of violence. Plus, the city has a hard time promoting itself as a beacon of progress and renewal when its citizens are dying on a daily basis and being locked up in high numbers for unimportant crimes.

Renewers bring needed attention to the issue of public safety. Unfortunately, that political clout is only afforded to some, while much of the city’s population that is most affected by the city’s violence are denied voice in the process. Further, those most affected by violence in the city do not feel optimistic about the future of public safety in New Orleans. These Disposables do not think that issues with violence are getting addressed, and they trust the NOPD less and less (United States Department of Justice, 2011). For most Disposables, public safety is a nonexistent oxymoron, as they do not feel safe and rather feel permanently threatened in public.

Many people also attribute the increase in violent crime since the storm at least partially to the housing crisis and demolition of housing projects (Hill, 2011). With the previous public housing projects, poverty was concentrated and centralized in nodes around the city. However, communities and social networks also were fortified around these places and their identities. Place-based identities connected to these projects have been strong sources of pride. I saw this daily in my work in schools, where students had difficulty completing a drawing that did not
refer to their housing project affiliation, even though many of these students had not lived in those projects for over five years. The demolishing of these projects actually acted to heighten this sense of loyalty to their previous neighborhoods, especially as the residents of various former public housing projects were suddenly mixed together in new neighborhoods. A native-born teacher in a Disposable school had a particularly glum view of the results of this integration:

The increase in the violence that you see with teenagers, the increase in the violence that you see at schools, is a result of what has occurred after they start tearing our lives down with the housing development. There is a lot of turf wars going on because they started tearing down a lot of housing development. It’s like a design plan: it’s a plan to have, and I hate to say it like this but I want to be real with you, blacks destroy blacks. It’s all a design plan.

Many people feel like this teacher, and the public rallies that protested the destruction of the housing projects voiced similar concerns about planned disposability. As violence escalates and neighborhoods further deteriorate, it does seem like the city is plotting for former public housing residents to just go away and not be a part of the “new” New Orleans by losing themselves in violence.

Disposables thus tend to get caught up in violence, or at least in the criminal justice system. A study of the current city jail found that 60% of those in jail are incarcerated for misdemeanor offenses and 80% of all inmates are for non-violent offences (Austin, 2012; Vera Institute of Justice, 2011). This included people not paying traffic tickets, indecent exposure (a particularly tricky one in New Orleans where Bourbon street is internationally celebrated for people bearing their exposed private parts), and other one-time non-violent offenses. Disposable youth in New Orleans are being exposed to a path entangled with the criminal justice system from an early age, as 100% of the teenage students I worked with knew someone in prison right now (SilenceIsViolence Peace Club Survey, 2010). Few options seem available, and their lives
feel more and more enclosed by the terrible statistics of being young and Black in post-Katrina New Orleans.

The progress of addressing the issue of public safety seems very different for Renewers and Disposables. The city appears to be taking care of the violence problem through well-publicized smoke and mirrors events that are aimed to make the city look progressive and reforming for Renewers and their national reputation. Yet Disposables feel the problems worsening as violence in the city stays ridiculously high and Disposables feel all the more precarious. At the time of this writing in 2012, the city is slated to break its murder record and stay the murder capital of the United States, making public safety again the decisive issue in the stability of people’s lives in post-Katrina New Orleans. How the city’s problems with violence are dealt with is definitive for the renewing, redefining city: is the “new” New Orleans a place overcome with violence, a primary sign of failure to its renewal process and making the city unfit for Renewers to settle down in? Or is the “new” New Orleans a city that does something about its problems, and rises above challenges? These questions are key to understanding how the post-Katrina city will be defined as a place, and what the new place-based identity will look like: is it a city that changes or one that is stuck in its pre-storm poverty?

Overall, there are consistent trends of shifting institutions that tell a story of privatization and idealism, dividing who is benefiting and being left behind from change. Post-Katrina institutions encourage the city’s repopulation by young educated people who want to do something meaningful and work hard. Charter schools, community health clinics, and savvy real estate development all require working extensive hours, strong qualifications of human capital, and a willingness to follow influential, visionary leaders. The pre-Katrina type of New Orleans
resident—poor, low education, African American—is deemed largely unqualified to lead these institutions and their changes, as much of the change is enacted by nonlocals. What constitutes the ideal of public institutions is being redefined as something progressing, community-based, “cleaner,” pro-active and working hand-in-hand with private entities. The public relies on the private and shifts to resemble it as its spaces become re-segregated and renewed.

In looking at how discourse has affected the actual rebuilding of New Orleans, the institutional landscape paints a common trend of divided narratives building structures of people’s realities on the ground. Institutions of the city are changing and adjusting to the need to follow the idealized future of the city, bringing this beyond mere discourse to actual rebuilding effects. A city of hope and optimism is created for some while a city of neglect and exclusion permeates the existence of others. The “slow violence” (Nixon, 2011) experienced by low-income residents in New Orleans is pushed further with each additional institution that changes for the sake of urban renewal, and it is all masked not as violence but as reform for the push to build a better New Orleans for “all.” The city has become structured to support the building of an ideal and neglected New Orleans simultaneously. These narratives and realities create very different worlds for those living in the city, as I will ethnographically explore what it feels like to live out each side of the narrative in the following chapters.
Despite the crumbling status of many parts of the city, the constant news reports of violence, and the disappearance of many public resources, for many people the years after Katrina was a time filled with enormous hope and optimism. In the wake of a destructive disaster came opportunity and idealism for many: an overwhelming sense of change, both discursive and on-the-ground, penetrated all aspects of life in post-Katrina New Orleans. The movement for change in post-Katrina New Orleans is embodied by an emerging idealistic generation of New Orleanians. In some parts of the city, post-Katrina New Orleans feels dominated by 20 and 30 somethings who have moved to the recovering city to be a part of something meaningful and make their mark. These young adults bring with them a drive to be part of the rebuilding process and are quick to introduce new forms and strategies for doing so. Many people in the city repeatedly discuss the new spirit of New Orleans as being purposeful, dedicated, and energetic, with young energy taking on a whole new level of appreciation and inertia. They are embraced as part of the “new” New Orleans, and are in turn used to project an image of the ideal city that is driven by renewal.

This image of renewal and young energy is in stark contrast to the vision of the city projected during the storm. In those first few weeks after Katrina made landfall, New Orleans became the international emblem for neglected and oppressive decades-old poverty and racism that left the majority of a city’s population stranded, homeless, and in need. During Katrina, New Orleanians were portrayed as victimized families who needed help from near and far; “refugees” in their own country, who were sometimes welcomed and sometimes disdained in receiving
cities; and people who were purposefully neglected, stranded, and enraged at the government. This image of the city was a big draw for young idealists across the country who were hungry to work for change, and New Orleans provided a great venue for putting their wants to fix the city’s needs (Ehrenfeucht and Nelson, 2010). Moving to New Orleans felt like a philanthropic contribution.

The city quickly moved beyond this image of a city-in-need to a vision of a city making progress, and this shift is embodied by the young idealist residents. The city is now promoted not as a destroyed, struggling city of poverty and sadness, but as a symbol of strength as it is celebrated for its progress and renewal. This is seen in the shifted political discourse; the constant exaggeration of New Orleanians’ resiliency; the ubiquitous use of print media (bumper stickers, t-shirts, flyers, billboards) to promote an exciting, strong local identity; and the many broadcast examples of residents being philanthropic or taking care of business on their own. America loves to ride on positive stories of resiliency and communities pulling themselves up by their bootstraps despite any odds, and New Orleans has become a frequent example of this type of success story. The myth of the American Dream is perpetuated by a message of hope and mobility (Wyatt-Nichol, 2011; Hochschild, 1995), and New Orleans produces many examples of the American Dream’s success that are selected as representative of the whole. This is largely accomplished by pushing a narrative of an ideal resident (Oza, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 1989) of the “new” New Orleans who embodies the American Dream. New Orleans comes to be seen as an emblem of success and progress, and economic development and political neoliberalism easily follow this narrative’s path.

Many great feminist scholars—Federici (2004), Oza (2006), Yuval-Davis (1989), Mies (1986)—discuss the creation of an image of an ideal resident as part of building a place-based
identity and especially defining who is included and excluded from that identity. These scholars have shown different examples (Medieval Europe, India, Israel) of when a specific type of person is promoted as emblematic of a place and used as a tool to exclude others. This has especially been true for places in transition—due to either national crises, like war or disease, or economic global integration—when national identity consolidation has been particularly important for easing the social, cultural, and political impacts of that transition. The ideal resident is used as a symbol of the future of those places, and development narratives are structured around this vision of the ideal future.

For example, Rupal Oza (2006) discusses the emergence of an ‘ideal woman’ in India during the height of its global economic integration in the 1990s. An ideal “new Indian woman” was used to both promote these economic changes and a modern national image, as the “new Indian woman” was associated with the modern, economically liberalized India. The promotion of this image of the new India softened the blows of large-scale, disruptive transitions and the disappearance of anything left of the old India that was not modern or neoliberal.

This same process of creating an ideal to ease and promote transition is large in New Orleans. Identity consolidation of the “new” New Orleans is centered on the promotion and celebration of the “Renewers” as representatives of the post-Katrina ideal city. These Renewers—people who are dedicated to the renewal process of post-Katrina New Orleans—bring a message of hope and optimism in the city’s future, and this narrative is in turn used to guide the city’s development. The ideal also delineates who is not ideal.

This chapter seeks to understand how it feels to be a part of defining the ideal “new” New Orleans, and the embodied political narrative and institutional actions that ensue. It draws on extensive ethnographic research conducted from 2009-2012 to understand the intentions, needs
and feelings of the Renewers in being a part of the repopulation project of a “new” New Orleans. In addition to spending time at community meetings, schools with a strong presence of Teach for America or other teacher fast-tracking programs, health clinics, art events, community organizing programs, and other post-Katrina innovations, I interviewed many artists, community organizers, social workers, teachers, real estate developers, doctors, nurses and others who considered themselves to be a part of the new energy in New Orleans. Some of this research was conducted as I worked with SilenceIsViolence, where I spent structured time across the city’s public schools and community cultural events. The work was focused on improving the situation of Disposables, sometimes in collaboration with or by harnessing the energy of Renewers. I was able to understand what it feels like for both Renewers and Disposables to be a part of the defined “new” New Orleans and how they in turn effect this process of renewal. Later, I found that my argument was further justified as I worked for two years in a public charter school that was completely managed and staffed by Renewers. I am, by default of my race, class, education, and professional focus, also a Renewer. Although I am critical of much of the Renewer narrative in post-Katrina New Orleans, I am also sympathetic to Renewers’ intentions and potential for positive contributions.

This chapter focuses on showing how Renewers are being used as the emblem of the “new” New Orleans because of the hope and opportunism that they bring and what this feels like for Renewer actors. Renewers are creating an ideal new New Orleanian, and this narrative is being used to justify the exclusion of the Disposables and institutional rebuilding discussed in the previous chapter. I begin the chapter by defining the Renewers, both locals and non-locals, and explain their motivations for being in New Orleans. Then, I will describe how hope dominates the social narrative of the city guided by these Renewers as a vision of inspiring opportunism,
and how an exciting cultural future makes New Orleans into an optimistic city for Renewer residents. This message of renewal moves beyond the social realm; I use the example of city politics to show another realm that has also grabbed hold of the Renewer narrative and discursively present a vision of a city that is politically working to improve itself. Hope dominates the narrative of the post-Katrina city—both socially, politically, and economically—and this hope creates a vision of New Orleans as different from before (even though it is just as segregated and violent—if not more so—than before). With the Renewers, hope comes to be a distributable tool that is encouraged and celebrated (even though others are denied it).

Defining the Renewer Ideal

The dominant narrative of a changed, new city is embodied by the Renewers who are the ideal “new” New Orleanians. As the ideal representative of the transitioning city, the Renewer is used to define the future vision of the city (Oza, 2006) as the ideal creates a clear definition of who is desirable and who is discardable in the “new” New Orleans. The Renewer becomes the celebrated symbol of the key to the city’s future.

The Renewers are mostly young professionals or recent college graduates, and the majority are White. Oftentimes referred to as YURPS—young urban redevelopment professionals—they are a welcomed addition to the redeveloping city. While they work in all employment sectors, they are particularly heavy in jobs that harness their idealism and interest in revitalizing a community:

- Young teachers who have been through teacher fast-tracking programs like Teach for America and TeachNOLA, and who see New Orleans’ education system as previously decrepit and behind but now as exciting and cutting edge with the charter school experiment;
• Community organizers who see New Orleans as a city with many deeply seeded social issues but with the potential to make change happen due to its small size and transitory state;
• Early career artists who see New Orleans as an inspiring, open cultural environment where experimentation is encouraged;
• Those in the medical field who see New Orleans’ health care system as desperately in need of quality health care workers who are willing to work with difficult populations under sometimes impossible working conditions; and
• Early career lawyers and social justice advocates who see New Orleans’ criminal justice system in great need as they develop their own careers in law.

They are seen as revitalizing the New Orleans workforce (Sellers, Perry et al, 2012) and have created a current of hope-filled hard work that guides the city’s rebuilding project. Their narrative is one of self-sufficiency, inspiration, willingness to rely on one’s personal agency and a take-no-excuses attitude, and a confidence in one’s abilities to enact change. This narrative is in direct opposition to that portrayed of New Orleanians during the storm and is emblematic of the focus on individualism in the myth of the American Dream (Hendrix-Sloan, 2007; Messner and Rosefield, 2001; Hochschild, 1995) that so guides post-Katrina discourse and neoliberal reform worldwide.

A city that has undergone a dramatic disaster like New Orleans is not an obvious place to want to move to for young people with an optimistic, privileged future ahead. As most of the city’s resources are lacking and housing options are limited, post-Katrina New Orleans would not seem to be desirable nor comfortable. Yet, Renewers have come to New Orleans and see it as an ideal, exciting city for their work and social development. Renewers move to New Orleans filled with optimism and inspiration, but their reasons for coming to the disaster-stricken city differ primarily based on whether they were pre-Katrina locals or not. Their motivations for coming to New Orleans frame their actions in the rebuilding city, and become an important part of the dominance of the Renewer narrative.
Pre-Katrina New Orleans Locals. Many Renewers are young adults who are from New Orleans and made an important decision to move back to the destroyed city in order to feel connected to their home at a time of complete upheaval. Renewers (and many non-Renewers alike) had this desire to just be a part of things and had a challenging time of divorcing themselves from the drama of Katrina. Most of my local Renewer participants explained that they came back to New Orleans because it was too hard to feel separated from the action at home, as they were “just like everybody else and wanted to obsess on New Orleans recovery 24/7,” as one participant described. I personally experienced a similar motivation: it was very difficult to feel disconnected from home when the very notion of that home was so compromised. Katrina created a new sense of urgency and dedication to New Orleans as home, and pre-Katrina local Renewers were prouder than ever to be New Orleanians and to be a part of their city’s future. This sentiment has been echoed across New Orleans and capitalized by a renewed celebration and heightening of the local in post-Katrina New Orleans (that I discuss further in Chapter 7).

At a time when many people were making important decisions as to whether New Orleans was a viable place for their future or not, an emotional attachment to their transitioning city was often enough to draw people home. Marcela, a young nurse who was born and raised in New Orleans, worked on rebuilding health care access after Katrina. She became very active in the community and was a visible advocate for equal access to health care. She explained how she decided to stay in New Orleans even after she was given an attractive job offer in California:

I went for my physical, and it was the doctor that was like, “You’re moving?!” And it was like you were on one side of the fence or you were on the other. You were either bailing or you were committed. And he was like, “But we need you! You can’t leave! You’re a nurse, and we need you!”
Marcela stayed in New Orleans and later built her family there because she was committed to her home where she felt needed. Many New Orleanians are like Marcela and felt an immense sense of loyalty to the city. They saw fulfilling this loyalty as staying in New Orleans and being a part of its rebuilding, as many have discussed leaving as irresponsible and a form of abandonment. This is a very important distinction between the Renewers and Disposables: not a single Disposable participant mentioned feeling any sort of obligation to the rebuilding city or wanting to be a part of things. Disposables came back to New Orleans because they were excited to re-establish their connections to their community, but there was no sense of their ownership or role in the rebuilding process. Renewers alone were granted this sentiment of feeling not just welcomed but *needed* in their hometown.

On the other hand, *all* of my local-born Renewers mentioned a *need* to be in New Orleans and an obligation to be a part of the “new” New Orleans. All of my local non-black participants felt a sense of clear responsibility to help the city. They explained, for example: “it seemed like I owed it to my community” (a young attorney); “I just had this commitment to the city” (a medical student); and “I don’t ever feel like it was an option, like I don’t think I ever considered not coming back. I would have felt like I was abandoning my home” (a social worker). All of my local Renewer participants talked about a commitment and responsibility to their city. They all felt like New Orleans was their responsibility, and that they had the potential and obligation to contribute to fixing the city’s problems. Leaving New Orleans was seen as a form of abandonment, and their mere presence in the city felt important to them. Being a part of urban renewal felt like an obligation to pre-Katrina Renewer New Orleanians, and this obligation translates in the ensuing Renewer narrative.
Post-Katrina New Residents. Many Renewers moved to New Orleans to be a part of an inspiring project, and New Orleanians are growing accustomed to noticing “outsiders” and seeing them as part of the renewing city. As one of my participants explained, “I tell people, if you want to see how we’ve repopulated the city, look at how many license plates from out-of-state are on Subarus, Saabs and Volkswagons.” Out-of-state license plates and non-local area code phone numbers are very common in New Orleans, and the presence of outsiders has become normalized as part of the “new” New Orleans. As a young, white woman working in low-income public schools, I am constantly asked by students and their families where I am from. They assume that I (and all people that look like me and work in Renewer sectors) would not be from New Orleans because that has been common in their experiences in post-Katrina New Orleans.

There are many programs—like Avodah, Americorps, City Year, teachnola, Teach for America, etc.—that are designed to specifically attract young people to the city to work in hands-on, potentially motivating jobs (like education, health care, non-profit organizations, etc). Teaching programs are particularly popular, like Teach for America and TeachNOLA, and have placed tens of thousands of aspiring teachers in schools since Katrina. Habitat for Humanity is active in New Orleans and its national reputation makes it a popular choice for many. Americorps interns and City Year employees can be seen everywhere in the city: community centers, schools, health clinics, etc. These programs are largely embraced from above as they make new residents feel very welcomed, encouraged, and empowered by their move to a destroyed city for philanthropic, optimistic motivations.

Non-local Renewers’ motivations for moving to New Orleans after the storm varied greatly. For many, moving to New Orleans was about adventure and discovery, as many
participants were willing to just figure things out once they got here. Jeanne, a teacher who had gone through a fast-tracking teacher program, is a good example of the Renewer adventure of moving to New Orleans, “I kinda moved down here on a wing and a prayer…job placement and all that was totally up in the air.” From a small town in Arkansas, she had nowhere to live when she arrived, very little money, and little social network to help her get life established. Although instability is generally not seen as a desirable characteristic of residents (especially in an already very unstable city), narratives of people like Jeanne get re-articulated by potential employers and politicians as an asset for a rebuilding city. Many young people came to New Orleans in search of adventure and had the pioneering attitude that was beneficial to their success. Figuring it out as they went along has been part of the game.

For some of my participants, coming to New Orleans was coincidental: they were at a point in their lives when they were looking for their future, and New Orleans seemed to be a place in need that also had an ambiguous future. Many young people who came to New Orleans were coming from middle American smaller communities or places that they saw as less exciting. They wanted to escape from their hometowns that were, as in the words of one young artist, “feeling claustrophobic,” and New Orleans seemed to have a plethora of opportunities. Elizabeth, that young artist, moved to New Orleans from a small town and was excited about the diversity and excitement around her. She explained, “I just graduated school and I lived in Virginia for long enough and the walls were closing in on me.” When she came to New Orleans, she bounced around from job to job, waiting tables and finding art opportunities wherever she could. For people like her, moving to New Orleans was a way to leave the lack of inspiration of their hometowns, experience adventure in an exciting city, reinvent themselves and find
enrichment in building their lives in a redefining city. New Orleans has been seen by Renewers as a land of opportunity.

Both local and non-local Renewers have played a key role in defining the narrative of the city’s future. They come to New Orleans to contribute to a struggling project and to be a part of something meaningful. Their work is highly recognized and appreciated. They are seen as central to the redesigned education system’s focus on charter schools, the ability of decentralized health clinics to increase access to public health, and the clearing of an immensely backlogged criminal justice system. They also bring with them new ideas for businesses, as creative new small businesses pop up all over the city like homemade popsicle shops, graphic clothing design stores with catchy slogans, and hip restaurants with enticing happy hour menus. Urban development projects also tend to be aligned with the social interests of this population, as neighborhoods are designed around being walkable, having bike lanes, and hosting an ambulatory farmers market. New Orleans is emerging, thanks to the new population of Renewers who bring energy and political clout, with a post-storm narrative that is starkly different from that broadcast during the Katrina evacuation: one of a city that fixes things itself, works hard, is innovative, and is dominated by young white people who are focused on helping others.

Their role in the post-disaster city is pivotal: while their intentions are usually considerate and forward-thinking, they do not publicly recognize the effect on the city of the dominant narrative being redefined to surround them. They come to New Orleans wanting to do good, and fill roles created by mass privatization without knowing that they are often exploiting and excluding others rather than doing good as intended. They become the emblem of the “new” New Orleans, as they embody a vision of a progressive, forward-moving city that represents
great resiliency and personal agency. The narrative surrounding the Renewers comes to define the socio-cultural, political, and economic development trajectory of New Orleans.

A Narrative of Hope

The ideal Renewer is used to define the status of the post-disaster city as “better than before.” Renewers bring with them a narrative that is dominated by their optimism, hard work, and push towards a progressive future. The ideal Renewers are promoted as the emblem of the future of the city, and their narrative becomes the dominant defining narrative of the future rebuilding trajectory. As Renewers represent optimism in what could be a very sad city, their stories are exciting and attractive to anyone looking to promote successes of post-Katrina New Orleans. There are two primary components of the Renewer narrative that are used to define the “new” New Orleans: inspiration and opportunism.

Inspiration. Renewers see New Orleans as an incredibly inspirational environment. All of my young non-black participants described life in New Orleans as “inspirational,” and none of my Disposables thought that New Orleans was an inspirational place. Part of that inspiration for Renewers comes from the portrayed resiliency of the city and its ability to “come back” after the storm—something many people attributed to as the “spirit” of New Orleans and the strength of the people. Partly, this spirit has come from the city’s focus on renewal that the Renewers bring. Young people moving to New Orleans make it all the more attractive for other young people, as their optimism feeds off into others and makes the city seem like an inspiring place for young professionals in general. As Jeanne, a young teacher, explained,

I’ve just met so many cool people here and I kinda think it’s like, I made the comparison to traveling to the third world: when you go to places like Guatemala, people are cool no matter where you’re from. And I feel like the people that are drawn here, there’s a lot of that too. I’ve just met amazing people that are from here and that have moved here.
Jeanne works in education, a sector that is particularly saturated with idealistic people who feel inspired by the educational reform movement in New Orleans. The 52 charter schools that are new since Katrina in New Orleans are predominantly employed by young teachers with little experience and large hopes (USA Today, 2008) and they find New Orleans to be a space for working towards that inspirational dream of reforming public education. For people like Jeanne who are becoming part of this movement, New Orleans has become a hub of “cool people” who are interesting and fun to be around. For others, the city is seen as a mecca for energizing inspirational people.

Gerard, a young artist who is part of a project to build a communal art space, reiterated this positivity. He tells vivid stories of a continuous sequence of events that he could only describe as symbols of luck and good fortune that he saw as representative of his life in New Orleans. When he and his friends took over an abandoned building to build an art space, they encountered a four leaf clover, a Native American symbol of good luck, and an actual bag full of cash (that they returned in full for “good karma”). They took all of these things as “a good omen” and as Gerard explained,

We just had that positive sort of excitement just kind of flowing in at all times. Like the domino effect. Just like all this cool stuff is happening and I can’t wait to see what awesome thing happens next.

Since then, Gerard has found constant inspiration by the rich art culture and artists in the city. He explained how he encounters the inspirational environment: “You just get to kind of bounce around to the excitement. I mean, with all of these exciting people and things happening.” Gerard is extremely excited and inspired by life in New Orleans, and this inspiration keeps him happy and motivated to work. He spends his time discovering new projects, encountering other artists from near and far, performing on the streets, and finding different ways to express his optimism.
with the city’s future. Although he originally came to New Orleans to just visit friends, he quickly decided to stay in the city and thinks he will be a permanent New Orleanian. The inspiration has enveloped him and keeps him satisfied with the rebuilding city. For artists in general, New Orleans seems like a particularly great place to be: there are many artists living in the city, a great art market for buyers, an appreciation and focus on culture in the city, and a general acceptance of the precarity of an artist’s lifestyle. Although the arts in New Orleans have always been strong, they have exploded since Katrina: there is now an international biennial held in New Orleans, public theater works have taken off, and a whole new “fringe” arts district filled with artists’ studios and lofts has been recently developed (to add to the already three other arts districts in the small city).

Renewers like Gerard and Jeanne are inspired by the rebuilding process, inspired by the sense of renewal, and inspired by people trying to be inspiring. The narrative of renewal that directs the development of post-Katrina New Orleans is guided by this sense of motivation and optimistic energy. This spirit is used as a point of celebration of life in post-Katrina New Orleans and as a point of identity for young professionals looking for their future. Marcela, who I previously explained is a native-born New Orleanian nurse who was thinking of leaving New Orleans, describes what made her really change her mind to not take the job in California and to stay in the city:

My real turning point: it was Martin Luther King Day and we went to a speech. It was the inauguration of the re-opening of the universities in that day in January, and there were a bunch of people—the Nevilles, the Landrieus—there were so many people that spoke. And I can’t remember who it was that spoke, but it was very Martin Luther King-esque, and it was so motivating! I walked out and I was like, “It’s game over! I’m not going anywhere! That’s it, it’s done. How can I leave?”

Post-Katrina New Orleans presents a perfect stage for inspiring speeches and moving political rhetoric. People are yearning to feel moved by the work to be done in the city, and this emotion
pushes through any inconveniences of living in a recovering city. Marcela felt the energy of renewal and bought into it without hesitation, knowing that by grabbing on to this time of rebuilding her hometown she would be a part of something larger than herself. Excitement abounds in the stable social classes of New Orleans, and people feel inspired to be a part of the rebuilding project.

It is easy, especially for someone with privilege who cannot feel the overwhelming daily burden of crime and poverty, to feel like New Orleans is an exciting, adventurous place that overflows with positivity and inspiring energy. The weather is tropical and inviting; live music seems to flow out of every unexpected corner; people spend a lot of time outside, either sitting on their porches or spontaneously dancing in second lines; the cuisine is indulgent and unique; and the people are famous for being able and willing to talk to anyone they may run into on the street. My participants would always remark on these cultural values of the city, and how it made the city feel like a place with a different, optimistic, and quality-focused take on life that was even further inspirational.

Those who are invited to be a part of the optimism of post-Katrina New Orleans and afforded access to the positive spirit of rebuilding find New Orleans to be a place full of enrichment. Being surrounded by positivity, learning experiences, and exciting cultural activities makes New Orleans an especially attractive place for young people and people willing to soak in the experiences around them. Their optimism fills the city and forms the basis of the rebuilding project of post-Katrina New Orleans, as this positivity is exactly what a down-trodden city is perceived to have needed.

**Opportunism.** My participating students from the Academy for Last Resorts agreed unanimously that although they were excited about moving to New Orleans after the hurricane,
they hated living in New Orleans now and were looking forward to the opportunity to move away from the city as soon as they were old enough because they saw little opportunity for their futures in the city. My Renewer participants were the exact opposite: they loved living in New Orleans and saw it as a place with endless opportunities. Renewers see New Orleans as a place where exciting things are happening all around them that they want to be a part of. It is also a place that is possible to really see the impact of one’s work and give back to a community. Idealism dominates the Renewer narrative due to the hope and possibilities that are seemingly available to this demographic in the city.

For many people living in post-Katrina New Orleans, the city feels like a place where things are always happening or able to happen. Perhaps based on it being a small-sized city with a lot of art and development projects, it seems like a place where one could easily “make it.” This is especially important for young people who still might be experimenting to find their professional direction in life. As Elizabeth, the young artist who moved to New Orleans to escape the boredom of her hometown, expressed about her own professional future in New Orleans, “I feel like right now, New Orleans is totally a playground.” She feels like she encounters exciting social and professional opportunities every day. She has connected with nonprofit organizations that give her chances to work on inspiring art projects; she has exhibited at big galleries and art centers in New Orleans; and she finds many venues—like art markets and popular street vending areas—to make a living by selling her artwork. For many people, New Orleans seems like a city that is overflowing with opportunity, inspiration, and a place where anything could happen. It is a place to learn while gaining experience.

Many people moving to New Orleans were looking for opportunities to contribute to the rebuilding process. They saw the events of Katrina unfold on their televisions, were shocked by
the tragedy, and felt like they wanted to be a part of “giving back” to rebuilding the city. They saw the wrongs that the people of New Orleans faced with the storm, and felt morally inclined and socially responsible for responding. Most of them were at turning points in their lives anyways and were already potentially mobile, so moving to post-Katrina New Orleans was not very difficult. Luis, for example is a young artist who is building the communal art space with Gerard. He explained how he ended up in New Orleans:

I was just curious because everything that was on TV was saying one thing and people were saying another… I came down here and saw the houses and that image stayed with me. I was applying for jobs to like get involved and stuff. I just graduated so I wanted to see what I was capable of doing.

For people like Luis, life was already up in the air. He had a college education, little work experience, but lots of motivation and willingness to take risks. Luis found many opportunities in New Orleans to explore his capabilities: he worked in project management, non-profit arts education, and then had the fortitude to befriend the owner of several old properties in New Orleans, one of which he was given the liberty to renovate and rebuild himself and turn into an art center. Katrina presented an opportunity to “get involved” and be a part of something with a real contribution. There are thousands of people like Luis living in New Orleans now who find opportunities to build their careers along the rebuilding project. Many work in the arts, education, health care, law, and other sectors that have seen significant institutional shifts since Katrina. These are all people who were looking for a place to contribute to a developing community, and New Orleans was in need. Like others of their generation, many of the new residents of New Orleans, like Luis, are educated, dedicated to social justice, and focused on ways to be civically involved (Tulgan and Martin, 2001).

Jeanne, the young teacher who was originally from neighboring Arkansas and sees New Orleans as a hub of “cool people,” had a similar experience. She saw people around her
contributing to rebuilding and donating resources during the evacuation. As she was living abroad at the time, she felt distanced and wanted to be a part of it too. As she said,

I was actually in Seoul when Katrina hit and it was just heart-wrenching. Being that far away and just feeling how close it was…My family was doing all this cool stuff, like sending trucks down here, and like doing all this amazing stuff. And I was just so removed from that.

Jeanne quickly moved to New Orleans after Katrina, where she joined a teacher fast-tracking program and got a job in one of the city’s most impoverished and violent schools. Like other young professionals, Jeanne saw rebuilding New Orleans as something she wanted to be a part of and it helped define the direction of her life. When the disasters overtook New Orleans, Renewers from all over were shocked by the calamity and ready to direct their lives towards dedicated rebuilding.

In addition to just wanting to be involved and contribute, Renewers also felt needed as part of the rebuilding process. This was especially true of Renewers who were from New Orleans and felt an obligation to their hometown—like Marcela, the nurse discussed earlier, who felt needed in New Orleans. Another native New Orleanian Renewer explained, “I think we saw that urge of wanting to do something because you see how much chaos and need there is. And we were also thinking, ‘Hey, we should have some kinda skills here.’” This seemed to be a universal sentiment among Renewers: that they had skills, education, and/or energy that should be put to use by a situation like that presented with post-Katrina New Orleans. Opportunity to use their education and “do good” abounded. There is this type of hero mentality among many Renewers. Sometimes helpful and sometimes paternalistic, it certainly empowers many Renewers to want to give back to the world (Arena, 2012). Young professionals in New Orleans felt like they had the education, energy and motivation to dedicate to rebuilding an important American city. They
have been hopeful about the possibilities for contributing and creating a great future city, and took advantage of the opportunity for moral fulfillment.

Besides people wanting to contribute to a place in great need, Renewers saw post-Katrina New Orleans as a place where one could really see the impact of their work and make a difference as the city recovers from the storm. In New Orleans, they could volunteer, organize or professionally engage in needed services, and because the city was seen to be in such disarray already, their impact felt strong. As Marcela explained how enriching it was to be a part of renewal in her hometown, “It was really depressing to see the city in the state that it was in, but it was really motivating to be working on something that might make a difference.” Renewers are motivated when they see the impact of their work, and this creates and contributes to this spirit of renewal that has become such an integral part of the dominant post-Katrina narrative.

For Gerard, an energetic young artist, New Orleans is seen as a very hospitable city that is enveloped in positivity. One could tap into this positivity at anytime and be open to a plethora of opportunities for life advancement. This makes Renewers feel like New Orleans provides an immense potential for growth, and they felt excited to continue to see what their future holds in the exciting city. Gerard illustrates this when he described what he likes about New Orleans:

The whole area having such potential and having like all this energy with all the culture. And different people coming in and seeing it and feeling it. All the opportunities to make things happen. It is just a very exciting place. Just put your feet in and just jump in full.

Gerard felt like he continuously encountered amazing opportunities to take advantage of, as the city was pumping with enriching energy. Especially as New Orleans is a small city and therefore not overwhelming, new residents can easily find out about events, organizations, and chances to get involved. New residents feel like it is easy to immerse oneself in the environment, and opportunities seem to fall at their feet. Renewers have been inspired by this hope and motivation
to make post-Katrina life worthwhile and enriching. There is an understanding that New Orleans can be a “playground” if one were to have enough personal agency and inspiration to take advantage of it. This is very different from Disposables, who feel like they are constantly being watched, defined, restricted, and excluded.

Despite the city’s many challenges, Post-Katrina New Orleans suddenly came to be an attractive place for young people looking for opportunities to enrich their lives. These people have moved or moved back to New Orleans to contribute to the recovery process and to make their lives meaningful. In New Orleans, they have found a “playground” of opportunities and a strong spirit of renewal that encourages entrepreneurism, civic engagement, and grassroots community building. New Orleans is a place of opportunity and inspiration for them, and they contribute to creating it along this hope-filled vision.

*Renewal of Politics or Renewal of Political Discourse?*

This optimistic Renewer narrative has also guided politics that is pushing a platform of being different from before. Before Katrina, New Orleans was infamous for its government’s corruption, racism, and dysfunction. This became internationally apparent during and right after the storm through the numerous spectacular cases of government officials’ abuses of power: federal investigators finding $100,000 in cash in Congressman William Jefferson’s home freezer; police unnecessarily shooting at unarmed evacuees who were crossing a bridge into Gretna, a whiter metropolitan area, to evacuate during Katrina; a spectacular and prolonged court case that revealed a complicated political cover-up of police shooting an innocent man, Henry Glover, in the days following Katrina; the school board’s embezzlement of tens of thousands of dollars; and the list goes on. New Orleans has not had a good reputation for politics and governance in
general over the years, perhaps most famously exemplified in the 1991 gubernatorial election where the run-off candidate choices were between David Duke, a former grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, and Edwin Edwards, a man with a long history of white collar crimes who left office in 1996 to spend ten years in prison on racketeering charges. Politics has never been New Orleans’ forte, and even the United States Department of Justice (2011) has discussed the structural racism embedded in the city’s policies and approaches. Often nicknamed with a coyish pride “The Big Sleazy,” New Orleanians had become normalized to political corruption and ineptitude. Before the storm, the overriding narrative of New Orleans was dominated by entertainment and celebration, embodied in the city’s widely used motto, “laissez les bons temps rouler” (let the good times role). It seemed that before Katrina, anything goes and people were pretty apathetic to wrong-doing, with very little social mobilization in response to decades of political corruption.

The “new” New Orleans would be different and corruption, overt racism, and dysfunction would, at least explicitly, not be a part of the city’s new narrative of political renewal. The city has undergone immense institutional changes immediately after Katrina and urban development ideals were being redefined. Politics followed suit with the 2010 election of the first White mayor in several decades, Mitch Landrieu, who was also a lifetime politician and the son of a former mayor. Despite his long and familial roots in politics, Mayor Landrieu’s campaign stressed a need for political change and something “new,” with a stated campaign slogan, “What was OK before Katrina isn’t OK after Katrina.” He utilized the corruption and media scandals in New Orleans politics to argue that he would redefine the political values and public accountability of civil servants.
Landrieu’s campaign and service have benefited and utilized a narrative of renewal and optimism in the city’s political future that is rooted in change, following the “Obama-hope-liquor” that Bonilla-Silva (2010) discusses as a discursive shift in the nation’s governance. Bonilla-Silva (2010) critiques Obama in the wake of his first term election for utilizing hope to create a narrative of optimism in renewed political change, even though the expected reality of that change was minimal. Landrieu’s campaign timing was strategic, as he was able to capitalize on national sentiment and optimism that Obama generated for hope and change and follow a similar path to political office. This strong push towards a “new racism” (Bonilla-Silva, 1997) regime—one that stresses colorblind racism for development and growth—has allowed Landrieu, a White mayor in a predominantly Black city, to mistakenly be seen as an advocate for all residents. This has been a discursive tool, as on-the-ground change has been guided by colorblind policies that strongly favor Renewers and grossly exclude Disposables.

Discursively, this is seen all over New Orleans politics. There are many examples. The first action item for Mayor Mitch Landrieu was to appoint a new police chief superintendent, a position that is highly scrutinized amidst the intense violence and infamous police corruption in New Orleans. In order to appear diplomatic and open to change, Mayor Landrieu appointed an advisory search committee to fill the position made up of community organizers and leaders. Several members of this committee resigned early in the process, claiming a complete lack of transparency by the Mayor and an understanding that their identities were being used to claim a transparent, participatory process that was actually pure smoke and mirrors (Henderson and Landis, 2010). The Mayor concluded the process by appointing Ronald Serpas, a man with deep family roots in New Orleans politics and who did not represent change at all with one exception: he is White, which certainly was a break from the many African-American police
superintendents before him. The process appeared racially equal, publicly informed, and fair but really was a significant move away from the decades of African-American political power in New Orleans. Still, the process was argued as a real sign of renewal and change (The Lens, 2010), even though it shrouded the on-the-ground reality of colorblind racism and politics-as-usual.

This has been seen even when Renewers have tried to enter the political realm as they attempted to act on the narrative of change that blankets the city. Two highly visible Renewers have recently run for New Orleans City Council: Dana Kaplan, the founder of the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana and one of the primary advocates for reform in the city’s criminal justice system, and Nolan Marshall, a native New Orleanian who has worked for non-profit organizations in the education and business sectors. Their campaigns for public office were dominated by messages of change in City Hall, political transparency, and newness. Both candidates were strongly endorsed by Renewers in the city, with fun campaign fundraisers featuring brass bands and beer.

Politics, however, could not continue to promote change and renewal without at least demonstrating some small concessions towards that intention. That bone was thrown with the creation of a new Office of Neighborhood Engagement at City Hall, the position filled with a former executive director of a grassroots community organization for Latino services. The creation of this office was widely celebrated among community organizers and Renewers, despite the position’s lack of real purpose or teeth. It has institutionalized community initiatives without taking real, invested action. For example, one initiative of the office is “NOLA for Life,” a new community push for public safety. The project began to show the mayor’s interest in working towards public safety. However, it makes no effort to collaborate with the many already-
existing public safety community organizations, does not work with law enforcement officials (as does other anti-violence organizations), and stresses interrupting violence by promoting low-income, low-skill job opportunities to African-American men (who are automatically equated as potential criminals). The project essentially does nothing more besides promoting already available job opportunities, hosting minimal social events like “Midnight Basketball,” and messaging the potential for violence to change if criminals were to make other decisions. The project does nothing to address law enforcement strategies and approaches, lack of opportunities in the job market for low-income residents, oppression in schools, and the disposability for life of many in transitioning post-Katrina New Orleans.

Political change has been, unfortunately, absent from the reality of post-Katrina New Orleans. Corruption is still extremely common, with examples of corrupt politicians constantly surfacing in the local news: former Mayor Ray Nagin was recently indicted in federal courts for corruption (CNN, 2013), the senior member of the New Orleans City Council was ignited for accepting bribes in 2007 (New York Times, 2007), and New Orleans was recently ranked as one of the most corrupt places in the U.S. (Chicago Tribune, 2009). Stories of strong racial profiling and structurally racist policies are frequent, with the NAACP and other local anti-racism organizations making public demands and hosting open meetings with the Mayor and his administration to discuss concerns over racial profiling (WWLTV, 2013). The government still seems largely dysfunctional, as many simple services in the city are inconsistent and make the city resemble the “third world”—like consistent drops in service to the city’s water supply due to basic malfunctions in the system, causing the city to be under a boil water advisory for days at a time (Times Picayune, 2013). Change has been a constant in political discourse, yet has rarely taken shape on-the-ground.
Still, political discourse to create a narrative of change (that does not necessarily equal real political change) has been used by politicians to capitalize on the Renewer movement that is sweeping New Orleans and dominating institutional change. Mayor Mitch Landrieu has been a predominant exemplar of utilizing this discourse and Renewers have noticed. Miles, for example, is a very politically engaged native-born New Orleanian. He is a young lawyer who works in an anti-discrimination non-profit organization. He is very socially active among Renewer communities in New Orleans, is on the Board of Directors of several organizations, has begun two non-profit organizations himself (including one to help engage young professionals in New Orleans politics), and is constantly in discussion with others (including leading municipal politicians) about New Orleans’ political future. Miles’ social network is immense, and many people look to him to generate support for events and issues. He actually hosted campaign events for both of the Renewer city council candidates discussed above, and has been invited to all of Mayor Landrieu’s big social events. I asked Miles to explain Mayor Landrieu’s use of political discourse:

One thing that Landrieu did when he came into office was that we are not in recovery anymore; we are in renaissance. We are in a new phase. That’s all sort of rhetoric, but I think it does sort of underscore where is his administration’s focus. His agenda is not based on a framework of dealing with the problems of Katrina, its about dealing with the problems of New Orleans. I just feel like the media and the general political discourse is hugely different now in particular in thinking about Katrina.

With a new mayor came a new era, at least discursively. Under a new administration, the city’s discourse no longer focused on the Katrina experience, one that is based on trauma and challenge and one that directly circumscribes the city’s newcomers out of the narrative since they did not experience Katrina. Rather, a shift to focusing on the city and the city’s problems, as if it were any other American city, enables anyone to be a part of the “new” New Orleans. Everyone in the city can contribute to its “renaissance” and can be part of its future. Talking about “recovery”
implies prior trauma, something that is not necessarily alluring to young people in search of life enrichment. “Renaissance” or “re-creation,” on the other hand, is very attractive and something that anyone would want to be a part of. These labels entail a space of excitement, innovation and optimism, something that young people with education and skills would certainly want to be a part of.

New Orleans: An Ideal, Changing Place

Hope in the future of New Orleans is hope in the American Dream: a story of meritocracy, opportunity, and agency. The Renewers knowingly and unknowingly suspend this narrative above the rebuilding project: they create a narrative of hope, idealism, and opportunity that motivates and inspires those around them to believe in an ideal New Orleans. New Orleans comes to be seen as the epitome of success: a renewed city that is “making it” by individual and community agency, helping it to emerge strong after the immense challenge of a category five hurricane. The narrative of the future of New Orleans is guided by this hope in the city’s future and becomes the focal point of celebrating the city’s “successes” in “coming back.” Post-Katrina New Orleans becomes a very changed city from the pre-storm environment, and New Orleans becomes seen as a city that attracts, rather than loses, its young professional population; rebounds with resiliency and optimism from a huge disaster, rather than drowning in political corruption and public apathy; and is a progressive city filled with successful, engaged individuals, not the symbol of poverty and racism displayed during Katrina. Renewers feel like New Orleans is an inspiring city where things happen, and political discourse focuses on change and an optimistic future. This hopeful narrative has become the dominant narrative of the
rebuilding city, and its optimism engages Renewers and makes them even more bought in to the city’s future path.

Yet, as feminist scholars theorize (Oza, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 1989; Federici, 2004), the creation of a dominant narrative that defines an ideal comes with great consequences: the dramatic exclusion of many. In defining who is the ideal “new” New Orleanian, anyone who does not fit that ideal becomes disposable and excluded from the city’s rebuilding path. The ideal “new” New Orleanian brings hope to the rebuilding city, works hard to create the destroyed city’s future, is inspired, inspiring and takes advantage of the opportunities that abound.

The city is recreated along this narrative as politicians, urban developers, and entrepreneurs build a city to mirror the interests and desires of the Renewers. Renewers move to New Orleans to be a part of an exciting city that is full of expedient change, and they in turn change the city as they work towards change. Their effects on the city are seen in the dramatic institutional redesign that they work in like the rapid charter takeover experiment, the construction of satellite community health clinics, the gentrification of hip and developing neighborhoods, and the movement of political discourse away from Katrina and towards the city’s future. All of these changes disproportionately negatively effect Disposables, while they also cause Renewers to fall further and further in love with the city.

In addition to its inspiring and opportunistic environment, all of my participants talked lovingly about New Orleans due to its rich and unique culture and that this was a key draw to the city for them. They all were quick to discuss New Orleans’ music, food, arts, and architecture, and they loved this aspect of the city and saw it as an important benefit to living there. New Orleans is seen as different from the rest of the U.S.—socially and culturally—and young residents revel in the adventure and exoticism of being somewhere different. New residents love
the city for its uniqueness, as one community organizer proudly explained, “I keep telling my friends, ‘yeah, I moved to the country of New Orleans because it’s very different from the rest of the U.S.’” Many local cultural traditions and artifacts—the Mardi Gras Indians, second line parades throughout low-income neighborhoods, exotic foods and flavors, brass band music, etc.—are not seen anywhere else in the world, and experiencing them as a resident (not tourist) is thrilling. As one new resident responded when asked how he felt about New Orleans, “Every time I walk out the door, I feel like I’m swimming in ice cream.” New residents marvel in the excitement of the city, and love being a part of a place that feels “like something new will happen with every turn of the corner.” With constant cultural stimulation and pride in New Orleans’ uniqueness, the city becomes all the more attractive and keeps young residents involved, engaged and excited.

This energy and spirit has infiltrated the rebuilding process. The city has publicly grabbed on to it and uses it as a driving force of development. The spirit of recovery infiltrates the city’s identity and guides promotions, political platforms, and urban development as much of post-Katrina New Orleans is designed to cater to especially this young idealistic population. Entertainment, for example, continues to be a central selling point of the city to new people, and the city actively uses this as a symbol of its recovery status. The newspaper reports that New Orleans has more restaurants now than before the storm (Anderson, 2010), and this is a point of excitement for many New Orleans residents who see the post-disaster city as a place that is better than before by its ability to cater to their needs. Music and cultural festivals, art fairs and neighborhood events are more frequent than ever, as it seems like there is always an event to engage residents in celebration no matter what the occasion.
New Orleans becomes the place defined by the Renewers, as the narrative of renewal that redefines the city’s public institutions are dominated by a discourse of hope and progress. Renewers come to and see New Orleans as a land of opportunity where they can make their dreams happen with hard work and engagement, and they are excited about New Orleans for its social and cultural possibilities. Their narrative of inspiration and opportunism redefine New Orleans not as the destroyed, poverty-stricken, racist, corrupt city but as a city emblematic of the individualistic values of the American Dream and the future of the country.

Adjusting to this new narrative is not a simple process: it involves changing the institutional foundation, processes and culture of the city to support and focus on a younger, more professional population base. One older long-term New Orleanian who works in urban development explained that a shift was necessary:

We’ve exposed everything of the soft underbelly of this city for what it really is and needed to take a fresh look at where we were going and what this city is really about. And so I think there’s been a cultural change…It’s gotta start with the reeducation of an entire population.

He sees the need for the culture of New Orleans to change: for it to shift to become a city that is practical and attractive for young professionals. The city must create lucrative, stable jobs for young professionals—which it certainly has in the charter school movement—and move its image from an unstable, unpractical party town to a livable, enriching city that successful people want to move to, settle in, and one day raise a family in. Katrina ushered in a new narrative for a deeply changed New Orleans, and the culture is shifting to redefine the city along this narrative.

The young professionals and newcomers to the city form a new class of people in post-Katrina New Orleans who are the emblems of renewal. These Renewers are powerful and are changing the city’s landscape as they have a strong voice and create a vision of hope and optimism that form the type of city that they want to live in. Although their intentions might be
valiant and important for social change, there is an important effect of the creation of this narrative of hope: many people are even further excluded from the city’s future and become disposable. Unintentionally (or unconsciously), the Renewers are driving the exclusion of so many New Orleanians by redefining the city’s development narrative around their vision. Exclusion takes the form of being circumscribed out of the optimistic narrative and so being denied hope altogether, as they are left to live amongst the dying remnants of institutions progressing. Those who do not fit the ideal are disposable to the city’s future, as they are structured to disappear in the “new” New Orleans.
CHAPTER 5:

Education and Structuring for Disposability

Post-Katrina New Orleans is being institutionally re-segregated in the name of urban renewal, and public education has been a primary platform for branding disposability. Neoliberal education reform has completely taken over New Orleans, as teacher accountability, testing, constant school closures, and a disguising notion of school “choice” (over community) dominate the landscape (Aggarwal, Mayorga, and Nevel, 2012) and push students to classed charter schools. Disposability is learned in New Orleans in the little that is truly public of what’s left behind of the city’s transitioning public education system. As 52 of the city’s public schools have now been converted to independently run charter schools and only 9 non-charter public schools left in the city—and this number continuously decreases year after year—public schools are closing to make way for renewal. A push for “ed reform,” legitimated by the decrepit state of pre-Katrina public schools and misdirected promises of accountability (Fine, 2012) dispossess all those who stand in its destructive path. Those who must rely on discarded public schools learn everyday through their educational abandonment that they are not seen as important, optimistic members of the “new” New Orleans. African-American youth are learning that there is no place for them in the “new” New Orleans. They watch urban renewal progressing around them and watch their futures’ disinvestment. They are the Disposables of the ideal post-Katrina New Orleans and they are treated as if they have no right to an education because they go against the ideal “new” New Orleans.

Much of life for these students post-Katrina conveyed a clear message of disposability, as their experiences with the storm and post-storm rebuilding policies have been designed to
circumscribe them out of the disastrous city laid bare to the world during the Katrina evacuation. With neoliberal reform comes the disposal of the marginalized and oppressed for the sake of renewal (Giroux, 2006). In this chapter, I will further Giroux’s argument by showing a clear example of structuring disposability with educational reform in New Orleans. As New Orleans is redesigned to accommodate an ideal population, the many bystanders who represent the antithesis to the vision of a “new” New Orleans and the reputation of poverty and backwardness so keenly broadcast during the storm are discarded. They are not only disposed of but their disposability is constantly engrained on their everyday lives as they function in dispossessed institutions and see their home being re-imagined without them.

This chapter is in conversation with Fine and Ruglis’ (2009) discussion of “circuits of dispossession” and illustrates this cycle of oppression (see Figure 6) through the lives of youth at the Academy for Last Resorts. As the public and private institutionally intermingle, some youth are left prey to the “‘color blind’ cul-de-sac” (20) that goes hand-in-hand with a “systematic miseducation” (22) of disposable youth that aggressively, yet quietly, teaches them their own disposable status in the renewing city. This circuit begins with the dispossession of youth of color of their hometown and all familiar institutions, especially schools that are structured to discourage any hope in their future. Students in these schools feel the ramifications of educational reform as their non-charter public schools do not look like schools but rather feel like oppressive, depressing holding pens. With the relative deprivation that students learned while evacuated from the storm of the lack of investment in their education, students come to understand that their education in New Orleans is leaving them behind.

This chapter illustrates how a system is being created in post-Katrina New Orleans to make an entire population disposable and feel that disposability. I begin the chapter with an
explanation of my ethnographic research methodology at the Academy for Last Resorts. I then
describe the built environment of the school, showing that the institution’s complete
abandonment has been clarified through its instability and lack of resemblance of an institution
of learning. The physicality of the school is so impactful to students because of their experiences
in exile from Katrina, where they learned what public education should look like and how New
Orleans is supporting their dispossession. I then discuss school culture at the Academy and how
it reinforces the disposability of students by teaching them that school is a place to isolate them
from the renewal of their city. Even teachers—many of whom came to teaching because they
wanted to make a difference in disadvantaged youth’s lives—lose hope in the students as the path
of urban renewal in New Orleans beats them down and has them believe in the seemingly
inevitable disposability of their students. This chapter concludes by looking at how these
students tie their disposability to New Orleans, a place that they understand as embedded in their
own demise. The following chapter dives into the effects on the city’s youth of feeling this
disposability, Fine and Ruglis’ (2009) “consequences of dispossession.” In the next chapter, I
discuss Disposable students’ dangerous inability to see a future for themselves as their
aspirational capacity (Appadurai, 2004) is squashed by schools structured for their elimination.

Field Work

The Academy for Last Resorts (a pseudonym) is an alternative high school in New
Orleans that is the focus of my field work. As an alternative school, its student body is composed
of students who have failed standardized testing too many times and have become overage for
their grade, students who have been expelled from their previous school for a variety of reasons
(fighting, excessive uniform violations or absences, disrespect to adults, etc.), and students who
have gotten in trouble with the law and are dealing with courts and probation. While the Academy is currently a high school, it has changed purposes many times: in just two years, it had changed from a discipline-heavy reform school to an alternative school for only 8th graders to an alternative high school.

With whichever purpose, the Academy has consistently intended to be a temporary school for students to be “fixed” and then returned to a regular school. Students at the Academy may qualify to transition out of the school when they have achieved minimal expectations of attendance, academic performance, and positive teacher and counselor recommendations. I rarely saw students transition out of the Academy or the other alternative schools (unless their school was closing). Students came to the Academy at various points in the year, although their enrollment increased dramatically every year after the October 1st cut-off date for charter school funding determination. Many sources have revealed that certain charter schools will accept any student in the beginning of the year—partly because they are obligated to as open-enrollment public schools (an important part of their claim to success) and partly because they need to have enough students enrolled in their school to abide by their charter. Once they have fulfilled their charters’ obligations and received their yearly funding, they expel students who would potentially bring their scores and school performance assessments down. Many of the students at the Academy are the by-product of this shady practice.

For two years, I spent countless hours at the Academy (and several other public schools), working with the students and organizing their art classes, their only true enrichment offering at the school. I was the Director of Youth Programs for SilenceIsViolence, a non-profit organization that seeks to give voice to those involved with violence and mobilize them to try to stop it. I had created their Peace Clubs program: a project that places professional artists of a
variety of medium in struggling public schools to host anti-violence themed art projects. The program is designed to be project-based, although the real impetus behind it is less about the outcomes and more about creating a safe space for students to express concern or interest in alternatives to violence. The Academy for Last Resorts quickly became the most significant school that SilenceIsViolence worked in: the school itself had undergone enormous and consistent changes, and each of the multitude of murders of young victims in the city in recent years could usually be traced to a connection at the school. For example, in a particularly depressing month in 2009 that counted six teenagers killed in just four short weeks, each fatality was somehow connected to the Academy: two were current students at the Academy, three were prior students at the Academy who had since transitioned to regular non-alternative schools, and one was killed during a burglary that he committed with two other Academy students. Enveloped by violence, the students at the Academy for Last Resorts had great needs for positive forms of expression, and the Peace Clubs created this outlet.

I was at the school for at least a couple of hours every day. Sometimes I would be there to support the art classes and talk to the students during the class. Usually, I was there to just hang out and be a fixture at the school, helping them with tough student issues and school-wide programmatic needs. The principal and most of the staff came to respect my work at the school and I was included in most of the school’s staff functions. I got to know many of the staff members very well, and would engage in long conversations with them as we confided our frustrations and sadness about the Academy with each other. The students would often come talk to me about troubles they had at the school or at home, and they would ask me about the “other side” of New Orleans and outside opportunities they might have. Eventually, I decided to turn
these informal conversations into something organized, and so we formed a regular discussion group.

The students were always eager to come to the bi-weekly discussion group that I led at the school as a space where students could talk freely about issues important to them without any academic consequences. The school principal invited me to organize such a group, as she was overwhelmed by the intensity of violence at the school and wanted greater insight into potential strategies. I agreed to consult with her if the students knew about my conversations with her and if they could talk freely without consequence. She agreed and gave me complete autonomy.

The meetings quickly became an important social and thought space for these students. I had known most of them for at least a year already, and they became important defenders of my reputation as an ally to those students at the school who did not yet know me. The group was very mixed and was collaboratively chosen by the principal, school counselor and myself. The first meeting was a little slow, as I innocently came to the meeting with participation activities planned and ready, which the students were not excited about as they had become accustomed to the structure-less environment of the Academy. I quickly learned to give the students’ full control over the conversation, and to just ask honest questions that provoked them to talk about things that they are not used to talking about in school (like race, violence, their futures, etc.). Although the format began with a different student leading and a different student taking notes at each meeting, it eventually turned into something much less formal and more organic: one person would ask a question, and as people became closer to each other and more intrigued by the open discussion format, everyone would jump in.

Every now and then our conversations were light-hearted and jovial, and the students enjoyed these moments of laughter and fun. For example, one day we somehow got on the
conversation of scary movies, and as a group we imagined that we were all in a scary movie and cast each group participant as a role in the movie: the undercover murderer, the sly informant, the oblivious weak victim, the friends who split up to cover more ground, and the one who out-smarts them all. Type-casting each other was a great exercise in understanding our group dynamics and inter-personal relations, and hearing these teenagers, who generally looked somber and intense, laughing out loud and having fun was relieving. It also helped me learn more about their social perceptions of each other and of me. Two girls, who seemed like best friends in the group and at school, both thought that they would split up if chased by a murderer. One student who seemed like a calm, quiet beacon of the group was labeled as the “sly informant” because none of the others trusted him. I was surprised by how fragile they saw their relationships with each other, with little loyalty or trust among them. Considering how they were all thrown together at the Academy from various other schools and learned their disposability while there, the insubstantiality of their social being was practical. They labeled me as the oblivious weak victim who would shriek and cry at sight of a murderer. Their perception of me as “the innocent one” carried over into our weekly discussions, where they saw their role more as educating me about their school and experiences with violence. They became protective of me and would frequently offer me advice on how to deal with violence if I ever encountered it.

Usually, our conversations were earnest and complicated, as the students discussed and debated with each other about their values, behaviors, and plans moving forward. We talked about a variety of issues: their reason for being in an alternative school, their thoughts on their school and education, their experiences with Katrina, their experiences with educational institutions elsewhere while being displaced from Katrina, drug use, perceived racial differences and assumed racial identities, their future dreams and plans, friendships, sexuality, and their
opinions about New Orleans as a whole. Through these conversations, it became very clear that the students’ experiences at the Academy for Last Resorts were debilitating and left them without hope in the “new” New Orleans. While they all eagerly shared stories of their past run-ins and obstacles, they all struggled to talk about their futures.

The Physicality of Educational Abandonment

Most post-Katrina institutions are structured to create disposability. Many schools—places that are intended by purpose to develop young people into contributing, laboring citizens (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1986)—serve to push a generation of youth to lose their hope in themselves and in their hometown (Kozol, 1992). Additionally, many schools in New Orleans are being literally disposed of: old public educational institutions in New Orleans that represent tradition and history are closed each year since Katrina to make way for the great charter school experiment. The dramatic changes to the city’s school landscape keep those connected to these institutions as feeling shuffled around and in constant transition. Their educational instability is coupled by the other large institutional shifts—like public housing and access to health care—that together make an entire population feel disposable and despairing of their city’s future. To make matters worse, the schools that are left behind in the dust of transition and renewal do not resemble institutions of progressivity or learning.

The Academy for Last Resorts provides a clear example of a systematic willingness to give up on a part of society and to completely abandon any public obligation to educate all youth. Although some students in post-Katrina New Orleans who attend well-endowed charter schools are benefiting from an increased attention to the city’s transforming educational system, those who are labeled disposable are certainly not seeing any investment in their human capital
and experience everyday in their schools what it feels like to be intentionally left behind. The physicality of a school sends important messages to students about their own identity, self-worth, and future (Fine and Ruglis, 2009; Maxwell, 2000; Fanon, 1967). In looking at schools like the Academy in post-Katrina New Orleans, it is quickly evident that some schools are not created, designed, or managed with the intention of a democratic notion of education; rather, they are designed to reinforce existing power structures of the dominant classes (Bowles and Gintis, 1976) and maintain an oppressed, uneducated, unhopeful mass of subservient young adults.

In January a few years after Katrina, the Academy had just moved to its new campus midyear: a closed down elementary school on the opposite side of town from its previous location. With cruel irony, the Academy’s prior school building was vandalized on Martin Luther King Day and was forced to move into whatever was available in the district, leaving them with an elementary school located a twenty minute drive from its original location. Being located so far from its original school presented an extra hardship for students to get to school, lowering the school’s already low attendance rate of 40% to about 25%. Upon arrival, the new campus felt abandoned with its broken windows, chained fences and “do not trespass” signs. Filled with playground equipment and chairs suited for much younger children, the new campus is awkward for the teenage students of the Academy. It is easy for students and staff to feel like they are getting the leftovers of the city’s transitioning educational system as they enter a school that was so obviously unfitting.

The prior building was remarkably even worse than its new campus. Besides the bars on the windows, complete lack of outdoor space, and grayness that blanketed the old school, it had a curious location: sandwiched between a closed down housing project and an abandoned important historical landmark. The housing project was mostly boarded up and covered in debris:
fallen trees, detached pieces of lumber and other housing materials, and overflowing garbage bins. A stone wall that separates the housing project from the school property has remnants of children’s paintings on it, the pastel paint seen wherever the walls rocks haven’t fallen. The historic landmark was an immense and potentially beautiful auditorium where many important African-American musicians (Ella Fitzgeralld, Louis Armstrong, etc.) once performed. It was also the first indoor venue where Black people were allowed to congregate for entertainment purposes in the South after slavery and so holds a special historical value to New Orleans, a city whose success has rode largely on the backs of African-American cultural outputs. Closed and casting a shadow on the old school building of the Academy callously sent the message to the all-Black student body that their ancestors and culture were not worth commemorating and rebuilding.

Just being on the Academy’s campus makes one feel the desolation. As many of the students have explained, the Academy certainly does not look like the kind of school environment that they saw on television or that they have experienced elsewhere. Sandy was a student who loved her educational experiences during her Katrina evacuation in Texas and who had many difficulties in the transition back to New Orleans. Her world had been turned upside down as her family separated in the evacuation process and her mom struggled upon return to New Orleans to find housing, a job, and care for her children at the same time. Sandy expressed her confusion when she first came to the Academy:

My first day, I was like, where’s the school? huh? What school is that? What kind is this supposed to be? Where the classes supposed to be like? I don’t get it!

Sandy’s everyday behaviors at the school mirrored her analysis of the Academy as “not a regular school.” She was rarely inside a classroom, never had a book or pencil at the school, and was
usually found alone, unsupervised and sleeping in the cafeteria. When I would ask her about her classes, schedule, or what she was learning, she would just shrug and not answer. I never saw a teacher or counselor at the school intervene with her lack of effort. She was left alone at the school and given no attention at all. Sandy was given up on, and she gave up in believing that the Academy was really a school.

Physically, the Academy (and most other public non-charter schools in New Orleans) does not look like a “regular” school. The buildings are crumbling, have many broken windows, and much of the school seems as if it had not been cared for over a decade. The classrooms’ paint is peeling and heavily damaged; there are several humidity damaged spots on the walls where mold is growing; and several windows in each classroom are broken or missing and covered with garbage bags. Because the Academy is hosted in a former elementary school, the playground is full of equipment designed for very young kids. The teenage students of the Academy look and feel out-of-place as they sit on childish playground equipment, their adult-sized bodies too big for see-saws and short primary-colored slides. The school has a charred, brown look: the earthen outdoor areas have no grass, the buildings are made of heavy dark bricks, and there are bars on most of the windows. The walls in the only hallway of the school are lined with unpacked boxes of new books that they have never used nor even opened, a constant reminder of the learning that could happen if there was any effort. The school feels and looks forgotten.

The Academy is not unique: many schools in New Orleans physically reflect disposability. Many schools in the city are still operating out of mobile trailers. These schools have limited space and feel fragile. Every time it rains, for example, the water pounding the thin metal roofs make so much noise that no one’s voice can be heard and teachers are often forced to
stop direct instruction. Other schools that do have actual buildings are not much better off. Peeling paint, moldy walls, broken windows, and dark hallways are commonplace in New Orleans’ schools. In what’s left of the public non-charter school system, you can see lingering, unfinished renovation projects that have been left in limbo and constantly remind students of their transitional and unvalued status.

At the Academy, the physical environment reinforces the lack of education at the school and sends a clear message to the students of the low value the public has placed on their education. The students are very aware and upset about the poor state of their school, and understand that they are losing out on learning opportunities due to the poor resources. They have discussed the lack of science and computer labs, the almost complete absence of books and seemingly basic learning materials, and missing out on common high school activities like dissecting a frog, having athletic teams and going to a prom. Understandably, the students who have already been labeled as “problems” by being placed in an alternative school in the first place get a heightened deviant status as they witness the stagnation of their education and opportunities.

As school does not feel like school but rather as a place to learn disposability, tensions at the school are always high: every day, several fights break out, oftentimes resulting in a kid leaving the school in handcuffs. Most of the students pass the day in the school yard mulling around the cafeteria or smoking weed behind the basketball court. There is not much learning going on, and no one seems to even be bothered by it. Everyone—including the teachers, students, disciplinarians, and school administrators—are just hanging out. From the time the students arrive, everyone just waits for the end of the school day to come, watching time pass as if with nothing to do to fill it.
The classrooms are usually empty; the few classrooms with people inside generally have teachers sitting behind a desk and doing independent work, as students watch bounce music videos on youtube. There is very little interaction between teachers and students in general, except when teachers have to yell out for the behavior specialist to break up the occasional fight. The school is a very boring place to be and feels like nothing is celebrated, except when fights break out.

Further, the students are not even allowed to bring anything with them into the school. This includes notebooks, pens and pencils, which are especially prohibited for fear that students would stab each other with them. Anything they bring is confiscated by the security guards before they walk through metal detectors and kept in a locked closet for the duration of the school day. These students enter the school with the expectation that they will not be learning anything or doing any scholastic work. They feel like they are not supposed to be trusted with the tools they need and that expectations are rock bottom.

Education is forgotten at the Academy, and students go to the school to watch their educational years pass them by. Not being provided any sort of support or visible investment in their development, the students learn at school what it feels like to be the Disposables of a city. They understand that the city does not care to give them the resources they need because they are not part of the ideal “new” New Orleans: they are the ones who fail their exams, keeping the city’s poor educational status at national lows, and who act aggressively towards others, sinking in to the city’s soaring crime statistics. For lack of visible other options, the students become what these statistics of post-Katrina label them as: poorly educated, violent, and without futures. Their school environment shows them that they are not worth the investment otherwise, leaving them with the only option of disposability.
Students of New Orleans public schools clearly understand the “façade of ‘naturalness’” of the “circuits of dispossession” (Fine and Ruglis, 2006: 20), a lesson they learned during their time away from New Orleans in exile from Katrina. Based on their experiences in schools elsewhere during their evacuation, the youth of New Orleans understand the difference between good and bad schools, as they step back beneath the Duboisian Veil of double consciousness (Dubois, 2005) upon return to New Orleans schools. After experiencing real public schools elsewhere, Disposable New Orleans youth learn that the environment in New Orleans is structured for their demise. Coming home to dispossessed institutions has not been a joyful, renewing experience thus began their circuit of disposability.

My students at the Academy for Last Resorts frequently talked about their very different experiences with education during their time displaced from New Orleans. They loved talking about their experiences at schools in Houston, Atlanta, or other places where they lived while displaced by Katrina, portraying these experiences as grandiose and enriching. As most schools in the country were open to accepting any Katrina evacuee immediately to start the new school year (no fees or testing required), many of my students got to experience more equally funded public schools for the first time in their lives. They were treated with warm welcomes wherever they went, as their host schools sought to provide assistance and sympathy to the unlucky Katrina evacuees. These students had only experienced the grossly under-funded, under-resourced, and poor looking schools of New Orleans. Suddenly they were placed into schools that at least physically looked like what they had envisioned proper schools to look like from the media.
During our time together, the students would frequently talk about how great their non-New Orleans schools were, and their faces and bodies would be animated and proud as they described their access to resources. Sandy, a 15 year old student at the Academy, had regular emotional and social struggles at home and at school. She was a student who spent her entire day at the Academy isolated from others and completely removed from any educational engagement. She usually had a dark hood over her head, hiding her delicate eyes and chiseled cheekbones.

Sad and feeling forgotten, I rarely saw any energy or excitement out of her, even in our most heated group discussions with other students. The only time that I witnessed animation from Sandy was when she talked about her time in Texas evacuated from Katrina. She explained her first day at her new school in Texas:

Middle school, it was like, you know how you see on T.V.? Like the bells ringing and all? I was like, oh this is heaven! They even had lockers in the hallways, and clubs and stuff like that.

She was so excited talking about going to a school like those on television, as she felt like she was being given the opportunity to live out what she had grown up imagining education to be like. Sandy loved to talk about the many aspects of her school in Texas that made her feel good: facilities, common spaces, options for lunch in the cafeteria, books and reading materials in the classrooms, and a regular curriculum. Something as mundane as school bells made Sandy feel important and like she went to a great school. The school in Texas physically reflected a place of education and development, encouraging her to take pride and interest in her academic work. At the Academy, there were no school bells, lockers or clubs; there were just places to sit and watch time pass. The Academy physically looked like a place to waste away, encouraging students to learn their disposability. Moving from a school like hers in Texas to the under-resourced schools
in post-Katrina New Orleans taught Sandy that New Orleans was a place that expected her to fail.

Although Sandy had many excuses to do poorly in life while displaced by Katrina, she claimed that she excelled in school in Texas and had good grades for the first time in her life. She described her personality at her Texas school as the class clown and as a star athlete. She was proud of this persona that she saw as ideal for her age. This was quite a contrast to the lethargic, solitary student who I saw every day at the Academy who constantly smoked pot and exhibited pride only in her reputation as the girl who pulled a weapon on a student at her previous school. While displaced from her home, friends, and school, Sandy never felt unwelcomed or estranged and did well in a new learning environment. While home, Sandy felt that being her version of an ideal student was impossible. In New Orleans, she was expected to act disposable.

Upon return to New Orleans, her behavior slipped and her mother did not know where to send her to school amidst the city’s transitioning education system. While feeling welcomed and starting afresh in Texas helped Sandy excel, returning to New Orleans where confusion, trauma, and a need to protect old personas weighed heavily on her. She had several fights—some very serious involving weapons—and was constantly shifting between schools. She was held back twice since her time in Texas due to her negative behavior. With these retentions, she became overage for her grade, which only acted to keep her frustrated and uninterested in classes as she knew the material already. Sandy quickly lost interest in school altogether and felt like her “coming home” was more of a lesson in being excluded from one’s home. School had become somewhere to waste time, grow to hate learning, and understand that the city does not want you
there. By feeling placeless and excluded, the students at the Academy learned that they really had no home in the “new” New Orleans.

Being forced from one’s home and all one knows could be the definitive traumatic event of one’s life. Yet for students like Sandy, the trauma was much more powerful (Pintar, 2006): it was the trauma of learning that in her most vulnerable, desperate times, people elsewhere had it better than she ever would in New Orleans. By going from her school in Texas that provided a subjective dreamlike model of education to schools like the Academy for Last Resorts, students like Sandy learned that there would never be interest in her success in her hometown, or as Pintar (2006) explains, the necessary material changes in her social world for her trauma to be addressed.

All of the students at the Academy for Last Resorts would often talk about their schools elsewhere during evacuation as awesome places that inspired them to want more for themselves. They discussed seemingly small things as indicators of being in a real school: lockers, school bells, vending machines, having more than one option for lunch, uniforms, and other operational aspects of a typical school. They also talked about having teachers and counselors at school who were interested in their success and would meet with them frequently. They felt like they had people to talk to, and adults who had their backs to help support them through the difficult transitional experience. In New Orleans, they found none of these things and were shoved into schools like the Academy that showed zero interest in the students’ future.

Students learned with Katrina about their exclusion in New Orleans. They had places of high expectations as a basis of comparison from their Katrina evacuation. They knew relative deprivation (Merton, 1938) and felt their disadvantage. They learned elsewhere, while displaced from their home, that their hometown does not invest in them. They described their experiences
elsewhere during their Katrina evacuation as filled with typical teenage experiences: going to the mall, getting a lot of attention from their families at home, going to great schools where they learned a lot, making friends and sleeping at friends’ houses on the weekends. They were not bothered by experiences that would seem to be the most troubling of a Katrina experience: lengthy and scary evacuations, homelessness, loss of their possessions, loss of social networks and separation from friends, etc. For the students at the Academy, the most troubling part of their Katrina exile was learning their deprivation and what a teenager should be experiencing. All of the students were well-aware of the relatively low-quality of their current educational experience, and all of them dreamed of leaving New Orleans to get a better education elsewhere. New Orleans was not seen as a place for growth and opportunity as with the Renewers, but rather as a place to fall further and further behind.

_School Culture_

The school culture at the Academy for Last Resorts reinforces the sense of educational abandonment that permeates all actors at the school and is another contributing factor to the circuit of dispossession that is public education in post-Katrina New Orleans. Besides the lack of emphasis on academic learning whatsoever, the Academy’s school culture is dominated by violence. Much of how the school operates is designed around controlling (or purposefully not controlling) violent student behaviors and then responding to violence when it does occur. Students’ learning is focused on aggressive social interactions with others and interpreting how adults support these behaviors. Disposability is learned at the Academy through the discipline system, lack of adult supervision, and the excitement over violent fighting as perhaps the only way to get attention or higher status at the school.
The students and teachers frequently compared the Academy to other types of non-
educational institutions, which is understandable considering how little academic activity
occurred there. Some called the Academy a jail based on the discipline system and the school’s
intention of being sent somewhere to reform. As one teacher expressed, the dark, dingy, and
crumbling buildings do little to build a non-jail like atmosphere and “that’s why students feel in
jail because once they get inside, it’s horrible! I understand, because every time I go to that
building, I feel like I’m going to jail too!” With restricted movements, a dark environment, and
the feeling of being punished just by having to be at the school in the first place, I felt like the
Academy was like a prison in too many ways. The students frequently referred to “doing time”
as they waited to be “reformed” and transition out of the Academy. The school-to-prison pipeline
is alive and strong in New Orleans (Kim et al, 2010; Tuzzolo and Hewitt, 2006), and the
Academy is a great example of schools being structured so as students feel that there are no
options for their future.

Prior discipline systems at the Academy have given the school a reputation as a place of
intentional and direct oppression. Eighteen months prior to my research at the Academy and
towards the beginning of the Peace Clubs program, the school district had outsourced the
school’s security to a company called Gladiator Security (a pseudonym). Gladiator did more than
just handle the school security for its almost two years at the Academy: it actually organized and
managed the entire school. Under Gladiator, the school’s purpose was reconfigured to be focused
on discipline and reforming young students with behavior problems. The school was run like a
reform institution and students were immediately labeled as societal problems upon enrollment.
Behavior enforcement was outsourced and privatized, making it very difficult to pin direct
responsibility to governance for any wrongdoing and making it even more likely for youth to get
hurt and not be treated as public citizens. Mr. Thomas, a teacher who was at the Academy under Gladiator and after Gladiator left, explained how things were under Gladiator’s supervision:

They had the kids walking into what you call protocol. Protocol basically meant that when the kids were walking in the hallway, one hand had to be behind their back, so that they wouldn’t harm another kid. There was an intake process, when they patted everyone down and if they brought a booksack, it had to be a clear booksack. It came with the perception that the kids were just gonna be violent. So, basically, you have this outlook like they’re criminals before they walk in the door.

Gladiator’s school culture was intentionally designed to resemble a prison while still officially being a public school. The habits and routines were like prisons, and students felt this and understood that it was not a “normal” school. Yet increasing resemblance of schools to prisons is not unqiue to the Academy on a national lens, as schools across the country are becoming more and more infiltrated by public safety officials, protocols, and machines (Nolan, 2011). Schools like the Academy conditioned young people to think that prison was their ultimate and only goal, especially as they were dispossessed from any seeming right to an education and access to hope.

The school district received a lot of negative press and attention for Gladiator’s brutal actions at the Academy. In 2008-2009, several articles in the Times Picayune highlighted stories of Gladiator employees slamming students and treating them with physical violence as a form of discipline at the school (Carr, 2009; Baquet, 2008). The “learning” environment was one of students under siege, and until it was brought in the public, it was accepted as the way to manage these students. With violent disciplinary measures run by an outside contractor, the school board could claim innocence and blame their wanting to reform students with physical violence on ignorance of an outsider’s actions. They wanted outside “specialists” to handle behaviors that they labeled as too intense for a regular school. These students needed their future hopes and self-valuing needed disposing of.
Shortly after the *Times Picayune* articles, the school under Gladiator closed and it was re-opened as a public alternative school run by Recovery School District employees. Under Gladiator and in its wake, the Academy became structured to feel like a jail: a place where you were managed and herded, and then spent your days waiting out your time and rotting. The Academy’s school culture was forever imprinted as treating students as criminals who were not worthy of a true education. Students spent their days not engaged in anything academic but just waiting for the end of the school day. The students interpreted their time at the Academy as a place to waste away and watch their lives’ prospects fall.

More often than discussing the Academy as a jail, the students saw their school as a daycare because the Academy for Last Resorts was a place where they were simply babysat. The high school students were treated like toddlers who needed to be watched at all times, controlled, and kept. They were rarely treated as young adults who had a valuable future and were worthy of educating to contribute to their city. School was a place where they needed to check in, make sure they did not hurt themselves or each other, and stayed off the streets. There was no higher educational purpose, no sophisticated activities or prospects, and the only challenge presented to the students at school was to not fight. The true objective of the Academy was not education but rather to keep them off of the streets and from hurting others. School isolated their disposability from the rest of the city.

School should be a place where students are intellectually challenged, pushed to grow and become better, and learn self-confidence and are motivated for opportunity. The Academy had none of these qualities. Spending every day at the Academy, it was difficult to conceptualize the institution as actually a school. Students and staff were right in metaphorically calling the Academy a jail and a daycare: it certainly more closely resembled an institution for holding
individuals who were labeled as incapable of being safe alone. Feeling this purpose of an institution that should have been growing and developing students was completely demoralizing.

The “behavior specialists” at the school reinforced this affect, as they pushed a school culture of passivity and nonchalance. There were generally 3-4 behavior specialists at the school at any given time, at least half of whom were dressed in security guard uniforms and were non-school employees. For the most part, the security guards spent the day sitting and watching the walls. Every time I would walk in the school, I would be greeted by one friendly security guard who sat at the entrance to greet and direct people. Once I arrived to the main hallway of the school, there were two behavior specialists: one managing the metal detector and another dealing with severe behaviors. The one who managed the metal detector had very little to do all day, and spent most of the day sitting with the janitor and gossiping. The students had a very low opinion of this behavior specialist and thought that she only gave them a hard time because she was so bored all the time.

The other behavior specialist who dealt with extreme behaviors, Mr. Jones, had been a part of the school for many years (including under Gladiator), and I had the opportunity to see his role change pretty dramatically over the years. When I first started working at the Academy, Mr. Jones was the tough disciplinarian of the school who often got out-of-hand in his dealings with students. He was rough and the students feared him. With an immense body covered in tattoos, his presence was large and commanding. Trained by Gladiator, he used to get physical with students and oftentimes verbally abusive. Mr. Jones represented the new type of security in schools where policing takes precedence (Nolan, 2011) and hope in students is not part of the plan. When I first started working at the Academy, Mr. Jones manned the ISS (in-school suspension) room: a room where students who were emotionally heated would go. Mr. Jones
would send the students into the ISS room that had no desks or chairs, was dark and had more broken windows and plastic bag covered windows than any other room in the building. He would stand outside of the room at the entrance, and most times when emotionally heated students were sent there they got into fights. Rather than be counseled or talked down from aggression, they were encouraged to fight each other and take it to ISS. Mr. Jones would often allow them to fight in ISS for a few minutes, only later diving into the room with his own aggressive energy to break up the brawling teenagers. My first day at the Academy, I saw four fights break out in ISS in a short 45 minutes.

After Gladiator, Mr. Jones moved to the other extreme: extremely hands-off and absent. He would sit all day at a student desk and play on his cell phone. He rarely responded when fights would break out but rather would watch students hurt each other and wait for the security guard to come. He came to befriend most students, who would come sit with him and hang out rather than go to class. He encouraged them to stay out of class and had become more of a peer to most students. He gave little discipline at all. Most students liked him, and confided in him about their out-of-school problems. He would listen, but never gave advice. He was more of someone who could understand the students’ sadness and share in it. He gave up on action and went the other extreme of completely giving up. Students understood that behavior specialists were not invested in the students’ lives and futures, and did not care enough to intervene and help them learn. They created a school culture that encouraged disposability.

This disposability was reinforced by the lack of emotional support to students at the school. Social and emotional support to students would be supporting students in need and helping them to survive or raise out of their challenges, not hoping they fail and are disposed of. There was a dire shortage of social workers and counselors—a much needed commodity at a
school like the Academy for Last Resorts (and for any school in post-Katrina New Orleans for that matter)—another contribution to the circuit of dispossession (Fine and Ruglis, 2009) of disappearing public education. There was only one counselor and one social worker on full-time staff at the school. Especially as the Academy is an alternative school and is intended for kids who are dealing with severe behavioral problems, this mental and emotional support was essential. The counselor and social worker who were on staff were also checked out and closed off to the students. The social worker changed her role in the Academy’s last year from helping students with needs to working on transitioning students out of the school. She understood that the school could do little to help them, and so worked to herd them elsewhere. She fought an uphill battle, as few schools would willingly accept Academy students who already carried the label of being a “problem.” Less than a handful of students ever transitioned out of the Academy during my two years there.

The counselor spent the majority of her day in an isolated, over air-conditioned office, where she sat in front of a computer all day (often playing solitaire). Her door had two gigantic signs with “PLEASE KNOCK” written in bold, capital letters. Students were certainly not invited to her space, and none of them ever went in there to talk to her unless they needed a bureaucratic paper signed. She had no relationships with students and spent her day waiting until school was over like the students. She was usually the first one to leave. The students understood that the support staff at the school gave up on them. Darnell, a student from the discussion group who was particularly vocal and angry at the disposability of him and his friends, constantly expressed his frustration with the situation at the Academy. He wanted help from caring adults at the school, and got angry at his unattended need for help,

They couldn’t give less fuck about you. They know you don’t want nothing better for yourself, so why waste their time. They get their paychecks every two to three weeks.
With the student support staff at the Academy also understanding that these students were beyond help and hope, *everyone* at the school (including the students) learned that the school was setting them up for even further failure.

Students thus would begin to act the part: disposable and with no future ahead. They learned every day from so many different angles that they were socially unvalued and would thus act to eliminate each other and with no consequences to their own futures. Students did not care about being suspended (or even expelled), and had zero interest in their academic transcript and what that meant for their future. Violent fights broke out several times every day—sometimes in the middle of class, sometimes in the cafeteria or playground, and sometimes during transitions between classes.

When a fight occurred, the explosive energy would attract students from all around who would stop what they were doing and rush to watch the fighting peers, whom they evaluated and gossiped about later. If a friend was fighting, sometimes students might jump in to defend their friends. The fights would get really ugly: bleeding, biting, ripping clothes, etc. Oftentimes, those involved in the fight would put on a show, girls pulling out each other’s hair weaves and screaming intentionally-comical profanities at each other as they were pulled away. I’ve seen students really hurt each other by punching each other or banging heads on the concrete floors. The fights always continued until a security guard—or in some cases, the cops—came to hold the students off of each other. Sometimes the students were given a few minutes to calm down and then were sent back to class. Sometimes they were handcuffed to furniture and left for the police to pick up. In rare cases, they were given a temporary suspension from school. Students are only expelled if they brought a weapon to school, which has certainly been known to happen. After a fight, the school would go on “lock down,” which just meant that no student transitioned
to other classes. Under lock down, students were left in the same classroom all day with nothing to do. They would lose their patience and leave their classroom to go hang out in the schoolyard or cafeteria. Consequences are low to match the expectations. Violence dominated the school and “education” for many students at the Academy is about learning to lay low and defend themselves.

Their educational abandonment became further clarified as students were focused on violence rather than academics at school. When I have asked the students what they have learned during their time at the Academy, the resounding (and only) answer I got was learning about self-protection. The students learned to always watch their backs at the Academy and to never trust people. For example, Darnell explained what he learned at the Academy:

How to move about. Like you know there’s trouble around here. It’s like you know its raining outside, but you still gonna get wet. So you gotta, you know, move around with caution.

He knew that his greatest lesson at the Academy was self-protection. Students came to expect violence at school, and they knew that they were going to be dragged into it in one way or another. One student who generally avoided violence described how he would wait in classrooms during class transitions longer than usual and be late to his next class so as to not encounter others in the school hallways. He knew that violence was unavoidable if he were to encounter others, and so he learned to lay low by hiding. All of the students talked about this need to avoid fights, to know how to act with certain people, and to learn how to stand up for oneself when necessary. Their school learning is all defensive, not constructive.

The feeling of punishment promulgated at the Academy is quite successful in reproducing the dominant social structure (Rusche and Kirchheimer, 1939): students generally lose all prospects for upward mobility while at the Academy and understand their place in New
Orleans’ class structure. Their education is equated with a need to be punished, and this keeps them feeling low on life and themselves (Melossi, 1998). They take their time at the Academy as a need to reform themselves, but they see no prospects of where to go with any sense of change as everywhere they know is dominated by the decrepitude of the city. After being physically displaced by the storm, pushed between different schools after Katrina, and searching for stability in other sectors of life that slip into privatizing trends, the school culture at places like the Academy forces youth to lose an important aspirational capacity (Appadurai, 2004), without which, they have no future or vision of struggle against the structures of disposability.

*The Teachers: Losing Advocates*

The disparaging school culture of the Academy for Last Resorts infiltrates the teachers as well. Generally, teachers initially came to the Academy because they wanted to make a difference with high-needs students. Their valiant, optimistic motivations are quickly crushed at the Academy, where they feel the beating down of the disposability of the Academy and join in withdrawing any expectations for students’ academic performance. Further, relationships are limited in dispossessed places (Aggarwal, Mayorga, and Nevel, 2012), making it difficult for teachers to connect with students as they know that they are being disposed of. Teachers also fall under the pressures of disposability, and come to understand that the purpose of the Academy is to act as a holding pen, not as an educational institution for inspiring and raising youth.

The teacher’s ability to teach is severely handicapped by the instability of the school and its lack of resources. The classrooms are physically dismal with few functioning teaching aids like bulletin boards, projectors, etc. There is a photocopy machine available to the teachers to
copy materials from their own books for the students, but the teachers are forced to bring their own photocopy paper for the machine as the school does not provide paper. Other essential teaching items—like chalk—are also not provided by the school, and the teachers must bring their own. Teaching the Academy students is already shown as an unimportant, unvalued job.

The teaching staff at the Academy underwent very high turnover as many teachers have left with the school’s changing mission or have left by emotional need. There have been several Teach For America (TFA) teachers, most of whom do not make it through the school year and lose interest in a career in education if they do happen to make it through their TFA contract. The students hold little respect for these teachers and treat them accordingly. These young teachers have acted with readable fear, the students knew that their teachers were scared of them and thus acted uncontrollable. These teachers are Renewers and, at the Academy, have all been young and White.

One TFA teacher, Mr. Dawson, was twenty-two, from Connecticut, and was constantly ridiculed by the students for wearing a tie every day to school. Pretty unanimously, the students hated him: he spoke to them in an artificially commanding tone, and the students could read his discomfort and that he was trying too hard. He came to the Academy because he really did want to “make a difference,” but he did not really know how to bridge the enormous cultural divide with his students and so struggled communicating with them. He would constantly message to students the importance of hard work and perseverance, and would roll his eyes at stories of students making bad choices. The students interpreted his insensitivity and naiveté with personal aggression, as students would try to one up each other by publicly disrespecting him in the middle of class. Several months into the school year, there was a physical fight between several students in his class. Rather than call for help, he innocently tried to intervene and the students
broke his knee to get him out of the way. Mr. Dawson was out of school for several weeks afterwards to physically recuperate, but he never did emotionally: three weeks after being in school after the injury, he quit TFA and decided to move back to New England to take a job in finance. He was burnt out and learned that he could not help these students. Once he was gone, the students bragged about their ability to “chase him away” and told glorious stories about the event. The students had little interest or trust in a Renewer like Mr. Dawson, and understood his need for philanthropy as self-motivated and not because he cared about doing anything to fix the unequal urban renewal of New Orleans.

The demoralization of teachers was not isolated to TFA or out-of-town teachers; locally-born, long-term teachers also grew emotionally checked-out at the Academy. Many teachers at the Academy who could command respect from the students would lose hope in the system. Mr. Thomas, for example, began his time at the Academy with zeal and authentic concern for the students. He was with the Academy from its inception and was the only academic teacher to remain at the school through its changes and transitions. Born and raised in New Orleans at the neighboring public housing project, African-American with roots in the local Mardi Gras Indian culture, and with over a decade of teaching experience in New Orleans public schools, he seemed to be the ideal teaching candidate for the Academy. He represents the pre-Katrina typology of New Orleans teachers: veteran, life-time teachers who identify with students and form important, inspiring relationship with them. Yet, even Mr. Thomas gave up eventually on believing in the students.

His time at the Academy began with hard work, emotional investment in the students, and a relentless belief in their ability to transition out of the school. He taught social studies and tried to make the material interesting for the students by connecting it to their personal lives. His
classroom was initially filled with posters and student work marked up with his positive comments and smiley faces.

He also connected with students who respected him and saw him as an ally. One day in the Peace Club at the beginning of the school year, Mr. Thomas pulled a student out of the classroom to talk. The tall, lanky seventeen-year-old eighth grader was visibly upset, and Mr. Thomas removed him from the room to have a counseling-type talk with him to find out what was wrong. As they began talking, Mr. Jones (the behavior specialist) approached them and asked what was going on. Mr. Thomas responded, “He looks like he’s gonna cry and I’m just trying to find out what’s up.” Mr. Jones then intervened and asked the student in an aggressive tone about his disposition, to which the student remained silent. Mr. Jones asked him once more, got angry that the student would not respond to him, and then responded, “There’s nothing wrong with this punk! He’s just being disrespectful.” Mr. Jones then slammed the student against the wall and dragged him down the hallway to ISS. Mr. Thomas was trying to be compassionate with the student, but the school culture was such to not have space for teachers’ emotional investment in the students.

Showing “respect” for adults and stern discipline trumped understanding and compassion. The Academy was not a place for connecting with nor uplifting disadvantaged youth; rather, it was a place for continuously beating students down. People like Mr. Jones were leaders in the school, while teachers like Mr. Thomas needed to learn the true mission of the system.

Even a teacher like Mr. Thomas who would seem like the ideal person to work in a school like the Academy and who was genuinely devoted to helping students like those at the Academy could not remain hopeful. By his last semester at the school, he was completely
checked out of the workings of the school and put zero effort into working with students. During that last semester, I rarely saw him interact with students at all and never saw him try to teach an actual lesson plan. Actually, there were usually no students even in his classroom during his class periods; if there were, they would be surfing the internet and watching videos on YouTube. His room was totally bare and lacked any signs of academia. Every time I would enter his classroom, he would be surfing the internet for great shopping deals or gossiping with another teacher. Even when I asked Mr. Thomas for a good time to schedule the interview for this dissertation, offering after school or during his planning period, he said, “Anytime really. It doesn’t matter. I don’t have anything going on.” It was impossible for teachers to remain optimistic at the Academy. The disposability of the students at the Academy was pushed too strongly for teachers to fight it, and teachers like Mr. Thomas were being phased out of the education system where there was no place for longitudinal investment.

Mr. Thomas and the other teachers at the Academy came to understand the helpless struggle against the disposability of their students. As Mr. Thomas explained during his last semester at the Academy,

The objective is not about truly educating them. The objective is about just keeping them off the streets so they won’t be committing crimes...once you really get into it, you understand that the expectations are lower and just to keep them on campus so they don’t hurt themselves or others.

Teachers understand that the Disposables are beaten down by the structures of post-Katrina New Orleans, and that there is no interest in making these students not disposable. Expectations for the students thus become rock-bottom, as even educators who are supposed to believe in students’ potential lose hope in their futures. The students understood and felt these low expectations daily at school. While few students even ever attended class, those who did go to class had no motivation: they would put their heads on a desk as soon as they entered the room.
and slept until it was time to change rooms. The students felt, very clearly, the teachers’ loss of hope in them.

Another teacher first came to the Academy with optimism and motivation, as he specifically wanted to work with students in need of attention and had already been teaching in parochial and public schools in the New Orleans area for five years prior. His own expectations for teaching quickly adjusted:

My main goal is to teach at least 15-20 minutes a day. If I can teach 15-20 minutes, then that’s it, I made my day. That’s how bad my goals are.

After seeing his classroom every day, I think 15-20 minutes of teaching is actually a lofty goal. It seemed impossible to get students to focus on learning or feel inspired by anything as they were subsumed by their own plotted eminent future. Teachers are so beat down by institutions like the Academy that they come to believe in the disposability of their students and submit to it.

Both the teachers and students were well aware of these low educational expectations. The teachers frequently felt like they were trying to fight an uphill battle. They are embedded in a system that expects their students to fail. When the system is designed for disposability and even the greatest of student advocates lose hope, that is what the students learn.

Putting your “New Orleans Education” in Context

When everyday life is dominated by disposability and the supposedly safe space where children should learn is rather characterized by a crumbling built environment, oppressive and debilitating discipline, and adult advocates who can no longer care, the path to learning disposability is what you like those at the Academy see access to. This understood disposability is internalized and becomes the lens for their interpretation of their context (Fine and Ruglis, 2009). The students at the Academy learn disposability and rightfully map this abandonment
onto their understanding of New Orleans. They see the quality of their education as indicative of the “new” New Orleans, a place that becomes less and less appealing.

Rather than learning and growing at school, students at the Academy for Last Resorts saw their lives passing before them, with no place to develop or move. They saw their friends at other schools who were achieving and moving up grade levels. Meanwhile, they were stuck in a place where they were not expected to learn and had no options of trying. They felt like they had been “taken advantage of” and were being “robbed of their education,” as several students discussed. This is a very powerful emotion, as a notion of perpetual deprivation and abandonment radiates. The students understood this and referred to it frequently. They never stopped talking about how school was a waste of their time, that nobody at the school cared about them at all, and that they were just there to be under surveillance and pass the time.

Darnell, one of the more socially conscious students in our discussion group, understood this and was deeply troubled about his future prospects in New Orleans. Although he was extremely popular at the school and also often talked about loving the city’s cultural traditions that were deeply embedded in his family, Darnell was eager to leave New Orleans and finish his high school education elsewhere. He would frequently complain about the students’ “New Orleans education” as something inferior relative to a national context, and he wanted to avoid having a “New Orleans education” define his future. He felt like having a “New Orleans education” would be a permanent marker of his disposability, and he saw the only way to fight this was leaving the city (which he did several months after the conclusion of this research). As he criticized a good friend of his who dreamed of getting a nursing job one day in Texas,

How are you going to go with your New Orleans education and compete with all of them with their Texas education or whatever?! They’re not gonna even look at you! They’re gonna laugh.
Having a New Orleans education was a source of shame. The students saw their opportunities as completely qualified by being a part of an inferior education system altogether. Darnell would constantly claim the impossibility of getting a quality education in New Orleans and understood his own education as one of relative deprivation. He knew that he was being denied something big, as he explained that they “were getting a bad education, they don’t have the right environment and are given rock bottom!” He was constantly angry in our group discussions when we got on the topic of New Orleans and education. His voice would quickly raise, as he would scream at the other students and try to have them feel angry too. As he once exclaimed,

This shit ain’t alright! This shit pisses me off! This shit is the last resort, you know what I mean?! And I don’t want to be in it!

He understood that being at the Academy was engraving his oppression onto his future, and he wanted all students to achieve this level of conscientization (Freire, 1970) and fight against their own demise.

Living through this knowledge was extremely deadening for the students: knowing that even if they tried their best and behaved as adults wanted them to, they did not feel like there was ever going to be a way out. Just by getting “a New Orleans education,” these students felt like they were already entering the world with handicapped footing. They associated their idea of a “New Orleans education” with their understanding of the world’s vision of New Orleans: a city that is poor, uneducated and violent. The students assumed that these labels of the city would label them for the rest of their lives. Even if they were to strive for achievement, they believed that they would be discriminated against for the rest of their lives based on the low quality of their education. They assumed that New Orleans permanently defined them as less worthy than their counterparts elsewhere. After seeing other possibilities, the reality of their being not only
discarded but perpetually disadvantaged in post-Katrina New Orleans sunk in. Their oppression was profound and institutionalized.

While the students had largely given up hope on their educational prospects in New Orleans, they had a clear understanding of the larger picture of social oppression. They believed that there was a larger plan that kept them oppressed and pushed them towards self destruction and giving up. The Academy was not a place to inspire them to learn or to want much better for themselves: it was designed as a place to hold students, isolate them from students who are seen as actually having potential to learn, and keeping them off the streets. The school does nothing in preparing them for any type of productive future nor of any growth and self-learning. As Darnell explained when arguing with one student about her willingness to give up on her schooling:

That’s what they want you to do. They want you to be like, “alright, oh, this is how school is? Well f school, this is like me! This how I’m gonna go out!” It’s a trap.

Darnell intuitively saw the school as a place that was trying to label them and keep them permanently labeled as troublemakers. He argued with his friends and tried to help them understand how they needed to fight against the Academy’s structuring for their disposability. He said that the school encouraged destructive behaviors, and the system *wanted* them to be failures. If students lose their motivation for learning, than the schools do not have to provide it.

While there were some students at the school that had been in and out of prison or had done some very bad things to others, the majority of the students at the Academy for Last Resorts were there for being at the wrong place at the wrong time or often for extremely minor infractions (uniform, tardies, etc). For all students, being at the Academy was devastating and for many it was the last straw after a series of debilitating events that pushed them towards self-destruction or overly aggressive behavior. As one of the school’s teachers insightfully described:
This place is like a jail: you got the murderers, the thieves, the rapists, and then you got the people that didn’t pay a traffic ticket for five years. What do you think is gonna happen to them? What would you expect?

These students—the ones who “didn’t pay a traffic ticket”—have lost their possibility for optimism in post-Katrina New Orleans, and any remnants of childhood hopes and dreams have been stolen from them by the oppressive educational system that wants them to fail. These students’ loss of hope becomes clearly evident at the Academy, as they adjusted to fit in and defend themselves in the school’s rough environment. Students who have never before had behavior problems got in fights at the Academy, bragged about their drug use, treated other students and adults disrespectfully, and clicked out on occasion just to show their potential to others. This loss of hope was especially seen in the classroom where no student—even those who had good grades in their prior school and liked to talk about their intellect—gave any effort and instead would lay their head on a desk for the duration of classtime.

Many of my participants expressed that perhaps this is all part of a larger plan. As New Orleans bounces back from the storm and works to show the face of a city full of resilience, renewal and growth, there becomes a growing need to increasingly oppress young, African-American teenagers who have storm-related needs and contradict the vision of an ideal White middle class “new” New Orleans. These students, whether they are at the Academy for serious or non-serious actions, are intended to be at the Academy for being poor, Black and not rule followers. They challenge the vision of a successful post-storm New Orleans and embody the social reproduction of a side of the city that is no longer desirable (Katz, 2008). The students finish feeling clearly as the Disposables of this post-storm vision: those whom are labeled as holding the city back from growth. In feeling disposable and ignorable, they lose out on the potential for educational expectations and resolve to a life without personal development and
self-love (West, 1994). The violence they portray is the logical ending to their denial of hope in the name of “renewal.” They are the back-lashing byproduct of the destructive nature of urban renewal. The “new” New Orleans has circumscribed students like those at the Academy for Last Resorts out of the city’s future. These Disposables feel this exclusion and internalize their demise. They learn that they have no hope, no future, and no home as their places are disposed of.

A couple of weeks after the conclusion of my field research, the Academy for Last Resorts closed permanently, joining the ranks of hundreds of other schools across the country that were being closed as an “intervention” strategy (Ayala and Galletta, 2012). Following with the Recovery School District’s movement towards transitioning all of the city’s public schools into charter schools through accumulation of failing schools, three new charter alternative schools were slated to open in the following fall semester, and all of the city’s public alternative schools except one were to close. One year later, the previous four public alternative schools were now slashed and shoved into one charter alternative school, moved to the far outskirts of the city, hiding the narrative of dispossession that dominates these students’ lives. Erasure laid heavy on students’ memories, as places they know and associate their lives with are disappeared into the bulldozer of urban renewal.

Towards the end of my time at the Academy, the school’s eminent closure laid heavy on teacher and students’ shoulders, drilling them further into anger and apathy. With only two weeks left of the semester and the deadline for the common application for most of the city’s better public and charter schools having long passed, I would ask the students on a daily basis where they were planning on going to school in the following year. Generously, I would estimate that 10% of them had an idea. The rest, would shrug, ignore me, or answer quietly and seriously
“I don’t know.” There was no image at all of any future as they continued to be excluded by institutional change of urban “progress.” The circuit of dispossession was complete (Fine, 2012), as students understood and, at times, internalized their status as the disposable byproduct of institutional erasure.
Figure 6: Circuit of Dispossession in post-Katrina New Orleans Educational Restructuring

"New Orleans Education" as marker of perpetual inferiority

Educational Reform

Relative Deprivation Understood with Evacuation Experience

Educational Abandonment in many school
- Physically
- School Culture
- Teachers

'Challenge or Punish'
'Simplify or Push'
CHAPTER 6:

“I Hope I Make It To 20:”
The Effects of Learning Disposability

As school closures, city-wide institutional reform, and a push for renewal structurally dispossess so many who are outside of the ideal New Orleans, especially those in the remnants of the public education system, the effect on those being left behind is important for understanding the “new” New Orleans and how this ideal will progress. What “haunts” the dominant narrative of social life reveals an important level of complication and underpinnings, and these “ghostly aspects” (Gordon, 2008) tell an important part of the true post-Katrina city. As renewal sweeps across New Orleans, embedding disposability further into the structural design of the city, the texture of the dispossessed reveals important challenges to the progressing, reinventing city and its supposed renewal.

This chapter follows Avery Gordon’s call for looking at the “hauntings” of neoliberal dispossession, the “animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known” (Gordon, 2008: xvi). As an aggressive agenda of urban renewal is pushed across post-Katrina New Orleans that labels an entire segment of the population as disposable, the disposables are not simply disappearing into the background. Even though their institutions like the Academy for Last Resorts are designed to bring them down and push them out of the “new” New Orleans, they do not go silently. These young students live with ghosts of the past that haunt them daily, and these ghosts are many: the ghosts of memories of quality schools experienced during their Katrina evacuation; the ghosts of fallen loved ones, forcing them to question how close is their turn; and the ghosts of the “old” New Orleans, feeling like their home is a place
they want to escape from. Their reaction to a haunted life is aggressive and challenges the city’s urban narrative of a hopeful post-Katrina ideal.

This chapter explores ethnographically through the lens of youth at the Academy for Last Resorts what it feels like to be dispossessed by urban renewal and labeled “disposable.” The consequences of school structuring disposability for these students reverberate across the city, as the students live out an alternative vision of post-Katrina New Orleans as violent, poor, and without a promising future like the city’s pre-storm vision. Understanding their purposeful exclusion, disposable youth are not invested in being a part of the “new” New Orleans and push against it. They lose their ability to see their futures in the specific context of New Orleans. These are the consequences of dispossession (Fine and Ruglis, 2009:23), where youth “come to see how class and race/ethnicity fundamentally organize our nation; how hollow the promise of meritocracy rings; how vast and enduring social inequities are, and how written off they and their peers have become by adults in positions of public authority.” These consequences leave a generation of youth in New Orleans rightfully angry and abandoned, as they give up on finding a positive future for themselves in the “new” New Orleans. The ghosts of urban renewal stay with the dispossessed, as they explicitly feel their disposability and react to it by either submission or struggle.

Many authors have discussed inner-city schools and youth who have been forgotten or trained to forget their futures (Kozol, 1992; Willis, 1981; Ferguson, 2000; Noguera, 2008; Fine, 1991). These students go through school thinking they have no productive future and nowhere to go but prison. The students at the Academy (and other struggling public schools in New Orleans) are living this vision, as they have extremely high exposure to prison, with 100% of all of the students ages 12-17 I worked with over two years at the Academy for Last Resorts knowing
someone currently in prison (SilenceIsViolence Peace Club Survey, 2010). The school-to-prison pipeline is a much discussed concept (Wald and Losen, 2003; Christie et al 2005; NAACP Legal Defense Fund 2005; Kozol, 2005), and it has shown that across the country, schools are pushing students towards prison. While many authors have explored and validated the trend (Tuzzulo and Hewitt, 2006; Kim et al, 2010; Gregor and Hewitt, 2011; ACLU, 2008; Pettit and Western, 2004), there is a need to further look at the real interpretations and internalizations of this educational abandonment by students. While the context of New Orleans and Katrina are certainly relevant here, this story is one that can be found across the U.S. and beyond in “countertopographies” of disinvestment and dispossession (Katz, 2008; Katz, 2004). What is happening in New Orleans is happening everywhere the neoliberal wand of urban renewal passes in the name of progressive reform. Educational reform is sweeping the U.S. with few pauses to audit and assess its effects. The data and stories in this chapter speak back to reform and force a reconsideration of the erase-ability of active voice of the ghosts of disposability created by renewal.

This chapter builds on my analysis in Chapter 5 of schools structuring disposability under the guise of renewal and draws upon the same primary data source: years of ethnographic research, interviews, and a survey conducted with students in the Academy for Last Resorts and other struggling public schools across New Orleans in collaboration with SilenceIsViolence. Although I worked with many students at the Academy, I hosted a regular discussion group with 8 students who gave me the greatest insights into their everyday lives. While all of these students were African-American teenagers who had been expelled from their previous school, the students’ situations were extremely varied. Two of the eight students had parents who worked office jobs; two of the students had more than one parent in their lives and two other students
frequently referred to other positive adult role models in their lives; two of the students were openly bisexual (and I expect others who were less vocal questioned strict heterosexuality as well); two of the students spoke brashly and frequently about high sexual activity; at least four students smoked marijuana regularly and two others had openly admitted to the group stronger drug use; two of the students were self-proclaimed “partyers” and two of the students were proudly labeled as the nerds or “smart ones;” and two of the students had admitted to the group self-inflicted damage to their own bodies, either cutting or suicide attempts. Despite all of this variety, all of these students except one had experienced the loss of a family member or close friend to violence in New Orleans in the past year, and all of these students discussed intense personal struggles in their time in New Orleans since returning from their Katrina evacuation.

In this chapter, I will explore what dispossession feels like for students at schools like the Academy for Last Resorts and show how they interpret living among the ghosts of urban renewal. While the dominant narrative of post-Katrina New Orleans pushes a story of resiliency, hard work, and a philanthropic sense of personal agency, the ghosts of this narrative feel defined by their lack of means and narrative exclusion. Their disposability feels branded on their forehead, as they struggle to get out of it and waiver in the structural environment around them that plots their dispossession. This feeling of disposability is amplified by the trauma they encounter in their hyper accountability for childhood mistakes and loss of loved ones to violence, which makes even their relationships feel dispossessed. As these students realize that their lives and futures are part of the path of erasure (Ayala and Galletta, 2012) seen across the city as institutions that represent tradition, culture, and familiarity in New Orleans are closed, they react. This response often takes the form of fulfilling the disposable typecast through self-deprecating behaviors to escape their futureless feeling or violent, aggressive stances towards everyone based
out of a lack of trust. Although there are some examples of constructive responses to disposability though engaged, organized resistance, most disposables lose their will to dream of a future in New Orleans. They see their only way of survival is divorcing themselves entirely from their place identity.

A Stance on Agency and Life: Jump in or Float By?

At the Academy for Last Resorts, it is really easy to feel defeated. As described in the previous chapter, the school does not feel like an institution of learning, but rather as a place to further contextualize the students’ lack of opportunities in life. At the Academy, school has become a place to feel controlled and punished—as students are enclosed as if they were in a jail or daycare—not a place to learn and find support. The school’s built environment sends them a daily message of disposability, they are treated with nonchalance and criminality, and they understand the relative deprivation of their “New Orleans education.” Students are surrounded by the “rubbings” of erasures (Ayala and Galletta, 2012), as the disposability of neoliberal reform leaves them haunted by remembrance of a past filled with community and strength and left to live in a neglected state by the ghosts of what has been transitioned out of the New Orleans narrative. This leaves a heavy weight of denigration on young students, who have difficulty in seeing any hope or way out of the future being paved for them amongst the pressure of structured disposability. Rather than learn anything productive in school, youth lose their most valuable asset: a capacity to aspire (Appadurai, 2004).
Figure 7: Consequences of Dispossession in New Orleans

Dispossession by Urban Renewal

Reaction
- Violence and/or Organized Struggle
- New Orleans not home

Feeling of Disposability and Losing the Will to Aspire

Living with Ghosts:
- Their disappearing N.O.
- Lost loved ones
- Institutional erasure
The majority of students at the Academy had little vision of their future and rather fell prey to the weight of dispossession, which took the form of giving up on their lives. Most of them had difficulty thinking about life after the Academy and could not answer the question “What do you want to do when you finish high school?” or “What do you want to be when you grow up?” I would usually get shoulder shrugs, blank stares, or answers like “I don’t know. I guess just get a job somewhere.” At the Academy, students learned to submit to what seemed like their “life path:” removed from the hope of urban renewal and becoming increasingly lost and disenfranchised in their hometown. Most Academy students gave up on finding something more for themselves outside of the Academy, and rather submitted to the idea of school being a holding pen instead of an institution of academic learning (DeLuca and Rosenbaum, 2001).

Darnell was an exception: he was a dreamer. He did spend his days at the Academy like the other students—rarely in class, smoking pot outside, unmotivated and largely alone. Even though Darnell looked calm and lethargic at the Academy, he took the lack of engagement at school as time to think alone to himself and he had grown very agitated about life at the school and in New Orleans. Every day, he felt like he was being robbed of opportunities. He wanted to get out and find something better for himself. He was angry and wanted more for himself. He would spend most of his day sitting on the playground equipment, watching the others fight with each other, and not talking to anyone. Unlike the others, I rarely saw him engage in any deviant behaviors like fighting or disrespecting others, except for his constant marijuana smoking.

Darnell did have dreams and he talked with certainty of going to college. He felt ashamed of being at the Academy and saw it as a devastating blow to his future. He reports that he was at the Academy because he took the blame for a friend at his previous school, and being at the Academy gave him time to question concepts of friendship and loyalty. While he would tell me
that he appreciated his time to think at the Academy, he also felt like the place was setting his path for failure for the rest of his life. He understood that many people and structures in New Orleans would prefer for him and his friends to just give up, to not chase their dreams, and to even have never moved back to New Orleans in the first place. He knows that they are not on equal playing ground with the rest of the city, and perhaps joining in is not even possible. They fight an uphill battle, and wallow in their unarticulated struggles that leave them in the depressed, purposively forgotten environment of the Academy.

On one particular day, our group’s discussion turned to the topic of life goals, particularly looking at how their experiences at the Academy for Last Resorts and with Katrina have affected their ability to think of their futures. Darnell and Melody debated as usual: they often got into screaming matches with each other, as Darnell pushed Melody to think more critically and Melody loved to play devil’s advocate and push his buttons. In contrast to Darnell’s critical view of the Academy as a place that brings the students down, Melody usually liked being at the Academy. She felt comfortable being around “her own people” and felt like she belonged there. She liked being around other people with “problems like her” and felt less of an outcast around students already living with deviant labels like her.

On this day, Darnell got angry at Melody for explicitly saying that she liked attending an alternative school and didn’t mind her school acting as merely a place to keep her off the streets, which Darnell interpreted as her submitting to power and being satisfied with oppression. As good friends, he got angry at her lack of ambition and satisfaction with disposability. Darnell wanted Melody to have a more critical consciousness and to want more for herself. He understood that he and his friends were already living within structures that destined them to fail, and that they needed to be angry and have an intensely motivated personal drive in order to rise
above the path before them. He explained to Melody using a visual metaphor for her to understand:

Darnell: You say you want to know how to swim. But how can you say that if you keep looking at that damn pool and walking around it, but you ain’t never gonna know how to swim until you jump in!

Melody: I don’t know how to swim.

Darnell: I’m just saying as an example for life, you better take that first step.

Melody: What if I don’t know how to swim. Everybody just can’t learn how to swim just like that.

Darnell: Nobody is saying that Rome was built overnight. It’s gonna take time. You see the pool, and everybody ya know is swimming in the pool. You’re like, “I’m gonna jump too!” But you gotta take that first step and jump in!

Darnell was saying that she and the other Academy students needed to keep dreaming and not easily collapse under the oppressive pressures around them and drown under it all. They needed to fight back against that narrative and try to make something of themselves. Even though it is easier to just follow the path that disposability leads to and never jump in the pool, Darnell said that they’ve got to take those difficult, scary steps of trying to take the right path and struggle against what seemed to be their destiny.

Darnell understood very clearly that there are people and structures established to encourage them not to achieve in life. Yet, they could see “the pool” all the time: they see possibilities for success in life in the media or in the narratives of rebuilding and hope that dominate post-Katrina New Orleans. Darnell wanted to be a part of this, and wanted his friends to want to also. At least on this day, he insisted on not “drowning” in the violence and destruction around him, and on not “floating by” and letting this structured destiny define him. He understood how easy it was—and how the system encouraged young black teenagers like himself in New Orleans—to never even try for success in life. Darnell insisted that they must
“jump in,” even when they do not know how to swim: they must engage in a struggle against the narrative around them and want to hope for something better. Darnell wanted them to be able to hope too and to jump into the optimistic narratives that blanketed the city. He was angry at Melody for being satisfied with oppressive, low-quality institutions in life and not wanting to reach her goals.

As the conversation continued, his anger towards Melody heightened, almost violently, as she continuously tried to defend her apathy and willingness to settle for a bad school. Darnell then yelled at her (so loudly and passionately that the behavior interventionist came in):

Fuck, Melody! I’m not trying to be hard. I’m just saying, better yourself and set your goals higher! I’m saying, you gotta dream! But you can’t say like “oh, there’s my fucking dream” and you not gonna try to chase that bitch! “Oh, there’s my moment and there it went!” You gotta get a hand on it!

Darnell sees that they all can either “jump in” and struggle against this pushed narrative of disposability or “float by” and never contest the context, an option that is certainly easier to envision and one that unfortunately the majority of the Academy students follow.

The next day, I conducted a one-on-one interview with Darnell. This day, his resolve was not as strong as the day before: earlier that morning, he struggled with the politics and bureaucracy of his transitioning out of the alternative school and into a regular high school. He had his vision set on returning to his previous school, which is one of the few historic schools left in the city that is not engaging in any educational innovation and whose reputation has accordingly gone downhill. He wanted to return to this school so that he could play football, which he saw as his only ticket to college. Darnell was rejected from returning to the school due to what they qualified as “severe behaviors” (something I never witnessed in the year I spent with Darnell at the Academy). When I asked him about his thoughts of the Academy on this day, his response:
It’s a trap. It ain’t nothing positive in here. Like this bitch brings down your spirit, period. You could be the happiest mother-fucker in here, in New Orleans. You come into this bitch, and this bitch will just kill your spirit.

Even for the hardest working, most optimistic students, one cannot “stay strong” (or be impossibly resilient) all the time. Darnell, who was usually defiant and insistent on not succumbing to the structural pressures of dispossession around him that pushed failure and complacency, had his moments where it was just all too much to handle and resist. He, too, gave up.

I saw this same lack of resolve from all students at the Academy, who would spend most of their days looking bored and depressed as they waited for the school day to end. Many students at the Academy became convinced that they belonged in a place like the Academy and couldn’t make it elsewhere. Armaud, for example, was one of the more academically advanced students at the Academy and was known for being the school “nerd.” He was the only student at the Academy that had already applied to and gotten into college (a state community college), and everyone at the school bragged about him as the school’s success story. Still, Armaud had learned to set very low expectations for himself and his future. He was actually given the opportunity to transition out of the Academy and spend most of his last year of high school in a regular, popular high school. Instead, he made the conscientious decision to stay at the Academy. He doubted his ability to control his behavior, and he was nervous that he would get in trouble in a new school and end up back at the Academy anyways. As Armaud explained why he did not transition out of the Academy:

I know my ways and I know how I am, and I don’t want to be here but I might get into a fight and wind up back here where I was before.

Even though he had never been in a fight at the Academy and spent most of his days on the computer in school, he was worried and filled with self-doubt. The Academy had knocked him
down and taught him to not trust himself “out there.” Like the other students at the Academy, Armaud had learned to lose hope in himself and to feel at home in disappearing institutions that build disposability. He was haunted by the ghosts of neoliberal reform and urban renewal, and could not escape the impression they left behind on him and his environment.

*Losing Their “Childhood”*

One of the ghosts that students at the Academy lived with everyday is the ghost of time lost. The students at the Academy for Last Resorts talked a lot about having to grow up very fast and losing their opportunity for a true childhood—a time where, as Darnell defined, “you are like, damn, that pot is hot! I’m not gonna touch that no more.” The students at the Academy talked about losing their opportunity for making mistakes and learning from them without consequences so dire that they ruined the rest of their lives. They have been held so accountable to mistakes that they have made (violent behaviors, uniform violations, attendance issues, etc.) that they have landed in an alternative school that feels like their last option in life. Their childhoods were disposable, and losing this important time to grow and learn amplifies their loss of a capacity to aspire. As they were shoved from school to school, losing homes, loved ones, and a sense of community along the way, their remembrance of hopeful times became also displaced.

While the whole Katrina experience (evacuation, displacement, return, reconstruction) was difficult and traumatizing for most people, the storm consumed the memories of these teenagers’ childhoods. As Darnell sadly articulated,

> By me being the age I am and by when the storm hit—I was like 13, 14—ya know, that’s your childhood! Ya know, a lot of your friends that you knew, that you’ve been growing up with, gone. (voice choking up) Gone! Never see them again. Or you come back and everybody’s life is different, not in the same school.
Their experiences of loss from the storm were not the physical loss of material things nor the nostalgic loss of a connection to their hometown; their loss was more of a loss of important time. For most students at the Academy, they experienced their most memorable childhood years during the storm, a time filled with confusion and anxiety over one’s stability. Their visions of growing up were dominated by trauma and difficult struggles.

The students were therefore very curious about the idea of their “childhood” and they made it a frequent topic of our discussions. Many of them were very interested in how they defined childhood, whether they were living their childhood right now or whether they had lost it and its opportunity altogether. They talked a lot about how their chances to make mistakes and actually learn from them had been lost. Their childhood took place at the Academy, where there were no fields to play in, no resources to explore, and no adult mentors to confide in and to care for them. Their childhood at the Academy has been spent watching their backs, adapting to a violent environment, and learning how to keep their lives safe. Childhood was not for enrichment or personal growth, but for management and maintenance against adversity.

For some of these students, childhood was a distant memory because they were dealing with so much in their post-evacuation experiences that they were forced to grow up quickly for lack of other supports. Coming home was hard, whereas many of the students told stories of their personalities during their displaced time that contrasted sharply with their attitudes and behaviors at the Academy in New Orleans. These stories illustrated moments where they felt like they had a childhood, and explored the world and themselves.

Sandy, for example, talked of her athleticism and general clownish high energy at her school in Texas. She talked of making friends very easily in Texas, people liking her due to her high energy and humor. At the Academy, for contrast, Sandy had no friends, sat alone or in the
corner at all times, and acted sluggishly and with no energy or happiness. Most of the students admitted to me in private of being nervous around her. Her silence hid a lot: Sandy was at the Academy because she brought weapons (a knife and a loaded gun) to her previous schools, twice, with intent to hurt someone. It was hard to imagine her as jovial and fun, as she was generally such a loner at the Academy. But the evacuation was a chance for Sandy to be and act youthful. Coming back to New Orleans and attending schools like the Academy forced Sandy to transition to an adult-like attitude quickly and darkly, as she lost her motivation and focused instead on self protection. Losing opportunities to be intensely supported and nurtured by families and communities is a marker of experiences of poverty (Lareau, 2011). These students exemplify this theory, as their precarity became even more heightened post-Katrina.

Mike had a post-Katrina experience that was consumed by exacerbated problems of poverty from the storm. This student was at the Academy not because of his grades or any behavior problems; he had to go to an alternative school because he had too many absences, which were on account of his family moving around so much. In less than two years since he has been back in New Orleans, he had changed homes 5 times: once due to the closing of a public housing project, once due to his house burning down (suspected arson), once because of problems with the landlord, and twice because of his home being robbed. His family suspects that the break-ins were from his drug-addicted mother, who had been the main cause of his having to change households so many times as he moves from one family member to the next. The school has been unable to keep up with his address and thus unable to arrange school bus transportation for him to and from school. Many other students had similarly unstable lives at home from before the storm that did not give them great resiliency in the face of emergency.
Like other students, Mike told stories of a different personality and attitude during the storm. Mike was tall and goofy, and in contrast to many other students at the Academy, Mike was not always trying to appear like a grown adult and was comfortable acting like a young child. The teachers and counselors have talked about his sexually deviant behaviors, but he was essentially at the Academy for uniform violations and truancy. At the Academy, Mike was always found sleeping in a classroom or watching music videos on youtube. He never socialized with other students, never played sports, and never engaged in school work. However, Mike described his time during his Katrina evacuation as involved with volunteer work by helping displaced people in a shelter. He said that he loved his time in evacuation, as it gave him a chance to help others. He particularly enjoyed entertaining kids in the shelter, with whom he would play basketball or cards with all day. This spirit and motivation to serve looked very different from the character seen at the Academy. Rather than the portrait he painted of himself as a young boy looking to help others and play with kids during the evacuation, at the Academy Mike slept his days away in solitary classrooms and never went outside or socialized with others.

While evacuated, students like these lived a very different persona than what they projected at the Academy. These students’ experiences in other environments gave them a chance to reinvent themselves as different from their history and labeling in New Orleans. They saw the opportunity of newness while being in a new place, and an opportunity to create a new life and identity. While forced from their homes, these students experienced a capacity to aspire and felt like children who could dream and explore. But then they moved back to New Orleans, where they were immersed in a bounded environment that defined them as disposable to the city’s future. Their spirit of change and reinventing themselves ended with their uprooted homes and sad schools.
Dealing with Loss

In addition to being structurally dispossessed of their city by neoliberal reform movements and feeling forced to grow up fast, the Disposables also are witnessing the disappearance of their loved ones to intense physical violence. In a 2011 survey that I conducted for SilenceIsViolence of the five most challenged schools in New Orleans (as identified by a senior administrator in the district school board), 83% of students claimed to have someone close to them who has died because of violence in New Orleans, 60% of them a family member and 53% a close friend (SilenceIsViolence Peace Clubs survey, Spring 2011). This is an enormous amount of trauma and loss for the city’s youth to be managing. In conjunction with the trauma related to growing up with their Katrina experiences and facing the constant structural abandonment of their schools and other resources, the youth of New Orleans are having to understand life as they navigate extreme violence and the falling of those around them. Patel (2012) describes coping with trauma associated with dispossession as if along an “imaginary straight line” that defines “the only choice” as “to follow it or stagnate.” Indeed, this is how the students at the Academy felt: like they had only the choice to succumb to trauma. As in the chapter’s title, I frequently heard students say “I hope I make it to 20” and most students have said that they are just awaiting their turn. There was no vision of a future when death surrounded them every day.

All of the students in our discussion group at the Academy were dealing with the loss of one or more loved ones, some of them in very intense predicaments. Darnell, for example, lost two of his very close cousins of about his same age to violence—one a case of mistaken identity in a drive-by shooting, and the other’s body found mutilated in a neighbor’s garbage can—both
within his first year of being back in New Orleans after the storm. He was very conscientious that his doing poorly in school was directly tied to his bereavement, as he struggled to focus on his schoolwork. Melody lost both of her parents after the storm to substance abuse related health issues and now lives with her older sister. She was constantly struggling with this loss. Raschelle, who has also been separated from her mother since the storm, lost two brothers at different times to violence after Katrina. Sandy had seen many of her siblings and family members die in these past few years. The list could go on, as the normalization of dealing with loss had set in throughout the high school. Every day, students expressed their loss in different ways: wearing clothing adorned with pictures and names of their lost loved ones; sitting quietly in a corner and taking a moment alone; or letting their emotions explode as they lashed out at another student or adult.

New Orleans, and especially post-Katrina, has become a very dangerous city for many of its residents. It has become all too common for people, especially low-income African-Americans and particularly young Black men, to be victim to homicide. The death of so many young people to violence is certainly hard on those that are left behind to deal with the loss. Additionally, others feel the threat of their own death looming in so close of reach when they see people of the same age being regularly killed. The death of young Black men in New Orleans has become so commonplace that parents are taking out life insurance policies on their children. As Angie, a local life insurance sales representative, explained to me,

> It’s one of the most common kinds of policies [parents’ for their children under age 18] that I write, especially in New Orleans because, well you know, we have a high crime rate and parents are scared and they know people in their situations who know someone who was killed and they didn’t have insurance. Especially if you’re a black male in this town, you better have insurance on your children. It is just so common.
Losing one’s children—what seems as the ultimate sorrowful experience—has become commonplace in New Orleans. Especially after learning with Katrina about the importance of insurance for dealing with significant loss, families are much more likely to protect themselves from what seems to be an imminent risk. Yet, buying life insurance on children is like buying into their disposability. Death seems as if it is lurking at all times.

Coping with loss has become commonplace, frequent, and overwhelming for teenagers in schools. Most schools are not equipped to assist with this coping, and spaces to explore this process are practically nonexistent. Rather, the inability to cope becomes part of their normal life. My students felt angry, hurt, and abandoned.

At the end of one especially heated discussion group, Raschelle finally confessed to the group that she just found out that her brother had been killed. When Darnell advised her of the importance of thinking and talking about loss so as to not get consumed by the grief, Raschelle responded,

If I think about them, I’m gonna go crazy. I’m sorry but I am tired of my brothers dying! Everybody dies, always dies!

Abandoned by her mother and with her brothers being killed, Raschelle felt a complete loss of her support network and overwhelmed by the grief. She dealt with it by cutting herself, leaving fingernail tracks all over her body as she scratched the sadness out of her. She shyly confessed to the group about her cutting, at which the group was divided: several group members gasped in concern, while several others confessed to their doing something similar at one point in their lives. At first, I thought that she had cut herself with a knife, as she showed the group the track marks across her chest from afar. Later in the day, I pulled Raschelle into the bathroom, where she showed me the cuts more closely. I could see that the cuts were not that deep but were extensive, as wound lines covered her arms and chest in a frantic pattern and were made with her
fingernails. Raschelle did not know how to deal with such strong experiences and emotions, and school was not a place where she was given support to work through it. In a private interview with Raschelle, I asked her about coping with all of this loss:

Allison: I know you’ve had some hard stuff with your brothers. How do you cope with all that?

Raschelle: I don’t. Obviously. I really don’t. I don’t care.

Allison: Well, when it happened, what did you do? Did you cry?

Raschelle: No, I didn’t do nothing. I just finished eating my dinner.

Allison: Did you get sad? Or were you just, “my brother died.”

Raschelle: Like yeah, he gone. What am I going to do? I can’t do nothing to get him back.

Allison: When you heard that he was dead, did it make you feel frustrated?


Raschelle’s cool and nonchalant attitude were chilling. “Normal” for Raschelle had become losing what she loved. She angrily accepted instability and fragile love as the norm for her future. Raschelle had learned to lose connections to things, places, and people around her. This is a significant consequence of the circuit of dispossession (Fine and Ruglis, 2009) ignited by urban renewal.

This was a very common reaction for students, and most students ignored their grief and acted like it was bound to happen someday, a type of “we’re all gonna die someday” attitude. Melody, for example, had been through a lot in the years around Katrina: after caring for her mother for many years through her struggle with intense substance abuse, her family was forced to leave the town in Mississippi where they had evacuated to due to criminal issues that always seemed vague to me and Melody never wanted to explain in more detail. Shortly after moving
back to New Orleans, her mother passed away due to health issues and her father was killed by violent crime. She was especially saddened by her mother’s death, although she did not talk about her grief with anyone. When the question of her coping mechanism came up, Melody responded,

Like I ain’t let it get to me. I don’t worry about it. Like when it comes to me, I just push it to the side.

Raschelle, her best friend, immediately responded for her, “Like she really just going crazy and then they be like, ‘she just like that because her momma dead.’” Melody’s friends recognized that she was affected by her mother’s death, but they did not really ever talk about it with her. Their support came in the form of leaving her alone to feel her sadness, but in a stoic form where she would sit quietly and stare into space without having to explain herself. She frequently showed a severe, tough persona to others that contrasted strongly with the animated debater that would come out in verbal arguments with Darnell. With the students at the Academy, it had come to be considered cool to not show signs of grieving, as tears are usually jumped upon as a sign of weakness. Loss is something they all deal with and so not something that they feel should be given special attention. Students are slow to admit their grieving, and oftentimes the deaths of their friends and family went completely unrecognized at school.

As loss had become so commonplace for so many of the students, their grief had given way to normalization. Rather than allow themselves to feel sadness or despair, they pushed it aside and gave way to the structures that expected their loved ones to die. The transitory nature of the city with urban renewal mirrored the students at the Academy’s transitory stance on their lives and their relationships. Being disposable in the “new” New Orleans feels like complete loss: of one’s right to education, sense of place, and loving relationships.
Not Like “Normal” Kids

As the students were cooped up in a sad building, dealing with strong emotions and loss without any constructive form of energy and emotional release, other forms of emotional management were bound to surface as they went deeper down a path that seemed to have no hope or future. This generally came out most often in the exploration of mood-enhancing substances. While there were some excessive drinkers or heavy drug users, the vast majority of the students I worked with at the Academy just smoked lot of marijuana. They generally were very proud and talked openly about their pot smoking (or other substance use) while at the Academy, and discussed it as a form of escaping from the difficulties of their day-to-day. Students would dull themselves to the challenges and oppression of the Academy by smoking weed in the school yard for most of the day. They also were well-aware of how different this school experience was, and it made them feel less like “normal kids.”

While some drug and alcohol use is expected of teenagers at this stage in their life, what is less normative is where much of the use is happening: on campus during school. Darnell, Sandy and others have all showed me their joints at school and talked openly about how they smoke throughout the day while at school. One day when I came to the Academy, Darnell was rolling a joint out in the open in the schoolyard with teachers in clear sight, and no one said a thing to him. Most of the students smoked in a less visible, but still very open, area of the schoolyard. The teachers and staff were well aware of the students’ drug use at school but did little about it. As Darnell explained, “They aren’t stupid. They know. They just don’t care.” All of the teachers and security staff that I talked to were well-aware of the students’ on-campus drug use, yet not a single one of them discussed it as something worthy of addressing. One teacher justified their inaction as practical reasoning: he thought that their smoking marijuana at
school was less debilitating than other things they might do at school (fighting, heavier drugs, etc.) and so let it slide. Another teacher thought that their smoking marijuana at school was a good thing as it would “chill them out” and lower the amount of fighting at school. No teacher ever mentioned to me the issue with marijuana on campus lowering students’ expectations of their educational experience. This lack of thought about the importance of their education mirrors the students’ experiences.

How the students conceptualized their drug use was particularly interesting. Although Darnell was smoking marijuana several times daily, he claimed to not be addicted at all because of his dream to play football once he transitioned to a regular high school. For him, smoking weed was something to do until he could play football, and he confessed to never touching any sort of substances before coming to the Academy. He anticipated not smoking pot anymore once he transitioned out of the Academy and was playing sports again. Marijuana was something to do at the Academy, not something as part of a regular high school experience. As students knew they weren’t doing any formal academic learning at the Academy but were wasting their days away, smoking marijuana gave them something to occupy their time with.

Sandy also had never used drugs before coming to the Academy and saw drug use as antithetical to her positive energy. She conceptualized her smoking as deviant behavior and talked about how when she transitioned to a regular high school that she would try to quit. As she said,

I don’t think I wanna smoke around normal kids. They’ll probably look at me and say “who’s that fucking idiot?”

She saw her drug use as abnormal behavior that only “bad kids” did, and she thought it was something that “normal kids” would look down on her for. This in no way deterred her current drug use and was a very different conception from the more frequent flaunting of drug use at the
Academy as a sign of being cool. She wanted to fulfill the label (Rist, 2007) of a “bad kid” and showed no signs of wanting to be a “normal kid” while at the Academy. Her thinking that “normal kids” don’t smoke pot, yet her continued insistence on being high, reveals Sandy’s lack of motivation at the Academy to ever be “normal.”

Sandy confessed that her reasons for smoking marijuana were very specific and personal. She had a history (that is practically unaddressed) of dealing with severe depression since Katrina, and she has cut her body extensively, had run away from home several times, and attempted suicide twice before. For her, she smoked to escape stress and to calm herself down: “I was like, instead of cutting myself or hurt myself, might as well smoke instead of trying to kill myself.” She started smoking a week after she transitioned to the Academy, which was a few days after her second suicide attempt. She was looking for an escape, and a way to deal with her hardships. I had also seen Sandy come to school inebriated, using alcohol to cope with the intense violence in her life. Being drunk at school though was perhaps an “improvement” from her previous experiences dealing with violence at school: Sandy had been kicked out of two schools prior to coming to the Academy for bringing weapons to school. When describing one of these past events, she explained, “I didn’t really want to kill him. I just want him to know that I had a gun and I could really shoot him. I’m not really a violent person.” Sandy was obviously needing emotional attention and help with making sense of the challenges in her life, and the only places she found solace were in violence and substances. Sandy began smoking the first day that she was transferred to the Academy. She saw a couple of kids smoking weed and thought that she should try it as a good option for suppressing her rage. She wanted to restrain her emotions and be a “regular Academy kid.”
The students’ substance use was directly tied, in their mind, to their disposability. They saw substance use as fulfilling the narrative of neglect, disposability, and death that surrounds them and becoming what seemed to be the only option before them. They conscientiously submitted to the surrounding dispossession that was laid out for them by their educational abandonment and the consuming violence around them, as they decided to become not like a “normal” kid but like an Academy kid.

**Clicking Out**

Oftentimes, it all just became too much to handle and the students would further break down. They felt like they have no voice to contest the path of disposability and their stories were silenced for the sake of contentment (Fine, 2003) with public education reform and post-Katrina urban renewal. Frequently, the students would just feel like it was all too much to suppress with marijuana or stoicism.

In those moments when they could not handle it all anymore, they would break down in rage and lash out on anyone or anything around them. This reaction was so normalized that the students had a label for it: “clicking out,” because with a “click” one explodes, either verbally or physically, against their perceived injustices. “Clicking out” was a phrase I would hear on a daily basis at the Academy, and the students perceived it as a sufficient explanation for their rage. If they “clicked out,” it meant that they had just had enough and could not take the stress anymore. “Clicking out” was a release of emotion, and they all seemed to sympathize with others who would “click out.” “Clicking out” was not seen as a sign of weakness or concern, but was just something that “normal kids” at the Academy do on a regular basis.
Melody and Raschelle (and many of the others) would click out very easily and frequently—almost daily. Melody was generally very explosive and had dramatic mood swings: from calm and severe, as she quietly did her work and listened intently, to screaming her opinion passionately in our group discussions, as she would jump to her feet with aggressive body language. Her friends would usually try to calm her down, as they “know how she gets,” and the security guards of the school often interrupted our group meetings when Melody’s aggressive energy could be heard from afar. Raschelle looked younger than the rest of the group, and she had a sweet, kind demeanor. Her compassionate persona could quickly change: she would “click out” easily, scream over minute issues, treated everyone around her disrespectfully and offensively, and hated to be called out for her behavior (even though she might admit her rudeness later on in a quiet place). While she claimed that it was because her “nerves were bad,” she also recognized her aggressiveness and was not happy with it. While she never openly regretted physical fights that she had with other students, she often confided in me how she wanted to control her disrespectful verbal clicking out and wanted to get better about not being rude to people she cared about. There were several times when Raschelle got into a big fight at the school (and rarely received any consequence for it).

For example, one afternoon the students went on a field trip to play Laser Tag. As the bus pulled up to school and the kids were walking off the bus, one girl (someone with whom she had been friends with) looked at Raschelle funny as they stepped in the aisle of the bus. The girl did not even say anything, but Raschelle clicked out and jumped her. Raschelle aggressively punched her, pulled her hair, bit her arm, and screamed derogatory profanities at her. Quickly, the fight grew: Melody and two of Raschelle’s other closest friends joined in, as well as some other girls on the other side. When the behavior specialists were finally able to tear the girls off
of each other and walk them into the school, the girls were steaming and disheveled: some of them had pieces of hair weave missing; some of them had blood on their skin and clothes; and all of them were breathing heavy and having difficulty talking to anyone. I tried talking to Melody and Raschelle, but they were too heated to communicate with me and just stared at the wall in anger.

Two days after the fight, I met with the girls. Their composure was completely different: they were back to their “normal” selves, speaking loudly and energetically as they were excited to be with me to talk about what’s important to them. I prodded them to talk about the fight. Rather than any sense of shame or remorse for losing their cool, the girls were proud and boastful of how they “kicked ass” and defended themselves. They could recall gory details of the event, and were quick to brag about their wins: who got blood, hair, or tears of the other girls. Yet, when I asked them why they started fighting, Melody and the other girls said because “their girl Raschelle was in it” and they felt the need to stand by her. When I asked Raschelle what started the fight, she could only remember a girl looking at her funny. She explained that she had “had enough the whole day, everyone getting on my nerves, and I just clicked out. It don’t matter what for, I just needed to.” Raschelle just needed emotional release and for her voice to be heard, and the others in the group sympathized with her need as they nodded their heads in agreement.

Raschelle is not unique at the Academy as almost all of the students have “clicked out” at some time. The students have normalized clicking out as something that just happens: that physical violence to release their tension is just inevitable. Students do not look down on one another when they click out, nor is it rarely glorified as a special event. Rather, they support each other when they click out and understand that it has to happen sometime for the good of the student. Clicking out is normal for the disposables of the Academy for Last Resorts, as they
reach their breaking point and can’t repress this expression longer. This in turn entails them acting disposable and becoming the labels of “uneducatable” and “violent” that are already pushed on them. They learn how to be disposable at the Academy and in New Orleans, where they find that their only form of expression of their loss and exclusion is physical violence.

*It’s Just New Orleans*

Dealing with dejection is difficult under normal circumstances, particularly for youth. Doing so under the guise of a city that has become infamous for its outstanding crime rate, poor education status, and hurricane destruction—while being constantly labeled as the source or outcome of these problems—is even more debilitating. Students of the Academy came to feel “as if they embody the inferiority of their schooling” (Fine and Ruglis, 2009: 25) and would intuitively blame their problems on the city itself. They mostly saw it as an environment that they simultaneously loved for its cultural uniqueness and history, yet could not wait to run away from due to its lack of opportunities and overwhelming disparities. They were not able to grasp onto the renewal and optimism that blankets much of the city, but rather were enveloped in the sadness and despair that created their narrative of post-Katrina New Orleans. They felt the heavy weight of the social reproduction of poverty and hostile privatization in New Orleans (Katz, 2008), and sought to interrupt this structure by leaving New Orleans.

Besides the constant statistics thrown in the news of New Orleans being the murder capital of the country, the incarceration capital of the world, and the second-to-worse public education system in the country (all statistics that have become vernacular for the students), many of these students blamed the city for their failures since returning from elsewhere while displaced from the hurricane. Many of these students lived in safe, secluded suburbs of Houston,
Atlanta and Dallas or in small towns in Mississippi and Florida while waiting to return to New Orleans during their Katrina evacuation. They attended high quality public schools, lived in nice housing or hotels for free (with FEMA vouchers), and experienced different communities for the first time. Understanding the other side caused them to reflect on themselves and their own environments, especially what those environments had to offer them. As Darnell explained vividly in one animated group discussion,

   It’s like once you see outside of New Orleans, you’re like, “Damn, I wanna go here, I wanna do this, I wanna do that!” That’s how I feel. The storm opened my eyes to see what’s out there.

The storm gave them hope in the possibilities of life available to them outside of New Orleans, something they rarely thought of while drowning in the disposability and poverty of New Orleans. These students were inspired to dream of their lives as big outside of New Orleans but empty in their own hometown. Suddenly, they became all the more aware of their relative deprivation and this conscientization (Freire, 2000) was deadening to their connection to their city. Darnell saw what was out there when he left the city for Katrina, particularly as he was invited into well-resourced schools, decent housing, and accessible public institutions. Returning to New Orleans, and especially to the Academy, was an enormous blow to his personal motivation and aspirational capacity, which grew high during his Katrina evacuation. Inside New Orleans, there seemed to be no possibility of a future and he saw his entire education and future robbed. The ghosts of urban renewal in New Orleans and the relative deprivation they felt from elsewhere haunted them daily, as they felt and understood their dispossession and disposability in New Orleans.

   Many of the students commented on their inability to change things like the city’s soaring rate of violent crime and poor state of public education because “that’s just how New Orleans
is.” New Orleans was seen as a place that was destined to be poor, violent, racist, and with in-your-face inequality. It was hard for them not to feel like that when power has seemed so inaccessible and the city has developed around you but not with you. Most of the students recognized that the city was changing, but felt like their New Orleans was permanently stagnant. They knew that they were outside of the Renewer narrative, and this exclusion made them feel even more helpless. Darnell believed that it was impossible to change New Orleans as he saw violence as an inherent part of the city’s identity, “This is New Orleans; it’s always been like this and always will be.” As someone who saw many people close to him fall victim to violence, he could not even imagine the possibility of a violence-free life in New Orleans. There is a pervasive idea amongst those at the Academy that New Orleans was just a dangerous place and that there was nothing to do about it, hence the acceptability and normalization of clicking out. In order to escape that violence, the students believed that the only option was to escape from New Orleans altogether. Otherwise, violence would become one’s destiny.

Sandy shared this vision. She saw New Orleans as the antithesis to her safety, and believed that bad things would happen to her if she were to spend time outside her home. She exclaimed bluntly, “Do you know where I’m at?! I’m at New Orleans, Louisiana!” when I asked her about her excessive time hiding indoors. It’s hard to debate the topic with her, particularly after hearing her countless stories day after day: a 13-year-old girl raped around the corner from her home when walking to the store; kids selling drugs on almost every block around her; and her witnessing a brutal murder while standing on her porch one day (with her life directly threatened by the perpetrators). That week, she was visibly shaking, hollowed, and inebriated at school. She also carried a weapon with her to school that week hidden in her pants that was discovered when she momentarily felt threatened by another student and pulled it on him.
Since returning to New Orleans, Sandy was suicidal and often inflicted damage on herself. She connected her depression directly to New Orleans. As she explained her suicide attempts,

I guess because I was more stressed and more down [when I moved back to New Orleans]. Because I guess in Texas you don’t really have no stress. Down here, you have so much stress that they lead you to it.

The stresses of the environment of New Orleans, especially after being exposed to the possibilities of leading an “easier” life, led her to the edge on several occasions. It is ironic that living in displacement—a time of potential homelessness, uprootedness, loneliness, and figuring life out as it happens—was less stressful for Sandy than being dispossessed in her hometown.

When speaking with the students in the group, all of them admitted whole-heartedly and quickly to being excited about moving back to New Orleans after the storm. They felt separated from the places and people they knew and, like everyone else in the city, were yearning for the comfort of feeling finally at home. They were all very hopeful about their possibilities in New Orleans and had great expectations for their families, education, and futures growing up in a city they all loved. Yet unlike other people in the city, all of these students discussed with frequency and passion how they wished they had never came back to New Orleans. They all planned on leaving the city at their first opportunity.

During one group discussion, I asked the students if they wanted to stay in New Orleans after high school or move elsewhere. Unanimously and emphatically, every student wanted to move out of New Orleans. They immediately began screaming responses like, “I’m done with it,” “Man, I’m trying to go anywhere!,” “New Orleans is stupid. We just need to hurry and get ourselves outta here!” and “Ship me off to somewhere! Damn, Haiti! Somewhere!” Darnell actually did move shortly after the conclusion of this research, and when I talked to him by
phone in his new home, he had no remorse of leaving his hometown. Many students were
desperate to get out of the city, and thought that New Orleans was what is holding them back.
They saw the environment as constricting and inescapably debilitating. The quicker they could
leave, the more likely they thought they were to succeed. Their hometown had become their
life’s obstacle, and the students were very conscientious of the weakening force of its structures.
Their anger and disappointment in their situation in New Orleans and at the Academy for Last
Resorts, which they easily and clearly articulated as a quick transition from hope and happiness
to despair, has been amplified by a plethora of untreated issues like storm-related stress, family
deaths and/or abandonment, crime-related violence, unstable housing, and substance abuse. Their
coping mechanisms have often been destructive (to themselves and others), as they vividly lived
out what it feels like to be labeled “disposable” in the narratives and development of post-
Katrina New Orleans.

New Orleans youth are growing up to dream of their lives outside of their homes. They
do not necessarily have direction or ideas of where to go, they just are clear that they want to
leave and build their lives elsewhere. New Orleans no longer feels like home, and the haunting of
neoliberal reform have pushed them to redirect their understanding of their home. They feel like
the city brings them down and puts them in an environment that is impossible to escape, and they
feel powerless to change it. New Orleans is a place that makes them disposable, and they
understand their low place in the renewing city and thus ready themselves to look elsewhere.
They have learned to feel disposable and act accordingly, and they want to reject this oppression
and find another path.

_Fighting Back_
Despite the seemingly lack of paths out of the work of urban renewal and the furthering of the disposability of those most excluded, there are many efforts to struggle against this plan. There are several key groups providing a path to resistance and discarding their neglect. These groups are making noise in their efforts, and importantly, it is the kind of noise that Renewers are attracted to. They are refusing to be dispossessed of their home and sense of place, and are rather responding to the ghosts of renewal by voicing them, challenging their path, and bringing much attention to their destruction.

There are many non-profit organizations, like SilenceIsViolence, that seek to create outlets for pushing through the voices of those that renewal tries to silence. The Rethinkers, for example, are a group of middle school students who come together in a participatory fashion to challenge things that they are not happy with about their schools. While much of the Rethinkers work has focused on school food programs thus far, they held a powerful conference in July 2013 calling for restorative justice programs in their schools. To take the place of suspensions and expulsions, students persuasively argued in front of a packed audience for restorative justice circles and conversations between disputing students. Pushing against punitive disciplinary procedures and school policies decided for the students, the Rethinkers are talking back to Disposability and trying to resist their exclusion.

SilenceIsViolence has taken a similar approach with victims of violent crime. While police, public officials, business owners, and real estate developers generally react to violent crime with a call for more policing and less civic engagement in public spaces, SilenceIsViolence works to open conversation more when violent crime has occurred. Once a month, the group hosts a Second Line procession in a neighborhood where a recent homicide has occurred. The Second Line is led by the grieving family, who is surrounded by hundreds of
friends and community members who offer their support and solidarity. The group works to reclaim public spaces for the people and show that they won’t be prisoners to violence.

Women with a Vision, a powerful grassroots health group of community organizers, pushes back against restrictive and diminishing health care. Among other projects, they go door-to-door in low resource neighborhoods to offer information and resources about sexual health. They recently led an important campaign in Louisiana to protect long-term civil rights of sex workers, and are always on the cusp of fighting for health care and rights of the city’s low-income population. While the organization is very under-funded, it has brought a lot of attention to state-wide unjust policies towards sex workers and the need for further HIV education in low-income neighborhoods in New Orleans.

Artist Brandon Odums from 2cent entertainment—a group of young African-American artists who have created videos celebrating literacy, contemporary New Orleans local culture, and the right to the city—has created a political art installation in the remnants of mostly demolished public housing project. “Project Be,” as he calls it, is composed of enormous murals of African-American cultural and historical heroes (Angela Davis, James Baldwin, Malcolm X, Coretta Scott King, etc.) painted across the walls of the soon-to-be demolished housing project. Reclaiming this disposable space as art, history, important, and attention-getting has been a great political move. A young New Orleanian, Odums has been very out-spoken and powerful in his push against disposability, as he tries to set a new narrative that challenges the Renewer-Disposable divide.

These projects and others are all strong examples of a push for self-determination that some have declared as an alternative to Disposability in post-Katrina New Orleans. Refusing to accept their dispossession and the dominant narrative of post-Katrina urban renewal, many actors
in New Orleans are challenging reform and urban development and pushing for another narrative. Although they lack the economic and political leverage that key development narrative actors have, they are making noise and getting some attention for it. Odums and the Rethinkers have both recently been featured in the *Times Picayune* newspaper (2013), SilenceIsViolence has been solicited for a formal partnership with New Orleans Police Department for their work with victims of violent crime, and Women with a Vision’s leader was awarded as BET’s Health Hero. These projects show an alternative to disposability and dispossession that is also not following the Renewer narrative.
Hurricane Katrina unraveled a disastrous New Orleans for the world to see and agonize over. The widely broadcast response to the storm depicted New Orleans as poor, Black, and shockingly “third world” for a great American city. It felt like the world was finally let in on a huge secret: New Orleans (like other cities in “highly developed” nations) was not very progressive, invested in, or advanced, and structural racism still dominated life in the city. During the evacuation and the ensuing months of Katrina-related media coverage, it became clear that there was a very visible population of Disposables in New Orleans that represented a low image of the city and of the United States as a whole. Especially as interest in the destroyed city was worldwide and strong, it was evident that the city’s urban identity needed to reinvent its vision to the world and move away from this narrative of helplessness, unyielding tragedy, and overwhelming poverty.

Since Katrina, the city has purposefully moved away from this vision of Disposability to redefine itself as a great American symbol of renewal. The story of those left behind by renewal—the Disposables—is ignored and they are left in disappearing public institutions that exclude them from the rebuilding of the city. The tragedy that they experienced with Katrina has been exacerbated and continued by their exclusion from their hometown. Simultaneously, the story of those successful, hopeful, and powerful in the transitioning city becomes the dominant emblem of the city’s post-disaster status. Post-Katrina New Orleans is emerging as a deeply partitioned city, as some places and institutions are renewed and reinvented with great gusto and others are left to fester and fall in the shadows.
Images, stories, and heroes that publicly surface—or disappear—are largely defined racially by the post-Katrina ideal of the “new” New Orleans. Continuous trends of a racialized slant—seen in media and political discourse, institutional reconfiguration, and patterns of urban development—dominate the narrative circuits of emergence and disappearance. Predominantly White Renewers emerge as the pioneers of a city building itself as “better than before.” The reality of poor, Black people labeled as Disposable due to their continuance of a pre-Katrina image of failure disappears under the dominant guise of triumphant urban renewal. The overriding narrative creates spaces for some to ride on their hope and idealism, while others are denied spaces of hope and left to make sense of their hegemonic disposability.

While the realities of post-Katrina New Orleans embody this divided narrative of idealism and disposability, the vision of the future of New Orleans that is actively promoted through discursive and cultural narratives tells only one story: that of a city being built on the backs of its community’s resiliency and propelled by optimism, dedication, and a willingness to work hard to be a part of this idealized future. Despite two realities on the ground, this dominant narrative has defined the “new” New Orleans ideal. This narrative is largely rooted in the push for progressive reform that is uprooting and redesigning key institutional sectors, making New Orleans the central model for many national reform movements.

The Renower narrative of the “new” New Orleans is one of resiliency and a strong personal drive despite structural obstacles to daily life (like the government’s ineffective assistance in evacuation and recovery). Post-Katrina Renower residents no longer wait around for others to save them, but they fix things themselves. Celebrated stories are abundant of neighbors cutting the grass of abandoned neighboring lots, people forming neighborhood associations and community organizations to address their issues, people cleaning garbage in
public spaces, etc. Renewers are more likely to take things into their own hands and celebrate others who show a do-it-yourself stance on life, and disdain for those who are dependent and looking for government “hand-outs.” This is the basis of neoliberal reform. This narrative of whitewashed hard work and agency forms the hallmark of values promoted through education reform in charter schools in New Orleans.

In redefining the city’s post-Katrina urban narrative to create a dominating story of renewal, reifying a local identity is important for pushing the platform of reform. The consolidation of a post-Katrina urban identity has taken a specific path that supports the narrative of renewal. What emerges from this narrative is a city that promotes its renewed sense of purpose and local specificity, creating an image of a truly exceptional, unique American city. In general, the city’s already strong, unique local identity has been even more emphasized since Katrina. Renewers, politicians, development projects and more celebrate and elevate the local. Renewers participate in “exotic” local cultural activities, Mayor Landrieu always gives examples of the importance of local business and culture, and development projects draw on a thirst for local influence—from giving condominium buildings names like “the Preserve” and haphazardly adding New Orleans architectural details to facades, to charter schools hosting brass bands and Mardi Gras Indians at school events (all the while pushing students away from these cultural lifestyles). The local has become cherished since the storm as it seemed so threatened by Katrina, when doubts about New Orleans’ ability to come back or not were heightened. Anything and everything that celebrates the essence of New Orleans returning is heralded as signs of the city renewing and successfully rebuilding.

Yet the idea of “the local” has changed in New Orleans since Katrina, and it has adjusted to the economic trajectory of the city’s urban renewal. Many parts of the pre-Katrina local
identity are not part of the post-Katrina ideal, and these have been hegemonically eliminated from the city’s new narrative to allow for urban renewal to follow a path of development towards privatization. A focus on the local has become a significant tool for defining inclusion and exclusion into the post-Katrina dominant narrative, and has enabled the structural redefinition of the city on the ground. It is a very specific idea of what is “local” that is considered to be a part of the post-Katrina identity, and that local is promoted and celebrated while elements of the “old” New Orleans local identity are washed away.

This chapter discusses how the local identity of the city is being redefined in the push for urban renewal and reform in post-Katrina New Orleans. The previous chapters discuss the discursive and on-the-ground realities of post-Katrina New Orleans and the dominance of the Renewer narrative. Here, I will bring these back together and discuss the effect on the place identity of the divided, renewing city. After discussing the theoretical context for understanding the importance of locality and a sense of place to development and urban narratives, I will then show how the local dominates everyday life and is used in New Orleans for building a post-Katrina urban identity. Yet, that local is used to facilitate rapid reform, as change garners support if it is seen as for the good of the local. Dominating the city’s cultural and economic Renewer landscape, locality becomes a sign of inclusion in the ideal post-Katrina New Orleans and is purposefully ambiguously defined. Local washing facilitates clean, uninterrupted development, as all efforts of renewal come to be at least portrayed as embedded in the local. What is considered to be part of this local identity has shifted since Katrina to include the Renewers and to marginalize many Disposable elements of what is “authentic” New Orleans. The “new” New Orleans thus has two very different visions of what is New Orleans and who is defining it.
Theorizing a Sense of Place

Although global economic integration does open places like New Orleans up to the world and follows the much talked about world-wide trend of global-local tension (Appadurai, 1996; Stiglitz, 2002), the local still dominates everyday life. A localized sense of place continues to be a central defining feature of social interactions despite globalization and modernity (Friedland and Boden, 1994), as a retreat to the local is common when people in places are confronted by the threat of cultural globalization (Lefebvre, 2002). Many authors have written about the confrontation or involvement of globalization entailing an ensuing heightening of the local and idealization of homelands (Appadurai, 1996; Safran, 1991; etc.).

Place therefore becomes an important part of one’s identity, especially as we retreat to the local under pressures to define identities amidst what appears to be increasing cultural confrontation. Attachment to place is particularly telling (Gieryn, 2000) as people form affective bonds with their places that define their life path (Altman and Low, 1992). I agree with Keith and Pile’s (1993) call to sociologists to add place as a key factor in interpreting identities, particularly in a city with such a strong place identity like New Orleans. Attachment to places can determine people’s life choices and structure, and this is seen very heavily with Renewers and Disposables in New Orleans who often make decisions based on their cultural attachment to the city or wanting to “give back” to a destroyed city.

Place has another very important function when it comes to identity: place reinforces or builds division. As Gieryn (2000: 474) explains, “place sustains difference and hierarchy by routinizing daily rounds in ways that exclude and segregate categories of people, and by embodying in visible and tangible ways the cultural meanings variously ascribed to them.” Place can define who is included and who is excluded in the dominant urban narrative, and it then
emphasizes this division through pushing a sense of place that is specific and directional. This sense of place is defined by an idea of the local that blankets on-the-ground realities in that place.

Focusing on local culture and the raising of a collective consciousness of the experiences of rebuilding serves to build, shape, and consolidate a strong local identity. As discussed by many (Massey, 1997; Zolberg, 2006; Sassen, 1998; Federici, 2004), local identity is important particularly at times of dramatic transition when that local identity appears threatened. It creates a politically motivated assertion of insiderness (Anderson, 2006) that reinforces sentiment of outsiders versus insiders based on assumed commonality and bonds. A reactionary, reclusive “sense of place” is defined to cushion the seemingly dramatic and jolting changes associated with transition (Massey, 1984). Usually, this identity and sense of place are juxtaposed onto the bodies in that place to define an “ideal” that fits that identity (as discussed by Oza, 2006; Federici, 2004; Yuval-Davis, 1989), but one that can also be seen as embracing the future associated with the transitions.

New Orleans has certainly been experiencing changes: demographic shifts, becoming more open to global economic integration, and deep institutional changes. With these changes, an ideal body—that of the Renewers—has been used to define its future. It is promoted through a focus on the local as something purposefully ambiguous, yet resilient and hard working. This is a change from the city’s pre-Katrina urban narrative of culturally rich poverty and being a party town. Some of these parts of the old New Orleans are not desirable to development and are therefore changed or discarded. Other aspects of this image make New Orleans seem exotic and exciting and so are co-opted in the building of a post-Katrina local identity.
Heightening the Local and Consolidating a Sense of Place

Reasserting a local identity is a central part to any rebuilding process (Landry, 2006) as it is important to build a cultural basis from which to rebuild and give direction. Besides the obvious challenge of rebuilding New Orleans physically and emotionally after a significant disaster, New Orleans is also a very particular city with a unique local culture and history that makes it different from other American cities. This is directly related to a renewed hysteria over celebrating local identity, as people were concerned with Katrina that New Orleans’ cultural authenticity would be sacrificed and forgotten for financial rebuilding. In post-Katrina New Orleans, there is the need to not only reconstruct and consolidate a local identity, but that local identity is specifically unique.

New Orleans has always thrived off of its distinct character, and this has been the central feature of its tourism-focused economy and daily cultural life for decades (Gotham, 2007b). New Orleans has a unique cultural identity with completely distinct food, holidays, architecture, musical traditions, heritage, and even pronunciations that differentiate the city from the rest of the country. Many of the city’s cultural outlets focus on this conscious pride in being unique, and this strong social imaginary plays a key role in everyday life. Since the storm, there has been an intentional focus on cultural preservation (and using the language of cultural preservation, as seen in the names of such organizations as “Save our Brass,” “Sweet Home New Orleans,” and “Music Rising”), with several different new projects all over the city that focus on various services and programs to re-establish and bolster the city’s cultural outlets. Before Katrina, New Orleans’ main source of economic revenue was its tourism industry and it was focused on the promotion of the uniqueness of New Orleans’ cultural heritage, with Cajun, Creole, and Jazz cultural icons dominating the tourist scene. As one of the nation’s most cherished cities, New
Orleans emerged after Katrina with a renewed tourism industry. Tourism’s path of cultural promotion (Gotham 2007a) now focuses on the city’s cultural preservation, as if it was threatened with Katrina and the city was able to triumphantly save it.

Further, even in pre-Katrina New Orleans, there has always been a strong resistance to typical symbols of American global integration and to anything that threatened the focus on local culture and local business. Perhaps the two strongest commercial symbols of contemporary global integration in the U.S.—Starbucks and Wal-Mart—both only came to New Orleans very late compared to the rest of the country and only after much struggle. Starbucks opened in New Orleans in 1998 after years of struggling against neighborhood associations and local business associations, which protested its presence in their areas and waged an explicit battle of the local versus the global (Eggler, 2000). Wal-Mart faced a similar path, and only opened in New Orleans in 2004 after many obstacles, including the demolition of a public housing project. The company knew that they would have to do things differently in New Orleans than they did in the rest of the country in order to ensure their positive reception, and so Wal-Mart accompanied the grand opening with a New Orleans style second-line parade with local brass band musicians and local cuisine. New Orleans was one of the last big cities in the country to host these businesses, and it was a challenge for them to garner support. They only were able to do so by drawing on the local. Even after the storm this impetus for stressing the local has been relevant: in 2008, a Borders Books opened in a historic building on a central, elite location. There was one important stipulation to its opening: it must maintain the original façade of the old building, even if it appeared to be glued to the front of a globally standard Borders-style architectural design.

All of this is to say that in New Orleans, there is certainly a very strong sense of place, and this tangible social imaginary and belief in the local compels residents to defend and express...
their identification with local culture. Since the storm, this obsession with the local has been even more poignant as people have felt motivated behind their interests in cultural preservation. There was a much talked about fear that with Katrina, New Orleans would lose its cultural traditions: that musicians would not come back to the city, oysters and other seafood staples would be unable to survive from the storm, and that the city’s festivals would just not happen. While none of this occurred in reality and the city’s cultural vibrancy is certainly still intact, the fear of losing these precious urban elements propelled most to rethink their role in rebuilding New Orleans and supporting community enrichment. As the one motto of the local professional basketball team clearly articulated—’Passion, Purpose, Pride’ (The Official Website of the New Orleans Hornets)—New Orleanians are more than ever dedicated to and motivated by the local and associate this dedication with their experiences in rebuilding from the storm.

More than ever, people are proud to be living in New Orleans and relish in displaying this pride for all to see. On the individual level, this can be seen in the proliferation of Fleur-de-Lis symbols (the unofficial post-Katrina symbol of New Orleans and the official symbol of the city’s recently triumphant football team) adorning the fronts of houses, clothing, and even as a popular tattoo; the renewed support for local businesses and cultural icons; and the proliferation of songs of resiliency since Katrina with titles like “I am New Orleans” (Vince Vance), “Bent, but not Broken” (Matt Clark), and the album “Love Letter to New Orleans” (Irvin Mayfield). The latest advertising campaign for the New Orleans Hornets (the local professional basketball team) is “I’m In!” Billboards show local celebrities and less known local characters—restaurant chefs, artists and musicians, high school marching bands, etc (see Figure 8). All of these characters
are flocked by large logos that say “I’m In!” The billboards move people to feel that important people around them are committed to New Orleans, and draws on a sense of real New Orleanians pulling them into the city’s rebuilding project. Signs of pride in living in New Orleans envelop the city, and residents of all types engage in promoting their honor of being a part of a post-Katrina “new” New Orleans. Signs of locality abound.

Locally owned businesses take part in this heightened sense of locality as they hark on their local identity as a key selling point. Many businesses will use their “local” status as the pivot of their marketing plan. Rouse’s grocery store is an example of one business that does this aggressively (see Figure 8), as the business has successfully competed with many large national chains and has emerged as one of the most popular grocery stores in New Orleans with locations

Figure 9: Rouse's Grocery Story Billboard on Highway 90 in New Orleans, 2012
spread throughout the city. As one person who works in local development explained, people are “supporting their locally owned business with just this sort of missionary zeal.” Being a part of the “local” is seen to be enough reason to show solidarity, and consumers are eager to show their dedication to the local by supporting locally owned business. There is a feeling that by supporting local business, one is supporting the rebuilding of New Orleans and engaging in part of a grassroots movement to renew the city. Consciousness about being from or living in the specificity of New Orleans is high, as people use this insidership as an important motivator.

Being proud to be from New Orleans is definitely in style and actually all of my respondents—both Renewers and Disposables—eagerly said that they love the cultural identification involved in claiming New Orleans as home. That is the one thing that everyone in New Orleans finds unity around: a love for the city’s cultural uniqueness.

Yet, defining what is the “local” is tricky business and there are many questions that remain unanswered. What is a local business? Does it need to be small, based only in New Orleans, and/or support New Orleans culture? What is local culture and who can participate and celebrate it? Can new cultural artifacts that have been created post-Katrina become “local”? And perhaps the most difficult question: who is considered to be “local”? Is being local defined by your accent, history, race, or cultural habits? How long do you have to live in New Orleans to be considered “local”? The ambiguity of what is “local” in post-Katrina New Orleans makes it a very important and easily adaptable tool, depending on the beholder’s definition.

Local Washing

Everywhere you go in the city, you are bombarded with signs of locality. This stress of a place-based local identity was particularly strong right after Katrina, when ties to New Orleans
were promoted as a right to grieve and feel a part of a dispersed city. Adorning billboards, commercial goods, and bumper stickers were quotes like “I know what it means to miss New Orleans” (from a Louis Armstrong song) and “Be a New New Orleanian (wherever you are).” Carefully, it has not been defined as who was a part of pre-Katrina New Orleans or who are the native-born New Orleanians. Rather, it has been defined as something that almost anyone could grab hold of and take part in. Anyone who has ever visited New Orleans (or even read about it in books or appreciated it in a movie) can essentially miss New Orleans if that essence is being threatened. Anyone can be a New New Orleanian, even if you do not live in the city. Anyone can now be considered “local.” One does not have to be part of old money New Orleans, a Mardi Gras Indian, or a Cajun descendant; everyone is included as part of the “new” New Orleans and everyone can participate in local traditions.

This tension is frequently exhibited in what one of my respondents referred to as “local washing,” or the tendency to call things (or at least to surreptitiously portray them as being) local that may not have much local connection. Most often, this is done for promotional purposes by “an entrepreneurial class of folks” who “are just thinking about ways to sell something,” my respondent explained. In New Orleans, there are many examples of condominium buildings being developed by non-local contractors with non-local labor, while utilizing local architectural elements or names inspired by local culture to make the properties more marketable. Many people in New Orleans sell products of all kinds with fleur-de-lis symbols, jazz musicians, or symbols of Katrina on them to appeal to people looking to prove their locality through their locally symbolic products. Slogans like “Defend New Orleans” and “New Orleans: Proud to Call it Home” adorn bumper stickers, t-shirts, storefronts, and business slogans, as everyone and anyone utilize these statements as advertisements of their commitment to the city. The local is
not only for people born in the city or even who live there: anyone can promote being local by just sacrificing themselves emotionally to post-Katrina New Orleans.

The local has been utilized as a defining force of who’s “in” the project of rebuilding New Orleans. A place-based identity is widely promoted to support development while appearing sympathetic to the larger project of post-Katrina New Orleans. One can purchase a t-shirt that says a catchy, insider slogan about post-Katrina New Orleans—like “Soul is Waterproof” or “Listen to your City (adorned with trumpets)” (www.dirtycoast.com)—and feel like an “insider.” One can volunteer extra time to gut and rebuild homes with Habitat for Humanity or other local organizations and feel like they have invested enough time in the city to have the credibility of local status. One can work in a school and form amicable relationships with low-income kids and feel like they have done the work to change New Orleans for the better. Making locality open to “renewers” and others who are able to invest their time, money, and energy in post-Katrina New Orleans enables development projects to garner wide support if they strategically utilize local identity.

New Orleans’ economic landscape has deeply changed since Katrina, which has had serious effects on the city’s local identity. With the storm, the city was opened to the world: through the media, international assistance in the evacuation and rebuilding processes, and, as follows, to global economic markets. Non-local contractors flooded the city, working on both large and small-scale projects, and the city became a recipient of large quantities of outside assistance. As the storm showed a very poor, corrupt, and backwards side of New Orleans to the world, the city had the opportunity to turn over a new leaf from its heavily isolated and “backwards” pre-storm economy with all of this swift outside influence. Suddenly, the city was of great economic interest to the country—to the federal government and taxpayers, who were
investing enormous funds into the city; and to investors and developers, who saw the city’s blank slate (Klein, 2007) as an enormous opportunity for financial gain. Many people within the city were excited about this economic change, as finally the city was given some financial importance and the economy might improve. At the same time, many have feared what this economic change would do to the city’s unique cultural identity.

Thus, the city’s idea of a “local” identity has adjusted so as to accommodate both. Now, the city can change and develop while still honoring its sense of place. That sense of place is now defined by Renewers, who embody a notion of urban renewal for the improvement of “the local.” The Renewers dominate the narrative of post-Katrina New Orleans and show a face of the “new” New Orleans.

The more globally conscious we all become, facilitated by the compression of time-space through technology, the more consciousness and private life become intertwined (Lefebvre, 2002). Rather than opening society with increasing access to global phenomena, modernization has led to the re-privatization of everyday life (Harvey, 2003). This is seen very starkly in post-Katrina New Orleans. As discussed in Chapter 3, there is a movement in New Orleans towards privatization with a dramatically shifting institutional landscape. Health care, education, the housing market and recreation are all making decisive moves away from the public realm, and neighborhoods are being redeveloped to resemble a new type of divided city: parts with highly gentrified neighborhoods and other neighborhoods dominated by blight. The landscape of New Orleans has changed swiftly and rapidly since the storm, and a new focus on privatizing and re-organizing key institutions of everyday life is leaving the city more segregated than ever.

Katrina opened a space for the privatization of the city’s key institutions and the centralization of corporations as a key redevelopment force. This is seen everywhere in New

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Orleans. The great charter school experiment has left kids and schools to be managed with a business model of organization. The great public hospital that so many people in the city identify their personal histories is closed and sits abandoned, as a private hospital chain takes over all medical facilities. Neighborhoods are morphing away from large public housing masses and towards commercial corridors. A very different vision of the overall ideal of a “neighborhood” is emerging post-Katrina. Before the storm, neighborhoods were composed of a neighborhood-based school, a playground and community center, a corner store selling a mixed bag of goods, and oftentimes a public housing project as the neighborhood’s centerpiece. Public spaces have been performative spaces of important cultural artifacts like Mardi Gras Indians and Second Line parades. Post-Katrina, the neighborhood ideal has completely shifted as neighborhoods are being developed as commercial corridors, making them walkable and commercially focused. Schools are no longer neighborhood-based but are “open enrollment,” and public recreation spaces are geographically isolating. Neighborhoods feel directional and overcome by privatization, as they move towards appeasing a different post-Katrina population.

Most of these movements had actually begun before Katrina, just with much less inertia. The St. Thomas public housing project was torn down with much controversy in 2000 and replaced with River Gardens, a mixed income housing development with lower density and more appealing aesthetics. This process took extraordinary processing time to gain public and bureaucratic approval and then several years to complete—and this was just one public housing project (all of the “Big Four” housing projects have since gone through this “redesign” process). In a similar vein, the Recovery School District was formed before Katrina, but had been unable to enact wide reform until the storm. The one charter school that existed in pre-Katrina New Orleans was quickly able to expand with Katrina and charters took over all the public schools.
across the city. The city had begun talks of building a new VA hospital before the storm, but plans had made little-to-no progress. The city was interested in changing its institutions before Katrina and had slowly begun moving in that direction, just with small, slow steps of progress.

Katrina changed the change game. Suddenly, the city was wiped away and presented a “clean slate” in need of rebuilding and remodeling. This opened a space for the swift implementation of far-reaching, dramatic reform that was not possible otherwise. As people suffered through the tragedy and trauma of Katrina, many other opportunists began enacting widespread changes and taking advantage of the unstable environment. Moves to not just raze one public housing project but to demolish all of the public housing projects at once were suddenly possible. The school system underwent complete overhaul as all of the public school teachers were fired en masse after the storm and schools were transferred to charter school systems where the teachers had to fight to retain their jobs. Now, there are less than a handful of non-charter public schools left in the city, and the charter schools largely rely on non-local teachers to come and transform the city’s educational standards. Countries like Qatar stepped in to help build community health clinics, and private hospitals all over the city were bought up by Oschner (a private corporation). Oschner now has 8 hospitals and 35 health centers across the city and is by far the dominant health care provider. Widespread change took hold of New Orleans in all sectors. Katrina presented a disaster capitalist’s perfect storm opportunity to push a “shock therapy” platform of completely redesigning the landscape of New Orleans at once and with great efficiency (Klein, 2007).

Enacting widespread, dramatic change was made possible by the dramatically disruptive situation of Katrina. Everyone’s lives were in disarray, and the world seemed to be collapsing around. As most people were living in a state of transition, it was a fairly easy time to talk about
change. At the same time however, people were very concerned about the future of their city and how it would look and feel post-Katrina. Therefore, the push for change needed to take a very particular path: it needed to be framed as a locally-inspired movement for rebuilding a local community. With people being obsessed and emotionally committed to the local, the city’s rebuilding project needed to at least appear to be local as well. Otherwise, public support would have dwindled and a narrative of success and resiliency would have been impossible. New Orleans would have appeared as an American tragedy.

The “local” has been used and stressed so as to have people focused on a spirit embodied by a renewed resiliency rather than the exploitation of people at their most vulnerable. This became the dominating narrative: people celebrating their local identity and supporting each other’s return to the city, a vision of optimism in the local. Residents have wanted New Orleans to be rebuilt “better than before” (Landrieu, 2010), as it has become clear that there are hopes for post-Katrina New Orleans to be decisively different from pre-Katrina New Orleans: whiter, more successful, and rebounding from the images of the poor, devastated, unequal city that became popular during the storm. At the same time, there is a felt motivation to express and reassert the city’s uniqueness, cultural pride, and local flavor that made it such a great source of tourism and national importance before the storm. Gotham (2007a) refers to this tension as a dialectic division in the city’s key economic industry, tourism, as “tourism from above and below.” This tension in the city’s economic sector redefines the city’s identity.

Although both Renewers and Disposables are guilty of over-using signs of locality, their symbols and expressions look different. Here is an excerpt from my field notes from a baby shower of a leader in the charter school movement in New Orleans. In attendance at the party were all women, ages 26-44, 95% of whom worked in education reform in New Orleans:
We gather around the honored mother-to-be as she opens her gifts. I can’t get over how much New Orleans-themed baby stuff there is now: New Orleans themed books about king cakes, the Saints football team, the swamps, local music, etc.—all stories intended to get little children excited about their hometown; and it seemed like onesie after onesie decorated with a catchy, cute New Orleans-themed message—like “My parents found me in a king cake,” “Who dat!” (the cheer for the local football team), “Sidewalk side” (a Mardi Gras reference), etc. Everyone oohs and ahhs at each new t-shirt or book, and I hear fellow mothers say things like “Oooh, I’ve never seen that one before!” As John Boutte music plays in the background and I eat another cup of vegan gumbo (I’ve never had gumbo without meat or seafood!), I can’t stop thinking about a new generation of local New Orleanians coming into the world so differently. I am born and raised in New Orleans and was always proud to be from my city, but I never had a cool t-shirt or cute book to define that for me—I experienced local culture first hand, and that’s how I knew what I was. January 2013

Renewers have embraced local washing as a strategy for claiming their space and future in New Orleans. They love to show their “locality” by purchasing merchandise with catchy slogans to publicly assert who they are. This also shows the preciousness of locality: it’s something that everyone wants and is willing to buy into, literally. Through these signs of locality in print media and apparel, they promote a narrative of New Orleans whose cultural outputs are fun, cute, and open to appropriation by all.

At the same time, Disposables are prone to local washing as well, but it is certainly of a different nature. Disposables’ local washing is dominated by the ghosts of pre-Katrina and what’s been left behind—remembrances of the local that has been washed away. These ghosts include pride in school names and identities that no longer exist, mourning over lost loved ones in a very public way, and continued strong identification with neighborhood projects that have been demolished. Here is an illustration from my field notes:

This is the third school that I have been to today—and all very different (an elementary school, a high school, and now an alternative high school). I continue to be shocked and saddened by how the students can’t not talk about the housing projects and how intricately their identities seem to be tied to these demolished spaces. The art activity that we did in all three schools was around drawing self-portraits. Almost every single student’s drawing was dominated by ward symbols, messages about people’s memories
they carry, and slogans reifying their dedication to their past housing project—like “St Bernard 4ever.” The kids in this class right now are mostly around 13 years old, and they still talk about these housing projects as an essential part of their identity. It seems to be who they are and how they think of themselves—demolished rubble that is replaced by shiny new mixed income housing. Renewal takes its toll and leaves behind such strong memories.

May 2010

These are the rubbings that Ayala and Galletta (2012) refer to: the impression of the disappeared that contextualizes analysis of the future. Remembrances of past erasures defines the local for the dispossessed who see their New Orleans being taken from them all around and changing without them, and so their memories of a past urban narrative washes their perspective of the city’s future.

Both the Renewers and Disposables are using local washing as a strategy to claim their belonging in a changing city, although of course from different angles. The Renewer strategy of local washing is rooted in power and envy, as they purchase their way into being able to call a city as unique as New Orleans their home. Through their co-optation of the local they come to redefine it and dominate it. As they do so, they push out the Disposables, whose local is defined by the ghosts of accumulation. This Disposables use local washing to cling to a small piece of New Orleans’ new urban identity and still find a way for the city to influence their identity. Everyone grabs hold of claiming New Orleans as home.

*Effects of the new post-Katrina Local: a Cultural Shift*

The local identity that is built post-Katrina functions to build a sense of place for a transitioning city. While it is focused on celebrating and brazenly claiming locality, it is really not all-embracing of local culture. Much of New Orleans culture is perceived as not desirable for the “new” New Orleans. The vision of New Orleans as a city overcome with poverty portrayed
during the Katrina debacle is one that the city aims to move away from as it moves towards a vision of progress. However, much of New Orleans’ culture—with its focus on traditions deeply-rooted in poor communities and the domination of festivities over finances—works against this vision. Important parts of what would be considered to be “the local” in pre-Katrina New Orleans have not been lucrative nor conducive to large-scale development and have often even been obstacles or counter-productive.

There is the desire to use Katrina as the turning point in the city’s narrative of economic development: from a purely party town to a city with the perfect combination of controlled festivity and upward financial mobility. One fifty-plus year New Orleans resident elaborated:

We have to address the culture that was New Orleans. It was a party mentality. It was lazy…We embraced Mardi Gras and festivals. We didn’t create business development or that type of atmosphere.

Post-Katrina, the culture of New Orleans needed changing to create a new idea of “the local” that is attractive for people like the Renewers and still emblematic of a successful city. New Orleans still wants to be seen as a joyous city that is full of festivals, has great bars and restaurants, and has a vibrant social life for young, middle-class adults. This is seen in the vast increase in number of organized city festivals, regular art and farmer’s markets, and city-wide public events that are well publicized and sponsored. As many people are quick to note by many of my Renewer interviewees, post-Katrina has a lot more restaurants than pre-Katrina (Anderson, 2010), as this was seen as an important sector to quickly rebuild after the storm. Local culture in post-Katrina New Orleans is focused on the plethora of middle class entertainment outlets and the frequency of public entertainment like street festivals and art markets. Yet, New Orleans is slowly moving away from its narrative of wreckless alcoholism, senseless celebration, and political apathy and towards a planned, more intentional type of entertainment.
There is important tension here: Renewers love New Orleans’ culture and find it to be a big attraction to living in the city. Every single one of my Renewer participants mentioned their love of New Orleans culture and appreciation of the city’s uniqueness. They would talk about how proud they were to live somewhere so “exotic,” pride in their neighborhoods, the frequency of exciting cultural activities, and the city’s racial diversity. To the Renewers, just living in a place that felt different from the rest of the country was exciting, and a sense of exoticism made them feel like more interesting people just by living somewhere so unique.

Therefore, in order to keep attracting them to the city and keeping them engaged, elements of traditional New Orleans culture must be part of the post-Katrina ideal. Post-Katrina local culture could not just resemble a cookie cutter version of middle class culture in other parts of the U.S; it had to keep remnants of the exotic side of New Orleans because that is what Renewers love about the city. Therefore, many of the more community-based, largely African-American cultural contributions are stressed and advertised to give a sense of authenticity to the Renewers’ experiences living in New Orleans. These are often seen to be the less-tourism oriented, more genuine side of New Orleans—the part that is poor, African-American, historical, and different from everyday American life. These are the cultural traditions that have traditionally been very local-focused as part of the “insider” life of New Orleans.

For example, many of New Orleans’ most unique cultural traditions—like the Second Line and Mardi Gras Indians—are not traditional sources of financial revenue. These traditions are rooted in mysticism, free communal celebration, recognition of ancestors and oppressed histories, and reclaiming public spaces. They have been about people with strong community-based clout—yet little political leverage—coming together and showing unity around forces that enclose them. They have been widely celebrated for their perceived authentic culture.
Because these cultural traditions are considered the most authentic in New Orleans, they are still celebrated widely in post-Katrina New Orleans. More and more, the audience at these events is transitioning to include spaces for young, especially white participants—a demographic that had rarely attended such events before. Now at Second Lines, at least 20% of participants are Renewers, a group that had never been seen at these events before Katrina. They will mingle with the crowd, dance in the streets, and eat and drink street food like everyone else. They might take more pictures than other participants, but they are active and enjoying the events.

However, because of their lack of place in a narrative of economic renewal, these traditions have frequently been under attack in post-Katrina New Orleans. The police have increasingly restricted Second Line parades, demanding tight restrictions on their duration and frequency. Piggy-backing off of a murder that occurred at the first post-Katrina Second Line, the Mayor’s Office has tried to challenge the cultural tradition by drastically increasing the permit fees for holding second lines and demanding a heavy police presence at each public event. The leaders of the various Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs who host Second Lines came together and created the New Orleans Social Aid and Pleasure Club Task Force, which successfully won a lawsuit against the city and was able to maintain affordable fees. Despite the win, the Second Lines remain heavily policed events and a looming security presence sends the message very clearly that Second Lines are seen as in need of controlling. The city wants and needs these types of cultural traditions because the Renewers find them inspiring and keep them excited to be living in a unique city (Mincha, 2006). Yet, they are seen as needing severe controlling, as they really do not fit within the narrative of the “new” New Orleans’ economic development.

At the same time, the elements of these traditions that are promoted are selective. While many parts—like the beauty of the Mardi Gras Indian costumes, the Second Line music, and the
homemade food sold by community members at events—are emphasized, many others are intentionally neglected. For example, the Second Line parades are often organized to honor the death of a loved one. Paraders might plan the parade route to visit the loved one’s home or place of death, and many paraders will wear clothing that is decorated with photos of the deceased and statements of remembrance. The Second Line tradition historically comes from the Jazz Funeral tradition, where funerals would be organized as a procession with a live brass band. Therefore, the contemporary Second Lines use of public space to honor the passed is a historically contextualized tradition. These parts of Second Lines are never discussed, and the effects of the city’s violence on culture are completely neglected from popular and political discourse. Rather, there is a focus on the upbeat atmosphere produced by hundreds of people dancing in the streets to live music in the sun: a vision that many young Renewers find exciting.

The image of the “new” New Orleans has benefited on both sides. By maintaining traditions like Second Lines that are unique to the city, the “new” New Orleans appears resilient to the storm, still exotic and authentic to Renewers and tourists, and as a city that has “come back” with a development path that honors the local. Yet, by downplaying the historical context of Second Lines and increasing State control of them, they become more of a tool for governance and less as a public contestation of the state of affairs. With Second Lines, we see an example of New Orleans culture being co-opted, shaped, and used to support the narrative of urban renewal that dominates the post-Katrina ideal.

Second Lines are generally joyful and important public events for the poor, African-American population of New Orleans, and they are promoted for this cultural contribution. At a Second Line, one sees many different actors: the hosting Social Aid and Pleasure Club members, who are dressed to the nines in full colorful suits with feathers, umbrellas, and fancy matching
shoes; parading brass bands (usually 2-4 bands) with at least six musicians each; vendors selling hot sausage and pork chop sandwiches or water, beer, alcohol or cold drinks out of coolers on wheels; and lots and lots of dancing passers-by, hundreds of people who jump into the parade wherever they are and walk for the entire route, usually dancing and socializing with the joyful music. Some participants come to the parades wearing their swankiest clothes, as a Second Line is really the time to see everyone from the neighborhood. Yet even more so, many participants come wearing clothing to honor their friends and family who have fallen to violence. Shirts, hats, and jackets are adorned with collages of the deceased surrounded by messages of their “sending off.” These hidden transcripts (Scott, 1992) surface at a Second Line as it is an important space for Disposables to reclaim public spaces. A celebration of death at a joyful public event makes ignorance impossible.

At select times, violence has unfortunately occurred at Second Lines—and of course, politicians and the media jump at the chance to sensationalize these isolated incidents and associate Second Lines with violence so as to further validate regulatory forces. In 2013, an enormously tragic shooting took place on Mother’s Day at the Original 7 Second Line, an important annual cultural tradition. Two young men came to the street looking for retaliation on a particular individual, and they opened fire on the crowd, wounding (some critically) 19 by-standers. This tragedy effected an unusually large number of people. Usually, violence at Second Lines is not as widespread. In 2010, a teenage student at a non-charter public school (not the Academy) was shot and killed at a Second Line. He was killed about a half block off of the Second Line parade route, and the shooting occurred after the parade passed (although it was still reported in the Times Picayune as violence related to the parade). I had worked with this student in our Peace Clubs before, and I expected his death to have a serious impact on the other students
around the school as he was very popular and charismatic. I went to the Academy the next day, and here is an excerpt from my field notes at the school:

In the art class, six of the seven students were wearing matching black collared shirts with a fuzzy picture of a teenage boy printed gigantic[ally] on the back. Surrounding the boy’s picture were highly stylized lettering in almost cryptic-like font: initials, abbreviations, and symbols—mostly taken from texting shorthand and gang symbols—identifying the fallen boy’s social role in his neighborhood and gang. His funeral was in the afternoon and the students were planning on going (and they still managed to come to school for the morning—wow! I would have never come to school on a day like today as a teenager). We talked about it a little bit, and they kept saying things with a stoic-like toughness like “makes me think that my turn is next” or “never know if I’m even going to be here tomorrow.” There doesn’t seem to be any outlets at the schools (and I know they don’t have other outlets in their neighborhoods, except for a couple of their churches) for talking about it—the t-shirts, buttons and hats get as close to expressions of “mourning” as they show. The principal said that she wanted to do something, but didn’t know what or how besides calling the boy’s mother and crying with her over the phone. Meanwhile, I enter the makeshift teacher’s lounge, looking for the social worker to ask more, and I overheard two young, new teachers talking in the corner about the buttons and clothing. One of them says, “It’s a shame about what happened to [deceased boy’s name]. I was feeling like it was such a great second line until I got home and saw the news on TV about them killing him.”

February 2010

Despite attempts at seeing New Orleans through an optimistic lens, death and violence continue to be central qualities of local culture. Perhaps most importantly is how the young students interpret this violence: most of the students at the Academy never showed signs of sadness or mourning. They would tell me how they dealt with sadness: “push it out of mind” and think about the precarity of their own situation as they watched their backs.

At the same time, many of the Renewers constantly encounter these difficulties of violent crime with their students, and many of them talk very lovingly of the sadness they have felt over losing their students. They see murder and violent crime as the most troubling issue in New Orleans and it concerns many of them very deeply. The majority of my Renower participants discussed their concern with the city’s crime as deeply troubling and saddening, even if they did not encounter its effects in their everyday lives. Several even mentioned their concern with the
city’s violence as a reason that they would question their long-term ability to stay in New Orleans. It is a real issue in their ability to love New Orleans with open arms.

Those most directly affected by the violence, the Disposables, have a divergent stance. Although a few of them talked about violent crime around them as a problem, most of them actually denied it. We talked about this a lot in the discussion group at the Academy. They were much more likely to talk about specific violent incidents as a problem—as when a loved one was unjustly killed—rather than see violence as an important city-wide issue. They saw people around them getting killed regularly—sometimes unjustly and sometimes they thought that they “had it coming to them.” They hated losing loved ones, and hated mourning. Yet, they often denied the issue of violence as an overwhelming problem in the city. They saw it as part of the course, and as an inevitable aspect of life in an urban place. As one Academy student expressed,

I mean because everywhere you go there’s going to be murders. Everywhere you go there’s going to be rape. Everywhere you go there’s going to be killings. Everywhere you go you’re going to have racist people. Everywhere you go there’s going to have stuff just like New Orleans. New Orleans is just another place in the world, so I don’t feel like it’s a problem.

The students, almost unanimously, agreed that violence was not the most important problem in New Orleans: educational quality was the city’s biggest problem in their opinion. For them, violence was just another thing that happens in New Orleans that they cannot control. Violence was seen as a potential reality for their short life, not as an issue that they can address.

The cultural identity of post-Katrina New Orleans therefore shifts. Elements of the exotic side of New Orleans remain as part of the post-Katrina narrative, yet with much control and restriction. When this enclosure is less successful and erupts, it is discussed as a fixable problem, not as an essential disconnect between pre- and post-Katrina; between history and renewal; or the disconnect between the discourse and realities of reform.
Divergent Futures

The remnants of co-opted, overly and unfairly regulated cultural traditions combined with frequent and intense violence leaves the Disposables with little cultural freedom or creativity. As they are silenced in the narrative of the “new” New Orleans and shut out by institutional reform, they are denied what Appadurai (2004) aptly terms “the capacity to aspire.” Appadurai describes a “capacity to aspire” as a particular cultural capacity that is a key component of inclusive development:

It is in culture that ideas of the future, as much as of those about the past, are embedded and nurtured. Thus, in strengthening the capacity to aspire, conceived as a cultural capacity, especially among the poor, the future-oriented logic of development could find a natural ally, and the poor could find the resources required to contest and alter the conditions of their own poverty (59).

In culture, we find the ability to see a future, something that is largely absent for the students from the Academy for Last Resorts. A “capacity to aspire” is not evenly distributed nor evenly accessible by all: poverty coupled with exclusive development practices prohibit many from seeing their future, even if they want to be aspiring. Appadurai’s vision of productive development that inspires a “capacity to aspire” of the Disposables has not been the path of New Orleans renewal where the Disposable voice has been excluded and neglected.

In post-Katrina New Orleans, the poor are denied any cultural capacity to see a future amidst the institutions closing in around them, particularly a future reflecting their own sense of local identity (rather than a co-opted version of that identity used for city-wide economic development). Any idea of future or hope is enveloped in the death encroaching around them, as expressed consistently and strongly by the youth of the Academy. The young, mostly White and professional population of Renewers, however, has a very strong capacity to aspire in the rebuilding city: they have reified a cultural shift that transitions the city’s development. They
show their capacity to aspire constantly, as they invent new projects, work hard on institutional reform, and dedicate themselves to a city that they see as “in need.” The Disposables are consistently denied the capacity to aspire, as their cultural traditions are co-opted and regulated by outsiders and their outlets for achievement are minimized. This cultural divide, and the constant juxtaposition of it, leaves much of the city’s population in a state of perceived hopelessness and consistently oriented towards death.

In Post-Katrina New Orleans, the bifurcated narrative of urban renewal is resulting in differing definitions of the “new” New Orleans. The Disposable youth, like those at the Academy for Last Resorts, see New Orleans as a place to become perpetually disadvantaged. For them, New Orleans is a place to watch their lives pass with inaction, and become something that the ideal post-storm city wants to dispose of. Youth in the city’s last non-charter public schools feel the enclosures around them. Their educational abandonment leaves them with no future, and they are only left with the violence that dominates their lives. These Disposables are growing up to dream of their lives outside of their homes, as their hometown of New Orleans has clearly rejected their presence. They do not necessarily have direction or ideas of where to go, they just are clear that they want to leave and build their lives elsewhere. For them, post-Katrina New Orleans is a sad city with no future. They learn that they have no hope, no future, and no home as their places are disposed of.

My Renewer participants were the exact opposite: they loved living in New Orleans and saw it as a place with endless opportunities and constant enrichment. Those who have been invited to be a part of the optimism of post-Katrina New Orleans and afforded access to the positive spirit of rebuilding find New Orleans to be a place full of excitement. Being surrounded by positivity, learning experiences and exciting cultural activities makes New Orleans an
especially attractive place for young people and people willing to soak in the experiences around
them. Their optimism fills the city and forms the basis of the rebuilding project of post-Katrina
New Orleans, as this positivity is exactly what a down-trodden city was perceived to have
needed. New Orleans has emerged, thanks to the new population of Renewers who bring energy
and political clout, with a post-storm narrative that is starkly different from that broadcast during
the Katrina evacuation: one of a city that fixes things itself, works hard, is innovative, and is
dominated by young white people.

Hope in the future of New Orleans is hope in the American Dream: a story of
meritocracy, opportunity, and agency. The Renewers knowingly and unknowingly suspend this
narrative above the rebuilding project. New Orleans comes to be seen as the epitome of success:
a renewed city that is “making it” by individual and community agency, helping it to emerge
strong after the immense challenge of a disaster. Post-Katrina New Orleans becomes a very
changed city from the pre-storm environment, and New Orleans becomes seen as a city that
attracts, rather than loses, its young professional population; rebounds with resiliency and
optimism from a huge disaster, rather than drowning in political corruption and public apathy;
and is a progressive city filled with successful, engaged individuals, not the symbol of poverty
and racism displayed during Katrina.

With all of its success in triumphing against the odds of being abandoned by the
American government during the storm, post-Katrina New Orleans has tried to become a symbol
of traditional middle class values and the “American Dream” (Hochschild, 1995): the values of
hard work and individual agency. The story of post-Katrina New Orleans is becoming one of the
power of individuals (who have the right kind of advantage) to enact change if they work hard
enough. Those who are seen as not working hard and dependent on disappearing public
institutions are Disposable. This type of story is one that no longer needs a strong, public realm—as private, individual forces appear more competent and driven. There is little faith in the capability of the State. The ideal New Orleans is thus one with a weak public sector, but it seems to not matter in the dominant narrative because residents (or at least Renewer residents) are working hard to bring New Orleans back themselves.

All hope is not lost on New Orleans, a city focused on its image of resiliency. The Renewers generally have the political will, good intentions and desire for others’ to share in their hope and optimism in the future of New Orleans. After learning from many of these Renewers (and being one myself), I truly believe that they want a more democratically inclusive narrative of the future of the city—and the city tends to be very responsive to their wants. Racial allies—as long as they are self-reflective and confrontational to racial realities—can be a powerful tool (Ture and Hamilton, 1967). If expanding the capacity to aspire to the Disposables was taken seriously and put into public consciousness, the effects could be dramatic: inclusive and participatory development, decreased violent crime, and a generally happier city. Yet it cannot just be empty promises of a future: there would have to be space for them to define the city’s future as well.

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5 As several organizations, like SilenceIsViolence, Women with a Vision, and the Rethinkers do.
METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX:

Coming Home with Hope, Finding Despair

After spending the summer of 2005 researching people forcibly displaced from their homes in Colombia as part of my Master Degree research, I returned to my home in New Orleans in late August only to find myself displaced as well by Hurricane Katrina. My life, plans, priorities, and research agenda necessarily and expediently changed. Going from studying the displaced of Colombia to being displaced myself gave me new insights into understanding the experiences of internal displacement. Certain sensitivities, positionalities (Sen, 1993), and experiences are untranslatable, and trying to be conscious of these while being an insider is an extremely challenging balancing act.

The disaster labeled “Hurricane Katrina” did not end when the hurricane passed through the Gulf Coast, nor did it finish when the flood waters receded two weeks later: the disasters associated with the hurricane’s impact still continue and have become structured into life in New Orleans. There are many on-going disasters in the city: the ecological dissolution of coastal land by global warming and oil spills that surrounds the city, leaving New Orleans even more vulnerable to future storms; the rebuilding of public institutions into less-than-public and unequal entities; rampant announcements of corrupt politicians and police; opportunism sold to the global north, while so many people of New Orleans have none; funding cuts on the State-level that dissolve important support—like mental health care and arts education—for residents’ emotional stability; and the list could go on. Seeing my home and community continuously suffer with the continuance of these disasters, I quickly understood where my responsibility as a researcher lies: working to promote the effects of change on my fellow New Orleanians.
Returning Home as an Insider

After the storm, I spent more than three years with my thoughts constantly consumed by what was happening in my home while I was unhappily physically distanced from New Orleans, either as part of my own 8 month evacuation/displacement process or at graduate school. This time was filled with anxiety over my notion of home and a yearning to reestablish that home and move back to New Orleans. I finally moved back to New Orleans in early 2009 to begin field work on this dissertation. The time away from the city was important, as it helped me understand better the outsider view of what was happening in New Orleans. Perhaps even more so, I saw the flooding of the media with Katrina stories and issues as a temporary “outsider.” While it was slowly normalizing to see friends and family on CNN and other international news sources telling their “Katrina stories,” it was even stranger to return to the city after some time and see it so unrecognizable.

Besides the expected physical transformations by the storm, I was shocked to see a very different population of city actors. In the wake of the storm’s destruction, thousands of people flooded the city in the name of assistance. Members of the National Guard could be seen in most neighborhoods, patrolling the streets by foot or cruising around in war tanks. 40,000 Lutheran teenagers came to New Orleans each summer (surrounded by much promotion) to perform a range of volunteer assistance projects. Springtime was particularly popular, as colleges and universities across the country promoted an alternative spring break to New Orleans for college students wanting to give back to something meaningful rather than go to the beach. Habitat for Humanity has been in full force in New Orleans. Every time I would come home to the city during those years away, I would feel like I was in a new city with all new actors each time.
I will never forget my first time going home after the storm. It was in September, a few weeks after Katrina and two days before Hurricane Rita was projected to hit New Orleans again. We were anxious to see the status of our house (that is located in a neighborhood that took at least 8 feet of flood waters during the storm) and we wanted to try to salvage some of our possessions before Rita had a chance to wipe out anything that was left. When we pulled up to our house and saw the destroyed and browned garden, ring of watermarks that wrapped the house, and heavy building materials that were flung far from their regular place, we could not help but stare and weep at our home’s destruction. The smell of mold, rot, decayed food, and old garbage was amplified by the humidity of a New Orleans summer and it was so overwhelming that we wore masks and mud boots. It was a lot to experience at once, and having to be careful and protected when entering your own home is a very displacing and jolting feeling. After about 10 minutes of being overwhelmed with these experiences and thoughts of losing our home forever, a young White man dressed in full fatigues with a National Guard badge approached our house. With a kind, childish face (but bearing an enormous gun at his hip), he asked to see our driver’s license so as to check that the addresses matched. We needed to prove to an obvious outsider that our home—that at that moment did not resemble, smell, or feel like our home—was our place.

It was surreal to see my city, a place that had played a central part of my own formation, suddenly overwhelmed by outside assistance and influence. While most of it was well-intentioned, there was still an overwhelming tendency to overlook the capabilities and emotions of local people. The world saw post-Katrina New Orleans as a place of change and even experimentation in some cases (Mathews, 2008), not as a place worth rebuilding as it was. It seemed like this was never even an interesting option and I was deeply bothered by the lack of
mobilization—and often downright exclusion—of locals from the important rebuilding and design work of the “new” New Orleans. It seemed like everyone else talked of “change” when all I could do was recover from trauma and yearn for my same home and life to come back. Even before moving back to New Orleans, my work thus immediately had a political agenda as I explored my own feeling of wanting a new and exciting hometown that was still the city I always loved. I wondered if the people of New Orleans also envisioned this change and renewal as something desirable, and how they saw themselves fitting into this process: as active participants, bystanders, or resisters? In the end, I found all three, and usually these categories were not so distinct.

Upon returning to New Orleans, my anxieties were high and centered on entering a space that was already flooded with disasters, already overtaken by attempts to colonize and privatize, already saturated with outsiders and the commodification of local stories, and already filled with complicated social relations. With this bearing, I have found many of the ideological commitments of Participatory Action Research (PAR) and community-based research to be clearly aligned with my own research design commitments and I used these as an epistemological tool to frame my methodology throughout. With PAR, there is a stated understanding that research can and should contribute to action (Fals Borda, 1983; Reason and Bradbury, 2008). My work constantly worked in between this activist-academic divide, and I have been committed to making the research relevant to those it affects (Smith, 2006; Johns, 2008). PAR also stresses reciprocity, constant reflexivity of the researcher, and an open acknowledgment of the biases in the knowledge production process (Harding and Norgberg, 2005; Gaventa and Cornwall, 2008; Ayala, 2009). As someone who considered New Orleans home and wanted to be a Renewer in many ways, I was constantly reflexive and wanted to
integrate my identity as a local-Renewer-activist-concerned resident-lover of New Orleans into the work. This formed my epistemological stance towards research, and framed my approach and analysis of understanding the big question of the process of urban renewal of post-Katrina New Orleans.

My own Renewer-Disposable hyphen was central to my daily confrontation with the city. I was clearly part of the Renewer camp, almost by default due to my white skin and middle class background. I, too, had yearned to return to my city out of a strong guttural attraction to molding the city’s future. As I watched for several months the consistently jarring news about a place that I felt so intimately tied to, I craved to be a part of it. In many ways, I felt like I was abandoning my community and my home by being away from it for so long (like many of my Renewer participants), and those years in graduate school and in my evacuation felt like I had brashly and irresponsibly cut the umbilical cord that tied me to my roots. Each time I heard a song about New Orleans or home or anything Southern, I teared up and clutched my “Do you know what it means to miss New Orleans” bracelet. As soon as I was able to move back to New Orleans, I looked for every opportunity to be involved in issues I cared about. I clearly articulated the lifestyle choices of the Renewers that I have described and criticized in this dissertation.

At the same time, my commitments were shoved elsewhere. My home happened to be in a neighborhood that is difficult to describe as anything but Disposable. My family and I had lived for several years in the seventh ward, a poor residential neighborhood in New Orleans that has struggled to thrive since the storm. We had close relationships with most of our neighbors, and we were greeted with hugs, baked goods, and tears upon our return to the community. I was also immersed in the world of SilenceIsViolence and the Academy for Last Resorts, where my relationships with the students and teachers dominated my everyday life. My weekends and
social time were spent with people from the schools or talking about them with other Renewers. Each time I would socialize with Renewers working in important sectors of community organizing—like public housing, education and health care—I would grow impatiently frustrated with their lack of knowledge of the lives of the Disposables and their vision of New Orleans as coming back “better than before” for all.

**Generating Questions**

I spent the first six months of 2009 being completely immersed in the local scene and taking it all in from a broad perspective. At this time, there were a lot of public meetings taking place in the city: neighborhood association meetings, city Master Plan consultation meetings, Latino forum (a consortium of people working in assistance organizations that target the Latino population) meetings, race discussion meetings, School Board meetings, meetings of health care providers, new charter school community meetings, meetings about the new teaching hospital and destruction of the city’s only public hospital, conferences about racial harmony and cross-racial collaborations, anti-wage theft meetings and protests, meetings about the community centers and public recreation, etc. There were many, many meetings and I attended as many as possible. I scribbled field notes, talked to people around me at the meetings, and tried to get a sense of why there were so many meetings and what people hoped to accomplish with them.

I also attended many of the city’s extensive cultural events. I tried to attend as many Second Lines as I could, as these seemed to be key places for the emotional expression of the local African-American community. There, I took detailed ethnographic field notes describing who was in attendance, where they took place, what types of security measures were in place, and what the ambiance and feeling of the event was. I also spent many days just driving and
walking around the city. I tried to visit every neighborhood of the city, especially those that were least discussed or popular. When touring the city, I took ample photographs and notes, paying attention to the houses, businesses, new organizations and assistance resources that varied across the city.

After six months of doing this ethnographic work, I realized the need to dive deeper into specific issues. In particular, three issues stood out to me that I needed to know more about: (1) the immense increase in community organizers and non-profit organizations in New Orleans; (2) the dramatically shifting education system; and (3) the shocking frequency of violent crime. It seemed to me that these issues, all of which were consistent news headliners and dominated neighborhood discussions, were somehow co-dependent.

After the storm, the city was over-taken by young, energetic people who were looking to be a part of “creating change.” With an estimated one million volunteers entering the city for some period of time during the first two years after the storm (Lopez, 2008; Flaherty, 2010), New Orleans was suddenly a mecca for young people who could contribute to the city’s rebuilding needs and could thus feel like they were a part of something important. After years of brain drain and loss of young, educated residents in the years up to the storm, many people were excited about this new influx of people who came with the specific mission of contributing to a struggling city (Bynum, 2006). I wondered how these new, civically active residents were doing in the post-storm city, and whether their optimism in moving to the city was matched by their experiences. Further, I wondered where this optimism led them, and how politicians, the media, and urban development would react to their presence.

Besides this change in the city’s population demographics, the education system was also undergoing a dramatic shift. New Orleans became the experimental testing ground for education
reform and a full charter takeover model: the majority of the city’s public schools have been converted to public-privately funded charter schools. Most of these charter schools are filled with a dominance of non-local teachers, many of whom are young and come to the city through one of the various teacher fast-tracking programs (Teach for America, TeachNola, etc.). While the charter schools seemed to gain a lot of praise and excitement in a city that has had one of the worst educational system in the country for over a decade (Tough, 2008; Mathews, 2008) and while the students of those charter schools seemed to gain a lot of research and media attention, the few remaining non-charter schools have rarely been heard from. I wondered what this systemic transition meant for students who went to these non-charter schools, and how their lives may have been affected by a changing city. I saw the process of educational reform mirrored in other institutional sectors and wondered about trends in changes to the target population’s lives.

There was also one issue that had certainly become the centerpiece of the local media and seemed to be the gravest concern of citizens: violence, with 41% of New Orleans residents reporting that crime was their number one concern in the city (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010). The crime rate in New Orleans was soaring, and the city was quickly regaining its status as the most violent small city in the country and the incarceration capital of the world (Safe Streets Strong Communities, 2006). The local jail was being renovated and vastly expanded, and while available hospital beds for mental health patients in New Orleans had been almost completely cut by State funding (WDSU, 2009), available beds in the local jail were being quadrupled in number (Safe Streets Strong Communities, 2006). Violent crime is certainly a hot topic in New Orleans, and considering violence as an emotional reaction to changing structures was an important element of this project. I needed to understand these issues and their intersection better and found a very suitable solution.
Working through Life and Death

In the summer of 2009, I began working formally with a highly recognized but very small local anti-violence non-profit non-governmental organization called SilenceIsViolence. The mission of SilenceIsViolence, as stated on their website (www.silenceisviolence.org), is:

To call upon both citizens and public officials to achieve a safe New Orleans across all communities. We engage youth in positive expression and actions to counter the culture of violence. We demand respect for every life, and justice for every citizen in our city.

SilenceIsViolence began in 2006 when two local prominent artists who were highly involved community members, Dinneral Shavers and Helen Hill, were brutally murdered in separate incidents. The lack of an official response infuriated friends and family members, so they organized a march on city hall to demand more public action on the issue of violent crime. What was originally expected to be a small protest turned into a large-scale city-wide march with over 5,000 people in attendance. From there, the need for further action was clear and the organization officially formed.

Small-scale and very politically progressive, SilenceIsViolence does enormous work on an extremely small budget. They are highly visible in the city, have frequent appearances in the news media and have gotten much political attention (especially by the mayor’s office, the Department of Justice, the District Attorney, and the New Orleans Police Department). This political attention is largely due to the clout they have built in the community since the march and their constant public vigilance of public figures, either through newspaper editorials, constant emails, or phone calls. The group has built a strong reputation for honest, grassroots work that focuses on the needs of the community members while ensuring that public officials are responsible for public safety.
The organization has four key programs. Their Victims Allies Project provides victim services, rights education, and grief counseling to family members of victims of homicide. In formal collaboration with the New Orleans Police Department, staff accompanies police to a victim’s home after a homicide to help the family with grief counseling and navigate service access. In this role, Victim Allies Project staff are also filling a key witness role to law enforcement. The organization also hosts monthly City Peace Walks that are Second Lines to a recent victims’ home. Participants walk and dance through a neighborhood where crime has recently occurred, reclaiming the streets for safety and finishing at the victims’ home where they join in prayer and remembrance. Family members often speak in the prayer, expressing and emoting their thoughts in an important public forum. There are also Youth Music Clinics that are held in a neighborhood center and taught by a local celebrity band. The clinics are free to participants and have been very successful at building social capital in the area. The head music teacher, Shamarr Allen, was a close friend of Dinneral Shaver’s and frequently sported his favorite t-shirt, “My trumpet is my weapon.”

I was hired at SilenceIsViolence as their Director of Youth Programs. My primary job was to design, launch, and provide on-going support and management to the organization’s fourth program: in-school Peace Clubs. These Peace Clubs were to be held at the most struggling schools in the city (and thus by default, schools in the Recovery School District) and as part of students’ daily curriculum. They are art classes (with art being loosely defined) taught by professional artists from the community who also have had experiences with violence themselves. The clubs are intended to create safe spaces where the students can explore and express themselves through art and have open discussions about violence in their lives. Usually the schools would recommend students to join the Peace Clubs, although we kept them open to
invitation to any student who was interested, and a teacher and/or social worker from the school was always in arms reach. The Peace Clubs would meet regularly throughout the school year, and I was present at all of them to help the artists’ learn about teaching and to build relationships with the schools and students.

Choosing the schools to work in was tricky, as many schools in New Orleans were in great need of anti-violence and extra-curricular programming after recent State-level budget cuts (LA Times, 2009)—and many schools in the city do not have any arts programs at all. Our programs were even more attractive because they were offered at no cost to the schools and students. After speaking with the Deputy Superintendent of the Recovery School District and visiting several schools, we decided to begin the programs in 5 schools: 2 regular non-charter public schools, both of which have long cultural histories in the city and recent notoriety for high violent activity, and 3 alternative public schools. The programs grew each subsequent semester, reaching out to another school and/or increasing the number of clubs and frequency of their meetings at the current schools. We began with 5 clubs total in 5 schools, yet by the time I finished working with SilenceisViolence there were 9 clubs per semester and I had hosted clubs in 9 different school across the city. This meant that I was spending a lot of time in many struggling schools in New Orleans on a daily basis.

The alternative schools—or “multiple pathways” schools—were particularly important places for our work. These were schools for students who have been expelled from their regular schools either for failing grades, minor infractions (like consistent dress code violations or tardiness), mid-level behavior issues (especially fights or disrespecting school officials), or serious behavioral infractions (like bringing a weapon to school, hitting a teacher, etc.). Students also came to the alternative schools if they were over-age for their academic grade (like 17 year
olds in 8th grade) for whatever reason (hurricane displacement, consistent failing, taking time off of school to work, etc.) and needed to be fast-tracked through school. They were also places for students who were currently undergoing criminal cases, on probation, recently out of the juvenile detention center (ironically and polemically called the “Youth Study Center”), or involved in rehabilitation or anger management programs with the Department of Justice. These schools had very mixed populations, with students attending under many different motivations: some coming to school in hopes of getting an education, some feeling tossed around the school system and only coming under family or State obligations, and some coming as a mandated alternative to prison.

The student population was very transitory at the alternative schools. Students were constantly added to the school roster as they were expelled from their schools, particularly after October 1 when Charter schools received their funding. Other students were able to transition out once they achieved certain minimum level requirements. Students could “do their time” and with “good behavior” they could get out and be integrated again into regular schools. It is understandable how students felt like it was a jail with so many parallels in the process. With the fluctuating enrollment and low attendance rates, it was really difficult for teachers to offer any type of sequential curriculum as they were continuously having to start their lessons over to adapt to the changing student attendance. Students’ learning was generally stagnant, and teachers and students would get quickly frustrated from the constant adjusting.

This certainly had an immense effect on the daily operations of the school, and calling these schools “unstable” would be a gross understatement. There was great volatility in the day-to-day of the school: constant fights between students, causing the school to go on “lock down” and thus prohibiting classes to continue; teachers getting tired and either not showing up for
work or leaving mid-day without notice; basic resources (books, chalk, copy paper, lightbulbs, etc.) being absent or not functioning; random body searches of students by security guards, often in the middle of class time; students not showing up for class or avoiding certain teachers, spending their time mulling around in the hallways, bathrooms and outdoor areas; ugly, loud arguments between students (or sometimes teachers) and the behavior specialists; etc.

Beyond the instability of daily operations, the system and the schools’ plans for sustainability were themselves uncertain. Each year, the district would change the design of the alternative schools. From the 2009-2010 school year, there were four alternative schools in New Orleans. These four were condensed into two schools for the 2010-2011 school year. For the 2011-2012 school year, these two public alternative schools were further reduced to one, and three alternative charter schools opened. At the time of this writing, these alternative charter schools seem unstable and unsuccessful, as rumors circulate around the city about their potential closure and condensation. Further, the administrations of the schools changed frequently, often mid-year, and sometimes the school’s physical location would change mid-year as well. Students are shifted around continuously, leaving their relationships, growth, and learning completely volatile. This was generally reflected in their behaviors and attitudes towards education. Interestingly, these schools received very little public attention and many people involved in education in New Orleans were oblivious about the alternative schools’ status, functioning, and issues. The alternative schools felt hidden and purposefully neglected.

For two years, I spent a lot of time at these schools. As I was the bridge in SilenceIsViolence’s programs for the various artists’ classes and across different schools, I became a regular part of many of these schools’ structures and operations. I formed close relationships with many of the teachers, janitors, behavior specialists, counselors, social workers,
secretaries, and head administrators at all of the schools. People became very accustomed to seeing me in the hallways, offices, or classrooms and kept me informed of the school’s operations. They appreciated SilenceIsViolence’s work in the schools under my leadership and understood that I was a caring, invested individual who was trying to understand these issues in a larger context. Many school administrators, teachers, and principals confided in me frequently and would ask me questions about their students, trying to understand better how to work with them and understand their problems. I had very strong relationships with the principals of the schools, who constantly impressed me with their dedication, intellect, and ability to love the students no matter how difficult their days were—and they were difficult. I was sometimes invited to staff meetings and celebrations (like Teacher Appreciation Day), and was rarely treated as a mere guest.

I was especially respected and valued at the schools for my strong relationships with the students. I got to know hundreds of students very well, and would talk to them regularly about their concerns, dreams, losses, and frustrations. While students were in our classroom, we would talk about New Orleans and where we all fit in. The students would talk to me about their families, home life and things they saw happening in their neighborhoods. They would frequently explain to me how they saw things, and I was often (and embarrassingly) shocked by the profundity of their insightfulness. We would talk about violence, and how they were tired of being labeled as the violators. Those who had children loved to talk to me about parenting, as sometimes I would bring my own baby to school with me strapped to my body in a sling.

Many of the students who didn’t know me at the school would approach me: early in the semester, I would frequently be asked if I was an anger management specialist or therapist for “bad children,” them assuming that students were forced or assigned to “work with me.” The
students who knew me would quickly negate this, defend me and explain to their friends my role. As the semester would progress, countless students would approach me for help, pleading to join the art classes. I would let in as many as we could, and promised those that we couldn’t to reserve a space for them next semester. I had very strong relationships with most of the students, and they appreciated having someone unofficial and unassuming to talk to. Generally, most of them just wanted someone to listen to how they struggled to bridge their home and school lives and to feel cared for, and this was something I could provide. It was easier for someone like me to fill this role as I did not officially hold a position of power over them: I did not give them grades, have any input into their report cards or ability to transition out of the alternative schools, and could not give them detention or more serious punishment consequences (suspension or expulsion).

I also had a very interesting relationship with the teachers. Some teachers questioned our work in the beginning, particularly as it entailed extra “babysitting” on their part as they were required to supervise our art classes and handle any serious student behavior issues. Quickly, they became some of our greatest allies. They saw our long-term commitment and willingness to help out with tough, ignored issues in the school that were in great need of addressing. They were also grateful to better understand a side of their students that they rarely had the opportunity to address in their courses: they wanted to know more about students’ obstacles and difficult emotional situations, but did not have the appropriate environment or resources to do so in regular class.

For me, I got to see the greater landscape of teachers in the city and understand better what kinds of teachers were teaching and in which kinds of schools. I was shocked at the number of first-time, Teach For America teachers placed in the alternative schools like the Academy for
Last Resorts, and the minimal support they were given for dealing with this kind of difficult situation. There was also a very apparent juxtaposition of young new teachers (like those of Teach for America) with long-time native-born teachers who had survived the storm and the school system’s purge. I learned a lot from their interactions and opinions of one another.

Besides my job’s positioning me to become intimately familiar with the students and schools, there was another important connection: by association, I became part of the community organizing networks in New Orleans, and through my work I came to know and understand the local artist population. I was excited, and perhaps sometimes annoyed, by how much community organizing was going on in New Orleans. People from all walks of life would contact me or be excited to connect with our organization or hear about our programs. Most of these community organizers were quite young, although there was a gamut. People seemed interested in resolving the wrongs of Katrina, and understanding that formal (especially civic) institutions were ineffective and unwilling to address the serious issues arising in New Orleans. Working with SilenceIsViolence gave me frequent contact with other community organizers and greater insights into the hope, optimism, and valiance of the struggle that so many of them selflessly engaged in.

I also spent a lot of time with artists, particularly as we collaborated with the Peace Clubs, many of whom had moved to New Orleans after Katrina. These artists were excited to understand the city better, and I was bombarded with artists who were interested in participating in our programs. They searched for inspiration and a way to share their gift and give back. Most of these artists were tremendous at what they did, and I loved watching them form important relationships with the students, talking about them for hours on end during our debriefing sessions after class each day.
This time with SilenceIsViolence was seminal to my work, and helped me truly understand some of the city’s issues framed from the inside. I feel extremely grateful to all those at SilenceIsViolence, and encouraged by their ability to continue struggling and bringing attention to those who most need it.

*Academic and Activist Research*

I was invited to join SilenceIsViolence’s small staff because of my past community organizing and youth education work, but also because of my Sociology background and knowledge of research methods. The Executive Director understood well that in order to start a new program, research would be a necessary skill: for proving our program’s worth to the school district and funders, but also for thinking about a continuous assessment and refinement of the projects. We had a clear understanding that I was working on SilenceIsViolence’s research and programs and my own academic work simultaneously, and that both would be available to use by the organization. With the support of the school district and the principals, and then with the subsequent formalized support of the parents and students, I conducted surveys with all of our students at all of our schools for SilenceIsViolence with a range of questions like “How do you feel about violence in your neighborhood,” “Do you like living in New Orleans,” and “What do you expect to be doing in 10 years.” The responses were chilling and painted a portrait of the city’s youth as traumatized and feeling under siege. As the survey was conducted with students from across our schools’ programs (a wide age range of 2nd graders to overage 12th graders), seeing an overall statistic of 83.0% of these students knowing someone who has died because of violence (with 59.8% losing a family member and 52.7% losing a close friend) sent a very clear message to our organization: a focus on understanding violence from the perspective of the youth.
of New Orleans is essential. With well over half of the students in these five most struggling schools having dealt with the heavy loss of a family member by violence, the weight they carried with them daily at school and in their neighborhoods was tremendous.

I spent countless hours at these schools over the two years and took constant ethnographic notes of the incidences, circumstances, and environments of the students, teachers, and staff. Organizationally, we wanted to know how our work could best suit the students’ needs, whether teachers and staff were interested and supportive of the work, and why there is so much street violence coming out of and affecting young, in-school students. There has been tremendous violence and victimization of teenage students in New Orleans. For example, in a period of four weeks in early 2011, I personally knew 7 teenage students from these schools who were killed because of violent crime. This particular, although not unheard of, bloody month shook many at the schools and created a cloud of sadness over much of their daily operations. Students would wear buttons and t-shirts to school that honored the fallen with their photos and nicknames. Much of the students’ art in the Peace Clubs focused on their fallen friends. There was much grieving going on, then and always, matched by little to no counseling.

While all of our schools were important and in need of attention, I decided to focus my research work on the Academy for Last Resorts (a pseudonym). This is an alternative school that has changed missions three times in a mere two years: it went from being a school for overage 8th graders only to a discipline-focused, military-type school for all middle schoolers run by an outside contracted management company to finally an alternative middle and high school. It also had changed administrations three times over these same two years, and changed campuses (to a very different geographic location in the city) once mid-semester due to vandalism. Many of the young people who were killed in that violent month in 2011 (and year-round) came from this
school or had been students of this school at some time. It was also a school that was planning to close forever after the spring semester of 2011, and so it seemed like a very important place to engage students and staff and help them through these further transitions.

In reaction and in hopes of action, I decided to form a discussion group at the school in the spring of 2011, a type of non-art related Peace Club. The principal, administrators, and teachers were all very supportive, and I am very grateful for this trust and heeded to the responsibility. I met with 8 students at least 2-3 times a week for about three months. The students were all recommended to me by the school’s counselor as students who might be interested in joining such a group to talk critically about violence. The original recommendation list was 12 students. I approached each student individually from that original list and talked to them about the idea to see if they were interested. While two students were interested but rarely attended school thereafter (one went to prison for grand theft), we eventually had eight students who regularly attended school and wanted to join. Four students who I originally invited were not interested in joining, and one student who was not on the original recommendation list overhead the idea and asked if she could join. At first, some of these students joined because they were curious: they didn’t know me yet but had seen me at school, and were surprised that an adult wanted to talk to them about violence. One student, Darnell, actually began an entire 10 minute one-on-one debate with me when I was inviting him to the group, him claiming that it is impossible to end violence in New Orleans but his interest sparked at the chance to continue talking about it. Several of the students joined the group because they knew (and presumably liked) me and trusted that I would offer them something worthwhile. A couple of the students openly confessed to joining just to get out of going to class, which they felt was usually a waste of their time anyways.
Regardless of their initial motivation, the eight of us met regularly. We started meeting once a week, but after the first session, the students requested more frequent meetings. At the first meeting, I asked the questions and guided the conversation; thereafter, a different student would do so at each meeting. Discussion topics ranged: while violence was a frequent one, we also consistently talked about their perspectives about their school and their experiences with Katrina quite a bit, and with less frequency we talked about drugs, recreation, race, sexuality, music, and whatever else they felt like talking about on any given day. I learned an immense amount from these students, and always appreciated their perspectives. We had very good relationships, and I continue to be in touch with them.

I also conducted one-on-one interviews with all of these students to get more in-depth understanding of stories that may have briefly surfaced during our group discussions. The interviews took place at the school, and I think in each interview both of us generally appreciated the individual time together. I found that my relationships with all of the students was strengthened after the interviews, as if they appreciated someone at the school knowing more about their stories in detail. I appreciated hearing them so as to better understand the larger picture of Disposability in New Orleans.

I also interviewed some teachers and staff members at the school. These interviews were particularly interesting due to their timing: most of these interviews took place during the last month of school in the school year. At this time, everyone was well aware of the Academy’s closing and all teachers, staff, and administrators had received pink slips. While schooling was never very formal nor effective at the school in general, at this time there was a heightened nonchalance and apathy at the school on the part of the students and staff. Teachers had grown frustrated, tired, and felt unappreciated, and many had given up on attempting to teach
altogether. Understanding their views on education in New Orleans at this time was partially overshadowed by their frustrations with the system, but I feel like this was also a key time for understanding these important transitions.

While being immersed in the state of education, I still spent a lot of time trying to understand the larger context of urban renewal in New Orleans. I continued to attend meetings, visited key institutions, investigated key stories in the news, and especially tried to understand the large population of people working to “do good” in New Orleans. I emotionally struggled being a part of two worlds—the community organizers and young professionals who purposively engaged in struggles, and the young students at the Academy and other schools who were being indirectly displaced by them and their work. I tried to work this divide of my own conscientious intentions as much as possible (Fine, 1998). I found that I was frequently straddling these two worlds and trying to actively bridge them together, at least discursively. I enjoyed engaging others, especially other professionals and organizers, in understanding the truth behind the education system and the alternative schools in New Orleans. At the same time, I constantly discussed with the students other non-education large issues in the city (like the building of the new jail, the closing of the public hospital, and political elections), invited them to political and cultural events, and frequently discussed with them current events in the news. As much as I could tolerate, I tried to bring the two worlds to each other, and have them engage with and raise consciousness about the Other.

In addition to the interviews with the young students, I also interviewed many community organizers, artists, and professionals working in key sectors (commercial real estate, medicine, law, cultural arts, recreation). These interviews were really important for understanding the divided vision of the current state of New Orleans. While I was exposed daily to the destructive
consequences of the “shocks” initiated by Katrina at the schools and felt like drowning in the sadness of the seemingly constant crime, many people in the city were hopeful about its future and valued the beauty of the city’s assets. While sometimes I would perceive these with an arguably overly-critical eye, it was also good for my mental contextualization of the city’s issues and for seeing how good intentions can be mixed with opportunism.

Together, these years gave me great understanding of the effects of rebuilding rhetoric and action on individuals. The stories in this dissertation illuminate a very divisive process with alternative visions of the future of New Orleans. These visions are not merely rhetoric and dreams, but play a central role in determining development patterns, political direction, and the redefining of a city to uplift some and exclude others, all in the name of “renewal.”

**Justifiability**

About a year after I finished my work with SilenceisViolence, I began working with a new elementary charter school in New Orleans. In this school, I was part of the school’s leadership team and had upper-level administrative responsibilities while also being involved in all-school programming. This enabled me to spend a lot of time in all classrooms in the school and remain easily engaged in all of the school’s activities. Being a part of the small leadership team also made me privy to big picture discussions about the school and its direction with the principal and other upper-level administrators. The school was definitely messaged as a Renewer school: a school that was saving one of the poorest communities in New Orleans (and the nation); had extremely hard-working, savvy teachers who worked ten hour plus workdays; was going to send all of its students to college; and had an enormous representation of first or second-year teachers from programs like Teach for America.
Working in this school as I completed the final stages of writing my dissertation gave me an enormous motivation and further sense of justification of my immediate findings. Every day, I heard stories of Renewer teachers who were looking to do good, be a part of change, and see their mark on a place in need like New Orleans. All of the teachers in the school were very young, and the vast majority were new to New Orleans and from places in the Midwest. They were largely oblivious to the real issues of poverty in New Orleans and had little sympathy or understanding for most of the students’ families. They talked all the time about students making good choices for themselves and creating their own path.

Even in this Renewer school, most students felt very Disposable most of the time. Students had a hard time connecting with teachers and an often impossible time believing in their messages of hard work and college. Students and their families had already gone through returning to New Orleans and being displaced by the disappearance of area public housing and their schools closing down. Trust was really low in the school and the teachers, and the difference between these two camps and their vision of their future in New Orleans was wildly different. The bifurcated narratives of post-Katrina New Orleans that I found at the Academy for Last Resorts was also reflected in a high-performing charter school that is promoted as exemplar of the “new” New Orleans.

_A Divided Self: A Note on “Insidership”_

Most researchers strive to gain entry into communities, and this challenge of gaining “insider” status is one that they see as determining the quality and depth of their data. I have the advantage, and heavy challenge, of being a fairly effortless “insider” in my research project in many ways due to my community origins. Not only am I born and raised in New Orleans and
experienced Hurricane Katrina, but I have also been part of one of the few non-black households in a predominantly African-American neighborhood, a community that took at least eight feet of water from the hurricane. I am deeply familiar with local customs and culture, which most locals strongly value in New Orleans and utilize as a basis for camaraderie. Therefore, “gaining entry” is much less of a concern: I was already well connected, and knew how to maneuver within the community to build social relations.

Understanding the complexities of my own stance in this project has been essential in trying to predict the complexities of the stances of my participants in order to remain sensitive to their struggles with rebuilding their lives, their memories and their environment. I, like most other residents, deal constantly with many hyphenated selves (Fine, 1998) in New Orleans. Understanding one’s position in a dramatically transitioning city is complicated, and it’s easy to have divisive stances. These include feeling like a victim (implying entitlement) and a survivor (implying empowerment) simultaneously; being a local (implying loyalty) while living outside of the city (implying abandonment) for some time; and experiencing the difficulties of the disaster-related issues (implying individual hardship) while trying to understand the larger contexts of these issues (implying social hardship). Many of these issues are being dealt with by people throughout New Orleans, as they negotiate and make sense of their own experiences and lives in a struggling environment.

While of course, a non-New Orleanian “outsider” could (and many do) essentially do great research and activist work in post-Katrina New Orleans, their burdens are heavier and quite divergent from my own. As understanding local culture is so essential to New Orleanians, “outsider” researchers must first spend time understanding the importance of local culture, as well as trying to grasp the complexity of issues that locals deal with surrounding their
experiences with Hurricane Katrina. This is a thorny route towards “gaining entry,” particularly if one’s research goal is focused beyond local culture and Katrina experiences. These are very different “outsider” issues from the ones I faced.

Being an “insider” and working within my own community is also very complicated. Besides the fact that I have my own preconceptions and expectations due to my intimate knowledge of this community, I expect that my community has a similar disposition towards me and this could greatly influence all conversations and research. It can be more difficult to understand with some degree of objectivity a community that one is so embedded within, thus any claims to “objectivity” must certainly be conditioned here (or with all research, see Tuck and Fine, 2007).

Yet being an “insider” also has given me a particularly poignant motivation within my research. As someone who calls New Orleans home and was there for the storm, it was (and continues to be) surreal seeing my city and community as the center of the world’s attention. Seeing the city inundated with researchers, NGOs, and investors is a strange experience. There has been a strong tendency for various actors to commodify the “Katrina story,” looking to use it for reaching other, usually financial or professional, ends. Residents sometimes benefit from this commodification, but generally do not at least feel that they do. For a population who has always prided itself on local businesses and a distinct local culture, the presence of “outsiders” is definitely being felt. And as the city struggles to recover, especially emotionally and spiritually, these feelings are central. Most people in the city are still coming to terms with their own traumatic experiences, and have not been afforded the opportunity to do so without seeing them first broadcast in the national media. I profoundly understand what Eve Tuck (2007) calls the
“sacredness of stories,” and have integrated my own understanding of this sacredness in each interview and conversation.

Throughout the dissertation, I discuss the emergence of a divided narrative of post-Katrina New Orleans between experiences of a sense of renewal driven by the Renewers—a mostly young, idealistic population who are working to rebuild New Orleans—and the Disposables—those left behind by institutional shifts, usually people who are poor, African-American and with long histories of historical marginalization. While through my work with SilenceIsViolence I gained great insight into the lives and affects of the Disposables, I am myself a Renewer and operate most frequently in those circles. This is another source of “insidership” for me, yet one that is even trickier: while I am a proud Renewer, I am disgusted by the explicit exclusion that this process entails for so many Disposables and am terrified by the implications for their lives. I have constantly struggled with how to make amends with this discomfort or better yet, how to convert it into constructive action.

All of my sources of “insider” status are a real source of anxiety, and this anxiety is as much rooted in my expectations of the advantages that insidership gives me as in its challenges. My burden lies in my personal commitments to my community: about hearing people’s hopes, needs, and frustrations without ignoring these for the sake of progress; about understanding that I am an “insider” but certainly have my clear “outsider” characteristics; about creating a participatory space, while allowing people’s suffering (including my own) to surface. This is a heavy load to carry, and guided my insights into understanding the re-segregation of my city and the false premises of recovery. While my research has been comprehensive and inquiry-focused, I make no claim to neutrality and have made my stance transparent throughout the process. With this in mind, I hope that this dissertation is used at service to people like SilenceIsViolence and
others hoping to bridge the divide, so that the future of New Orleans can actually be realized as “better than the before.”
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