

THE BLESSED PLACEMAKERS:  
VIOLENT CRIME, MORAL TRANSFORMATION, AND URBAN  
REDEVELOPMENT IN POST-KATRINA NEW ORLEANS

by

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DEDICATION

For Evan

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION .....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iii
LIST OF MAPS .....	xiii
LIST OF IMAGES.....	xiv
INTRODUCTION .....	1
Being the Sign.....	1
Initial Inspiration .....	4
Local Perspectives .....	5
A Sense of Place: The Love and Loss of New Orleans .....	6
Underlying Insecurity .....	8
Urban Violence: At the Front Door or Just Down the Street .....	11
Suffering, Healing, and Recovery: From the Inside Out, From the Bottom Up ...	13
Moral and Religious Groundings .....	16
Towards a Theory of Moral Peacemaking and Placemaking .....	18
Vulnerability and the Dwelling Perspective .....	21
What Disasters Do .....	24
Experience and Response to Urban Violence: Processes of Dislocation and Relocation .....	28
A People and Place on the Edge .....	31
Understanding Peacemaking and Placemaking .....	36
The Moral, Ethical, and Religious Groundings of Peacemakers and Placemakers .....	39
Expanding the Study of Lived Religion .....	39
Moral and Religious Communities: Frameworks, Organization, and Movement .....	41
Ethnographies of Morality and ‘Wisdom’ Set in Places.....	45
Research Methodology .....	49
Outline of Chapters .....	57
CHAPTER 1: SITE AND SITUATION .....	61
A Gift of the River .....	61
Deltaic Imaginings and Experience .....	63
The Urban Delta .....	66
People of the Delta: Past and Present .....	71

Sensing Vulnerability .....	77
Hurricane Katrina: Ongoing Impact and Recovery .....	79
New Neighborhood Landscapes .....	83
Urban Violence: Before and After the Storm .....	87
Finding Peace by Faith .....	93
Beginning Fieldwork .....	100
CHAPTER 2: PRAYING A CITY PLEASING TO GOD: THE OUR LADY OF PROMPT SUCCOR PEACE PRAYER GROUP .....	108
Meeting the Ursulines and Our Lady .....	109
A Catholic Town .....	111
Quick Help and Divine Intervention .....	113
In Search of the Shrine .....	115
Uptown New Orleans .....	117
The Shrine as Sanctuary .....	119
Sisters' Stories .....	123
Simple Religious Communication .....	128
The Petition Box .....	131
"But God is Good": Thais' Story .....	136
Praying for Peace .....	140
Prayer as Action .....	147
Moral and Religious Conversion .....	148
Peace Prayers, Not Politics .....	151
An Uncertain Future .....	152
CHAPTER 3: "MAKE US INTO BETTER METAL": VODOU, ANTICRIME CEREMONIES, AND COMMUNITY HEALING AT LA SOURCE ANCIENNE SOSYETE OUNFO .....	155
From Our Lady to Ezili Danto .....	156
Hurricane Ceremony XI .....	158
New Orleans Voodoo in Historical Perspective .....	167
The Contemporary New Orleans Voodoo Community .....	172
La Source Ancienne Sosyete Ounfo .....	178
At Home in the Bywater .....	181
Serving the <i>Lwa</i> .....	184
Violent Crime and Urban Vodou .....	187
Anticrime Ceremonies .....	189
Calling on Ogou .....	191
On Possession .....	195
Restoring Balance and Order .....	199
Wavering Support and Shifting Focus .....	203
Hope, Heritage, and the Healing Center .....	207
Ancestry and Authenticity .....	208
Voodoo and a New African Consciousness .....	211
CHAPTER 4: FROM KILLING TO CARING: THE NEW HOPE BAPTIST	

CHURCH .....	219
The Vigil .....	220
Black Baptists in New Orleans.....	230
New Hope in Central City.....	233
Anti Violence Campaigns and Grief Recovery .....	239
Thou Shalt <u>Not</u> Kill .....	239
After the Storm: ENOUGH .....	244
Mothers Hurting Because of Violence .....	252
Support Group Session, July 3, 2009 .....	257
Yes We Care .....	270
CHAPTER 5: MINISTERING THE MURDER BOARD: ST. ANNA’S EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND THE MINISTRY FOR VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE .....	277
The Murder Board .....	278
The Church on Esplanade .....	283
On the Edge in the Tremé .....	285
Katrina’s Local Impact: “Like Reconstruction All Over Again” .....	290
A House for All Nations .....	292
Ministries and Programs after the Storm .....	293
The Ministry for Victims of Violence .....	294
Rough Beginnings .....	294
Katrina as Opportunity? .....	295
SilenceIsViolence and the March on City Hall .....	296
Restoring Humanity .....	298
The Rose Ministry .....	299
Naming and Honoring .....	303
A Difficult Process .....	313
Social Justice, Transformation, and the Model of Christ .....	317
Entering the Mission Field .....	320
A Public Memorial for Victims of Violence .....	321
Community Outreach and Youth Ministry .....	322
Attending to the Perpetrators: A Response to Capital Punishment .....	323
A Shared Mission?: The Participation and Non-Participation of Fellow Churches .....	324
CONCLUSION: THE BLESSED PLACEMAKERS .....	327
“Making a World with the Right to Stay”: The Beatitudes of Peacemaking and Placemaking.....	327
Summary of Key Findings .....	329
The Urban Delta as a Liminal Space and Experience .....	333
‘Edge-People’ .....	334
Ways of Peacemaking and Placemaking .....	336
Embodied Experience, Embedded in Place .....	336
Sources of Infinite Knowledge or ‘Wisdom’: Telling Moral and Religious Stories .....	340
The Everyday Access and Application of ‘Wisdom’: Worship, Ceremony	

and Ritual .....	342
The Formation and Growth of Moral and Religious Communities .....	344
Morality, Civic Religion, and Urban Reform .....	347
Obstacles and Challenges .....	350
Issues of ‘Race,’ Ethnicity, and Class.....	352
Measures of Success .....	355
Broad Impact and Contributions .....	358
Remaining Questions and Future Research .....	361
Leaving NOLA .....	364
On Becoming an ‘Edge-Person’: Musings on “Death Work” and Ethnography .....	366
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>	<b>370</b>

## LIST OF MAPS

Map 1. City of New Orleans with Path and Course of Mississippi River. ....	41
Map 2. Louisiana “Bird Foot Delta.” .....	70
Map 3. Neighborhoods in Orleans Parish. ....	77
Map 4. New Orleans Elevation by Neighborhoods. ....	78
Map 5. Hurricane Katrina Flood Extent, Orleans Parish. ....	80
Map 6. Neighborhood Snapshot, Uptown. ....	108
Map 7. Location of Ursuline Campus, Uptown. ....	116
Map 8. Neighborhood Snapshot, Bywater. ....	155
Map 9. Neighborhood Snapshot, Central City. ....	219
Map 10. Location of Monument to Martin Luther King Jr., in relation to New Hope Baptist Church. ....	226
Map 11. Neighborhood Snapshot, the Tremé. ....	277
Map 12. Location of St. Anna’s Episcopal Church in the Tremé .....	279

## LIST OF IMAGES

Image 1. Thou Shalt Not Kill Sign and Vigil. ....	1
Image 2. The Mississippi River at "The Fly." ....	69
Image 3. Grand Bayou Wetlands and Raised Houses .....	85
Image 4. Life on the Water in Grand Bayou.....	86
Image 5. Site of My Father's House. ....	104
Image 6. Saratoga Street. ....	104
Image 7. National Votive Shrine of Our Lady of Prompt Succor. ....	120
Image 8. Main Altar at the Shrine. ....	121
Image 9. "Sweetheart's" Corner. ....	122
Image 10. Sister Joan Marie with Photo Album Showing her Religious Education. ....	124
Image 11. Petitions to "Sweetheart." .....	134
Image 12. Hurricane Ceremony Flyer. ....	156
Image 13. Fence in Rosalie Alley. ....	159
Image 14. Entering the Achade Meadows Peristyle. ....	160
Image 15. Drawing the Vévés.....	164
Image 16. Beginning the Petwo Part of the Ceremony. La Source Ancienne. ....	193
Image 17. New Hope Baptist Church Members, New Year's Day, January 1, 2008. ....	212
Image 18. Monument to Martin Luther King Jr., Neutral Ground, Claiborne Avenue at Felicity Street. ....	225
Image 19. Front Entrance, New Hope Baptist Church. ....	236
Image 20. ENOUGH Crime Walk by Men from New Hope Baptist Church. ....	247
Image 21. Celebrating Terrell's Birthday. ....	257
Image 22. Presenting Terrell's Birthday Cake to his Family. ....	269
Image 23. Preparing to Release the Balloons. ....	269
Image 24. Front Facade of St. Anna's Episcopal Church with 2008 Murder Board. ....	280
Image 25. Victims of Violence Scrapbook. Interior of St. Anna's Episcopal Church. ...	305
Image 26. 2007 Permanent Murder Board. Courtyard for Proposed Memorial Garden. St. Anna's Episcopal Church. ....	322
Image 27. Second Line on Rampart. ....	369

## INTRODUCTION

### **Being the Sign**

“I’ll tell you how it all got started” the pastor began. “You see, my goal was reaching people. So I came up with the idea of putting up these signs around town that would allow everybody to realize that what is going on as far as the violence in this city is *wrong*. And I wanted to make a statement that first of all it is *God* who says it is wrong. So we had a large billboard made with the words “Thou Shalt Not Kill” and we put that up on Martin Luther King Boulevard, right at the intersection of Claiborne. There was no image, no name of the church, and no other words except those: Thou Shalt Not Kill. We made thousands of smaller signs too, and we put those up all over town.”



**Image 1. Thou Shalt Not Kill Sign and Vigil. Photo Courtesy of New Hope Baptist Church.**



“Here, they looked like this,” the pastor said, taking down a photograph from the bulletin board behind his desk and handing it to me, pointing out one of the signs tacked to a telephone pole and congregation members gathered in prayer. It was a unique form of moral and religious education for the New Hope Baptist Church; one very visible campaign that was only part of their broader long-term ministry to transform the hearts and minds of residents and bring about an end to violence, especially within the local African American community.

It was the early afternoon in the middle of the week and I was sitting in the office of Reverend John Raphael, the pastor of New Hope.<sup>1</sup> Coming in the back door of the main church building, I had stepped around the tail end of the lunch line, served free on certain days to anyone in need of a hot meal. The hallway was still crowded with mostly elderly African American men who smiled and nodded their hellos, and a few younger Latino men – day laborers in the neighborhood who relied on New Hope for a solid meal and a place to pray.

Pastor Raphael had generously taken time away from his day to describe for me the history of the Thou Shalt Not Kill campaign and related ministries, and the impact he had hoped it all would have. “You know the parents used to *make* the children go to church” he began, “but that’s not happening anymore and many kids are not being taught right from wrong. They’re not getting it at home or in school. So I made sure that every day all those kids, on their way out and back, would have to see those Thou Shalt Not Kill signs, whether they went to church or not.”

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<sup>1</sup> The names of specific congregations, clergy, and other public figures have not been changed unless otherwise noted. For all other persons appearing in this work, pseudonyms are generally used; however in some cases names have not been changed, according to participant wishes and in memory of the deceased.

Congregation members stepped up their distribution, leaving signs with residents and business owners, nailing them up on boards and telephone poles, and staking them down in the grassy median or “neutral ground” as it is called in New Orleans, which runs down the center of most major thoroughfares. Soon the signs were visible at almost every turn – that is until the City of New Orleans Department of Sanitation swept through and removed them all.

It was a source of much frustration for the pastor. “We were putting those signs *everywhere*” he explained, cutting a broad swath with his hand for emphasis. “We started placing them in the neutral ground, all the way down Claiborne and Simon Bolivar, and then up Jackson. We were just putting those signs in the ground; I mean maybe twenty or so in a block on each side. And not long after that, the city trash department came through and took every one of those signs down. Took them down and threw them away, and they were *expensive* too! So I said, I’ll tell you what, *we’ll* be the signs. And so we brought all the members out here and we surrounded the whole area, from Claiborne to Simon Bolivar and Martin Luther King to Felicity. We stood shoulder to shoulder, with everyone holding up a Thou Shalt Not Kill sign. And we did that every week, on Wednesday nights, for a whole year. During that period we did not have *one* murder in this neighborhood. Not one.”

As I learned from Pastor Raphael that day, New Hope church members have a long history of moral and religious engagement, placing themselves body and soul on the front lines of their neighborhoods to directly confront a variety of issues, with a particular focus on the problem of urban violence. Parishioners and local residents still remember those Thou Shalt Not Kill vigils, with hundreds of church members lined up all the way

around sections of this Central City neighborhood. It was the height of the mid 1990s crime wave – a period of violence in New Orleans that took many lives and nearly paralyzed the city with fear, grief, and anger. The show of faith and force in the midst of these conditions was impressive; the congregation quite literally created a protective barricade around their families, homes, and neighborhoods. People still say it was a sight to behold – “really something to see, all of our members out there” – a solemn show of solidarity and an unmistakably clear condemnation of violence, coming “from on high” but made manifest in place and on the ground.

Pastor Raphael shared with me a particularly memorable encounter he had on one of those evenings. “There was this black guy – I could see him coming almost all the way from Simon Bolivar,” he recalled. “He walked right down the middle of that neutral ground, all the way down to Claiborne, came right up to me, looked me dead in the eye, and said, “This is the safest I have ever felt in my life.” I’ll never forget that! He said “This is the safest I have *ever* felt, in my *life*.” And every one of our members just stood there. They just stood there holding those signs that said Thou Shall Not Kill, and it was just awesome.”

### **Initial Inspiration**

Some ten years later, the impact of the vigil was still resonating. The story was repeatedly shared among church members, local residents, and with newcomers like me following my arrival in the city in the summer of 2007. It was a moving introduction, to say the very least, to a city and community still dealing with the harsh realities of violence, although this time in the extended wake of Hurricane Katrina’s catastrophic

impact from August 2005, and in the midst of post-disaster recovery and urban redevelopment.

The story and situation raised many interesting questions, which framed the anthropological inquiry and fieldwork I was to conduct over the next two years. Who were these people and what brought them forward to the front lines of their communities, then and now? What messages do they carry, how are they developed and by whom, and in what ways are they shared and promoted? What ultimately do they hope to achieve and are they successful? More fundamentally, what does it mean to “be the sign”? That is, what are the dimensions of lived and embodied experience, as people work to reform and redevelop the self, city, and society from a state and place of vulnerability and violence to one of security and peace?

The continued prominence of a story like the Thou Shalt Not Kill campaign gives some indication of the importance of these questions. More importantly, however, it demonstrates the way that these and many other residents are coming forward with a sense of reverence and resolve to confront and respond to current and critical issues such as violence and crime. They work from the bottom up to improve conditions, thus reclaiming and remaking their lives, homes, and communities, and working more broadly to affect change at the level of city and society.

### **Local Perspectives**

Over the course of the two years I spent in New Orleans, in extended conversation and exchange with residents across the city, I heard many similar stories of moral and religious engagement and witnessed a number of related campaigns. All together there

emerged several overarching themes, which represent the broad concerns, sentiments, and experiences of residents in the post-Katrina period. These themes were already well established within the community when I arrived, expressed and identified by residents themselves. My own research interests and objectives, therefore, were grounded first and foremost in these local realities.

To illustrate the development and framing of the research I will present in this dissertation, I briefly review these themes, staying close in language and tone to the ways in which they were initially revealed to me. They include 1) a strong attachment to the city and a fear of its demise; 2) a chronic sense of insecurity felt intensely at the margins of society; 3) a critical concern for the high incidence and impact of violent crime; 4) attention to physical and emotional suffering and healing; 5) the development of grassroots recovery and redevelopment programs; and 6) moral and religious beliefs and practices for healing and transformation, guidance, and intervention in times of trouble or need.

### ***A Sense of Place: The Love and Loss of New Orleans***

New Orleanians have a tremendous amount of love and pride for their city. It is an obvious sentiment, expressed in spite of the challenges that sometimes overshadow everyday life and experience. One resident, for example, gave a passionate description of the people and place, one that was echoed by many others. She stated, “It’s just a phenomenon how much people love this place! It’s not like any other place in the United States, certainly not like any other place I’ve ever lived and I’ve lived all over the country. I mean it’s just *different* here. We’re in the South but we’re not entirely of the

South. It's not the Bible Belt; it's predominantly Catholic which is a rare thing in the South. And people are passionate about this place, about the culture, the food, the music, the sense of humor. I mean the people here are just bizarre! Maybe it has to do with living below sea level, I don't know," she ended, laughing.

It was easy to understand what she meant; the *joie de vivre* is infectious and it is hard not to get swept up, with preparations for this celebration or that, and the many other local events and happenings that mark the day or season. There is an inherent sociality to life here, practically built into the landscape itself with dense neighborhoods (in areas not totally devastated by Hurricane Katrina) and narrowly spaced houses, where many families have lived for generations. The city invites one to feel at home and it's a sense of belonging that is not hard to find, as any early evening spent on the front porch will attest. The neighborhoods come alive with residents calling to each other across the street and carrying over plates of food. Generally speaking it is a place where people attend to and look after each other.

The sense of love for New Orleans is particular strong in part because no one really knows how long the city will continue to exist. People are keenly aware of how quickly things can change; Hurricane Katrina made that all too clear and in many ways the force of the storm is still being felt. Severe flooding that resulted from levee failures literally turned neighborhoods upside down, causing the death of 1,464 Louisiana residents and displacing nearly 250,000 people from the greater metropolitan area.<sup>2</sup>

There is also a strong public memory and knowledge of disasters dating as far back as Hurricane Betsy (1965), Camille (1969), and earlier events such as the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and the Yellow Fever epidemic of the mid nineteenth century

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<sup>2</sup> Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, hereafter GNOCDC.

that killed tens of thousands of people. As one resident explained, “We are all living in a place where we know it could all be gone in an instant, and that lends itself to paying attention. It lends itself to loving passionately what you have because you may not get to keep it. And it creates a unique sense of community.”

The strength of these bonds is tested with every new threat of disaster or crisis. During the mandatory evacuation for Hurricane Gustav in 2008, for example, residents depended on the close ties they had with family and friends in order to mobilize, share rides, and distribute food and supplies. As one resident described, “My neighbors have my house keys. They did not evacuate for this last hurricane [Gustav], but they lost power, and since I didn’t lose power they moved into my house. Sometimes we even string up extension cords between the houses so we can all share. It’s part of our communal experience, and that kind of sharing contributes to how we all feel about this place.”

### ***Underlying Insecurity***

Despite this passion, the recurring cycles of vulnerability, disaster, and long-term recovery take their toll, manifesting for some residents as a steady state of insecurity, anxiety, and fatigue, among other conditions. Vulnerability is greatest at the margins of society, for example for residents in low lying areas prone to flooding and communities impacted by poverty, poor housing and education, and situations of domestic and street violence. These conditions disproportionately affect the poor, people of color, the sick, the elderly, the homeless, and the mentally ill. I spoke with one local teacher, for example, who remembered asking her mostly African American elementary school

children to stand up and say five positive things about themselves and their families.

“They couldn’t do it,” she recalled sadly. “One little boy said, “Well, *my* daddy in jail!” and another one said, “Well *my* mama did this and that,” and I thought mmm hmm, this explains everything. We got a long way to go and a short time to get there.”

Residents of all backgrounds, however, have grown weary of these conditions and the continual process of trying to regroup in a place that remains vulnerable and unstable. In the post-Katrina period, people are particularly frustrated by the slow and uneven pace of recovery and the persistent social and environmental problems that make the long road home that much longer. For some it is too much to bear; and despite the returning population of old and new residents there is always someone who is thinking about leaving. For example, one of my neighbors spoke often of some friends who had recently moved away because they did not want to raise their child in such a volatile place. They hoped for a city that was safer, with better schools, and where there was not such a look of defeat and desperation in the eyes of fellow residents.

The memory and experience of Katrina is still very strong. Especially for those who did not evacuate, there are painful flashbacks to moments of panic when the water came up and there was nowhere to go. The lucky ones made it out through the roof or the water -- wading, swimming, floating on mattresses to dry ground. Those who were already evacuated watched with horror from afar as the city was submerged. Everyone remembers the death; so many of the city’s most vulnerable residents, neighbors, friends, and family members caught helpless, unprepared, and unprotected. The immediate aftermath was marked by such despair, grief, and anger, and there was a horribly



frustrating lack of information and understanding about what had happened and what would happen next.

There is thus a lingering sense of victimization and woundedness that extends into the recovery period. Those who remain do their best to keep abreast of neighborhood developments. Even the most casual conversations will invariably include important news about the community: the people who have moved in or out; the properties that have been sold or demolished; the rising cost of housing; the FEMA or “Road Home” money that has been spent, squandered, or stolen; the hospitals, stores, schools, libraries, and churches that have re-opened or are permanently closed; and the community organizers and elected officials who have been found corrupt or who might finally provide reliable and representative leadership.

Some residents are making the best of a potentially bad situation, taking matters into their own hands and often thriving within the “broke-down but still rising” culture and place that is now part of New Orleans’ identity and appeal. It is a shifting, liminal, and ‘edgy’ space conducive to grassroots development, improvisation, movement, and transformation; perfectly suited to a diverse and immensely talented community of activists, musicians, and artists who continually test the limits of creative being and expression. Many people perceive themselves to be in a place where they have the freedom to be who they are or want to be. They fight hard to preserve this way of life, they don’t want to be anywhere else, and when they are, they inevitably feel called to return.

Life proceeds in New Orleans, therefore, at an interesting and critical time, where hope and activity coexist with continuing insecurity and uncertainty. Residents know that

there is much difficult work still ahead. The long-term security and sustainability of their families, neighborhoods, and city is not yet realized or assured.

### ***Urban Violence: At the Front Door or Just Down the Street***

Residents cite the problem of urban violence as one of the most critical concerns of the recovery period. The rate of violence crime in New Orleans has consistently been high, in large part because of the extremely high per capita rate of homicides. According to annual city crime rankings, published by CQ Press and based on reported statistics from local law enforcement agencies, the homicide rate was the highest in the country in both 2007 and 2008, and the highest ever for a U.S. city in 1994 with over 400 murders in the greater metropolitan area.<sup>3</sup>

Residents of Orleans Parish, however, assess their vulnerability to violence in distinct local ways. It is measured, for example, by the frequency of gun shots or sirens, the number of deaths reported on the evening news, or the spread of red dots on the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) crime maps. Also important are the reports of violent crime that are shared between friends and neighbors, which reveal just how closely one is connected. The chatter increases when something bad happens: “Did you hear about the robbery at Donna’s Bar and Grill last night? They made everyone lie on the floor.” “What? I was just in there!” Or, for example, “Did you hear about the shooting in the French Quarter last week? They were just walking down the street and it wasn’t even that late out. I heard the kids who did it were only fourteen and fifteen years old. A friend of mine lives right around the corner from there.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <http://os.cqpress.com>

<sup>4</sup> Refers in particular to the 2008 robbery and murder of Wendy Byrne.

Even if the violence is not on one's own street it is never very far removed. Just driving around town it is not uncommon to come upon an active crime scene, with yellow tape stretched across a yard or the street cordoned off for emergency vehicles. Some residents find themselves much too close for comfort, for example when they or someone they know has been directly impacted. A new friend, for example, revealed to me that she was the key witness in a brutal murder case – her close friend was killed right before her eyes. Another friend had just met a young woman a few weeks ago, and was wondering why there had been no word from her when word finally came that she had been found dead in her home just a few days prior. She lived just down the street from where I worked part-time and I could see out of my office window the crime scene unfold on the day they found her.<sup>5</sup>

At its worst, the violence becomes so commonplace and so close to home that it seems normal. As one resident, someone who still grieves for the violent murder of her son, described, "It's like something you are almost expecting because it's happening so regular now. You used to be amazed when someone got killed but it's not even shocking anymore. You just go out and wash the blood away."

The violence has particular significance in the post-Katrina period. It impacts a population that is already traumatized by recent disaster and not yet fully recovered. Residents report a heightened sensitivity to crime, perceiving a "lawless" society with more "brazen" criminals who have "no respect for human life." Some label the perpetrators as "psychotic and sociopathic," or relegate the problem to the turf wars of "druggies," "thugs," and "gang members," who kill to control or to retaliate.

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<sup>5</sup> Refers to the 2008 murder of Jessica Hawk.

Such labeling serves in part as a way for people to distance themselves or their communities from the problem. Issues of ‘race’, ethnicity, and class are central here, for example there is a strong local tendency to equate “poor, black, and male” with “violent.” Those who make these associations are then jarred into response when the violence breaks out of its perceived boundaries to impact closer to home. Such views and experiences are tempered by those who remain sympathetic to the complexity of violence – considering for example, social, economic, and other contributing factors – rather than linking the problem to the imagined characteristics of a particular population.

Residents, however, are in general agreement that *something* has to be done to stop the killing, although there is great concern and an equal amount of confusion on what to do and how. Confidence in local law enforcement is low, due in part to post-disaster reductions in policing and several high profile cases of police brutality and corruption. According to one resident, “These people around here don’t respect the police; if we really want to stop the killing what we need is for the National Guard to come back.” Others, however, understand the local constraints: “We shouldn’t be blaming the police – we should be thanking them. They have it really hard out there; they get blamed a lot of the time for the culture of violence, but they didn’t create that.”

There is also evidence of a related belief that for multiple reasons one cannot fully depend on standard and state run systems to ensure protection and safety. Residents, therefore, have begun to rely on their own devices, networks, and cultural resources. They work, for example, through citizen watch groups, strong neighborhood associations, and other community based organizations and institutions to educate the public, to increase local safety and security, and to bring about an end to the violence.

### *Suffering, Healing, and Recovery: From the Inside Out, From the Bottom Up*

The people of New Orleans have suffered a great deal in recent years, and they continue to do so under the weight of chronic vulnerability, disaster, and ongoing urban violence. Hurricane Katrina dealt a tremendous blow, with the devastating loss of loved ones who didn't make it out or for whom the impact was finally too great, and the near total destruction of the city. The recovery and healing process is long and challenging, and it is made even more difficult by the persistent vulnerabilities and everyday crises that shape everyday life and lived experience. In regards to the impact of violence in the post-Katrina period, the continued loss of life can be overwhelmingly traumatic, particularly for those who have already lost so much.

One resident explained the emotional impact: "We have always had a high rate of murders. But I believe that coming back from Katrina we are so sensitive now. We aren't the same... we left out of here one way and we came back another way, as people who have suffered a loss. I believe the murders that are happening now are more poignant to us and more, I don't know... it's just that our skin has gotten very thin." Daily life proceeds, but as this resident described, people go about with "wounded hearts." Any act of violence, even the most remote, can reawaken painful memories and intense emotions.

Residents spoke frequently, therefore, of the need for physical and emotional healing, first on a personal level for one's self and family, but also on a communal level for the city and society. They relied on a variety of sources, often beginning with resources and support "close to home" within family, neighborhood, and other social networks. Mental health care professionals were also consulted, when available and

affordable. Some residents even reported the use and abuse of a variety of mood altering substances, prescribed or not, to manage a broad range of stressors and emotions. Others turned to creative expression and entertainment in all its local forms, as diversion or outlet.

One resident shared her feeling of being “on-edge” and frustrated that since the storm she just hadn’t been able to “get her life together.” Hers was an underlying state of anxiety, punctuated by panic attacks and intense feelings of fear whenever a violent crime happened in her neighborhood. While some relief came in the form of medication, she found comfort and refuge at home by drawing her family and friends in close around her. Healing and recovery is thus a serious issue – a vital aspect of one’s ability to function and stabilize in a city that is in many ways not stable itself.

While residents expressed concern about individual well-being and the care and stability of the family, they also worked to develop community based and more collective systems of healing and support. The recovery period is considered by many as an ideal moment for this work; an opportunity to repair the damage and begin anew. As one resident explained, “Katrina threw everything up in the air. Out of chaos comes creation. Suddenly there was hope. People were beginning to pay attention... they were not satisfied with the status quo. People knew that things were broken and we had to do something. It couldn’t be the way that it was.”

Repair and recovery has thus proceeded from the inside out and from the bottom up. Residents focus on their own needs and the healing of their families and communities. They also engage in the public sphere with a multitude of programs and initiatives that focus on support and aid to ease the suffering of fellow residents. Thus the healing and

transformation of both self and society is an essential part of overall urban redevelopment and reform.

### ***Moral and Religious Groundings***

Underlying residents' sentiments about life in New Orleans, the persistent vulnerabilities, the problem of urban violence, and the need to stop the killing, end suffering, and bring about the healing and transformation of self and society, are specific moral and often religious views. These views and related practices guide individual processes of recovery but they also work more broadly as frameworks for how the community and city should recover and move forward. This includes ideas about right and wrong conduct, justice, and the ideal of a peaceful, non-violent, and sustainable society.

At the individual level, many residents reported that their specific morals, religious beliefs, and practices helped them to manage the insecurity and instability of everyday life, supporting various processes of healing and recovery. These views and understandings of the world provided in many ways a useful system and structure for the orientation and re-orientation of one's life and way of being in times of crisis or upheaval. Moral and religious beliefs and practices also factored into people's sense of well-being and security, by connecting people to what was perceived as an infinite source of knowledge, wisdom, or divine power in an uncertain world.

As one resident described, her religious beliefs helped her to stabilize emotionally after the storm: "I prayed to God and I promised. I said, "Just get me to a point where I can get rid of the anger so I can get focused... so I can get a handle on this and I will go

back to church and never miss mass.” And the depression and the anger did disappear, and that’s my miracle.” Active religious participants also made reference to the close relationships they formed with clergy, fellow practitioners, and divine beings such as saints and spirits according to one’s particular denomination and belief system. These became the social and spiritual networks that structured everyday life, for example by providing support in times of trouble when disasters, crises, or instances of violence occurred.

More broadly, moral and religious views provided a framework for individual behavior in society. Residents, for example, spoke often of the family bonds and sense of community they worked hard to maintain and expressed a spirit of cooperation and mutual support that lingers on in the disaster recovery period. This sense of right and just conduct was also directly opposed to the sense of injustice that lingers on in the city, especially in relation to Hurricane Katrina. Many people, for example, expressed how morally wrong it was to abandon so many people; to fail to provide adequate levee protection, evacuation, rescue, and relief services; and to limit the opportunities for people to come back to the city by not adequately addressing problems of employment and education and by reducing the availability of affordable housing.

Residents also developed their moral and religious views in specific relation to the problem of urban violence. Not only did they speak about the basic right to feel safe and secure in one’s place of residence, they also spoke about violence as a problem of values – representing the devaluing of human life, little respect for authority and the law, and a lack of appreciation for one’s own people and place. For some, especially within the religious community, the scope and magnitude of the problem was considered to be far



beyond the capacity of humans to manage. What was needed, therefore, was the intervention of a greater and more powerful force that could heal, render moral judgment, and ultimately transform the people and the society. These residents thus placed their faith and trust in a higher spiritual power to bring about moral transformation and order on a larger scale.

This belief and trust, however, did not mean that one was not an active participant. For some, even the very basic forms of worship, such as prayer and devotion, were forms of action and social-spiritual change. Others extended their worship and ministry outside of their home communities, sharing their experiences, and working in the field to improve social and spiritual conditions.

The problem of urban violence and the task of moral restoration and redevelopment were thus taken up formally by several religious communities. Groups such as the New Hope Baptist Church were particularly visible, as the “Thou Shalt Not Kill” campaign demonstrates, but their efforts were just part of a larger post-disaster trend of local religious organization and participation. This trend existed in specific relation to the issue of urban violence but it was broadly concerned with recovery and redevelopment overall. These religious groups develop and share specific moral views and they respond to the problem of violence through a variety of activities, including ministry, advocacy, outreach, and religious education. The overall objective is to bring about a transformed, peaceful and sustainable city and society. A city that, in the words of one resident and practitioner, will “ultimately be pleasing to God.”

### **Towards a Theory of Moral Peacemaking and Placemaking**

With this understanding of local concerns and perspectives, I refine and expand the initial questions that inspired my dissertation research. First, I ask: What is the nature and lived experience of persistent vulnerability and insecurity, which in this case has to do largely with urban violence in the aftermath of disaster? What are the physical and emotional impacts and how do people manage the suffering? Second, how do residents work to move out of these situations and states of being? What motivates them, where are they headed, and what methods and resources do they use to get there? Third, what are the moral and religious frameworks that guide these processes? How for example might moral and religious values, and related practices, mediate the transformation of vulnerability and suffering on both an individual and collective level? Fourth, how are moral and religious views developed and promoted more broadly to frame and guide urban recovery and redevelopment? How might we understand ultimately, the moral and ethical foundations of the processes by which people work to reframe and refashion their lives and worlds, moving from a place and state of vulnerability, violence, and insecurity to one of resilience, non-violence, peace, and security?

To best explore and understand these processes, I argue for a theoretical and practical understanding of moral peacemaking and placemaking. As the congregation members of New Hope Baptist Church and the Thou Shalt Not Kill campaign so beautifully illustrate, “being the sign” is an embodied experience, one closely integrated with the social, environmental, and political-ecological landscape. It is from this place and state of being that one develops and stands for particular moral and ethical views and then carries these ideas and beliefs forward, from the private domain of home and family life into the public sphere. It is from here that one works creatively to improve and

refashion local conditions and ways of knowing and being, not only for the transformation of suffering at the level of the self but for change on a broader scale, at the level of city and society. One becomes ultimately a peacemaker and a placemaker.

A theoretical and practical understanding of these processes builds on existing literature from several important inquiries by anthropologists and scholars in related fields. I review here the most relevant work, pointing out their contributions and shortcomings in relation to the specific objectives and claims of my own research. I begin with the experience of the place itself, drawing on existing theories of human dwelling and the mutual constitution of people and place, but expanding from these theories to explore the particular nature and experience of dwelling in the urban delta. I focus in particular on one's relationship to the land, water, and other elements of the natural and built environment, as well as the chronic conditions of vulnerability that give a critical and unique "deltaic" dimension to life in this particular time and place.

Extending from this understanding of local vulnerability and being in place, my research provides a broadened examination of what disasters do, for example the larger collective processes of cultural and social change they initiate or reveal. This is a frame of analysis that is not adequately developed in existing research and literature. In particular I give much needed attention to the conditions of life "after the storm"; focusing in the post-Katrina recovery period on the sufferings and dislocations of person and place as well as the impact of persistent social problems such as urban violence. Thus I review and extend beyond the existing anthropological literature on crime and criminalization to ethnographically explore the *lived experience* of urban violence in the post-disaster setting.

I conceive of the recovery period as a liminal place, where residents are suspended in an ambiguous way between death or destruction on one side and rebirth and renewal on the other. I expand here on theories of liminality, particularly descriptions of liminal and marginal people or ‘edgemen,’ however I suggest that ‘edge-people’ in New Orleans rest on the edge of change not by virtue of their creativity or insight, but by their specific place-ness and circumstance. I thus align with a recent inquiry on the experience and phenomenology of liminality to examine the insight and moment of transformation that invariably, creatively, and hopefully arrives to people in precarious situations and places.

I argue that much of the work of peacemaking and placemaking is about the restructuring of one’s place in the world, including one’s relationships to immediate and extended family and community, both living and dead. Thus people devise ways to make peace with the violent past while simultaneously working through moral and ethical frameworks to reconcile and make peace in present and future time. I expand therefore, on existing theories of ‘placemaking,’ exploring how these processes are fueled by people’s connections to larger sources and systems of knowledge, and how ‘wisdom’ sits in *urban* places, especially during periods of radical social, environmental, and political change. I argue further that individual and local forms of peacemaking and placemaking then extend as new forms of civic moral and religious engagement on a larger scale, focused on the reform and redevelopment of self, city, and society.

### ***Vulnerability and the Dwelling Perspective***

Despite the recurring impact of vulnerability, disaster, and crisis in Southeast Louisiana, people exist and even thrive in this locale – living often in the midst of a fragile, ill defined, or otherwise ‘unsettled’ social and geographic landscape.

Anthropologists and related scholars have explored the connection between people and place in a variety of ways, with an especially relevant inquiry focused on theories of dwelling. The emphasis is on the mutual constitution of people and place, and the phenomenology of ‘being in place’ through sensory experience, bodily perception, and related ways of orientation and navigation.

These theories are part of a broader philosophical inquiry on the nature of space and place. While a complete intellectual history is well beyond the scope of this chapter, Edward Casey gives a very useful overview (1997). It begins with early conceptualizations of space as a blank environment, out of which place is derived. Casey argues, however, that a key moment occurs when early modern theorists, going against the dominance of space, “rediscover” place – through the body.

The move influences late modern and postmodern thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, who theorized that “the body’s role in the emplacement of things in regions is that of providing these things with a directionality they would lack when considered merely as occupying positions relative to each other” (Casey 1997:205). The dimensionality of space thus follows from the directionality of the body, which for Kant had specifically to do with the physical structure of the body, its two-sidedness, and the link between this structure and the polarities of the physical, social, and cosmic worlds (Casey 1996, 1997; see also Kant 1768, Hertz 1909).

This focus on the structure and movement of the body is crucial to understanding how places are inhabited. In the ‘dwelling perspective,’ as articulated by Timothy Ingold, humans are “immersed from the start... in an active, practical and perceptual engagement with constituents of the dwelt-in world” (Ingold 2000:42). The idea draws also on Heidegger’s philosophy of being in relation to the built environment (1996 [1927]) and Merleau-Ponty’s theory of perception and being in the world (1945). People and place are thus mutually constituted and perceived.

As Casey explains, this is not “a merely mute level of experience that passively receives simple and senseless data of place. Perception at the primary level is synesthetic – an affair of the whole body” (Casey 1996:18). The process requires a body with the capacity to sense and move in conversation with the surrounding landscape; it also requires “a place that is amenable to this body-subject and that extends its own influence back onto this subject” (Casey 1996:22). What results is an organic and dynamic relationship, a kind of “interanimation” where, “places animate the ideas and feelings of persons who attend to them... [and] these same ideas and feelings animate the places on which attention has been bestowed... the movements of this process – inward toward facets of the self, outward toward aspects of the external world, alternately both together – cannot be known in advance” (Basso 1996:55).

These theories of dwelling and interanimation are usefully applied in Southeast Louisiana, in order to understand the lived experience of the urban delta. Immediate questions emerge, however, that are not adequately addressed in existing literature. For example, given the mutual constitution of people and place, what happens when processes and experiences of interanimation involve or overlap with conditions of

extreme vulnerability? What is dwelling like within a fragile and rapidly changing environment? I argue that the dwelling perspective here might adjust, to reveal a unique dimension of people and place – a shifting and unsteady quality to life that is equally reflected in the person and body as it perceives, senses, and moves, as it is in the social and environmental landscape with which it is so closely integrated.

### ***What Disasters Do***

Anthropologists and related scholars have long studied the impact of vulnerability, large scale disaster, and recurring cycles of loss and recovery. Their approaches were instrumental in changing the field of disaster research from a focus on the event or hazard itself, to a culturally based consideration of chronic vulnerability in direct and corresponding relation to the high impact of any adverse event. Anthony F. C. Wallace made significant and early contributions, particularly in his study of a tornado in Worcester, Massachusetts, sponsored by the National Academy of Sciences, Committee on Disaster Research (1956). This work inspires later scholars such as anthropologist Anthony Oliver-Smith (1986, 1999, 2002) and sociologist Kai Erikson (1976, 1994), who each draw attention to the historical and social foundations of vulnerability and the phases of disaster impact, from rescue and relief to long-term recovery for people and communities.

A disaster is now understood as a process, a slowly developed and “socially produced condition of vulnerability” combined with “a potentially destructive agent from the natural or technological sphere” having impact on a population (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 1999:4). The central focus is on *people* – their processes, behaviors, responses,

relations, and ways of adaptation. The inquiry connects more broadly to studies of cultural devastation and revitalization, as whole populations struggle for survival and new hope in the face of long-term vulnerability and adversity (Wallace 1956, 1970; Harkin 2004; Lear 2006).

Despite the importance, relevance, and application of research in this field, long-term ethnographic studies of vulnerability and disaster are surprisingly few in number. Some of the most influential works by anthropologists and related scholars include studies of earthquake impact and recovery in the Andes (Bode 1989, Oliver-Smith 1999), a study of long-term disaster recovery, victims' rights, and grassroots activism in Bhopal, India (Fortun 2001), research examining conditions of social vulnerability at the margins of urban society following a deadly heat wave in Chicago (Klinenberg 2002), and ethnography of technological disaster, suffering, citizenship, and survival in the aftermath of the nuclear reactor explosion at Chernobyl (Petryna 2002).

This literature review revealed no long-term anthropological and ethnographic studies of disaster in New Orleans; however there is a great deal of related research on the subject, particularly focused on Hurricane Katrina. Several detailed bibliographies attempt to categorize this literature, including a reference created by Kai Erikson and Lori Peek for the Social Science Research Council (July 2009). The bibliography includes over 75 pages of cross-referenced Katrina related publications, categorized by topics such as emergency preparedness and response, evacuation, displaced persons, race and class, and post-disaster recovery. Several works by anthropologists are included – in reports, special journal issues, edited manuscripts, and films (American Anthropologist, 2006, 108(4); Cultural Anthropology, 2006, 21(3); Dawdy 2006; Button 2006; Browne 2008;



Button and Oliver-Smith 2008; among others). The number of anthropological studies, however, constitutes a fairly low percentage of the total research projects, at least by this listing.

Investigations of disaster in a complex urban setting like New Orleans exist in close relationship with theories of political-ecology and studies of urban change more broadly. Particularly relevant is literature that calls attention to the unequal distribution of resources and the systems of power and oppression that contribute to the marginalization and suffering of certain populations and regions (Biersack 1999; Escobar 1999, 2006; Vayda and Walters 1999). Also important is literature that pays close attention to “the dynamic relationships between a human population, its socially generated and politically enforced productive and allocative patterns and its physical environment” (Oliver-Smith 1998:189). The focus is on how “social relations are maintained by the dominant forms of production in a process that determines the patterns of resource allocation and other forms of social, political, and economic differentiation. This differentiation, in turn, privileges some individuals and groups with enhanced security, while subjecting others to systemic risks and hazards” (Enser et al. 2003:171, see also Blaikie et al. 1994).

While valuable, these studies fail to capture the larger sense of what disasters do to cultures and societies, particularly the social and environmental vulnerabilities they reveal and the larger cultural and social changes they provoke. Hurricane Katrina, for example, exposed the harsh realities and conditions that prevented many residents from evacuating, revealing in particular the extent of regional poverty and the lack of services, especially for poor people of color, the elderly, the sick, and other marginalized populations. The storm demonstrated also the inadequacies and shortcomings of disaster

management and public safety systems and operations. Not only did it show a lack of preparedness by authorities for a disaster of this magnitude; it exemplified for many people a blatant disregard for human life. Human beings and bodies were treated with a degree of disposability that was very difficult to witness – people were left behind, found floating in the floodwaters, or unceremoniously laid to rest at the Convention Center or Superdome.

The residents of New Orleans thus came face to face with death and destruction in a way that challenged many of their basic assumptions about the world and how it should work, for example the right to safe, secure, and sustainable conditions. After the storm, I argue that residents exist in a liminal state with no firm footing between complete destruction on one side and renewal on the other. They work to reorient and redevelop in a radically different context, where human suffering and the fragility of life are all too well understood. One's basic relationships are thus newly significant; with dislocated and relocated connections to home, family, friends, and fellow residents – those surviving and existing in present time, as well as those who are gone, deceased, or otherwise of the past.

The disaster has fueled, therefore, a social and cultural shift at both the individual and collective level. People continue to work to improve conditions, determining and developing the structures and systems of belief that will carry the self, the family, and the community forward. The storm has been viewed by many as an opportunity to begin anew, to regain solid footing, and to remake worlds according to specific frameworks and understandings. All together, the disaster has forced the overall restructuring of social life and support as well as larger assessments and determinations of core values to guide urban recovery and redevelopment.

### ***Experience and Response to Urban Violence: Processes of Dislocation and Relocation***

Recovery efforts, however, are often impeded by the continuing and new vulnerabilities and social problems that emerge in the aftermath of a disaster. Such is the case in New Orleans, particularly in regards to the problem of violent crime. The existing anthropological literature on crime and criminalization, as reviewed by Schneider and Schneider (2008), is primarily organized into two trajectories – one focused on processes of criminalization and the other focused on the ethnographic investigation of illegal and predatory activity.

Studies of criminalization are broadly focused on the development of a “threatening criminal imaginary,” a process that labels certain populations and activities as criminal or deviant. Following from earlier studies of peasants, “social bandits,” and colonial “others” (Hobsbawm 1959, Thompson 1975), contemporary research, especially in the United States, has focused much of its attention on youth. Research explores, for example, the link between discriminatory processes, youth entrapment, and pervasive racism played out in the U.S. War on Drugs (Schneider and Schneider 2008:356, see also Tonry 1995, Reinerman and Levine 1997, and Vigil 2003, 2007). Vigil, for example, focuses on “the multiple marginalizations of poor modern youth... Constrained to live in the ugliest and least serviced of neighborhoods, they lack work and opportunity; their families are in crisis; and they are not reached by schools and other institutions of the wider society” (2008:361, see also Vigil 2003).

Anthropologists arguably make their strongest contributions to the study of crime and criminalization through ethnographic work. As Philip Parnell argues in an edited

volume on the subject, the common forms and expressions of crime and criminalization tend to obscure and oversimplify relationships, processes, and experiences.

Anthropologists work, therefore, to look “beyond (and behind) the criminal category, finding its power in what it does not reveal or create” (Parnell 2003:6).

Their focus is on the locations of crime, the social nexuses that exist in those places, and the way that people situate criminal categories in their everyday lives. This includes the various systems of power at work and the relationships and structures on which they are founded. The objective is to investigate “crime’s power” at the local level – essentially seeing state power at the level of everyday life and in particular at the margins of society. Crime’s power is also investigated translocally; through the larger myths and constructions that work to organize social relations. The findings are frequently grim; when state power is replicated locally, it turns “those perceived as different or weak into victims (criminals) by inscribing vulnerability on their bodies” (Parnell 2003:3).

Despite the value of ethnographic work in this field, long-term anthropological studies of crime are relatively few in number. Relevant work based in the United States focuses primarily on the lived reality and perception of crime, including individual and community response, coping mechanisms, and capacities for mobilization and change. Sally Engle Merry, for example, studied everyday life in a high crime housing project, revealing differing fears and perceptions of ‘danger’ across various ethnic and social groups (Merry 1981). Philippe Bourgois contributes a valuable study of poverty, social marginalization, and drug trafficking in East Harlem, New York, deconstructing criminal categories to reveal a more nuanced quest for power and control, the complexity of social

and economic survival, and issues of dignity and respect at the local level (Bourgois 1996). Steven Gregory examines the political culture and activism of residents in a New York City African American neighborhood, focusing on their capacity to successfully mobilize and negotiate for both secure and sustainable living conditions (Gregory 1999).<sup>6</sup>

This literature review found no ethnographic studies of crime and urban violence in New Orleans, a surprising fact given the city's historically high crime rate. There has been, however, a recent surge in research on crime in relation to Hurricane Katrina. This work consists mostly of quantitative and short-term studies of policing, victimization, and drug trafficking in the aftermath of the storm (Deflem and Sutphin 2009, Potter 2007, Harper and Frailing 2010, Walsh 2010). There is also a recent manuscript by anthropologist Shannon Dawdy, which explores some of the historic and cultural framings of crime and criminality in New Orleans, going as far back as the early tensions of the French colonial period for this self-fashioned "rogue colony" in the New World (Dawdy 2008).

Generally these local studies, as well as the anthropological study of crime and criminalization more broadly, do not adequately address the lived experience of urban violence. I argue, however, that the impact of violent crime, especially homicide in the

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<sup>6</sup> Other influential ethnographies exist by scholars in related fields. Additional work based in the urban United States, for example, includes research by sociologist Elijah Anderson on interpersonal violence and the code of the streets for youth in inner city Philadelphia (1999). Also prominent is work from sociologist Sudhir Venkatesh whose research includes a long-term study of everyday life in the Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago (2000) and a more recent study of crack dealing gangs in that same housing project (2008). A great deal of comparative research is based outside of the U.S., for example an ethnographic study of homeless youth, street life, and crime in Canada (Hagan and McCarthy 1998); an examination of fear, crime, and patterns of segregation in São Paulo by anthropologist Teresa Caldeira (2000); a study of violence and performance in urban Bolivia by anthropologist Daniel Goldstein (2004); research on problems of drug trafficking, crime, and police corruption as challenges to democratic governance in Brazil (Arias 2006); and a study of memory, youth, and violent crime in Columbia by anthropologist Pilar Riaño-Alcalá (2006).

post disaster setting, involves multiple and persistent dislocations -- political, economic, geographic, and social, all at a time when people are struggling to *re-locate*. Residents in New Orleans, for example, work to rebuild and recover their lives and social worlds in a radically reconfigured landscape. Within a community still traumatized by recent disaster and loss, each additional violent death of one's family member, neighbor, friend, or fellow resident prompts new questions about the relationships that frame one's world, one's capacity to exist and thrive in this place, and the priorities and core values that will support overall recovery and redevelopment. It is a continual assessment of how humanity and the world is understood, how people view and care for their immediate and extended kin, and whether or not people are working to support, rather than to eliminate, each other.

### ***A People and Place on the Edge***

Together, the unique quality of local dwelling; the recurring conditions of vulnerability, loss, and recovery; and the impact of large-scale and everyday disaster contribute to an unsettled feeling and sense that impacts one's lived experience in this place. I argue that the disaster recovery period is in many ways a liminal place and state, where residents are suspended between violence and loss on the one hand and recovery and renewal on the other.

The experience can be very difficult; marked by a wide range of physical, psychological, and emotional suffering. To explore these experiences, I expand upon two particularly relevant threads of inquiry within the existing literature. First, anthropological studies of disaster give important attention to processes of recovery and

physical and emotional healing, situated at the level of the person, family, and community. In addition, scholars have developed overarching theories to describe specific post-traumatic processes and states of being, including frameworks of bereavement and social suffering.

Anthropologists studying disaster have long focused on the suffering that accompanies impact, relief, and long-term recovery. Anthony Oliver-Smith, for example, studying the 1970 earthquake and avalanche in Yungay, Peru, describes survivors' coping methods, which include the reformation of social and familial structures, the continuance of 'normal' activities and events, the retelling of one's story and experience, and substance abuse and other self-medicating practices to manage intense emotions and pain (Oliver-Smith 1986). Ethnographies of urban violence give similar attention to these processes; Sally Engle Merry, for example, describes the impact of emotions such as fear associated with urban violence and perceptions of 'danger' (1981), and the participants in Philippe Bourgois' work speak of the depression and psychological trauma that accompanies substance abuse and street life (1996).

The broader scholarly inquiry on human suffering, however, includes research on the embodied and transformational experience of suffering. For example, in a study of loss and grief, anthropologists Brison and Leavitt argue that bereavement is best understood by considering "how individuals think of emotional and bodily states, and... how they appropriate cultural belief systems to make sense of personal tragedy" (1995:396). The concern is with the "long-term existential adjustments provoked by bereavement... [and] the capacity of prolonged suffering... to shock people out of their commonsense worldview and to prompt them to use cultural beliefs to find meaning in

apparently senseless pain” (1995:396, see also Kleinman 1998, Obeyesekere 1990, Good et al. 1992). The authors draw also on related theories in psychology and other fields, which argue that processes of mourning are essentially processes of adjusting to a new reality or revising one’s assumptions about the world (1995:396, see also Freud 1917, Parkes 1993).

There is an important emphasis on narrative in this literature. Leavitt, for example, argues that “people deal with adversity over the long term by building stories or personal narratives that explain their experiences in a meaningful way... In the case of mourning, such stories might include interpretations of the cause of death, accounts of encounters with spirits in dreams, or tales about a deceased loved one’s significance in one’s life. The mourner draws on cultural and religious themes to address basic existential questions, to give death meaning” (Leavitt 1995:454). Narratives also work to establish and maintain a degree of relatedness – those individuals who have experienced repeated loss, for example, might develop “a preoccupation with establishing relationships with the dead” through ritual, ceremony, and other practices (Leavitt 1995).

Many of these same ideas are developed in the existing literature on social suffering, although with a more direct link made between loss, injury, and various forms of power. The study of social suffering thus “brings into a single space an assemblage of human problems that have their origins and consequences in the devastating injuries that social force can inflict on human experience. Social suffering results from what political, economic, and institutional power does to people and, reciprocally, from how these forms of power themselves influence responses to social problems” (Kleinman et al. 1997:ix).



In addition to this edited volume on the subject by Kleinman et al. (1997), influential works include Paul Farmer's research in Haiti on the "crystallization" of large-scale social forces at the level of individual suffering and experience (1996); Pierre Bourdieu's collaborative ethnography of the diverse forms of social suffering that characterize contemporary society in France (1999); and more recently, emergent narratives of suffering for women in relation to issues of fertility and loss in Vietnam (Gammeltoft 2006).

I argue, however, that more attention can be placed on the *transformation* of suffering, especially in post-disaster settings like New Orleans. To begin, I conceive of inhabitants in this liminal place as existing at the threshold and moment of change, both individually and collectively. This view of everyday life and the possibility and process of transformation builds on basic theories of liminality, particularly rites of passage, the space and experience of being "betwixt and between," and the movements from one status, territory, or threshold to another (van Gennep 1909; Turner 1967, 1969, 1974).

I expand also on characterizations of liminal or marginal people, who Victor Turner refers to as "edgemen." According to Turner, these are the people – artists, poets, prophets, and the like – who creatively exist and become, particularly at threshold moments of historic transformation, the "unofficial legislators" of humankind (Turner 1974:128). I expand from this theory, however, by considering the specific characteristics and orientations of "edge-people" who rest on the edge not by virtue of some artistic or prophetic quality, but by virtue of their situation, position, and need – their *place-ness*. The experience of liminality, therefore, and the moment of the threshold, has to do with

their attempts to move away from the edge towards a more stable, permanent, and peaceful world.

I thus align with a recent inquiry on the experience and phenomenology of liminality to examine the insight and moment of transformation that invariably, creatively, and hopefully arrives to people in precarious situations and places. Relevant literature includes recent work by anthropologist Michael Jackson, which outlines a very useful phenomenology of liminality focused on “the various ways in which temporal, spatial, personal, and cultural in-betweenness is *experienced* in human life, both through conventional conceptual or ritual manifestations *and* inchoate, oneiric, poetic, and imaginary expressions” (Jackson 2009:6, emphasis in original). Jackson’s interest is on “the unstable *relationship* – the *écart*, the cusp, the broken middle – *between* our experience of immediate and nonimmediate fields of experience” (2009:6, emphasis in original). This is a place and way of being where one is suspended between worlds and understanding; “between what can and cannot be entirely grasped” (2009:xii).

Of particular importance are the critical moments and possibilities of change that arise in one’s experience of the in-between. These “border situations” occur when “we come up against the limits of language, the limits of our strength, [and] the limits of our knowledge.” Despite their difficulty, these situations open people “to new ways of understanding our being-in-the-world, new ways of connecting with others” (Jackson 2009:xii). As Jackson states, “It would seem that for all human beings, regardless of their worldviews, it is in border situations... that they are most susceptible to those epiphanies, breakthroughs, conversions, and revelations that are sometimes associated with the divine

and sometimes taken as evidence of the finitude, uncertainty, and thrownness of human existence” (2009:102).

What Jackson and the literature more broadly fail to do, however, is to detail just *how* these transformations occur. Important questions remain, for example, about the processes by which people understand their circumstances and how they devise, in creative and even prophetic ways, new ways of being and relating as they work to move away from the edge. A comparative study of their motivations, timing, methods, and practices, therefore, is required.

### ***Understanding Peacemaking and Placemaking***

I argue that these creative processes and movements are most usefully understood as processes of peacemaking and placemaking, as people and places are actively, imaginatively, and peacefully refashioned. My review of existing and relevant literature begins with the idea that places are not fixed and bounded locales; rather a place is like an event – a gathering or particular configuration of humans, other organisms, and things. Places thus emerge in close conversation with their inhabitants, through the pathways, activities, and movements of everyday life (Casey 1996:25, Ingold 2009).

This active and interactive view of people and place is particularly interesting because it suggests that placemaking happens in the same fashion, by altering, perhaps strategically, the configuration of inhabitants and things as well as people’s pathways, activities, and movements. In many ways this is what Steven Feld and Keith Basso already suggest when they say that placemaking is concerned with “the cultural processes and practices through which places are rendered meaningful – through which, one might

say, places are actively sensed” (Feld and Basso 1996:7). The emphasis here is squarely on the place-makers, as their local voices are what animate a place to begin with (Basso 1996:8).

Also relevant is theory on the social and political mediation of place. Fred Myers argues, for example, that people are taught and disciplined to experience the world in certain ways, rendering place as something that is “already constituted in social relations” (Myers 2000:77-78). Places, therefore, “are not only the environment of experience; they are also objectifications of previous experience and process” (2000:79). Furthermore, places assume value based on “their capacity to mediate relationships of shared identity and difference, of hierarchy and equality within a regional sociopolitical system” (2000:99).

To the social and political mediation of place, one might also add the *moral* mediation of place. Particularly relevant of the existing literature is Keith Basso’s *Wisdom Sits in Places*, an ethnography of the meaning and significance of Apache places and place names and their corresponding conceptions and narratives of history, morals, and ‘wisdom.’ Here placemaking is more than just dwelling or sensory perception; it is a form of imaginative, cultural and moral activity, “a common response to common curiosities – what happened here? who was involved? what was it like? why should it matter?” (Basso 1996:5). As Basso further elaborates, “... place-making is a way of constructing history itself, of inventing it, of fashioning novel versions of ‘what happened here.’ For every developed place-world manifests itself as a possible state of affairs, and whenever these constructions are accepted by other people as credible and convincing – or plausible and provocative, or arresting and intriguing – they enrich the common stock

on which everyone can draw to muse on past events, interpret their significance, and imagine them anew” (Basso 1996:6).

Related to this work is consideration of the multiple ways in which places are ‘inscribed’ with meaning, for example through narratives, the written word, naming, storytelling, mapping, poetry, and music. The inscription of place has to do with how humans “form meaningful relationships with the locales they occupy... [and] “write” in an enduring way their presence on their surroundings” (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003:13).

These processes, however, are rarely so simple or straightforward: “placemaking involves multiple acts of remembering and imagining which inform each other in complex ways” (Basso 1996:5). Ultimately its significance is that “what people make of their places is closely connected to what they make of themselves... if place-making is a way of constructing the past... it is also a way of constructing social traditions and, in the process, personal and social identities. We *are*, in a sense, the place-worlds we imagine” (1996:5, emphasis in original).

Such frameworks of placemaking are particularly relevant and useful for investigations of urban dwelling, where the close and often crowded intersection of people and place is mediated by a broad range of social, environmental, political, cultural, and moral concerns and interactions. A small sampling of existing ethnographies on urban placemaking includes Gregory’s study of African American activism and placemaking in New York, City (1999); a study of place attachment, political and economic marginality, and the moral geography of rural-urban divide in Southeast Madagascar (Thomas 2002); a study of gay life and urban placemaking in Manila

(Collins 2005); and research on art, cultural politics, and placemaking in North Central Philadelphia (Miller 2005). A basic review of existing literature found no studies explicitly focused on urban placemaking in New Orleans.

### ***The Moral, Ethical, and Religious Groundings of Peacemakers and Placemakers***

Underlying processes of placemaking are key moral, religious, and spiritual ideas and frameworks. These are the local values and ways of moral understanding and being that guide individuals' conceptions and formations of the world (past, present, and future), as well as their extension of beliefs and practices more broadly in the refashioning of larger collectives, social institutions, and societies. To explore these foundations and processes, I work through and expand from existing literature on 'lived religion,' frameworks for the organization and movement of moral and religious communities, and a fairly recent approach to the ethnographic study of moralities. I work ultimately to understand how 'wisdom' sits in urban places – particularly how lives and social-geographic worlds are remade in the face of adversity and radical change. I argue that 'wisdom,' as it is locally conceived, experienced, and practiced, factors into the ways that places are configured, sensed, reinvented, and otherwise made meaningful, and that these processes and created worlds in turn reflect on the social-spiritual life and meaning of the place-makers themselves.

### **Expanding the Study of Lived Religion**

Existing literature within the study of "lived religion" is situated "amid the ordinary concerns of life, at the junctures of self and culture, family and social world"

(Orsi 2002:172). As such the inquiry works to reveal the ways in which moral and religious concerns are embedded and developed within everyday life and experience. In an edited volume by David Hall exploring lived religion in America, the concept is traced from its naissance within French sociology of religion to its comparatively recent application in North American contexts (Hall 1997, see also Hervieu-Léger 1997).

The work of Robert Orsi, an American historian and scholar of religion, has particular relevance. Orsi argues that it is through the study of lived religion that scholars work to understand “what people do with religious idioms, how they use them, what they make of themselves and their worlds with them, and how, in turn, men, women, and children are fundamentally shaped by the worlds they are making as they make these worlds” (Orsi 2002:172). In this view, religion is something that people actively engage with, take up, and use, and the process in turn shapes both people and place.

Orsi argues further that the study of lived religion is particularly valuable in complex and insecure settings; for example, in the investigation of religious conflict and violence. Lived religion, as he states, “disabuses us of any lingering commitment to order or coherence and instead attunes us to tragedy, sorrow, and grief. It tracks the explosive consequences for people, families, and political worlds at the juncture of intimate experience with political and social realities” (2002:173). In this view even seemingly private religious practices such as prayer are inextricably linked to larger conditions and realities: “In circumstances of great urgency, distress, anxiety, and pain... prayer is often the language spoken in these ruptures and to these ruptures” (2002:173).

Orsi’s ethnographic contributions include his work on community formation and everyday religious practice in American Catholicism (1985, 1996), his study of the urban

religious landscape in American cities (1999), and his essay on the relevance of the study of lived religion “to the world we live in” (2002). Other ethnographies that explicitly focus on lived religion include Joel Robbins’ work on Christianity, cultural change, and lived religious experience in Papua New Guinea (Robbins 2004a); and a recent text by Elizabeth Koepping on lived religion in Australia and Borneo. Koepping explores how religion is defined in terms of everyday life and activity, for example food, relationships, and rituals rather than through particular beliefs and ideologies” (Koepping 2008:73).

I argue that it is through a continued focus on everyday life and activity that the study of lived religion can best proceed, exploring in particular the practices and relationships that reflect and represent more broadly based moral, spiritual, and religious beliefs and doctrines. The focus would be on what people do in multiple contexts – how they configure and reconfigure their lives and social worlds, both within and outside of religious, civic, or other institutions, and how they extend from their beliefs and practices at the local level to various and often simultaneous kinds of outward expressions and involvements. An understanding of this *multi*-religiousness and everyday morality would lead also to an investigation of *inter*-religiousness, exploring the degree of interaction or exchange between moral and religious communities and the commonalities and differences in their practices and corresponding views of the world.

#### Moral and Religious Communities: Frameworks, Organization, and Movement

It is equally important to explore the core values themselves, their individual and collective development and expression, and the growth and organization of moral and religious communities. Anthropological and related approaches to this inquiry most



commonly trace back to Durkheim's sociology of ethics. Durkheim viewed religion as a stabilizing and unifying force in modern society – one concerned with “generating the overarching values and predetermined meanings around which the privatized, institutionally differentiated and culturally pluralistic societies of modernity are integrated and their natural identity sustained” (Tole 1993:2). For Durkheim “morality is socially constituted, and differs across time and place according to the very structures of each society.... Further, each member... is obliged to follow the moral rules of their own particular society, for the overwhelming force that society holds over each of them compels them to do so” (Zigon 2007:132, see also Durkheim 1957[1915]:206–9).

Running contrary to the unifying force of religion, however, is what Durkheim describes as “an alarming poverty of morality,” one that disconnects people from their social obligations and responsibilities (Durkheim 1951[1897]:387). These obligations and responsibilities “arise first and foremost out of the fundamentally emotional nature of group life, and... later find their rational formulation in moral codes, religious precepts, and ethical systems” (Tole 1993:25). Put another way, moral codes, religious precepts, and ethical systems work to build communal solidarity, and work against the egoistic and atomistic existence of the individual (Tole 1993:26). These ideas are further developed in Durkheim's later essays on civic morals and professional ethics, concerned with “the delineation of a moral domain... the relationship between individual and collective responsibility and justice, and... contextualized morality” (Howell 1997:7).

In its attempt to describe the contemporary organization and function of moral and religious communities, however, and given the view of morality as socially constituted and existing for the purpose of society rather than the individual, Durkheim's

theory leaves us with a somewhat hollow frame. I argue, therefore, that this empty category can be filled with evidence, documentation, and analysis of people's ethical imperatives. Particularly, and as the case studies of this dissertation demonstrate, within contemporary fragile and unstable settings where people exist on the edge of change, there is a very real sense of obligation and duty for things that must and should be done to overcome the hardships of life. Fueled by their moral and religious beliefs, people thus respond both individually and collectively and work to ease tensions, protect the vulnerable, improve conditions, and actively create the forms and structures of a secure, stable, and just society. To examine this sense of obligation and moral imperative in the current context is to retrospectively reread Durkheim through Kant.

The move allows for a closer and more locally situated examination of the beliefs and actions of people within moral and religious communities. It also allows for an examination of the way that these groups then grow and expand, connecting to larger social and political agendas, forms of civic engagement, and overall social change (Levine 1986:96, see also Gill 2001 for a more recent review of religion and comparative politics). Levine, for example, proposes that religion has a 'consolidating power,' referring to "the peculiar ability of religious metaphors, places, and rituals to sum up and intensify experience... by joining everyday events to a sense of supernatural intervention and by reinforcing religious ideas with material resources and a net of repeated human interactions. This is what religious organizations and rituals *do*, and this is why they are so powerful at unifying behavior across social levels and in different arenas and walks of life" (Levine 1986:97, emphasis in original).

Additional and relevant literature on religious organization includes examinations of religious revitalization, conversion, and resistance movements as well as more recent research on new social movements where religion is a key feature or concern. A useful review article by Richard Vokes on the anthropology of religious change (2007), for example, begins with contributions such as Anthony F. C. Wallace's study of revitalization movements (1956), Peter Worsley's study of cargo cults in Melanesia (1957), and studies of religious conversion in Africa from Horton (1971) and Comaroff and Comaroff (1991). The survey extends to more recent scholarship, ranging from Harkin's reexamination of revitalization movements (2004) to studies of new religious movements, for example Robbins' study of the globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity (2004b) and Beeman's examination of religious extremism in the Middle East and Muslim world (2001).<sup>7</sup>

Scholars engaged with these inquiries are increasingly revealing, however, that the organization and mobilization of moral and religious communities isn't always successful or without challenge. Religion does not always consolidate, unify, or promote social order and measurable progress towards an idealized state of the world. Bruce Lincoln, for example, points out the diverse human agendas that underlie the way in which religion and morality are constructed. He states, "Rather than being a divine and unyielding ground of morality, religion begins with a human discourse that constructs itself

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<sup>7</sup> Many other influential texts on moral and religious organization could be added to this list, from anthropology and related disciplines. They include Harris' study of African American religious activism (1999), Gifford's work on Pentecostalism in relation to contemporary economic and political conditions in Ghana (2004), Mahmood's research on piety in Islam (2005), and Keane's work on religious conversion in the mission encounter (Keane 2007). Also important to mention is work that focuses on religious organization and movement on the fringe of society. As Nancy Ammerman writes in her study of congregation and religious life in America, "...the first step in reconstructing what we think we know about the world is listening to the voices – the stories – of those at the margins" (Ammerman 1994:2).

as divine and unfailing, through which deeds – any deeds – can be defined as moral (Lincoln 2003:26).

These various agendas, belief systems, and moral views collide and compete as much if not more than they converge, complicating ideas of religious pluralism and visions of interreligious cooperation. Particularly after 9/11, and given the degree of religious extremism and violence still in existence around the world, scholarly work is increasingly concerned with the discord and conflict that exists within and between moral and religious groups (Lukens-Bull 2005, McGilvray 2008). In response new and more flexible definitions of religion have emerged that better accommodate the reality of moral and religious organization in private as well as public and political spheres (Orsi 2002, Asad 2003, Lincoln 2003, Smith 2004).

#### Ethnography of Moralities and ‘Wisdom’ Set in Places

Finally, one additional and important inquiry that sheds light on the moral, ethical, religious, and other dimensions of peacemaking and placemaking is a recent “ethnography of moralities.” The basic questions that guide this inquiry include: “How is ethical knowledge grounded? Who defines and enforces what is right and wrong? Which social domains most profoundly articulate moral values and which are most (or least) affected by such?” (Howell 1997:4). Foundational texts for this work include an early anthropological study of ethics (Edel and Edel 1959), a study of morality and the concept of the person among the Gahuku-Gama (Read 1955), as well as the more recent edited volume on the ethnography of moralities (Howell 1997).

Ethnographic work on local moralities has followed two predominant approaches, as reviewed by Zigon (2007). The first is a moral reasoning and choice approach (Howell 1997, Robbins 2004, Laidlaw 2002) and the second focuses on a dispositional or virtue ethics, considering how persons make themselves into “properly attuned moral persons” by training through a set of certain practices (Zigon 2007:133, see also Widlock 2004, Mahmood 2005, Hirschkind 2006). Also relevant are inquiries on moral life and being, which place the person at the center rather than a set of rules or processes. The focus is on self-reflection and one’s moral and ethical understanding and vision of the world. This work intersects with studies of kinship and relatedness – exploring for example the conceptions of morality and the moral bonds and mutual trust that form between humans, as well as the processes by which people are kept separate and cut off from one another (McKinley 2001, Kleinman 2006, Fricke 2008, and Zigon 2009). Such ideas have important philosophical roots; drawing for example from scholars such as Alasdair MacIntyre (1966, 1981), Charles Taylor (1985), and Iris Murdoch (1967).

Another important approach within the ethnography of moralities focuses on ways of moral imagination and speculation, for example the use of stories, fables, and parables to creatively consider possible courses of action and to deal with moral and social dilemmas. Examples include T.O. Beidelman’s work on the moral imagination of the Kaguru (Beidelman 1980, 1986) as well as Keith Basso’s aforementioned work on place, language, wisdom, and morality among the Western Apache of Cibecque, Arizona (Basso 1996). Basso’s work is especially inspirational; his understanding of the ways and places of ‘wisdom,’ as the concept is communicated to him by the Western Apache, reveals how placemaking occurs through a process of repeated journeying as people connect at specific

sites to ancestral knowledge and moral narratives. It is then through the critical application of these narratives that the past is understood and the present refashioned.

According to the Western Apache, ‘wisdom’ is a state of being, characterized by a smooth, steady, and resilient state of mind. As Dudley Patterson, one of Basso’s key informants explains: "Wisdom sits in places. It's like water that never dries up. You need to drink water to stay alive, don't you? Well, you also need to drink from places. You must remember everything about them. You must learn their names. You must remember what happened at them long ago. You must think about it and keep on thinking about it. Then your mind will become smoother and smoother. Then you will see danger before it happens. You will walk a long way and live a long time. You will be wise. People will respect you" (Basso 1996:127).

Basso further describes the Apache concept of ‘wisdom’ (*igoya’I*) as a “heightened mental capacity” and form of prescient thinking “that facilitates the avoidance of harmful events by detecting threatening circumstances when none are apparent.” Cultivation occurs by “acquiring relevant bodies of knowledge and applying them critically to the workings of one's mind” (Basso 1996:130). Having wisdom, “...men and women are able to foresee disaster, fend off misfortune, and avoid explosive conflicts with other persons. For these and other reasons, they are highly respected and often live to be very old. Likened to water because of its life-sustaining properties, wisdom is viewed first and foremost as an instrument of survival” (Feld and Basso 1996:73).

This inquiry inspires my research on peacemaking and placemaking in New Orleans. I argue that ‘wisdom’ also sits in urban places, and it is through the cultivation

of this state of being that people attempt in similar ways to foresee disaster, ward off misfortune and conflict, and survive in the face of vulnerability and uncertainty. Working through their various moral and religious narratives and related forms of practice and engagement, residents access and acquire relevant bodies of knowledge. This knowledge is site-specific, emerging within particular communities and places across the urban social and geographic landscape: for example at churches, temples, shrines, public ceremonial places, and sites of loss and remembering such as crime sites and memorials. This knowledge is then applied to everyday life at the local level of placemaking, and in the development of ‘wisdom’ and new ways of being.

Given the density, complexity, and scale of the city, however, I argue that this is not a whole and singular moral geography; rather there are multiple sites and stories connected to diverse neighborhood communities and groups all over town. There are also, therefore, multiple understandings of ‘wisdom’ itself. Residents, for example, might describe a desired state of being that has to do with acceptance and healing, justice, security, resilience, or peace. My research, therefore, explores how the various approaches to peacemaking and placemaking compare and coexist and how people express and communicate their ideas across their differences. However, in a city where people are continually confronted with destruction, violent loss, and death; and where so many others are gone, forgotten, or still displaced; I argue that the process and cultivation of ‘wisdom,’ across communities and geographies, can broadly be understood to be about the restoration, relocation, and remaking of humanity in this particular place and time.

I further expand on Basso’s work by suggesting that placemaking (and peacemaking) are retrospective *and* prospective processes. People work to reconcile and

learn from the past while also envisioning and shaping the present and the future. Thus the local forms of wisdom and moral placemaking are extended more broadly – socially, conceptually, and geographically. The objective is to promote moral transformation at all levels, from the individual and community to the level of city and society; across all regions, from the margins to the center and to the margins again; and across all forms of time, the past, present, and the future – as it is understood and imagined.

Beyond the local level, my research explores what can be learned from New Orleans. I explore, for example, how the people there might share their experiences, knowledge, and ‘wisdom’ with the rest of the world, particularly with those facing similar circumstances and challenges. How might their forward motion, toward an envisioned state of well-being, security, harmony, and peace, inform and impact the similar progression of other peoples and places?

### **Research Methodology**

To explore and test this theory of moral peacemaking and placemaking, I conducted a two year period of continuous fieldwork in New Orleans (July 2007 – July 2009). Once established in the field, I selected four religious communities for comparative study. My initial approach, research methods, and participant groups are detailed below, followed by a summary and outline of the data and chapters presented in this dissertation.

My overall position and place in the field is significant to note. While this was the first time I had lived in New Orleans as a full time resident, I was not entirely a newcomer. Some of my immediate family members, including my father and stepmother,



have lived in the city for over thirty years. As a child and young adult I visited them frequently, spending weeks and months at a time over summers and holidays. New Orleans, therefore, has always been like a second home.

In the summer of 2007, however, I encountered a radically changed environment. It was nearly two years after Hurricane Katrina and even though my arrival was eased by an already close personal connection, I entered into a city that was in many ways foreign territory. Many neighborhoods were completely destroyed, there were new routes and ways of getting around, social and other networks were restructuring in different ways, and many of the city's previous residents had not yet recovered or returned.

My immediate family members were among those who lost their homes. My father and stepmother's house flooded from the levee breach at the 17<sup>th</sup> Street Canal as the water flowed south, filling up the bowl and resting at a depth of approximately two to four feet in their neighborhood. It turned out to be the lesser of two disasters, for the house burned down to the ground about a week later, along with seven other townhomes attached on either side. A raging fire – one of several across the city during this time – had begun in the house next door. The cause remains unknown. The impact, however, was so great that an entire city block was essentially erased. While no one was injured, it was altogether a tremendous loss.

As I assisted my family with their recovery, I was impressed and moved by their strength and resilience and I began to follow the process more formally, obtaining their permission to conduct an initial inquiry from afar on houses and house-life, the experience of loss, and the differing and competing determinations of value, loss, and compensation that often strain the relationship between people (property owners) and

institutions (insurance agencies). The research provided a very useful understanding of the ways that residents must navigate and negotiate as they work to regain footing after a disaster or major crisis.

My family chose not to rebuild, but they have remained in the area since the storm. The introductions they facilitated were particularly valuable as I oriented to this new terrain. I found housing in the city and began to expand my social and research networks, establishing myself first in my own neighborhood and then developing connections in other areas. I worked in particular to make contacts within local religious communities in order to identify and eventually select the case studies for my project. Much of this work began through informal conversations with family, friends, and neighbors, who introduced me to local clergy and congregations.

I eventually selected and immersed myself within four religious groups in Orleans Parish. These were: An uptown Catholic “peace prayer” group; an Episcopal social justice ministry for victims of violence; an inner city Baptist church leading anti-violence and grief recovery ministries; and practitioners of Haitian Vodou conducting “anticrime ceremonies” for healing in targeted city neighborhoods. The selection of these groups was based primarily on the desire to have a representative sample, in accordance with regional surveys of religious affiliation. Some groups were selected, however, to enhance my comparative perspective, for example between communities at the center of society and more marginalized groups.

I searched also for groups with existing ministries and programs addressing the problem of urban violence, whose members were already concerned with the peaceful redevelopment of the community and city. While this approach was perhaps self-

selective, it allowed for a close comparison of groups and activities, and an analysis of similarities and differences among those already committed to these concerns. I also worked to ensure a locally representative sample of participants within and across groups, taking ethnic, religious, socioeconomic, and geographic diversity into account. Finally, my selection of religious groups was dependent on the receptivity and access afforded to me by clergy, spiritual leaders, and group members.

I first gained access to the Catholic community through the Ursuline Convent and National Votive Shrine to Our Lady of Prompt Succor, in the uptown section of New Orleans.<sup>8</sup> Our Lady of Prompt Succor, a local appellation of the Virgin Mary, is the patroness of the city and state. Devotion to her has been developed by the Ursuline Sisters of New Orleans since the late eighteenth century, following their arrival to New Orleans from France and their establishment of a convent and school in the *Vieux Carré*.

Devotion to Our Lady is closely associated with the protection and healing of the city and its residents. It is common, for example, to pray to her during hurricane season or whenever a threat of disaster or crisis exists. In addition, an extension of the devotion with specific relation to urban violence has been in existence since the mid 1990s. This is a small “peace prayer” group whose members – mostly semi-retired, wealthy, white Catholic women – meet once a month to pray for an end to local violence and for the moral and religious conversion of non-believers. In the recovery period, they focus specifically on rebuilding a city and society that will exist in accordance with the laws and teachings of the Church.

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<sup>8</sup>I present the religious communities of my study in the order in which I encountered them. There are many alternate ways to list these groups; for example one might trace their historical development, relative size, or geographic position.

My investigation led next to a community of Vodou practitioners. *La Source Ancienne Sosyete Ounfu* is a religious society based in the Bywater neighborhood in New Orleans' Ninth Ward. They are one group within the larger New Orleans Voodoo community, which emerges from the interaction of people and cosmologies from West Africa and the Caribbean, along with the strong influence of Roman Catholicism. The leaders and members of this particular group, however, are mostly white, although they are open to all and situated within a mixed income and ethnically diverse neighborhood. The group is therefore representative of the diversification and current expansion of the local Voodoo tradition, and part also of the tension and controversy that exists regarding the history and legacy of the religion, its future, and place in the city and world.

Group members, many of them initiated in Haitian Vodou, are dedicated to serving the *Lwa* (spirits) through devotion, prayer, music, and offerings. Ceremonies are held weekly in a small temple behind the private residence of the *Manbo* (Vodou priestess). These ceremonies are open to the public as well as other popular and annual events including a "Hurricane Protection Ceremony" that jointly honors Our Lady of Prompt Succor and her "counterpart" in Haitian Vodou, the *Lwa* Ezili Danto. Non-sacrificial offerings are made to ask for protection of residents and the city at large.

The society also works for healing; particularly the restoration of energetic "balance" and the maintenance of order in communities impacted by violent crime. "Neighborhood healing" and "anticrime" ceremonies are offered upon request, with the explicit involvement of the community and in targeted locations. In these ceremonies, group members call on particular *Lwa*, especially Ogou, to restore order, render judgment, and affect change. The society also focuses on community based projects and

cooperatives that provide vital services to some of the city's most vulnerable neighborhoods and populations.

My third case study is based at New Hope Baptist Church, in the Central City neighborhood of New Orleans; a church with one of the most visible local ministries against violent crime. A predominantly African American congregation of approximately 1500 members, New Hope's ministry has included initiatives like the "Thou Shalt Not Kill" campaign mentioned earlier in this introduction. In addition, the church offers grief recovery programs and support for those directly impacted by violence, and church clergy and parishioners conduct prayer vigils, anticrime walks, and other religious demonstrations across the city. Their work is targeted especially at the health and security of the African American community and the problem of black-on-black crime as post-Katrina redevelopment proceeds. More broadly, the church is committed to worship, religious transformation, mission work, service, and religious education and outreach, especially in underserved communities.

The fourth and final religious community selected for case study is St. Anna's Episcopal Church, located in the Tremé, a historically diverse French, Creole, and now predominantly African-American neighborhood adjacent to the French Quarter. St. Anna's has a diverse congregation with an active social justice ministry focused since 2005 on victims of violence in the New Orleans metropolitan area. Much of this work centers on the maintenance of the "murder board," a large sign and public memorial affixed to the front exterior wall of the church, which lists each murder victim by name, age, gender, date, and method of death. The board is updated weekly. The ministry also includes several related programs including the weekly delivery of memorial roses – a

rose for each person killed – to city officials, and the recitation of murder victims’ names during prayer in weekly church services.

More broadly, the activities of clergy and parishioners at St. Anna’s include worship, religious education, outreach, and advocacy in the community, focusing in particular on ministry and services for youth. The aim is to instill a value of life and to honor the humanity of each person impacted by violence, regardless of social or economic status. The group is overall committed to the religious transformation that comes through social justice work rather than being dependent on, or attached to, a specific outcome or measure of success.

Immersing myself within each of these groups to the fullest extent possible, I used an ethnographic, ethnohistoric, and social-geographic approach for data collection. I observed and participated in worship services, ceremonies, ministries, religious education, and related programs, in order to gain a sense and experience of the beliefs and practices of each group. I also conducted unstructured and semi-structured interviews with clergy and parishioners, and spoke with members of the broader community including neighbors, community leaders, and city officials and personnel.

In interviews I worked to solicit narratives of belief and experience, often starting with questions about religious upbringing and affiliation, social history and connection to New Orleans, and opinions about the state of recovery and the direction of the city. These questions and topics were on the whole easy for people to discuss, and participants provided valuable data on their social and religious histories, beliefs, and current orientations. My initial interview questions were designed also to prepare participants for an extended and more intimate exchange on topics that were more emotionally difficult,

for example one's experience with disaster, violence, loss, and recovery. These topics, however, also arose on their own, as part of a larger discussion on the current state of the city and continuing vulnerabilities and social problems.

The problem of urban violence, for example, was already a concern for most participants and a topic of frequent debate and discussion in daily life. However, as many participants had direct experience with violence and some had even lost loved ones, interviews often triggered painful memories and expressions of grief, anger, and other powerful emotions. I worked to prepare participants by discussing the intent of the study and the potential emotional impact, and by offering everyone the opportunity to decline or withdraw at any point. In all cases I obtained proper informed consent and worked to ensure that interview questions were ethically sound and posed. Over the course of my fieldwork I conducted approximately 120 interviews, spread out across the four communities in my study, and participated in countless informal conversations and exchanges.

To understand the social and geographic position of these communities, I conducted archival research on the history and development of each denomination as well as the particular history and growth of each group. I relied primarily on historic documents in local archives, such as the Historic New Orleans Collection, Tulane University's Amistad Center, and the City of New Orleans Archives. I also used archival materials housed at local archdioceses and in individual places of worship.

I studied also the history of the group in relation to patterns and conditions of local development or decline. I paid particularly close attention to the social-geographic impact of disaster, related conditions of vulnerability and resilience building, and the

history and incidence of violent crime, all in relation to the course and pace of redevelopment. For this aspect of my research, I relied on archival sources such as city planning documents and maps, as well as additional open source materials including crime statistics and police reports. I supplemented this data with my own visual documentation of sites and activities, through photography and video recording.

### **Outline of Chapters**

I present the findings of my research in the six chapters that follow. Chapter 1 focuses on the ‘site’ and ‘situation’, introducing the City of New Orleans and exploring its unique position in Southeast Louisiana as a fragile but dynamic urban delta. The chapter works to establish the mutually constituted relationship between people and place, including the specific ways in which people orient to and navigate the various landscapes and waterways that make up this complex terrain. The chapter thus sets the stage for an examination of “deltaic experience,” a liminal way of being that emerges within this environment shaped by persistent vulnerability and constant change.

The chapter also offers a brief and condensed history of the City of New Orleans, focused especially the diversity and interaction of the cultural groups that inhabit the region. Overall I present the city as a complex social-ecological system, and I describe some of the environmental, urban, and social tensions that have and continue to shape life here. This includes a summary of the impact of Hurricane Katrina, the progress of recovery and redevelopment, and an overview of the history and incidence of violent crime both before and after the storm. The chapter also discusses the various pathways residents take to security and peace, and the role of religion in supporting these processes



and actions. The local religious history and current religiosity of the city and region are also reviewed, as a way to introduce and situate the more in-depth analyses and case studies that follow. The chapter concludes with my own introduction and presence in the city as a fieldworker and resident, as I orient to these same conditions and concerns.

Chapters 2 through 5 focus on the four religious communities themselves. For each case study, I present the history and social-geography of the group, working to understand their place and position within the city and society. This includes details of their origins and development as well as their current demographics and membership. I also discuss the impact of Hurricane Katrina on each community and congregation.

The bulk of each of these chapters, however, focuses on the experience of vulnerability and violence and the range of responses by religious leaders and group members. I rely upon the rich narratives of participants, setting their voices and viewpoints front and center, with my own experiences and observations for background and context. Collectively, the chapters present rich and compelling descriptions of theologies and beliefs, the moral and religious stories that emerge from these groups, and the comparative details of worship, anti-violence and peace ministries, and related practices, programs, and initiatives.

Each case study also represents a particular aspect of moral peacemaking and placemaking. In Chapter 2, the case study for the Our Lady of Prompt Succor Peace Prayer Group, the focus is on the intimate spiritual relationships that people form with divine peacemakers and placemakers; the importance of prayer as a form of direct communication, interaction, and source of collective power; and the fine line that some groups walk between religious engagement in the private sphere or more public and

political involvements. In Chapter 3, the beliefs and activities of the Vodou group, La Source Ancienne, reveal the complexity of religious diversification and change and the tensions that exist between “traditional” and new ways of practice. The case study at New Hope Baptist Church, presented in Chapter 4, demonstrates the various forms of moral and religious education in the public sphere, and the embodied processes of peacemaking and placemaking that take group members out of formal settings and into the surrounding streets and neighborhoods. Finally, Chapter 5 focuses on the ministry for victims of violence at St. Anna’s Episcopal Church and demonstrates the naming and remembering the dead as a way of “placing,” and the intersection of moral and religious engagement with social justice work.

In the concluding chapter, I consider these religious practitioners as “blessed placemakers,” exploring and comparing the overlap of peacemaking and placemaking agendas in the urban delta. I pay particularly close attention to the specific characteristics and spiritual orientations of “edge-people” – how they survive and even thrive in the space in-between. I compare their motivations, timing, methods, and practices as they attempt to create a more stable, permanent, and peaceful world.

I focus also on what they envision – their various understandings of ‘wisdom.’ I look along the way for the points of convergence or difference between these visions and understandings, reviewing the moral and religious stories that each of these groups tells, and the practices with which they engage. Their motivations and methods speak volumes about the potential for social and spiritual transformation at the level of self and society. I discuss, therefore, how we can think about these movements and activities more broadly – what these groups can tell us about recovery and resilience in the face of adversity,

about the creative ways in which people work to move out of vulnerable and violent conditions and into peaceful and sustainable states of being. This knowledge is not just locally valuable; it has important significance for other populations and places undergoing change.

## CHAPTER 1: SITE AND SITUATION

### **A Gift of the River**

The oldest part of the City of New Orleans sits on the high ground of a natural levee, along the crescent shaped curve of the Mississippi River as it winds its last miles south and east towards the Gulf of Mexico. The location, a raised ridge along the river bank formed by overflow sediment from seasonal floods, was a strategic choice; the French successfully fought for and established a city and port that would ensure their control of the most important waterway between the Atlantic and the North American interior.

By all accounts from settlers, however, it was also a terrible place to build. The city sat on the edge of a low lying marsh surrounded by bodies of water on three sides. What little dry land there was lay unstable and soft, with much of it below sea level. The site, however, “was the least bad place in the swamp,” the most navigable point along the lower Mississippi, with access to a portage route that led overland from the river via Bayou St. John to Lake Pontchartrain and eventually the Gulf. It was a most advantageous position for ongoing conquest and expansion in the New World (Sublette 2008:11).

Southeast Louisiana is a vast deltaic region; a dynamic social-ecological system and a place of great exchange as humans, other organisms, the river, wetlands, sea, and the built environment all intersect. The 1,243,700 square mile Mississippi River Basin is

the largest watershed in the United States – it drains and filters about forty-one percent of the continental United States and fifteen percent of the North American continent. Thirty-one states and two Canadian provinces either partially or fully drain into the Mississippi; the outflow discharges along the southeastern coast of Louisiana with seventy percent discharged via the Mississippi River and the remaining thirty percent via the Atchafalaya River (Campanella 2006:58).

In seasonal flooding the river, rich with sediment from its long journey south, spreads across the delta, which gradually builds up barrier islands and wetlands. The land, therefore, is some of the newest in the country; it is a “thin soft alluvial ‘doormat’ cast recently out upon the continent’s margin” (Campanella 2006:38). As Herodotus once wrote of the Nile River Valley, Southeast Louisiana is in many ways, a “gift of the river” (Griffiths 1966:57).

Once a rich and fertile environment, the region is now highly vulnerable and its stability, indeed overall sustainability, is severely threatened. The wetlands are disappearing, the land is slowly sinking, and the water is rising to such a degree that the true coastline is steadily advancing north. Even the populated areas rest on fragile ground; parts of the city of New Orleans, for example, are sinking at an average rate of one inch per year (Dixon et al. 2006).

In part this is the fault of a vast engineered system of manmade levees that still struggles to redirect the course of the Mississippi River, while struggling also to protect inhabited areas from flooding. The levees prevent the natural and necessary spillover of the river and as a result the barrier islands and wetlands are not fed with new sediment. The land here is disappearing at an alarming rate of 10.3 square miles per year. The

levees meant to protect the region, therefore, have ironically increased its vulnerability, by contributing to land erosion and weakening the natural defenses against tropical storms and hurricanes. Industrial development has also taken its toll; seen for example in the wide canals and pipelines of the gas and oil industry that have further carved up the land. Overall Louisiana has lost between 2000 and 2300 square miles of coastal wetlands since the 1930s (Tibbetts 2006, National Research Council 2006, Campanella 2010). The gas and oil industry is also responsible for the devastating British Petroleum oil spill in 2010 that, by all estimates of that same year, will severely and perhaps permanently disrupt the already delicate balance of life along the Gulf Coast.

### **Deltaic Imaginings and Experience**

The ecology of Southeast Louisiana has been well studied.<sup>9</sup> Less attention has been given, however, to the interanimated and lived experience of this unique landscape. How do humans and other organisms dwell within these conditions? What is the relationship between people and place that unfolds here? In particular, what is the *experience* of the delta for humans and other dwellers? What impact and influence do inhabitants have on the deltaic landscape in turn?

Many of these questions are already current, particularly for creative and “liminal thinkers” who focus almost instinctively on the sensory exploration and understanding of being and place (Turner 1969). For instance, there is already a long and interdisciplinary list of poets, writers, artists, musicians, and others whose work has been inspired by the

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<sup>9</sup> In-depth studies include *The Ecology of Delta Marshes of Coastal Louisiana: A Community Profile*, 1984, by James G. Gosselink and Edward Pendleton (Center for Wetland Resources, Louisiana State University and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Resources), and *Coast 2050: A New Approach to Restoration of Louisiana Coastal Wetlands*, 2004, by Denise Reed and Lee Wilson. For more *social-ecological* studies see Colten 2000, 2005; Kelman 2003; and Campanella 2006, 2010.

integrated and complex nature of life and exchange at the Mississippi Delta. The author Lafcadio Hearn, for example, captured a unique sense of the place when he wrote: “The paradise of the South is here, deserted and half in ruins. I never beheld anything so beautiful and so sad. When I saw it first – sunrise over Louisiana – the tears sprang to my eyes. It was like young death...” (1908:42). Hearn alludes to the wealth of the Gulf South’s cultural and environmental resources set against often stark and persistent conditions of vulnerability and recurring disaster.

Joy Harjo, a Native American poet of Creek (Muskogee) heritage, conveys a similar mix of joy and sorrow, felt in the close integration of people, place, and time. In her poem “New Orleans,” people don’t just inhabit the delta; rather there is a “delta in the skin.” The Mississippi River holds more than water, it is a place where memory “swims deep in blood,” where “voices are buried” such as “ancestors and future children... beneath the currents stirred up by pleasure boats going up and down” (Harjo 1983:42-44).<sup>10</sup>

Even the local lore makes reference to processes of passage and filtration, within humans and the surrounding landscape. The Mississippi River, for example, in its long journey from the source in Minnesota to the mouth at the Gulf, cycles in and out of multiple municipal water and sewer systems as well as many agricultural and industrial operations before becoming the City of New Orleans’ drinking water. Some residents

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<sup>10</sup> Other examples include Tulane professor and poet Peter Cooley, whose most recent book of poetry is titled *Divine Margins*. In the poem “Correspondences,” the author takes his direction from the “undertow, swell and calm” of the Gulf waters, while mourning the passing of time and the death of a close family member (Cooley 2009). Brenda Marie Osbey, poet laureate for the State of Louisiana from 2005-2007, in her collection of poems *Ceremony for Minneconjoux*, invites one on a temporal and sensory journey – hearing “levees past silence,” “moving along the streets with an undercurrent of rhythm,” “moving to your bloodbeat and the sounds of your hands, reaching, reaching up” (Osbey 1983:5).

joke, half seriously, that by the time the water gets to New Orleans it's been through six people.

These depictions shed light on a kind of deltaic experience characterized by a close connection with the landscape, where the rhythms and dimensions of the natural world – the ebb and flow, the passage, the depth and density of water, earth, and other substances – mirror the rhythms and dimensions of everyday human existence, including life in the built environment. Here one is not merely *in* the delta; one is also *of* the delta. It is a landscape and experience teeming with life, but it is also one of constant change – loss, devastation, and death, are recurring situations. The experience of the delta, therefore, can perhaps also be described as one of suspension – a place and way of being with no firm footing, where the conditions and boundaries that structure everyday life seem impermanent and ill defined.

Similar depictions of deltaic experience exist from other parts of the world. Explorer and travel writer Wilfred Thesiger, for example, after visiting with the Madan of southern Iraq before the end of the Hashemite monarchy, described “a world complete in itself” with “canoes moving in procession down a waterway, the setting sun seen crimson through the smoke of burning reedbeds, [and] narrow waterways that wound still deeper into the Marshes” (Thesiger 2007[1964]:23). He is told by one of his hosts, “Yes by God, you won't be short of water; you will sleep in it” (2007:30). Fiction writer Graham Swift gives an equally provocative account of people, water, and passage in the Fenlands of eastern England, casting his characters as “plumbers of the land” who “strive not for but against water” (Swift 1983:13).



## *The Urban Delta*

Such characterizations are not limited to rural settings; they are equally possible at the center of urban dwelling. Thus, the City of New Orleans also exists as a “gift of the river” and the interanimation of people and place there is as evident. For example, the thin separation between land, levee, water, and one’s doorstep, is strongly perceived though not always paid attention to. One might argue further that there is an underlying sense of fragility and unsteadiness there, linked closely to the impact of past and recent disaster and the ongoing social and environmental conditions that continue to impact everyday urban life.<sup>11</sup>

Hurricane Katrina gave residents an acute sense of their vulnerability – evident in the extreme power of nature as well as the fallibility of the systems designed to ensure public safety. Unable in many ways to withstand the impact of the storm, the city literally came undone. Many residents felt powerless; limited in their ability to protect themselves and others and unable to prevent the resulting injury and death.

In the recovery period, residents work to reestablish their lives in a radically changed urban landscape and on a still unprotected and deteriorating deltaic plain. In addition to the seasonal threat of inclement weather and other environmental vulnerabilities such as rising water levels in canals, the river, and the lake, there is also the ongoing threat and impact of poor human and social conditions. Especially acute in

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<sup>11</sup> Despite the predominant focus on the rural delta, there has been a recent surge of interest in urban deltaic environments. This includes, for example, an inquiry emerging in fields such as geography and urban planning on “delta urbanism.” The American Planning Association has published a series on the subject, with the first two volumes focused on delta urbanism in New Orleans and in the Netherlands respectively (Campanella 2010, Meyer et al. 2010). In New Orleans the study pays attention to the relationship between humans and the landscape, including controversial post-Katrina proposals that seek to eliminate certain at-risk neighborhoods to better tailor the span and footprint of the city to what the geography can support (Campanella 2010). Despite the contribution and value of this work and based on a preliminary review of related literature, studies of the *lived experience* of the urban delta remain few in number.

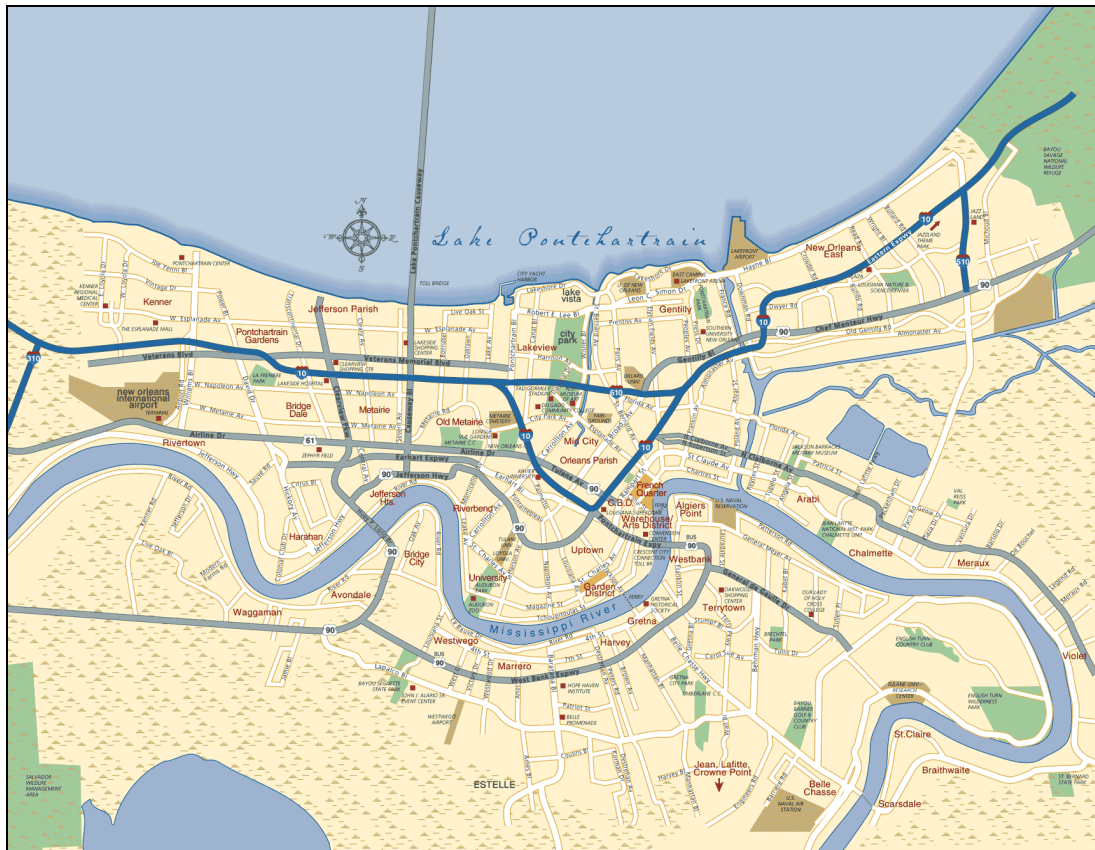
the inner city they include: poverty, unemployment, a substandard educational system, inflated housing prices, a lack of affordable health care options, and a rate of violent crime that is exceedingly high in certain areas. All of this is further complicated by budget constraints, charges of corruption, and struggles for power that have unfortunately become characteristic of local government in New Orleans.

This sense of vulnerability and fragility is tied in large part to one's connection to and experience of the urban landscape, embedded and expressed within even the simplest of details, orientations, and movements. The river, for example, is a constant companion; the path of most major roadways is influenced by its curve and course. It is even used to specify location; instead of relying on cardinal directions, for example, residents refer to the river's current. "Uptown" is generally considered to be the area of the city located upriver from the Central Business District and "downtown" encompasses the Central Business District and the French Quarter downriver, along with neighboring *faubourgs* on either side until the parish line. Lake Pontchartrain also exerts its influence; for example one can be either on the "lake side" or the "river side" of St. Charles Avenue.

Residents are also acutely aware of their position in vertical space. The highest land is found along the levee at the river's edge, where the elevation reaches in some places to around twenty feet. From there the terrain slopes downward towards the lake, descending into the flood plain and former cypress backswamp to approximately five feet below sea level in the Broadmoor, Central City, and Mid-City neighborhoods. The land rises again slightly at the Metairie/Gentilly ridge then falls again to as much as ten feet below sea level in and around neighborhoods such as Lakeview, Gentilly, Pontchartrain

Park, and New Orleans East before reaching the final elevated stretch of manmade waterfront along the shores of Lake Pontchartrain.

In addition to being geographically and topographically oriented to the river, one is emotionally and even spiritually attuned as well. Here the Mississippi is a wide and muddy brown span, descending to an approximate depth of 200 feet at Algiers Point on the West Bank of Orleans Parish. The size and volume of the river is matched also by its commercial and cultural significance, both as a transportation route and as one of the city's most important features, very closely linked to local history and cultural identity. Many residents are drawn to its edge, searching for direct access and view beyond the floodwalls and manmade levees.



**Map 1: City of New Orleans with Path and Course of Mississippi River**  
Image Source: [www.iscas2007.org/norleans.htm#city](http://www.iscas2007.org/norleans.htm#city)

Uptown at “The Fly”, for example, the long stretch of green fields running behind Audubon Park Zoo, the river comes into full and unobstructed view. There one can stretch out in the shade between the hot Sunday barbeque grills and the children’s birthday parties. The river bank is right there, sloping down a short rocky incline, and the barges and tugboats pass by directly in front – so close that crew members sometimes wave and call out to the sunbathers on the grass. Walking along the levee, one can follow the dog walkers on a small trail down to a muddy patch of low trees and a hidden beach. Sitting on washed up railroad ties next to a dubious industrial facility with pipes coming out of the ground, one can watch the dogs splash in the pale brown water. It makes for a relaxing afternoon but it smells a bit there, and is not a place to linger after sunset.

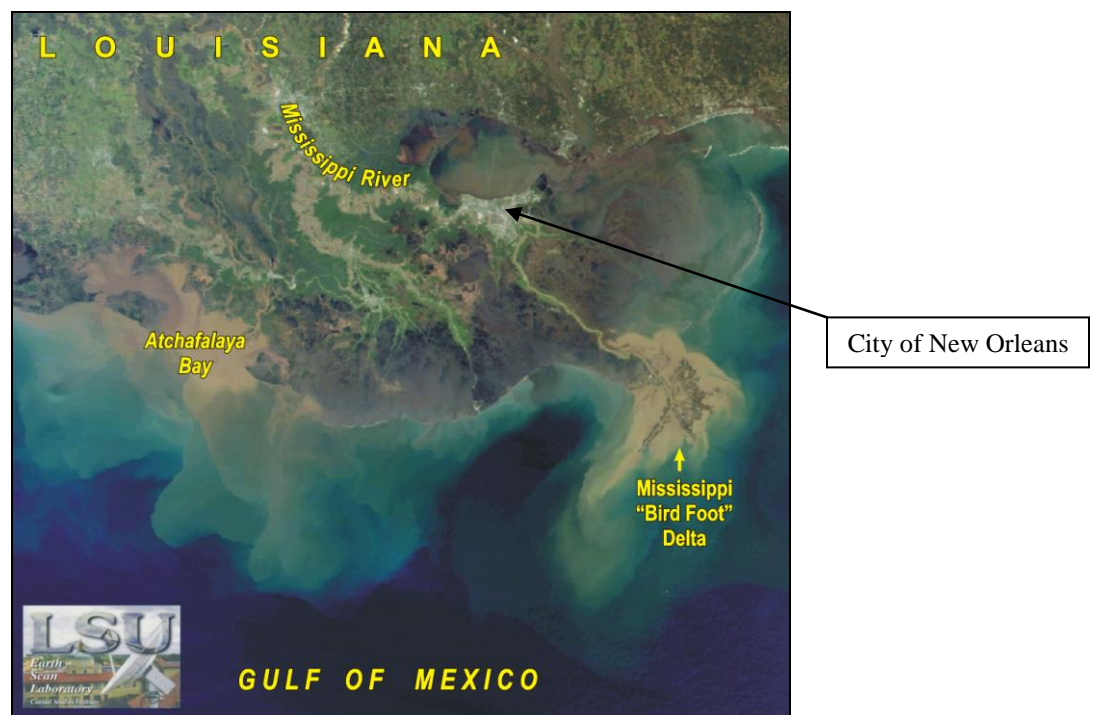


**Image 2. The Mississippi River at "The Fly." Photo by author.**

Following the river’s current in the opposite direction one winds slowly around, past the wharfs at the Port of New Orleans, past the Central Business District, and alongside the River Walk in the French Quarter before curving again to the south and east to define the edge of the Marigny, Bywater, and Lower Ninth Ward. Eventually, the river

takes you out of town, through St Bernard and Plaquemines parishes, heading towards the Gulf.

Alternatively by car (or boat), you can cross the river to the West Bank via the Crescent City Connection or the Algiers Ferry. Driving down Highway 23 through Belle Chasse, the road becomes a simple two-lane corridor in both directions – one way down, and one way back up. On one side is the river and on the other side the earth quickly breaks apart into the fragile wetlands of the Barataria-Terrebonne estuary. It is a patchy and mixed terrain that is part land and part water, fanning out towards the sea. The river splits into three parts at mile zero to form the Balize Delta, Plaquemines Complex, or what is more commonly described from aerial views of the three distributaries, as the “Bird Foot Delta” (Campanella 2006:71, see Map 2). At Venice, seventy-five miles from



**Map 2: Louisiana "Bird Foot Delta."**  
Source: Earth Scan Lab, Coastal Studies Institute, Louisiana State University

New Orleans and near the mouth of the Mississippi, one comes finally upon a sign that marks the “southernmost point in Louisiana.” While some refer to it bleakly as the end of the world, here one is officially welcomed to “the Gateway to the Gulf.”

### ***People of the Urban Delta: Past and Present***

The history of human dwelling in the Mississippi Delta reveals an extraordinarily diverse intersection of cultures. The convergence and sometimes collision of people here has been a simultaneously valued feature and a source of much tension, seen for example in the extent to which groups intermix or keep separate, the social-geographic allocation and use of land, and the disproportionate vulnerability of certain populations – especially those located at the margins of society.

The archaeological record in Louisiana dates to approximately 10,000 B.C. It reveals that the indigenous communities who settled in the Lower Mississippi Valley subsisted primarily by hunting and gathering. Theirs was a highly complex society; materials excavated at Poverty Point in northeast Louisiana, for example, confirm the existence of an archaic culture from the period of 1730 to 1350 B.C. with large-scale industrial production as well as elaborate ritual and ceremonial activity (Webb 1982, Gibson 2001). Early settlements such as this were precursors to the indigenous groups that later occupied the lower delta; these societies were long in place by the time European conquest of North America began in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Several Native American nations remain in Louisiana today, including the Jena,

Louisiana band of Choctaw; the Tunica-Biloxi; the Coushatta; and the Chitimacha Nations (Goldsmith et al. 2003).<sup>12</sup>

The colonial encounter in the Gulf South was a fierce competition over land and resources. France ruled the colony from 1682 – 1763 with the city of New Orleans founded in 1718 by Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville of the French Mississippi Company, a chartered trade company. In 1763, at the end of the French and Indian War – the North American stage of the Seven Years War with conflict between France, Great Britain, and their respective allies – France ceded its control of Louisiana west of the Mississippi to Spain, to compensate its ally for the loss of Florida to the British. When France later sought to regain control it convinced Spain to give back the territory in exchange for land in Europe. France thus ruled again from 1800 –1803. The United States, however, vehemently opposed a French stronghold west of the Mississippi and sent envoys to France to negotiate the purchase of the territory. Napoleon, recognizing his weakened position in the New World, and no longer dependent on resources from Louisiana after the loss of lucrative Saint-Domingue in the Haitian Revolution (1791–1803), agreed. The Louisiana Purchase took place in 1803 (Kendall 1922).

The residents of early New Orleans were in close competition themselves, crowding together on the city’s small area of elevated dry land. The city quickly became

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<sup>12</sup> The primary sources for this historical summary come from the Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana, Lafayette, which has an important nineteen volume series on the history of Louisiana, published in commemoration of the Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial. The series includes works on the French experience in Louisiana (Conrad 1995), a volume on antebellum Louisiana, life, labor, and politics (De Latte 2004), a volume on Reconstruction (Powell 2001), a study of immigration by (Brasseaux 1996), works on the African American experience of Louisiana from days of slavery to the civil rights movement (Vincent 1999); an extensive study of New Orleans and urban Louisiana from settlement to present day (Shepherd 2006); and a volume on religion in Louisiana (Nolan 2004). Other important texts published elsewhere include *History of New Orleans* (Kendall 1922), *Black New Orleans* (Blasingame 1973); the work of Gwendolyn Midlo Hall on Africans in colonial Louisiana (1992, 2005); studies of race and class in Creole Louisiana (Dominguez 1994); recent historical texts by Rebecca J. Scott (2005), Ned Sublette (2008), and Shannon Dawdy (2008); and a special issue of the *Journal of American History* titled “Through the Eye of Katrina: The Past as Prologue?” (December 2007).

home to a diverse cast, a mix of Native American, European, and then African, and Afro-Caribbean residents – in “a cultural as well as an environmental borderland where rich and poor, white and nonwhite often lived side by side – if not by choice, then by necessity” (Kelman 2007:702-703).

The population swelled, for example, with the forced migration of African slaves, which began in Louisiana in the early 1700s, the first large group of Africans arriving in 1719 (Campanella 2006:6). Slavery fueled the growth of a large plantation based economy focused primarily on the cultivation of sugar cane. Louisiana also became home to some of the 2500 to 3000 Acadian exiles who arrived in the Mississippi Valley between 1764 and 1803 from Canada, the Northeast part of the United States, and France (Brasseaux 1992:4). Arriving first to New Orleans, many of these groups then settled outside of the city, primarily in the Bayou Lafourche area, to the west of New Orleans and in the region south of Baton Rouge. New Orleans’ population continued to diversity when some 10,000 refugees – mostly whites, some additional Acadians, free people of color, and additional enslaved Africans – arrived from Saint-Domingue in 1809 after the Haitian Revolution (Geggus 2001:214).

Despite the rich culture that resulted from the commingling and forced interaction of these various populations, life within the early city was far from easy. Characterized as disorderly and rough, New Orleans was a self-fashioned “rogue” colony with diverse players and agendas (Dawdy 2008). Everyone competed for resources while struggling against wars, disasters, epidemics, and forces of nature. It was a challenging place for even the wealthiest of residents, and conditions were abysmal for the poor, the oppressed, and the enslaved.



The urban development of New Orleans followed a similar course of close exchange and competition, according to the social and geographic confines of the region. The diversity of New Orleans' population continued to grow after the Louisiana Purchase with immigration from Europe, especially Ireland and Germany from the 1820s to 1850s. Anglo Americans also moved in steadily, hoping to claim a piece of the fast growing Mississippi Valley frontier (Campanella 2007:705-706, see also Fussell 2007). To accommodate this growth, the geographic boundaries of the city began to expand. Neighborhoods developed alongside new streetcar lines and other transportation routes, supporting in particular the growth of an American sector upriver.

The city thus grew along several main corridors extending out like the spokes of a wheel from the hub of the French Quarter. The names of the streets changed along the way, reflecting the transition from the predominantly French, Spanish, and Caribbean neighborhoods of the French Quarter to the more American influenced business district and the plantations-turned-mansions in wealthy neighborhoods further upriver. Decatur Street, for example, becomes Tchoupitoulas Street, Chartres becomes Magazine, and Royal becomes St. Charles Avenue along the streetcar line. As local geographer Richard Campanella describes, "Traversing from downtown to uptown in New Orleans was a journey from the old to the new, from the city to the country, from the Caribbean to the American" (Campanella 2006:157).

In the downtown area, after the Civil War, a centralized urban and commercial core began to develop. Workers settled in a zone immediately surrounding this area to access work and better housing. Residential construction expanded to accommodate a predominantly low income population of immigrants and African Americans, one of the

fastest growing segments. The black population doubled in size after the Civil War, increasing to over 50,000 people by 1870 as newly emancipated slaves from nearby plantations moved into town.

By the late 1800s, pumps were being used to drain water from the low-lying “backswamp,” the area extending beyond the original city plan, to construct additional housing. This was a thick, mosquito infested, and disease ridden swamp, which was cleared and developed nonetheless with small cottages and “shotgun” houses. A new section of the urban landscape was thus created. Given the undesirable conditions of the backswamp and its association with marginalized and still oppressed populations, the area became known locally as the “back-of-town,” compared to the French Quarter and other elite expanding areas situated on elevated land at the “front.”<sup>13</sup>

The correlation between ethnicity, class, and geographic position, however, should not be oversimplified. Campanella gives an especially nuanced description of the social-geography of early New Orleans, one that successfully avoids this tendency by noting that settlement patterns had more to do with the access and desirability of the area (along transportation routes, outside of the flood plain, and not too close to the disease infested waters of the river or swamp). He states, “Wealthier whites predominated in the higher-elevation swath from the French Quarter through Uptown and in low-lying Lakeview; while middle-class African Americans, including those of Creole ancestry, predominated in the eastern half of the city, an area intersected by navigation canals

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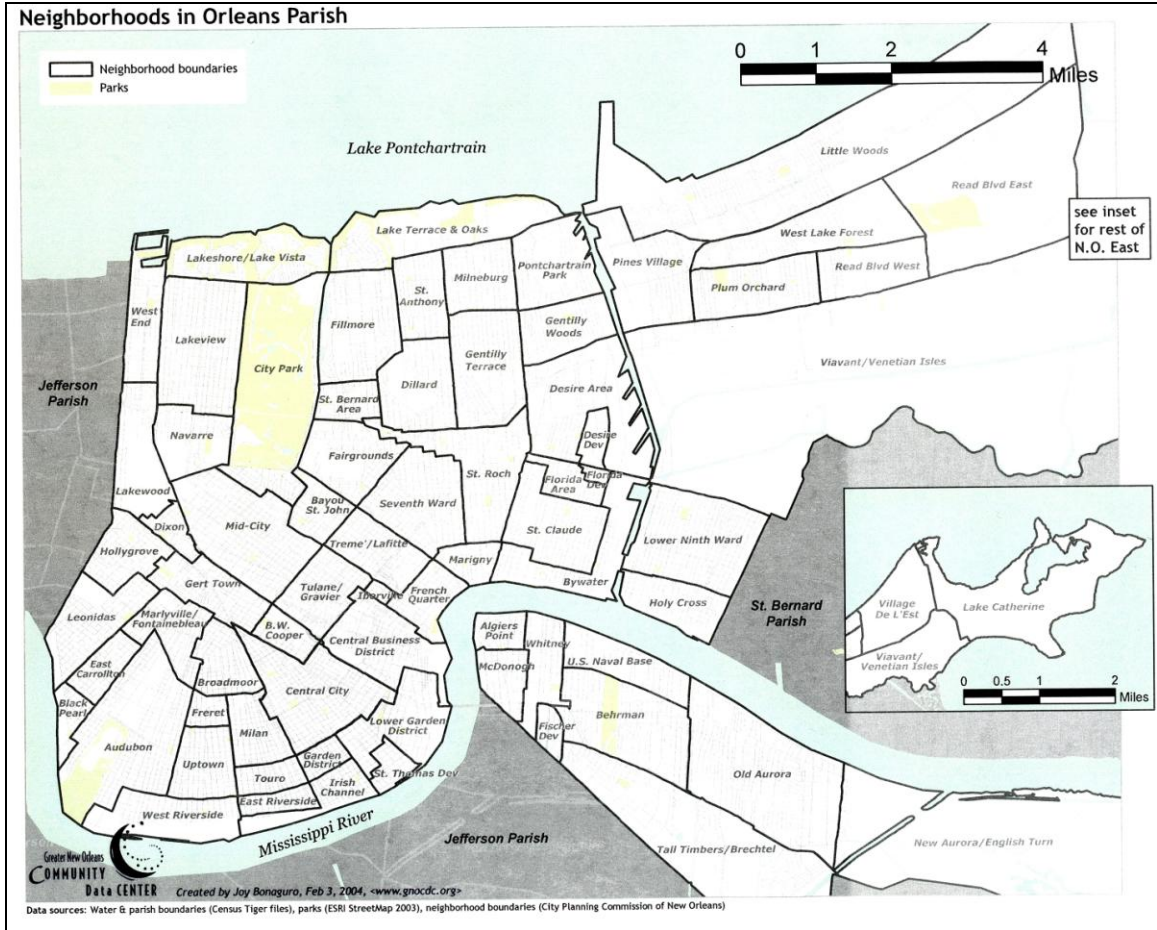
<sup>13</sup> The drained backswamp also eventually became home to a middle class white community when an area at the edge of Lake Pontchartrain was drained and developed in the early 1900s. Parcels of this land were then sold to whites as trendy lakefront property. Since racist deed contracts prevented African Americans and others from purchasing the land, a middle class white community essentially “leapfrogged over the black back-of-town and settled into trendy low-lying areas such as Lakeview” (Campanella 2007:709). Though lying some ten to fifteen feet below sea level, Lakeview residents and others along this stretch enjoyed an exclusive waterfront enclave, under the promised protection of a new manmade levee at the lake shore.

connecting with the Gulf of Mexico. Poorer African Americans settled there too but largely remained in the historical former back-of-town and immediately along the high riverfront, while the poorest blacks resided in high-density subsidized projects. Most immigrants lived in the suburban fringe” (Campanella 2007:710-711).

Urban development continued along specific social and geographic lines well into the twentieth century. As additional land outside of town was drained and developed, wealthy white residents left the city in droves, traveling along new elevated freeways to the suburbs (Fussell 2007). In 1940, for example, the urban population was approximately 70% white, but by 1990 that percentage had dropped to about 30% (Mosher et al, 1995:507). The flight was fueled in part by an opposition to racial integration in city schools and neighborhoods and by a growing concern about poverty, crime, and the many other social problems attributed to life in the inner city. It should be noted, however, that many upper class blacks and other people of color also left the city for suburbs, particularly Jefferson parish. The end result was the stratification of society – “with the poor of all races and people of color of all classes often occupying lowlands in the city while many middle-class whites, who could afford to do so, fled town” (Kelman 2007:702-703).

Many people, however, remained in the city and the population continued to grow, as far as the geography would allow, until neighborhoods butted up against levees, floodwalls, and parish lines in most directions. In US Census data from year 2000, the population of Orleans parish was estimated at 484,674. At the time over two-thirds of the population (67.3%) was African American. Whites accounted for 28.1%, Hispanics or Latinos made up 3.1%, Asians accounted for 2.3%, with smaller ethnic groups making up

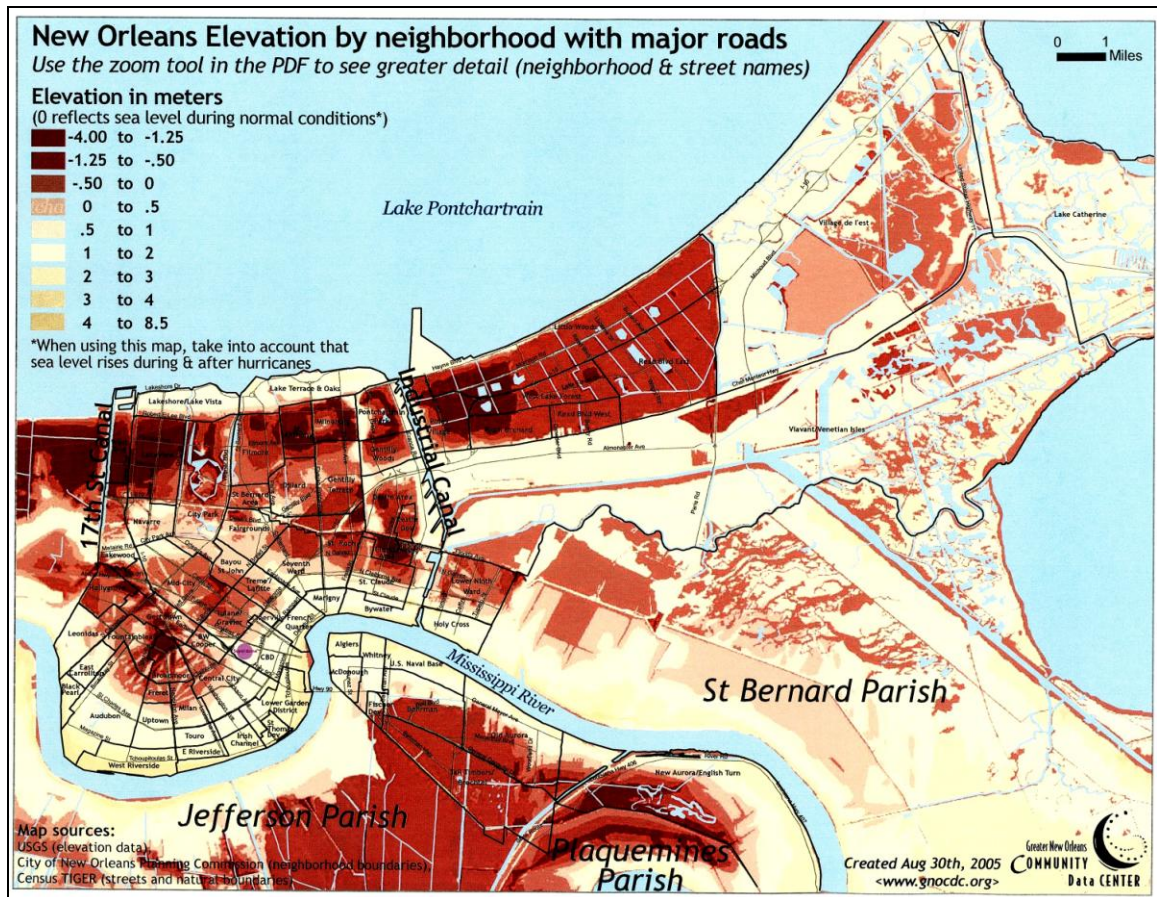
the remainder. Overall, 27.9% of the total population lived below the poverty level, primarily residing in areas below sea level.



**Map 3: Neighborhoods in Orleans Parish. Source: Greater New Orleans Community Data Center**

***Sensing Vulnerability***

Emplaced within the contemporary urban landscape, New Orleans residents come face to face with a diverse set of social and environmental conditions. For people at the margins of society the vulnerabilities are especially significant, and threats to one’s security are continually confronted and assessed. Even the simplest of thunderstorms can



**Map 4: New Orleans Elevation by Neighborhood.**  
**Source: Greater New Orleans Community Data Center**

quickly become a crisis; heavy rains almost always cause street flooding in low lying areas, and residents depend entirely on the city’s manmade levee and pump system for protection and relief when tropical storms and hurricanes occur.

These everyday conditions contribute to a generalized sense of insecurity, one that is also based on a history of recurring disaster, crisis, and loss. New Orleans has seen more than its fair share of catastrophe – among the tropical storms, hurricanes, and floods that have impacted southeast Louisiana, significant “events” include major hurricanes in 1909 and 1915, the great Mississippi flood of 1927, and the more recent hurricanes Betsy

in 1965, and Katrina and Rita in 2005. Other large scale disasters include the Battle of New Orleans in 1815 and the Yellow Fever epidemic from 1817 – 1905 that resulted in the death of over 40,000 people (Carrigan 1994).

Collectively, these events help sustain the memory, perception, and current experience of the city as an insecure and unstable place where daily life for so many people is marked by adversity, and it can all be suddenly disrupted by a major disaster to an everyday situation of destruction and loss. This sense of vulnerability is even embedded within the landscape – seen for example in the levee wall behind one’s home, the hurricane damaged and blighted homes still standing in one’s neighborhood, the ongoing poverty, the crime scene down the street, or the homemade shrines and memorials in all parts of town.

### **Hurricane Katrina: Ongoing Impact and Recovery**

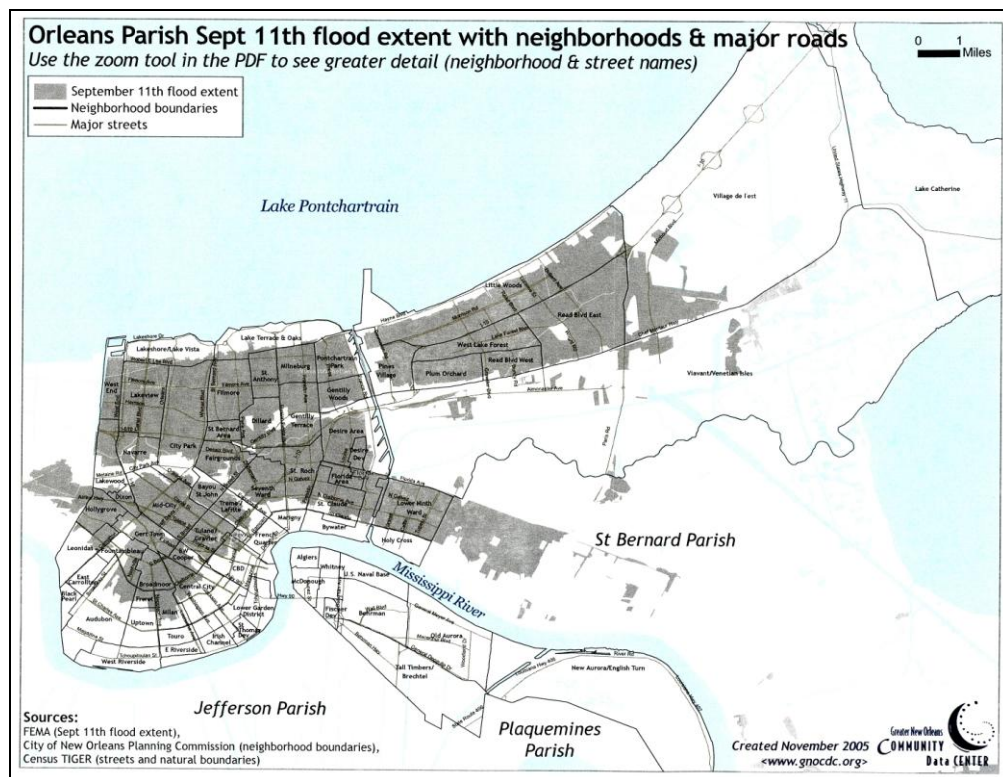
Hurricane Katrina made landfall on August 29, 2005, coming to shore near Grand Isle, Louisiana approximately 100 miles south of New Orleans. With winds exceeding 140 mph and a storm surge that crested at over 27 feet, the storm devastated nearly 93,000 square miles across 138 parishes and counties. While the history, development, and impact of the storm have been reported in great detail, the basic indicators of scale and force are worth restating.<sup>14</sup> Katrina caused over 135 billion dollars of damage to housing, consumer durable goods, and business and government property, including the destruction or damage of over one million homes. More than a million people were

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<sup>14</sup> More complete analyses of the impact of the storm include Petterson et al. (2006), Van Heerden and Bryan (2006), and Frey and Singer (2006). See also the Hurricane Katrina Research Bibliography published by the Social Science Research Council’s Task Force on Hurricane Katrina and Rebuilding the Gulf Coast (Erikson and Peek 2009).

displaced from the Gulf Coast region. While many people returned home within days of the storm, one month later over 600,000 were still displaced. The loss of life was equally immense; the death toll for storm related deaths was 1723, with 1464 of those being Louisiana residents (Pettersen et al. 2006:648, GNOCDC).

Approximately 80% of the City of New Orleans flooded after several levee failures occurred across the city, with some neighborhoods quickly submerged in over ten feet of water. The main cause of death for people who died in the city was drowning (40% of total deaths); many residents did not or could not evacuate and government rescue and relief services were criminally slow to arrive. Other deaths were caused by injury and trauma (25%) and heart conditions (11%). In addition, nearly half of all victims were over the age of 74 (GNOCDC).



**Map 5: Hurricane Katrina Flood Extent, Orleans Parish.**  
**Source: Greater New Orleans Community Data Center**

Despite the impact and these grim statistics, the City of New Orleans reports significant progress in disaster recovery, rebuilding, and redevelopment nearly five years after the storm, at the time of this writing. One frequently cited indicator is the rate of population return. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the July 2005 population estimate for Orleans parish, right before Hurricane Katrina, was 455,188. A year after the storm, in July 2006, the estimate was 208,548. By July 2010, the estimate was 354,850, a rate of return of almost 80% (GNOCDC).

In many ways, however, it was a different population. The city is now a mix of returning and new residents, and its overall ethnic composition is different. In the year 2000, for example blacks made up 66.7% of the total population but by 2008 that percentage had dropped to 60.7%. During the same time period, the percentage of whites increased from 26.6% to 30.7%. Significant growth also occurred in the local Hispanic community, where the population increased from 3.1% to 4.5% (Campanella 2007:714). There has also been a shift in the age distribution of residents. Many older residents did not return to the area, in part because of the severe disruptions and shortages impacting health care services. At the same time, there has been an influx of young people eager to help rebuild after the storm, indicated partly by the rise in the number of single households, up to 41% from 33% before the storm (GNOCDC).

Also cited as an indicator of positive recovery are statistics of socio-economic stability, despite a national recession. City officials, for example, claim that rebuilding efforts have helped to shield New Orleans from job loss. In December 2009 the unemployment rate for the city was reported at 6.8%, compared to 10% nationwide. Job losses since the December 2007 recession began have also been relatively small; down



1% compared to a 5% loss for the nation (GNOCDC). In addition, the city has seen a positive return on its post-disaster re-investment in local cultural economy. New Orleans has returned as a convention city, and the enjoyment, preservation, and promotion of local culture, music, art, and food remains strong and resilient for local residents and tourists alike.

Along with these broad indicators, there is also evidence of greater economic stability for individuals and families. The overall poverty rate for New Orleans fell from 28% before the storm to 23% in 2008. In addition, the rate of homeownership in post-Katrina New Orleans has increased from 46% to 53%. These statistics correlate with the presence of a more mobile and well educated population. There are fewer residents without access to a vehicle and the percentage of the adult population with less than a high school degree fell from 25% to 19% (GNOCDC). City officials and others also cite a new emphasis on sustainable recovery, such as green building programs and innovative reform within the public school system. More than sixty percent of all New Orleans public school students now attend charter schools, the highest percentage of any city in the country.

These signs of recovery, however, are neither the last word nor the whole story. The rate of return, for instance, varies widely between neighborhoods; it is exceedingly low in hard-hit areas like the Lower Ninth Ward, Holy Cross, Lakeview, and the public housing complexes, most of which have been demolished since the storm. In addition, while the population has recovered to over three quarters of its original size, it is a different population with many newcomers and a different ethnic and socioeconomic composition. The rate of “return” therefore really just refers to the rate of new population

growth; it is not a reflection of true return. Last but not least, while unemployment is low, most of the available jobs are low paying positions in the service and tourism industry. These jobs are sporadic, seldom full time, and not wage sufficient given the inflated cost of housing. Despite the overall indicators of recovery, therefore, much vulnerability and need remains.

### *New Neighborhood Landscapes*

Hurricane Katrina also dramatically impacted human dwelling and everyday lived experience, reconfiguring the landscape and creating new social and environmental conditions. In the city, whole neighborhoods were destroyed and many of the community landmarks and identifiers of place went also. Even when these markers remained, in many cases the people were gone. Neighborhoods in which people had lived for generations were torn apart and family members were displaced all over the country. Those that returned often could not return to their same locations and were forced to relocate to new parts of town. Areas that were less damaged, therefore, experienced an unprecedented population growth and became quickly overcrowded as people competed for housing and other resources. As a result, many residents lost their homes as well as their sense of place. The experience of dwelling became one of dispersal, dislocation, and relocation in a radically changed urban landscape.

Adding to the experience and sense of a changed landscape was the realization by many residents that one could no longer rely on the State for protection, rescue, or relief. Residents, therefore, restructured their systems and sources of support, oftentimes turning to local community structures as more reliable methods of building resilience and

security. The sources of their support thus shifted closer to home – within families, neighborhoods, community groups, religious organizations, and other collectives.

Katrina's impact on human dwelling was even more acute outside of the city, in already fragile rural areas outside of the levee protected zone. Many residents of Plaquemines Parish, for example, who evacuated with Katrina have not returned, and those that remain live even more closely integrated with their surroundings. The houses are raised on stilts some ten to fifteen feet off the ground and people make their living in relation to the Gulf. There are business owners, commercial fishers, gas and oil workers, and sports and recreation outfits, congregated together in small towns such as Port Sulphur, Empire, and Venice.

The vulnerability of these communities is increasing, from the loss of protective wetlands, to the brunt of storms and floods, to other environmental disasters such as the 2010 British Petroleum oil spill. The situation is grave; many of these communities are in danger of disappearing all together.

Grand Bayou, for example, is a multicultural Native American (Atàkapa-Ishak, Houma), Cajun, and Creole (mixed African, French or Spanish) community, whose residents maintain a unique but very fragile way of life located practically in the middle of the wetlands. The community is located a few miles off the main highway, near Port Sulphur and outside of the levee protection system. A small sign marks the turn onto a gravel road, over a natural levee, and then out across the wetlands to some buildings in the distance. It looks and feels like you are turning directly into the water, which is typically level with or just covering the road on both sides. In places the road disappears altogether, and when the tide is in the only way in or out of Grand Bayou is by boat.

There is a constant battle here between the land and the water, and the water always wins. It feels quite literally like one is perched on the edge of the continent – that at any moment, even with just another step, you would be in water going on forever. It feels like a place where people almost shouldn't be, where life could not possibly be sustained.



**Image 3: Grand Bayou Wetlands and Raised Houses. Photo by author.**

But people are there, and have been for centuries. I travelled once along the road until it ended at an abandoned school house and small marina with boats, many of them half sunken or in various states of disrepair. I met a shrimper there who was working on his boat; he told me about the school and how it had recently closed. There weren't enough children left in the community and now they went by boat from their homes to the main road, and then into Port Sulphur to school. I asked him also about his business and he shook his head: "The price of gas keeps going up," he told me, "and the price of shrimp keeps going down." Still he expressed a love for his community and for a life spent on and in the water. For example, he motioned for me to watch my step, pointing

out a dirty white duck at my feet that I had not noticed, who had made her nest in some old fishing net. She was in full sun, dry and dehydrated yet stubborn and protective – surviving against the odds like most everything else here.



**Image 4: Life on the Water in Grand Bayou. Photo by author.**

The families that still live in Grand Bayou (as of May 2010 there were reportedly ten families left) stay in homes raised on stilts high above the water. They shuttle back and forth by boat between home and the road. After the impact of Hurricane Katrina the landscape is even more surreal – the water has risen to such a degree that some parts of the community are now submerged and hover below the surface as the boats skim over. The community remains fully exposed and vulnerable to future storms and floods as well as to the ribbons of oil sheen from the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill that, at the time of this writing, are making their way into the bayou. These are powerful forces against which even the most protected and environmentally stable community would struggle to

survive. Since 2004, however, Grand Bayou residents have been organized through a non-profit grassroots organization, Grand Bayou Families United, which works for wetland restoration and cultural survival. They are a committed group, but it is a long and difficult campaign and time may be running out.

### ***Urban Violence: Before and After the Storm***

Back in the city, one of the most important concerns facing New Orleans residents in the post-Katrina recovery period is the high incidence and impact of violent crime. Urban violence has long been a problem in this locale; the city has consistently ranked as one of the most violent in the United States, due in large part to its high per capita murder rate. However, the concern about public safety is particularly acute as urban redevelopment proceeds.

In a survey of over 1,000 residents in Orleans Parish conducted by Tulane University and the non-profit organization Democracy Corps during Mayor Ray Nagin's last term (2009), the majority of city residents surveyed (over 58%) viewed crime as a citywide epidemic that affects all residents. These same respondents saw crime as the most pressing issue for the next mayor to address. In addition, in an indication of the personal and emotional impact of violence, more than 75% of those surveyed said that they feared for their own personal safety. Findings were significant across all demographic groups and regions of the city.<sup>15</sup>

Like most urban cities across the United States, New Orleans experienced an abrupt rise in its homicide rate over a twenty-five year period, from around 1970 to 1995.

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.democracycorps.com/strategy/2009/04/tulane-university-democracy-corps-mayoral-survey/?section=Analysis>

By most accounts, this is attributed to the drug trade, escalated by the introduction of crack cocaine in urban markets beginning in the 1980s (Grogger and Willis 1998). New Orleans was at the top of this trend; homicide rates there rose during this period by a staggering 329% (Currie 1998:23).

Drug trafficking is extremely high in port and coastal cities and the Gulf Coast, including the City of New Orleans, is designated a high intensity drug trafficking area (HIDTA) by the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy. Even though rates of violent crime started to decline in many cities after 1991, the worst year on record for New Orleans is 1994, when there were 414 murders in Orleans Parish; the highest annual number of homicides reported for any U.S. city to date (Lattimore et al.1997:16).

Despite local government and law enforcement agencies' best attempts at a "War on Drugs," the number of homicides in New Orleans has remained high. Crime statistics however, indicate a sharp drop in the rate of violent crime the year after Hurricane Katrina and a gradual decline since 2008. According to the New Orleans Police Department, in 2005 there were 211 murders, followed by 160 in 2006, the year after Katrina. The number rose again the following year in 2007 to pre-Katrina levels with 210 people killed, even though the population was half the size of what it was before the storm. The rate then fell in 2008 and 2009 with 179 and 174 murders respectively.<sup>16</sup>

In its annual ranking of metropolitan crime rates, CQ Press lists New Orleans as the most violent city in the U.S. for 2008, but by 2009 the city had dropped to sixth place.<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that overall this data remains controversial; as it is based on

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.cityofno.com/pg-50-11-crime-stats.aspx>

<sup>17</sup> <http://os.cqpress.com/citycrime/2009/CityCrimeRankings2009.htm>

reported crimes only and a category of violent crime that groups crimes such as armed robbery and assault together with homicide, even when no death occurs.<sup>18</sup>

Given the high incidence and impact of violence, residents put forth a wide range of ideas to explain and solve the problem. Some categorically and unfairly place the blame on certain ethnic groups, citing most frequently the moral values and behaviors of African Americans and/or Hispanics who live and frequently die in inner city neighborhoods. Others point to the criminal justice system, perceiving it as too lenient on violent offenders. They reason that if violent people are kept off the streets with longer prison terms and fewer options for parole, then crime in the city will diminish (Currie 1998, Beckett and Sasson 2004).

In *The Politics of Injustice: Crime and Punishment in America*, sociologists and co-authors Becket and Sasson argue that such assertions are problematic, and they offer instead four primary factors to explain the high rate of homicide in the United States more broadly. These are, “the ubiquity of guns, comparatively high levels of social and racial inequality and the concentrated urban poverty with which they are associated, the drug (and especially crack) trade, and a code of the streets that prizes respect and deference above all else” (Beckett and Sasson 2004:43).

The FBI estimates, for example, that there are over 200 million guns in circulation within the United States, and there is disturbing evidence that young people have

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<sup>18</sup> Annual crime rankings include those published by CQ Press and are based on reported crime and population. The FBI generates similar rankings using data from local police districts. However, FBI and other agencies caution against the use of crime statistics to compile rankings of cities and counties. Such practices, they argue, “provide no insight into the numerous variables that mold crime in a particular town, city, county, state, or region. Consequently, they lead to simplistic and/or incomplete analyses that often create misleading perceptions adversely affecting communities and their residents. Valid assessments are possible only with careful study and analysis of the range of unique conditions affecting each local law enforcement jurisdiction” (2007 Crime in the United States, U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2007/index.html>).



increased their access to and use of firearms (2004:30). Illegal drug trafficking, including a strong market for crack cocaine, remains a problem in many cities where it is closely correlated with a high incidence of related violence (2004:39). Many dealers and related personnel in cities beset by drug problems, operate also by a “code of the streets” based in many cases on a sense of entitlement, retaliation, and the acquisition of money, power, and respect (2004:41, see also Anderson 1990, Bourgois 1995).

These are national trends, but New Orleans has often been placed in a class by itself, much to the frustration of local officials and residents who are tired of the negative portrayal and stand in defense of their city. The common complaint is that there is crime in every large city – consider for example Baltimore, Detroit, St. Louis, and Washington D.C. Why should New Orleans have to be the fall guy for the problem of urban violence across the country?

One can argue, however, that there is a specific dimension to social life in New Orleans, especially in the post-Katrina period, which contributes directly to the scale and impact of local violence. In addition to the presence and circulation of guns, the drug trafficking, and the associated street codes, it is the second of Beckett and Sasson’s four factors that is particularly salient – these are the “comparatively high levels of social and racial inequality and the concentrated urban poverty with which they are associated.” Such characteristics are most frequently found in what Beckett and Sasson describe as “socially dislocated” urban neighborhoods, which are marked also by high degrees of family disruption and social instability. This ecological understanding of urban violence is important as it rests primarily on neighborhood conditions rather than the particular characteristics or traits of residents. As Beckett and Sasson state, “It is the degree to

which a neighborhood suffers from poverty-related social dislocation, not its racial composition, that helps to explain its homicide rate (2004:35, see also Messner and Tardiff 1986).

Following this reasoning, one can usefully look beyond the high level of drug trafficking in certain parts of New Orleans to consider also the extent to which residents dwell within and experience social, political, and/or environmental dislocation and displacement. Such conditions have important historic foundations, linked for example to both local and national systems of oppression and discrimination based on ‘race,’ ethnicity, or class and the social and political-ecological dimensions of urban development and decline. They are also linked to the environmental vulnerabilities of the region and the impact of disasters such as Hurricane Katrina. With Katrina, the oppression and suffering experienced by so many citizens came into full public view, as an already marginalized population was even further dislocated. Given the now multiple and extraordinary challenges of *re*-location and resettlement, it is in many ways not surprising that the incidence of violence in certain areas remains so high.

It is important to note that the residents of the most socially dislocated neighborhoods in New Orleans, and arguably in other cities in the U.S., are primarily populated by people of color, in this case mostly African Americans and Hispanics. The incidence and impact of violence, therefore, is highest for these residents, especially for the city’s young black males. This is also a national trend; for example, a comprehensive National Institute of Justice research study of homicide rates in eight major cities (Atlanta, Detroit, Indianapolis, Miami, New Orleans, Richmond, Tampa, and Washington D.C.) for the period of 1985 – 1994, showed that black males aged 18 to 24 “experienced

considerably more homicides and higher homicide victimization rates than the other race/gender groups” (1997:36). The situation has not significantly improved; a more recent national report by criminologists at Northeastern University showed that between 2002 and 2007 the number of murders nationwide involving young black men as victims rose 31% and the number involving young black men as perpetrators rose 43%. The increase was true for every region of the country (Swatt and Fox, 2008).

The incidence, impact, and lived experience of violent crime changed after the storm. This included, for example, the place and lived experience of the city’s most dislocated neighborhoods and populations. While local law enforcement cites a decline in city-wide rates of violent crime since 2005, crime rates have actually *increased* in certain dislocated neighborhoods since the storm. According to Patrick Walsh, a scholar of criminal justice based in New Orleans who conducts research on the post-disaster illegal drug market, when whole neighborhoods were destroyed by the storm, many dealers moved into more centrally located and less damaged areas where repopulation was occurring at a faster pace (2010:171). There they found new customers, including a recent influx of transient workers.

As Walsh explains, “Illegal drug markets in New Orleans expanded and reorganized, rather than disappeared... the storm actually produced better supply sources, lessened police attention and increased customer demand by returning customers, new customers, and relapsed customers” (2010:177). The phenomenon drastically changed neighborhood dynamics, creating new zones of fear and insecurity. Residents in Central City and the Irish Channel, for example, who were already struggling with violence

before the storm, reported a significant increase in drug trafficking and homicides since 2005.

Also changed is the public perception of violence in the recovery period. There is, for example, a common perception that the murders after the storm are more random, senseless, and brutal than before, and even the reported sense that one is living in a lawless society. In part this perception may be due to extremely high levels of post traumatic stress and a heightened sensitivity to any additional crisis, but it also has to do with the very real reductions in police force, cases of police brutality and corruption, and the ineffectuality of the criminal justice system to solve cases, make arrests, and keep dangerous criminals off the streets.

While public safety and criminal justice systems are admittedly still recovering from the storm themselves, the need for them has certainly not diminished. For example, homicide cases in process before the storm were put on hold indefinitely thereafter, due in many cases to the loss of evidence and records in the flooded basements of city buildings and the dispersal of key witnesses all over the country. Many individuals and family members of victims, therefore, have not completed criminal justice proceedings and many perpetrators remain at large. Such situations only increase distrust and prompt many residents to develop their own initiatives for local justice and peace.

### **Finding Peace by Faith**

In the post-Katrina recovery period, residents respond to conditions of vulnerability and violence by working to re-locate and reestablish their lives in meaningful ways, supported in many cases by specific moral, ethical, religious, and other beliefs and practices. The process, therefore, is supported and mediated in part by

religion. This happens not only in the relocation and reestablishment of social and spiritual networks and sacred sites destroyed in the storm; it takes shape more broadly in terms of the forms and methods of religious engagement and their role in fostering a sense of spiritual groundedness, support for healing and recovery, secure conditions, and the moral and religious frameworks deemed necessary for urban redevelopment and reform. In order to understand and explore these diverse forms of religious engagement, it is important to review the religious history and current religious composition of the region and city.

From the earliest days of the colonial period, Catholicism has had a lasting influence on New Orleans' social and religious life. Catholic priests traveled with early European settlers, attempting but often failing to convert the local indigenous population (Giraud 1974, Hennesey 1981:31). The Church had more success, however, with the religious leadership and education they provided to the early inhabitants of the City of New Orleans. Several religious orders, for example, were invited to open schools and orphanages. The Ursuline Sisters were the first to arrive, establishing their convent in 1727.

The Church also focused on the conversion and education of the African slaves who were forcibly brought to the region. The tens of thousands of mostly Senegambian and Kongolese people, however, arrived with their own distinct West African religious cosmologies and traditions, marked by a strong affinity with the spirit world, especially with the spirits of the dead. Some of them arrived also with their own forms of Catholicism, from Catholic missions already established in Africa (Fandrich 2007).

These traditions were preserved to some extent through permitted public exchange, most notably at a weekly public marketplace known as the *Place de Negres* and later as Congo Square (Donaldson 1984). Thus a unique and truly localized African American religious tradition emerged, which further diversified in the early 1800s with the influx of free people of color and additional enslaved Africans after the Haitian revolution.

The Catholic Church in Louisiana, however, maintained its influence, expanding with the arrival of many European immigrants; including the Germans and the Irish, who established their own Catholic parishes beginning in 1837. More conservative than the existing Church, these new parishes often conflicted with the established religious order and as a result served “several ethnic groups entering the city, which in turn created overlapping parish districts” (Reinders 1989[1964]:112). Many African Americans were practicing Catholics also; “the Catholic Church did not sanction segregation of the races at religious services... Negroes received sacraments indiscriminately with whites, they sang in mixed choirs, and were buried in Catholic cemeteries alongside whites” (1989:113).

Protestantism arrived in Louisiana in the late 1700s and early 1800s when several travelling preachers attempted to establish local congregations (Kendall 1922). The Protestant Episcopal Church was the first to succeed; the founding of Christ Church Cathedral dates to 1805 (Reinders 1989:117). The growth of local Protestantism, however, occurred primarily as part of the Protestant revival and Second Great Awakening during the middle of the nineteenth century, which coincided with the expansion of the American sector in New Orleans.

Methodist and Presbyterian churches were also established, with the Presbyterian Church attracting particularly large crowds through its extensive program of Sunday schools (1989:119). The first Baptist church was founded in the city in 1818, which was a racially mixed, though short-lived, congregation. This was followed by a black Baptist Church that was established in New Orleans in 1833, whose services were held at some risk for worshippers as it was still illegal for blacks to hold public meetings. However, by 1872, black Baptists were organizing to have their first state convention (Reinders 1989, see also Hicks 1998:228, 231, 232). Two additional white Baptist churches were founded in the city in 1843 and 1851 (Reinders 1989:119).

Free blacks continued to organize their own parishes, churches, and religious communities, which included the African Methodist Episcopal Church and St. Augustine's Church, which was consecrated in the Tremé neighborhood in 1842 and was one of the first black Catholic parishes in the country. These and other religious institutions became the base of black religious organization in postbellum New Orleans, playing a vital role in debate and activism around issues of exclusion and inclusion, segregation and integration, and civil rights for years to come (see Bennett 2005, Giggie 2007, Devore 2007).

In spite of this diverse religious growth, New Orleans was often perceived from the outside as an irreligious community, particularly when compared to the rest of the South. Many local practices were thought peculiar, for example “frequent indictments of local society hinged on... religious indifference, excessive liberalism among churchmen, spiritual ignorance... widespread intemperance, sexual promiscuity and racial amalgamation, and ministerial hypocrisy on the issue of slavery” (Reilly 1973:268).

While perhaps these characterizations are over generalized; when compared to the dominant forms of Christianity in the South, New Orleans was more Catholic than Protestant, more Latin than Anglo-Saxon, and more liberal than narrowly conservative (1973:272). In addition, the level of religious tolerance in the city allowed for a variety of traditions to flourish, while inviting simultaneously a range of often competing beliefs, ideologies, and practices.

Contemporary statistics of affiliation and adherence demonstrate the continued influence of religion in the region and city. The overall level of religious participation is high; in the 2008 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, conducted by the Pew Research Center, 73% of Louisiana residents reported that religion is “very important” in their lives, compared to the national average of 56%. Residents across the state largely identify as Christians, with 31% of respondents identifying as Evangelical Protestant, 28% as Catholic, 20% as Historically Black Protestant, and 9% as Mainline Protestant. Of the remaining respondents, 8% selected “unaffiliated” and 4% selected “other.”<sup>19</sup>

Specific data for religious affiliation in Orleans Parish, however, is comparatively difficult to find. However, the percentage of Catholics and Historically Black Protestants is expected to be higher in the city for three primary reasons. First, the majority of Evangelical Protestants live in the north and west part of the state and would not be included. Second, given the history of Catholicism in New Orleans one would expect to find many more Catholics still there, and third, New Orleans still has a majority African American population, with a high concentration of black Baptists.

Data on religious adherence in Orleans Parish comes from the 2000 Religious Congregations and Membership Study (RCMS), which finds an overall adherence rate for

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<sup>19</sup> <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/743/united-states-religion>



the parish of 44.1%. This report however, when later adjusted to account for omitted and undercounted groups, shows a 95.9% adherence rate for the parish, a remarkably high percentage believed to be due to the religious participation of the majority African American population.<sup>20</sup> The result is not altogether surprising; nationally “blacks have a higher rate of involvement in religious organizations than the general population and they are more concentrated in the South where religious involvement is higher” (Finke and Scheitle 2005:18).

These surveys, however, do not provide sufficient information about those who select “unaffiliated” or “other” as a designation. More data on these groups would be valuable, in addition to more recent data, given the changed demographics of the post-Katrina population. As residents return and newcomers arrive, religious affiliations and memberships are continually acquired, asserted, and redefined.

Surveys of religiosity also fail to capture the extent to which religious groups and institutions are neighborhood based, deeply embedded within the landscape, and closely connected to residents, local conditions, and concerns. Generations of family members from the same community and neighborhood often worship and attend school together and at the same place. Local religious congregations, therefore, are in many ways like spiritual extensions of the home. Indeed, residents speak often about their “church home,” identifying their affiliation in much the same way as one would describe where one lived and the people they were related to.

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<sup>20</sup> The original RCMS survey failed to include historically African American denominations in the congregation and membership totals. Several correctives were made to this study, however, by researchers at Pennsylvania State University, which accounted for the omitted groups, and improved overall adherence rates for counties, states, and especially for urban areas (see Finke and Scheitle 2005). In Orleans Parish the adjusted adherence rate was found to be 95.9%. These revisions, however, do not break out adherence rates by denomination, so information on county-wide adherence rates for Catholics, Historically Black Protestants, and other specific denominations is unavailable.

Hurricane Katrina severely disrupted or destroyed many of the networks, sites, materials, and institutions that are so integral to community social and spiritual life. In some cases congregations have reformed in other places – borrowing space within the city or regrouping outside of the area until members can return. In other cases the institutions were forced to close altogether, due to dwindling congregation numbers or the decisions of religious administrations to consolidate.<sup>21</sup>

As residents work to rebuild their social and physical environments, therefore, they also rebuild their spiritual lives and worlds. For some people, religion has even become an important part of the way that they contend with and work to improve conditions of vulnerability and insecurity. The work takes multiple forms, including specific types of worship, social justice programs, charity work, and outreach. People gather together in belief and faith, but also with the intent to address and better the conditions of their lives, families, and the community and society in which they live.

The incidence and impact of urban violence remains a central concern. All across the city but especially in areas where conditions are poor and the rate of crime is high, religious groups and practitioners work to find ways to stop the killing. Their efforts in this regard include programs to promote the healing and recovery of those who are impacted, attention to the moral and religious education of the community, and advocacy for the poor and disenfranchised who are more frequently involved as both victims and perpetrators. Ultimately these groups and practitioners strive, as moral and religious peacemakers and placemakers for the creation of a nonviolent, secure, and just society.

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<sup>21</sup> The Archdiocese of New Orleans, for instance, consolidated and also closed many of its churches after Hurricane Katrina. The decision was met with much protest from long-standing parishioners, many of whom had a particular affinity and attachment to their home churches. Some parishioners even staged sit-ins and were forcibly removed. Eventually the Church carried out its plan, thus further changing the religious landscape of the city.

## **Beginning Fieldwork**

I began my fieldwork in New Orleans in July 2007. It was nearly two years after the storm and residents were still deeply focused on post-disaster healing and recovery. The changes taking place in the social, cultural, and physical landscapes were ongoing and the tensions were palpable, as I established residency and settled into new networks and surroundings.

For the first year of my stay, I rented a small carriage house – a long and narrow space positioned at the far end of the lot behind the main house where my landlords lived. The space had been converted into a one bedroom apartment, suitably furnished with a writing desk, kitchenette, and small bathroom. It had been unoccupied for quite some time before I moved in and was very dusty and moldy. But it had some charming features, including a porch overlooking an overgrown garden with palm trees and it was affordable and secure with a locked gate around the yard and bars on the windows.

I was well-located for my research – halfway uptown and on the ‘river side’ of St. Charles Avenue. It was not far from the Irish Channel and close to the Louisiana and Magazine Street intersection. Locating myself on the map, I dotted a point near the center of the city’s crescent shaped curve, around which the Mississippi River famously winds. The river itself was just a few blocks away, at the floodwall along Tchoupitoulas and the Port of New Orleans. On busy afternoons, I could hear the ships blow their horns as they navigated the wharfs as well as freight trains and trucks rumbling by with whistles and screeching wheels.

I also noted my elevation. The carriage house and my immediate block rested some five feet above sea level, nestled in the first few blocks of the downward slope of terrain from the levee along the river. Just down the street, at the Tchoupitoulas floodwall, the elevation climbed to approximately nine feet. I was just high enough, therefore that my block was not prone to major flooding – I was told it had even stayed dry during Katrina. Several inches of standing water in the streets, however, was a common occurrence after a heavy rain when the pumps were initially overloaded.

The carriage house was also raised an additional two feet off the ground, offering protection above and beyond its geographic location. In the dry season, stray cats could be found in the crawl space beneath. A neighbor called them the “Katrina Kitties” – animals made homeless by the storm and doing the best they could in changed circumstances. One certainly couldn’t blame them for seeking high ground and they chose well; a free spot on this “sliver by the river”, the long, mostly dry, now overcrowded and overpriced stretch of elevated land along the river.

The blurred social and geographic boundaries of the city were immediately apparent in the space of my own neighborhood, and it was through the navigation of my new surroundings that I also slowly oriented to the vibrant but unsteady place and experience of post-Katrina New Orleans. My landlords, for example, were recent “transplants” to the city, by way of Texas and England. A middle class white couple; he worked at an art gallery in the French Quarter and she worked as an administrator for one of the local universities. They loved the neighborhood but did not hesitate to list its problems: the “crazy” old woman who lived for years across the street but never returned after Katrina, the “fat cat” contractors coming in to buy up houses even “when they don’t

even live here,” the house across the street and down closer to the river where that guy is always drunk in his front yard. “We keep an eye on that,” they told me, “but he doesn’t really bother us and we always make sure to say hello when we pass by.” Overall they assured me that I was in a very safe area, but added that if I could, I should try to park as close as I can get to the carriage house, because a block or two down, closer to Tchoupitoulas, things can get “a little rough.”

On the surface at least, the neighborhood appeared diverse and not so rough; with residents from multiple ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. There were black and white residents interspersed on my block and my neighbors on the other side were a large Honduran family. The house across the street was being gutted and renovated by a white out-of-state developer, presumably one of those “fat cats” who relied on cheap day labor from the city’s newest Latino immigrants. My block, however, was somewhat of a transition zone – as one travelled the few blocks south towards the river the average home value went steadily down and the percentage of non-white residents went up. Heading north across Magazine Street and towards St. Charles Avenue, the reverse occurred.

Commercially the area was an interesting mix of coffee shops, antique stores, bars, and restaurants, from Audubon Park uptown all the way through the downtown warehouse arts district. Further uptown, the neighborhoods extending off to either side of Magazine or St. Charles were some of the wealthiest in the city. Downtown the arts and commercial district was dotted with historic sites and redeveloped loft spaces, music venues, and art galleries, continuing all the way into and through the French Quarter.

My neighborhood was located in the middle of this span, not far from the exclusive Garden District and the Irish Channel, a predominantly poor and African American neighborhood with one of the worst rates of violent crime in the city. Gentrification was occurring along the perimeter of this community, with expensive condos and apartments closer to the Convention Center and renovated shotguns and cottages on the other end closer to Magazine Street.

I lived at the carriage house for only a year. I had planned to stay longer but had not been able to request a lease extension in time, and my landlords offered the place to a friend of theirs who had to move out of his FEMA trailer by the July 1, 2008 deadline. So I found and rented another apartment further to the north and east. It was a small shotgun, attached to a two-story 'camelback' house. Located just off Napoleon Avenue, it was situated mid-way between St. Charles Avenue and Freret Street. My new landlords rented the front part of the house to me, and they lived in the two-story section in the back.

I was particularly drawn to the neighborhood because it was located just a block away from where my father's house used to stand. He and my stepmother lived in this community for over thirty years, right up until Hurricane Katrina when their house flooded and the whole block burned down. When I arrived all that remained was an extended plot of concrete slabs where the ground floors used to be. Despite the grim reminder, it was nice to be in their old neighborhood. I had visited the area often over the years and knew it well. Some of the neighbors even remembered my family and they welcomed me warmly.



**Image 5: Site of my Father's House. Photo by author.**  
**Image 6: Saratoga Street. Photo by author.**

This new location, however, brought me to the very edge of the FEMA designated flood zone at an elevation of zero feet above sea level, rising and falling in some places a foot or two in either direction. My father's house, a townhouse, had sat flush to the ground but I was more fortunate in that my rented apartment was raised about three feet. My new landlords told me that during Katrina the flood waters came right up to the top step and stopped; miraculously no water got into the house. Many other homes in this neighborhood, however, were damaged – some beyond repair. There were blighted houses barely standing across and down the street.

Personal safety was also a concern in this new locale. Again, I was advised by my neighbors to choose travel routes accordingly, staying away from certain areas, especially at night. I had heard rumors about the residents who lived uptown in “safe” areas who never crossed to the other side of St. Charles Avenue, fearful that they might

inadvertently get caught up in the crossfire or have their car stolen. Instead they relied on the riverside routes to travel from uptown to the highway or to downtown and the French Quarter. Even some of the residents who did drive freely around town confided that they routinely rolled through red lights rather than stopping and risking a carjack, especially at night and when driving alone.

Through my interactions with new friends and neighbors I learned more about the local conditions and inhabitants. I got the story, for example, on the vacant house next door that was owned by Mrs. Cane, an elderly African American woman who before Katrina had been a fixture in the neighborhood. Too frail to return after evacuating, her house sat empty after the storm, tied up in legal proceedings.

The house had not been entirely unoccupied, however, during Mrs. Cane's absence. The Jehovah's Witnesses were there on numerous occasions, leaving pamphlets and prayer cards each time in the crack of the screen door. In a perhaps not unrelated incident, just before the evacuation for Hurricane Gustav in August 2008, a homeless and mentally ill man broke into the house and claimed it for his own, proclaiming to anyone who approached him that the house was a gift to him from God. A neighbor called the police and the man was found and arrested. Several of the neighbors came together after that, bought supplies, and boarded up the front and side windows. They were curt and abrupt about it; it was 9 pm, the work was done, and now everyone can go back home. Everyone finally breathed a sigh of relief when a local resident, someone already living in the neighborhood, finally bought the place and began renovations immediately.

Such tensions were common on my block, where there was a mix of stable homes and families interspersed with abandoned and crumbling structures and some projects in



renovation. Shortly after I moved in, one of my neighbors gave me the lay of the land, describing the residents on our street. Standing on the porch and pointing around in various directions, a cigarette dangling from his fingers, he surveyed the area: “That man who lives over there? He is heavily armed. He was shooting at people after Katrina who were trying to loot. And right there? That guy has a huge drinking problem. Have you ever been into his house? It’s a total wreck. He was doing pretty good for a while until his girlfriend committed suicide. Were you here that night he found out? [I was.] He was out in the middle of the street at two a.m. yelling and screaming. I finally had to come out here and yell at him to shut up [I remembered that too]. And that woman who lives down there? Well her son is a very famous drug dealer around here, so nobody messes with her. In fact this whole block, from that house over there to that house down there is protected. Ain’t nothing going to happen to you here.”

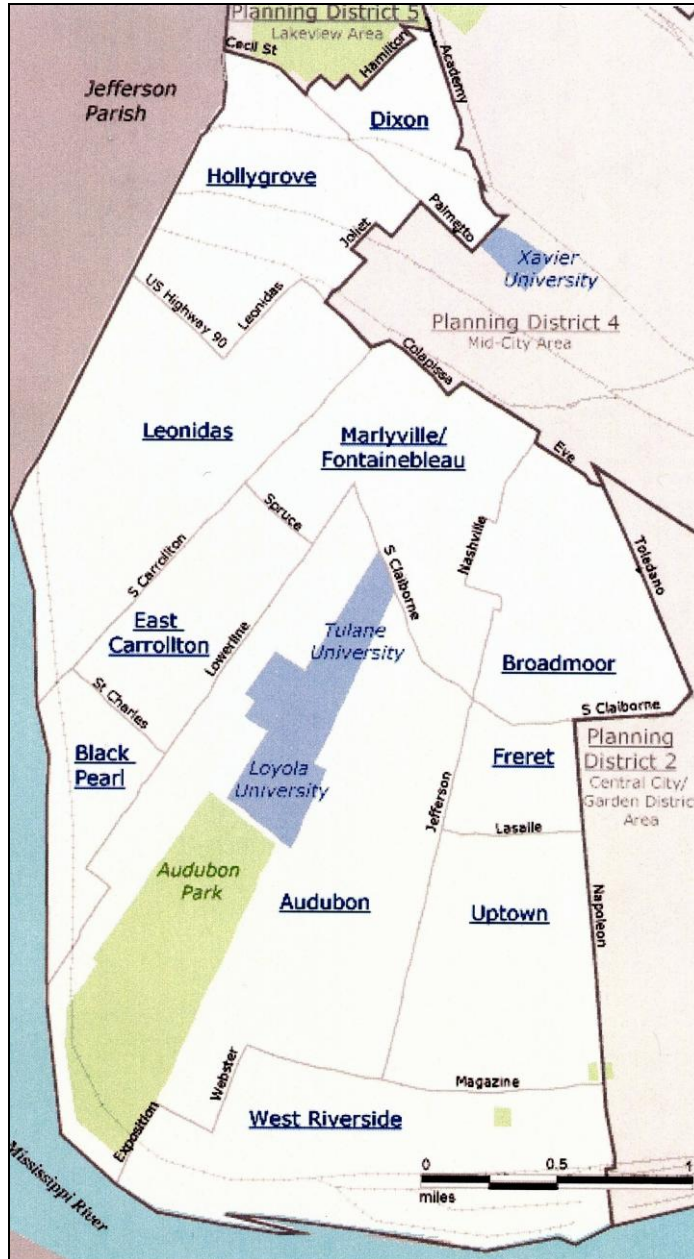
It was not exactly the most comforting of reassurances. That same neighbor’s nine year old daughter showed me one day how easy it was to stand on the garbage can, jump over the iron fence, and land on my porch in front of the door. “A swift kick and you’d be in,” she had said. I was not amused and looked into getting an alarm system, but the monthly fees were way beyond my budget. Instead I kept my eye on the New Orleans Police Department crime maps, watching for the appearance of an ominous red dot (indicating a murder site) close to home. During my stay there, the closest that one ever came was six or seven blocks away. From my perspective this was evidence of crime in the neighborhood, but by the New Orleans’ standard, where safety is assessed from block by block, it meant that I lived on a relatively low crime and safe part of the street.

I also kept close watch of my surroundings, for example when coming and going between house and car. There was a distinct and persistent feeling of vulnerability and insecurity made worse each time there was a sound of a gunshot, a car speeding by, or an argument on the street. There was a distinct sense that it was only a matter of time before I or someone I knew, would be directly impacted.

Indeed, as time went on I began to notice some increased activity on the corner, just a few houses away from my front door. At night there were sometimes two or three young men hanging around with cell phones, standing in the middle of the street and peering in at the drivers as the cars rolled slowly by. When I passed them in my car coming home in the evening or at night, I was already in the process of slowing down and they watched me carefully, expectantly. It was not until they saw me park and head through the gate and up the stairs to my front door that they turned away, no longer interested. It was a welcome dismissal; “Oh ok, she lives there.”

For the most part, however, my time on Saratoga Street was easy, surrounded by good friends, good neighbors, and extended family members. With this home base secured, I continued on in my research, continually refining my questions and the fieldwork I had set out to do. Over the next four chapters I present the vulnerabilities, resiliencies, and forms of ‘wisdom’ of the people and places I encountered. Immersed within these communities, I examine the social geographic dimensions of spiritual belief and practice, the diverse methods and ways of responding to urban violence, processes of healing and religious transformation, and the nature and impact of work for the recovery, redevelopment, and reform of urban self and society.

CHAPTER 2: PRAYING A CITY PLEASING TO GOD:  
THE OUR LADY OF PROMPT SUCCOR PEACE PRAYER GROUP



**Map 6. Neighborhood Snapshot, Uptown.**  
Source: Greater New Orleans Community Data Center.

### **Meeting the Ursulines and Our Lady**

“If you want to know about religion and recovery in New Orleans” Mrs. Benoit was saying, her eyes lighting up, “then you *have* to start with the Ursulines and Our Lady of Prompt Succor. She’s the patroness and protector of the city and around here people pray to her whenever there’s a hurricane. She’s saved the city on numerous occasions! Our Lady was surely watching over us when Katrina hit, because the storm actually missed New Orleans. It was *human* error that caused the levees to break and that is what gave us so much trouble.”

It was an unsolicited but very useful piece of advice from a family friend, at the beginning of my fieldwork. It pointed me immediately in the direction of local religious devotion, signaling in particular the role of faith in the way that some residents understand and manage the particular vulnerabilities and challenges of urban dwelling this locale. Sitting in her front parlor, in the large blue house on the corner she was soon to vacate, Mrs. Benoit spoke with some authority about the subject. Her children had moved away, her sister was not well, and the house felt empty and cold; it had been that way since the storm. Mrs. Benoit was spending most of her time in Houston anyway, with the family and grandchildren, so in some sense she was already removed.

But she seemed alive and at home once again with the mention of Our Lady, remembering and describing the devotion of her childhood. “Oh yes, we used to pray to Prompt Succor in school” she recalled, telling me how the Blessed Mother had been a divine and comforting source of protection. More broadly, Our Lady was known and loved because she had “saved the city” many times over – and she did so by watching

over residents, protecting and healing the vulnerable and the sick, averting crisis, and solving problems.

I wanted to know more about this divine figure, and Mrs. Benoit suggested I visit the Ursuline Convent in uptown New Orleans. “Go ask them” she told me. “They will tell you everything you need to know.” The main number to the convent was easy enough to find, and when I called I was connected first to the resident archivist: Sister Joan Marie. We made an appointment for the following week. Following the Sister’s directions to the convent, I travelled uptown along St. Charles Avenue and turned right onto Nashville Avenue. Nearing the intersection of Willow Street, the Ursuline campus came fully into view. It was a sprawling complex that occupied several city blocks, with expansive brick buildings all connected around an interior center courtyard. I found the main entrance to the convent at the northeast corner. After ringing the front bell, I was welcomed by a young girl in a Catholic school uniform who led me into a small office and sitting room and then directed me from there up the center stairwell to the third floor. Sister Joan Marie and the archives were located there – in one large room with several separate storage areas adjacent and across the hall.

The Sister greeted me warmly, inviting me to sit and discuss my research interests. I outlined my questions about the history of the Ursulines and the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor. She was an excellent guide, and over the course of several sessions we plowed through books, pamphlets, articles and other materials on the Ursulines – how they came to New Orleans, their mission and current activities, and in particular the devotion they created to Prompt Succor, a local appellation of the Virgin Mary. I found the materials fascinating, but I learned the most by just sitting at the long

wooden table across from Sister Joan Marie and listening to her many stories, personal accounts, and views.

She seemed to enjoy the occasion as well, particularly the memories that were triggered by revisiting a particular book or religious text, re-reading certain letters, or viewing again photographs and other objects, though much of this material still sat uncategorized in boxes for storage. What emerged from the exchange, even more clearly than the history of the religious order and devotion, was evidence of the deeply spiritual and intimate *relationship* with Our Lady that many residents have. It is a relationship, of caretaking, peacemaking, and placemaking, which originates in New Orleans with the Ursuline Sisters during the early history of the city, and it is a relationship and shared devotion that is also extremely significant for many people who make their lives and worlds within the region and around the world.

### **A Catholic Town**

New Orleans is a famously Catholic town; its roots as such trace back to the Colonial period when French settlers arrived in the late 1600s and staked strategic claim to the area now known as the state of Louisiana. The early development of the region, including the City of New Orleans, was managed in large part by commercial companies such as the Company of the West and the Company of the Indies. These enterprises, however, were still under Catholic jurisdiction and the companies were required to meet specific religious obligations, including for example the employment of priests who were in turn responsible for the religious conversion of the local population (Hennessey 1981:32).

Female religious orders, like the Ursulines, were recruited also, primarily to supply nuns to establish schools for girls and young women. The early French settlers of Louisiana were already familiar with the order; Bienville's own mother was reportedly educated by the Ursuline Sisters in Quebec (Heaney 1993:31). Formal recruitment of Ursuline nuns to come to New Orleans, therefore, was begun, led by Father Nicolas Ignatius de Beaubois, the superior priest of the Catholic mission in the region of the lower Mississippi. An agreement was reached between the Ursuline Sisters in Rouen, France and the Company of the Indies, which called for the supply of six nuns. Arriving in New Orleans in 1727, their tasks included "hospital nursing, teaching both white and black girls, hospitality for young women who came from France in search of husbands, and care also for "correction girls" sent to the colony. For these services the Company gave the Ursulines a house, eight arpents of land, and eight black slaves." The Sisters established a convent in the *Vieux Carré* and set about their work and charitable activities (Hennesey 1981:32).

The Order of Saint Ursula (OSU) is a religious order founded by Angela Merici, later Saint Angela, born in Italy in 1474. As a young Christian woman Angela was divinely directed through prayer to found a "company of virgins" focused on the education of girls. The order began in Brescia in 1532. Receiving the approval of the Holy See in 1544, four years after Angela's death, the order was established well enough to spread successfully throughout Italy and to other parts of Europe, particularly France, as well as to the New World (Heaney 1993).

Despite the early success of the Ursuline mission in New Orleans, the young convent struggled to sustain itself through the early part of the nineteenth century. In

touch with members of their former community in France, the New Orleans Sisters pleaded for additional support and personnel. Sister St. Michel Gensoul in France was one of the first to respond to the call, however in order to travel she required permission from the Pope, a difficult and lengthy process given the civil unrest in France at the time. She prayed, therefore to the Virgin Mary that permission be swiftly granted – promising that if it were, she would honor the Blessed Mother in New Orleans as Our Lady of Prompt Succor (*Secours*). When Pope Pius the Seventh did indeed quickly give his approval, Sister St. Michel had a statue of the Blessed Mother carved and dedicated, which she brought to New Orleans in December 1810. There, Our Lady of Prompt Succor was enshrined in the chapel within the French Quarter convent, and a community of devoted followers grew quickly around her (Heaney 1993, Clark 2007).

### **Quick Help and Divine Intervention**

Our Lady quickly made her presence in New Orleans known. Soon after her arrival several local miracles were attributed to her grace and divine intervention. Largely undocumented, details of these events are found most often in written accounts by the Sisters and related religious clergy, in correspondence and personal narrative from those who have witnessed or received favors, and in the repeated accounts and stories that are shared informally among Sisters, devotees, and members of the general public.

Sister Angela, for example, a nun who was in residence at the New Orleans convent for eighteen years but moved in 2003 to the Ursuline infirmary in Alton, Illinois, has kept a mental account of all the major miracles: “At first it was just small favors” she told me, “like Mother St. Michel obtaining the permission to come to Louisiana, or



finding something that was lost. But then in 1812 there was a big fire in the French Quarter and the nuns prayed and prayed for their safety (*placing her palms together*). They took a smaller statue of the Blessed Mother, the one they now call “Sweetheart,” and they held it out the upstairs window facing the fire (*holding her hands out as if holding the statue*). And at the last minute a great wind came along and blew the fire away from the convent (*sweeping her hands dramatically across and off to the side!*)”

A few years after this event, another important miracle occurred. This was the decisive and swift victory of U.S. troops over the British in the Battle of New Orleans on January 8, 1815. The victory was considered miraculous, given the fact that the U.S. troops were inexperienced and outnumbered, and the outcome is attributed to Our Lady of Prompt Succor because the Ursuline Sisters had prayed during the conflict for her protection and divine intercession. “There’s a personal letter in the archives from President Andrew Jackson thanking the Ursulines for their prayers, and do you know what it says?” Sister Angela asked me. “It says, “I won the battle, *but through divine intervention.*” After that there was a public mass of thanksgiving to Our Lady and a promise was made to do that annually for all the years to come, on the eighth day of January. And we still do.”<sup>22</sup>

Numerous other accounts of early miracles exist, many of them involving cases of miraculous healing from illness or injury; Sister Angela recounted, for example, the story of a young girl who was injured by a horse but survived after her family prayed a novena to Prompt Succor, as well as another miracle of a young woman who was attacked by a stranger and lost her ability to speak, but was suddenly healed during the

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<sup>22</sup> The 195<sup>th</sup> Eucharistic celebration of the Feast of Our Lady of Prompt Succor was held in New Orleans on January 8, 2010.

feast day celebration on January 8<sup>th</sup> that year. In many ways, it is the circulation and informal sharing of these accounts of miracles that has helped the devotion to grow. Over time it became customary for Catholics as well as others to pray to Our Lady whenever “quick help” was needed.

In 1928, at the request of the archbishop of New Orleans and the bishops of Alexandria and Lafayette, the Holy See approved the selection of Our Lady of Prompt Succor as the patroness of the city of New Orleans and the state of Louisiana. She thus became officially associated with the care and protection of the city and its inhabitants (Heaney 2003, Clark 2007). Devotion to her continues to spread, locally and far beyond the region. There are religious groups and devotees from around the country and world who pilgrimage to New Orleans to visit the Shrine. A confraternity was even established in New York. Prompt Succor’s Louisiana roots, however, remain clear and undisputed, as one of the Sisters was proud to assert: “She’s Louisiana bred. Now there may be other churches out there called Our Lady of Prompt Succor but they all come from this one. We’re not a parish and we have no obligations as such but the Ursulines still hold an important place in the Catholic history of the city.”

### **In Search of the Shrine**

The Ursuline Convent, located in “Uptown” New Orleans, sits on the larger campus that includes Ursuline Academy, the prestigious private elementary and high school for girls, and the National Votive Shrine to Our Lady of Prompt Succor. All together the campus stretches between Nashville Avenue and State Street and between Willow Street and South Claiborne Avenue.



**Map 7: Location of Ursuline Campus, Uptown New Orleans.**  
**Source: Greater New Orleans Community Data Center**

This location, however, is not the original site of the convent. The Ursulines first made their home on Chartres Street in the French Quarter. The “Old Ursuline Convent” is now a National Historic Landmark and is one of the oldest surviving examples of French colonial architecture in the lower Mississippi River Valley.

The relocation of the convent from the French Quarter to its current uptown location is closely linked to the industrial development and expansion of the City of New Orleans. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, in what was becoming a densely and somewhat dangerously overcrowded French Quarter, the Ursulines determined their location to be undesirable for a boarding school for girls. In 1818, therefore, they sold

much of their property on Chartres Street and purchased land downriver, about two miles to the east of, or “below”, the city. The original convent building, which they did not sell, was given as a gift to the Archdiocese (Heaney 1983:280). At their new location on Dauphine Street, within the newly developed Creole *faubourgs*, the Ursulines built a new and expansive convent and resumed their educational activities and charitable work. They resided there for nearly a century, on beautiful grounds with expansive gardens that fronted the Mississippi River, as well as a nuns’ residence and chapel where the statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor was enshrined, a boarding school for girls, and several additional outbuildings.

In 1912, however, the Ursulines were forced to abandon the property and move again. This time they were displaced by the construction, authorized by the State of Louisiana and the Port Authority of New Orleans, of the Inner Harbor Navigation Canal, a shipping canal between the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain. Informally known as the Industrial Canal, its construction displaced many other residents and destroyed several homes and buildings, including the Ursuline Convent. While most historical accounts describe how this land was “taken” by the State, it is also reported that the Ursulines “generously donated” their land to the city in 1911, before relocating to their current uptown/Audubon location (Campanella 2002:72-73). The statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor was moved also, to be enshrined again uptown in a new chapel dedicated in 1924: The National Votive Shrine of Our Lady of Prompt Succor.

## **Uptown New Orleans**

The Uptown New Orleans Historic District, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, gives Louisiana Avenue, Tchoupitoulas Street, South Claiborne Avenue, and Broadway Avenue as its primary boundaries. The residents of New Orleans, however, have designations of their own. They include, for example Canal Street, a street long viewed as the physical and cultural dividing point between the French Quarter and the upriver expansion of the American sector, with everything upriver considered uptown. For other residents the “starting point” for the uptown area was Jackson Avenue.

Each of these designations has a distinct social, cultural, and economic association. At least during the period of my field research, Jackson Avenue, for example, was considered a transitional street with “good blocks” and “bad blocks.” Particularly as one moved farther away from St. Charles Avenue or Magazine Street, the number of extended blocks with blighted properties went up, along with the extent of underlying social and economic problems and the incidence of violence. Louisiana Avenue, farther uptown, followed a similar pattern.

As a whole, however, uptown New Orleans was generally known for its many “good blocks” with spacious homes, large yards, expansive parks, century-old trees, wealthy white residents, and prestigious universities. Considered also to be one of the safest areas of the city, it had a relatively low rate of crime. Comparatively, the downtown area was perceived as more urban, grittier, low-income, artistic and bohemian, with a higher percentage of blacks and other people of color, and with higher rates of crime. Such designations also had religious associations -- the people uptown were more pious and pure and downtown was full of sin and debauchery. One resident, a woman with a strong religious devotion to Prompt Succor, summed up her view of the state of

the world by referring to the happenings on downtown's Canal Street: "The world is in such bad shape right now with this sin," she stated. "I mean they celebrate decadence on Canal Street!"

The social-geography of these places was in reality much more complex, and there were many nodes and neighborhoods across the city, which defied the uptown-downtown associations to take on other specific meanings. For example, Central City and the Irish Channel were two uptown neighborhoods that were home to a majority black population, and the downtown French Quarter and Marigny neighborhoods were majority white (Campanella 2006:165). In addition, the "good blocks" butted right up to the "bad blocks," making these distinctions relative and to a certain extent imagined.

The Ursuline campus was situated in a neighborhood of mostly small to mid-size residential homes. Located several blocks away from the back entrances to Tulane University, many of the homes in the neighborhood had been converted into multi-unit rentals occupied by university students. The streets filled during the day with overflow parking from the university campus as well as with school busses for Eleanor McMain High School, one of the high schools in the city's recovery school district, whose entrance was directly across the street from the convent. With the additional traffic from students at Ursuline Academy, the entire region was a bustling corridor, focused closely on education from elementary and secondary school, on up to the university level.

### **The Shrine as Sanctuary**

In the midst of all this exchange the National Votive Shrine to Our Lady of Prompt Succor was a peaceful sanctuary, resting like an anchor at the far end of the



**Image 7. National Votive Shrine of Our Lady of Prompt Succor. Photo by author.**

Ursuline campus. To enter the Shrine, I climbed the short series of cement stairs from State Street up to the front doors, and walked directly into the main part of the chapel. The interior was spacious and long, with a high arched ceiling and a center aisle leading past rows of pews up to the altar. The altar itself was set out from an elaborately carved stone east wall, extending from floor to ceiling. Positioned high on a pedestal jutting out from this wall was the carved wooden statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor. She stood several feet high with the baby Jesus in her arms; they were both adorned with jeweled crowns and brightly illuminated.

One of the Sisters told me that there are actually two sets of crowns; one for everyday use and the other brought out only for special occasions. Made for the coronation of the statue in 1895, the jewels themselves were donated by the citizens of

New Orleans in thanks for favors received from Our Lady. Gems were taken, for example, from wedding bands, pins, cufflinks, and other jewelry. The best gems were set into one pair of crowns, and the rest went into the other. The effect was impressive; one Sister even disclosed the location of a coveted seat in the chapel where one could see the sparkle of a particularly brilliant diamond, when the light was just right.

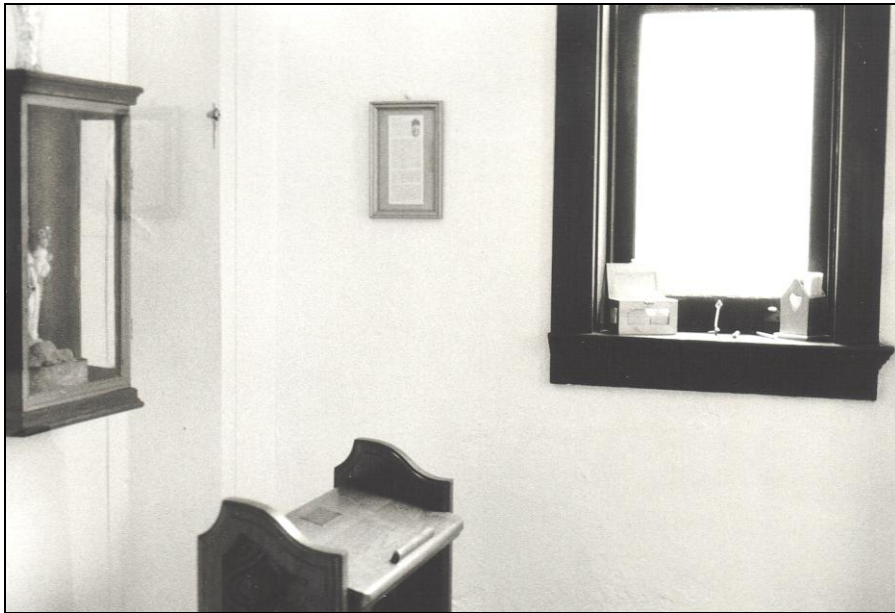


**Image 8. Main Altar at the Shrine. Photo by author.**

I passed through the main chapel, an L-shaped design with the longer section being the main aisle up to the altar. At the altar I turned to the right to face into the



“Nuns’ Chapel,” the formerly cloistered and gated area that served, during the time that I was there, as a space for overflow seating when the chapel was full or when school children gathered for mass. There was a little room off to the side of this space, called “Sweetheart’s corner,” where the smaller statue of Our Lady was enshrined. Here I found a bench for kneeling and prayer in front of the enclosed case holding the statue, as well as supplies – pencils and paper for petition making and a small wooden box in which to deposit them set on the sill of the one small window.



**Image 9. Sweetheart's Corner. Photo by author.**

The Nuns’ Chapel connected at the other end with the main hallways of the school. As I passed through to this space, I entered a wide hallway with lockers between classrooms and administrative offices winding around and then outside to a large rectangular courtyard with fountains and palm trees. Passing the cafeteria and kitchen, along an arched and covered walkway around the perimeter, I arrived finally at the far corner and back entrance to the convent and Sisters’ residence. The Shrine anchored one

corner of the campus and the convent anchored the opposite corner, with the school nestled in between. The entire place was secluded and felt well protected; seemingly a world within a world.

### **Sisters' Stories**

The Ursuline Sisters in New Orleans who were present during the time of my fieldwork, were fully dedicated to the devotion of Our Lady of Prompt Succor. They served, in essence, as her caretakers and believed in turn that she protected and cared for them and for so many others. The number of nuns carrying out this mission in New Orleans, however, has varied greatly over the years; when I arrived there were seven Sisters in residence and three of them were quite elderly and near retirement.

Two Sisters in particular, Sister Joan Marie and Sister Damian held particularly important roles in relation to the care of Our Lady and the Shrine, and in regards to the preservation and spread of her devotion. Sister Joan Marie was the appointed archivist at the time and Sister Damian was the caretaker of the Shrine. They were each kind enough to share valuable and personal information with me regarding the dimensions of their spiritual relationship and service.

In addition to being Sisters in Christ, the two were also sisters by birth. One afternoon, sitting on the front porch outside of the convent, I coaxed them into talking about their family and religious upbringing. "We grew up in Honduras," Sister Damian began, "because our Dad worked for United Fruit Company. But we had other relatives living here in Louisiana. When it came time for our schooling we came up here and

boarded. You weren't even in the mind of God then," she said to me laughing, "It was 1929."

After their preliminary studies, the two sisters entered the convent, roughly around the same time. They later continued their schooling at the university level. As Sister Damian told me, "Our whole educational experience has been with the Church." "We went to the College of New Rochelle, and then on to Loyola." I asked if they had planned their religious life together and Sister Damian replied, "Actually, we never talked about it. I just remember asking my mom about it and she said, "You too?" Well we got our things packed, my mom and dad came and talked to Mother Rose who was here at the time, and they took care of getting our bus tickets."

Sister Joan Marie described further the specific details of her calling, remembering with a smile her initial resistance to entering the convent. "I thought it was not for me," she recalled, "even though in high school I did go to mass every day. But one January our class had a retreat and our sponsor asked, "Have any of you all ever thought about entering the convent?" And don't you know I put my hand up, saying yes I would enter?"



**Image 10. Sister Joan Marie with Photo Album Showing her Religious Education. Photo by author.**

I asked the Sisters also about their personal devotion to Our Lady and the spiritual relationship that had shaped and sustained their lives for so many years. Sister Joan Marie responded, making clear the link between herself, Our Lady, and ultimately Christ or God. “Every time I say a prayer to a saint” she explained, “it’s a prayer to that person to intercede with God. They in themselves are not God. It’s an intermediary. And to me the devotion is transferred from that person to Jesus or from that person to God via the devotion to Our Lady or to any saint. It’s like I want her to ask Jesus something for me. But I follow the relationship through, because I do love Jesus and I do go directly to him also. I do.” Sister Damian, for her part, simply stated, “I can’t think of my life without her. It’s just a devotion that’s always been there. The world moves around her. It’s hard to explain it to you.”

In their service at the convent and Shrine, the sisters worked to maintain and facilitate the public connection and relationship with Our Lady. There was an important public sense and awareness of the devotion, primarily because of its association with protection and “quick help,” which became especially acute at times when tropical storms and hurricanes threatened the city. As Sister Damian explained, “Sometimes you don’t hear too much about her, but whenever there is news of a storm, the activity picks up. The phone rings, and the questions start coming, “When is your next mass going to be?” and so on. So there is a shared knowledge there.”

Sister Joan Marie gave a more detailed account of the devotion and prayers said during hurricane season: “Every day at mass... after the petitions, where you pray for this and you pray for that, well we always say this prayer: “Through the intercession of Our

Lady of Prompt Succor, may we be spared all loss of life and property during this hurricane season.” We say that every day, and all of the churches are supposed to.”

In the masses that I attended during the three hurricane seasons of my fieldwork, the prayer was recited as follows:

*Our Lady of Prompt Succor, ever Virgin Mother of Jesus Christ our Lord and God, you are most powerful against the enemy of our salvation. The divine promise of Redeemer was announced right after the sin of our first parents; and you, through your Divine Son, crushed the serpent’s head. Hasten, then, to our help and deliver us from the deceits of Satan. Intercede for us with Jesus that we may always accept God’s graces and be found faithful to Him in our particular states of life. As you once saved our beloved City from ravaging flames and our Country from an invading army, have pity on us and obtain for us protection from hurricanes and all other disasters (silent pause for individual petitions). Assist us in the many trials which beset our path through life. Watch over the Church and the Pope as they uphold with total fidelity the purity of faith and morals against unremitting opposition. Be to us truly Our Lady of Prompt Succor now and especially at the hour of our death, that we may gain everlasting life through the merits of Jesus Christ who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen. Our Lady of Prompt Succor, Hasten to Our Help! (last refrain said three times).*

While this prayer was one of the most public and familiar aspects of the devotion to Prompt Succor, its content also indicated the extent to which the devotion to Our Lady was used to address “all other disasters,” including the “many trials which beset our path through life.” I asked the Sisters, therefore, about the range of the devotion and the various situations for which swift and divine intervention was sought. In addition to storms and hurricanes, the broadest and most current concerns, they reported, had to do with illness, especially cancer, surgery, and problems related to fertility, pregnancy, and childbirth. Prayers and petitions were also offered for financial matters; Katrina recovery issues such as rebuilding delays or problems with contractors; and numerous minor requests for things lost and found, or from the local students – praying for a good grade or a date for the prom.

I was also encouraged to speak further with Sister Angela, the former caretaker of the Shrine, who had been in residence at the convent in New Orleans for eighteen years but who now resided at the Ursuline Infirmary in Alton, Illinois. “She knows a *tremendous* amount about the devotion,” one devotee assured me, “you *must* go and see her.”

I did make the trip to Illinois, to the Queen of Peace Infirmary, a skilled nursing facility that serves the Ursulines of the Central Province. There I found Sister Angela in remarkably good health and spirit at the age of ninety-two, though wheelchair bound and wearing a pacemaker. She wore a full habit and silver cross and was sitting in her room in the sunshine with a stack of papers on her lap when I arrived at our scheduled meeting time. She was eager to speak with me, and had already pulled together some information – letters and photographs from her time in New Orleans. We began our conversation, however, with the details of her religious upbringing and early formation.

Born in Galveston, Texas in 1917, Sister Angela was educated as a child by the Ursulines. She entered the convent at the age of eighteen and took her first vows at the age of twenty in 1937. “I’ve been a nun for seventy-two years,” she said proudly. Eighteen of those years were spent in New Orleans, from 1985 – 2003. I asked about her service there, and she described with delight the story of her arrival and the various responsibilities she accumulated: “The mother superior asked me right away to be in charge of the chapel. And I said I’ll do it, as long as I don’t have to use those big machines to wax the floor and only if I don’t have to iron anything, because I never did iron very well. But she said “No you don’t have to worry about any of that.” So she showed me what to do. At that point, it was just fixing everything for mass. Then the next

month after I arrived, the nun who was in charge of the tours died – and guess who got that job? So then I was fixing everything for mass and doing the occasional tour. And then all of a sudden, the nun who was taking care of the mail and answering all of the letters, well she had a heart attack and died – and guess who got *that* job? So then I had to fix mass, do the tours, *and* answer the mail (*laughter*). Then two years later Pope John Paul the Second came to New Orleans, in 1987, and all the school children had to learn about Our Lady of Prompt Succor. From that day on the tours and the interest in the Shrine and Our Lady multiplied like you wouldn't believe.”

### **Simple Religious Communication**

Sister Angela could recount almost all of the major miracles attributed to Our Lady, from the fire in the French Quarter to the Battle of New Orleans, and she told me also about the range of everyday concerns for which Our Lady's intercession was sought: “Sometimes it's even for small little things. Like after mass one Sunday there was an old lady at the Shrine who said, “I've lost my rosary I can't find it.” And I said, “Well look in your pocket, it might be in your pocket or something.” And she said, “No it's not in my pocket.” So we go back and look all around the floor where she was sitting, and she said, “No, it's not here.” And I said, “Well let's say a little prayer to Our Lady of Prompt Succor that you find your rosary because you need it.” You know? So we said a little prayer, you know how you do it with these older people (*chuckling*), and then she went out and guess where she found it? In the ditch. When she had gotten out of the car it had fallen. So she found it there and she came back in the church to tell me.”

In addition to interacting directly with devotees and others who attend mass or visit the Shrine, the Sisters helped to facilitate the communication of their needs and concerns in several other ways. They responded, for example, to all the letters they received from devotees who lived far away from the Shrine. These letters described their personal concerns and situations, asked for specific prayers and petitions to be made at the Shrine, and listed the prayer cards, statues, medals, and other religious items they requested to purchase and receive by mail.

As Sister Angela recalled, “People would write and ask for prayers, for tours of the Shrine, for any kind of thing. I remember an older lady once wrote to say that her daughter was pregnant and having an awful time and to ask would we pray at the Shrine to help her? And could she send some money so that we could have a mass for her daughter and get some holy cards, whatever? So I wrote back that yes, we have it on the schedule and we’ll pray for her. We had to schedule it on whatever date was available, so I put it on March 6. And I waited and waited for more news, but no news came. Well guess when I got the letter? Three months later and the child had already been born and was in good health. And guess what date the child was born? March 6. Do you see what I’m saying?” she asked me. “The *connection* that is there...?”

After Sister Angela left New Orleans, the position of caretaker passed to Sister Damian, who was in residence during the time of my fieldwork and responsible for reading and answering the mail. I asked her how she managed the correspondence. “Everyone gets a handwritten reply,” she insisted firmly, “a personal letter, but there is a small space in there also to include any thank you for donations. And we also put their intentions in, telling them we’ll pray for your son’s recovery, we’ll pray for you to find a



new job, and so on. But we always send a personal letter. Over and over again I'll get letters saying "Sister would you pray for this?" And then later I'll get another one later saying, "Sister, thank you for your prayers and this happened or that happened." In the summertime maybe we get one or two or three a day, but our heaviest time is right before January 8, before the celebration and feast day for Our Lady."

Pausing for a minute, she recalled a particularly memorable letter she had received from an elderly woman who was having trouble sleeping. "Obviously she was a nervous character" Sister Damian remembered, "and I sent her a picture of Our Lady and said "Now you put this picture under your pillow before you go to bed at night and you say a prayer to Our Lady and you ask her to take care of you and let you sleep." Now that's a simple statement. But you know what? I got a letter back from her a little bit later. It said, "*Sister*, I've been sleeping at night! I did what you told me to do!" (*laughs*) It's so *simple*, you know? It's simple, simple religious communication. I get letters every day from people in different parts of the city and in fact all over the world asking for prayers. So my job is to keep the contact and the communication going. And that's what I try to do."

As my relationships deepened with the Sisters and Shrine attendees, I observed many additional interactions and I began to see just how devotees maintained their connection to the Shrine through communication with the nuns, pilgrimage to the Shrine, and through other means, often aided by technology. I heard, for example, a story of prayer and healing in the face of a degenerative eye disease from Janice, a long-term member of the Shrine and a graduate of Ursuline Academy. I met Paula who organized an annual pilgrimage to the Shrine, bringing members of a Filipino Catholic Church in

California all the way to New Orleans by bus. They were all inspired by the miraculous healing, some years ago, of Paula's son from a childhood illness, after she had prayed to Our Lady. I traveled to New York, where I met with founders of a confraternity to Prompt Succor based there, and learned of their weekly radio and web broadcasts, which spread the message and devotion of Our Lady. They too journeyed to New Orleans whenever they could, to meet with the Sisters and pray at the Shrine. Finally in Illinois, Sister Angela revealed that she still maintained contact with devotees she knew from New Orleans, who now called her on the phone at the infirmary to pray.

### **The Petition Box**

Across all of these contexts, however, one primary and consistent method of communication supporting the close relationship and devotion to Our Lady was the act of petition making. Petitions were typically made in written form, either in person at the Shrine or sent in by mail. Devotees, however, also lit votive candles or spoke their petitions out loud at designated times during mass and other worship services.

There were several places in the Shrine where one could write and leave a petition. The primary place was a large wooden box set off to the side of the altar, on a small table in the main part of the chapel. As Sister Damian described, "There are some cards there and people can write in whatever they want and place it in the box." Devotees could also place their petitions in the baskets at the back of the church, and or in the small box in "Sweetheart's Corner" in the Nuns' Chapel.

I inquired about the nature and content of these petitions, and asked if it would be possible to see some of the written requests. I wanted to get a sense of the different

concerns and how they were communicated. I was a little hesitant, however, and worried that this would be an invasion of privacy in what is typically a very personal and intimate exchange. But the Sister I asked saw no harm in it, as long as I put everything back the way it was found and I did not remove any of the petitions from the building. She set me up in the sacristy off to the side of the altar, brought in the petition box, and left me to work.

The light in the room was dim, from sunlight filtering in through several large stained glass windows, casting broken patterns across the large wooden table. I set the box on the table and opened the lid. The contents came spilling out; it was near overflowing with petitions – thin white strips of paper, each a few inches long, and all folded in different directions. They were pre-printed with some basic instructions. At the top of each one it said “Petition,” followed by a picture of “Sweetheart” or Our Lady. Underneath that image appeared the following direction: “Write your petition and place this slip in the petition box.” There were several blank lines on the form for writing and at the bottom was the following: “Remember, O Most Gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection...was left unaided - St. Bernard.”

I began to sift through the petitions on the table. Wanting to get them back into the box as quickly as possible I decided that a quicker, although perhaps not less invasive, way to view them would be to take photographs of each one for later review. So I lined them up, there were about 50 in the box on that particular day, photographed each one and then placed them all back in their container. I returned the box to the Sister. “You’re through already?” she asked me, somewhat surprised. “Did you get what you needed?”

While it was impossible to know exactly when the petitions were written and placed in the box, it was April 2008 when I accessed them. They provided a good indication of the diverse concerns and ways of asking; however they were only a snapshot, an incredibly small sample that was probably not representative of the range of requests being made by devotees across the city.

Their content, however, fit into three broad categories. First, there were petitions for everyday concerns; in the box these included the following separate requests: “Please get me through UNO’s PhD program and the defense!” and “So that \_\_\_ does well on her computer test and homework today.” In addition, there were the following requests: “That the Ursuline track team gets safely to and from the tournament;” “That \_\_\_ will excel and grow spiritually and academically”; and even “That Mrs. Meow Meow will come home to heal \_\_\_’s heart.”

Second, petitions addressed urgent matters such as health or financial crises. For example, the petitions in the box included: “Dear Mary, please let my sister have a safe pregnancy and a healthy baby”; “That my father’s vision improve”; and “for my nephew and niece, especially for \_\_\_’s depression.” Others read: “Bless \_\_\_ with a good wife and mother and release him from loneliness”; “That \_\_\_ have success with the transplant”; “For a friend who is anxious and restless”; “Help with sickness in the family (cancer)”; and “That my mom find happiness.” A few of the petitions addressed religious faith and conversion, including the following: “For the conversion of my husband” and “That \_\_\_ be released from the bonds of homosexuality.”

Finally, petitions spoke broadly about recovery, peace, and security, addressing particular needs as well as collective concerns. Several of these petitions addressed needs

directly related to Hurricane Katrina. They included the following requests: “For all the people in New Orleans that have been affected by Katrina”; “That our case against State Farm is successful”; “That our home reconstruction continues without delay”; “That the rest of our Road Home money gets approved and that we receive it”; “That \_\_\_ and \_\_\_ find a house and an insurance company”; and “That I finish the study within 3 months and the whole house within 13 months, to both our satisfaction.” Specific petitions related to peace and security included: “For health, happiness, and the safety of family and friends”; “That all kids grow in safety, physically, psychologically, and in relationships with others”; and “For peace in the family and in the world.”

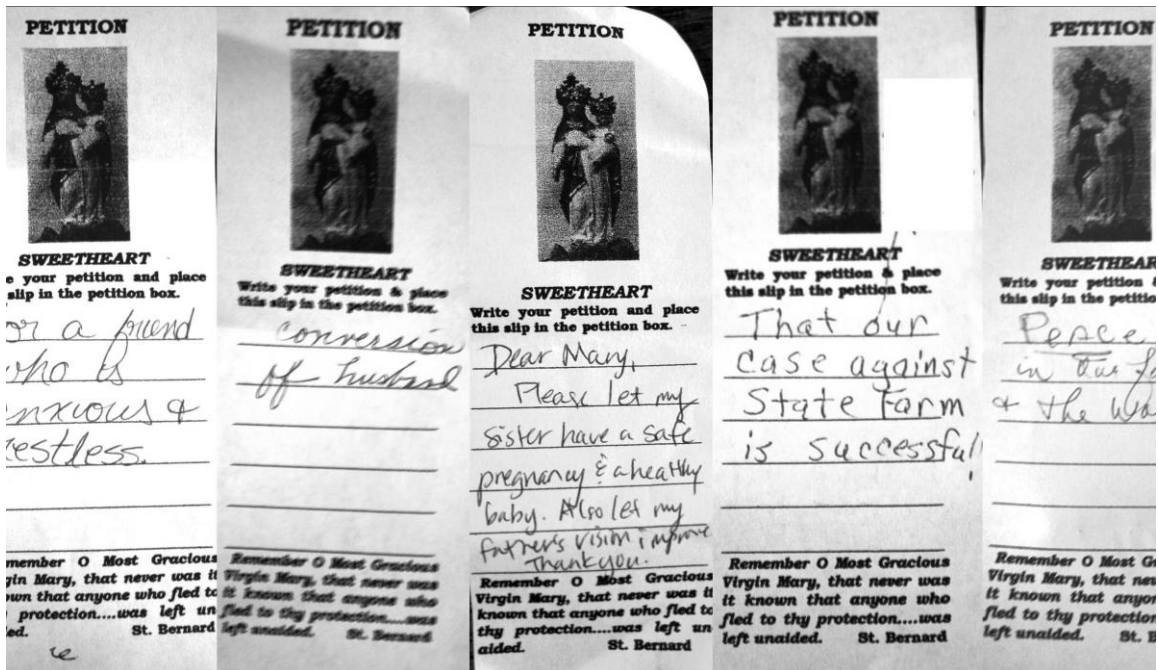


Image 11. Petitions to "Sweetheart." Photo by author.

Some of the petitions included additional phrases, such as “I’ll be eternally grateful”; “Our Lady of Prompt Succor, Hasten to Help Us!”; and “Thanks be to God”.

Several of the petitions I viewed also appeared to be written by the same person. Some devotees, it seemed, would take four or five petition slips and create one for each specific request.

I asked Sister Damian what happened to the petitions after they were placed in the box. “We leave them in there until the box is full,” she explained, “then whenever the nuns have their daily mass in chapel, they pray for all of the people who are praying to Our Lady, acknowledging all of the petitions and intentions together; It’s a collective thing for those who pray, for those who have needs. And then after that we empty the box, burn the contents, and put the box back in the chapel.”

In addition to the writing of petitions I observed devotees enter the Shrine, proceed up the center aisle to the front of the church, and light small votive candles on a stand near the pulpit. Many of them would then stand or kneel in prayer before taking a seat among the pews. I asked Sister Damian about the candles and their significance. She explained that a lighted candle is a way of saying “this is my presence before you Lady, praying for whatever it’s going to be. It’s me before you praying, saying I’ve got to do other things but this represents my needs and my desires and my hopes.” I asked if the candle in a sense stood in for one’s presence, when one could not be physically present in the Shrine. “That’s right,” she replied, “and lots of people do it. We have mass four or five times a week in the evening and at different times during the day. And we have some people, especially some older women who come, and they’ll go right up there and light a candle, and then stand there for a minute or kneel at the rail and pray for that intention, and then they’ll go back and sit down. What they are saying is, I can’t be here all the

time, but this is me praying, this is for me praising you, this is for me asking for your help for so and so, my brother needs this, my sister needs that, somebody is sick, and so on.”

### **“But God is Good”: Thais’ Story**

To learn more about individual devotions the Sisters suggested that I speak to a local woman named who was a frequent visitor to the Shrine. They described her as “a deeply spiritual person” whose story was a wonderful example of the miraculous presence and power of Our Lady. Thais was also serving as the Sacristan at the Shrine, helping to set up for mass during the day and evening and coordinating weddings and other special events. She agreed to speak with me and we met one afternoon in the main chapel. School was in session, but the Shrine was empty and closed for the moment to the public. We settled into a pew up front near the votive candles.

I had not been given much information about Thais’ story, but in many ways I expected to hear an additional account of religious devotion and miraculous and divine intercession. And while these aspects were discussed, the conversation that ensued dramatically expanded my understanding of the depth and significance of devotion to Our Lady, especially in regards to the making and remaking of one’s social and spiritual world following disaster, tragedy, or any other adversity. The conversation changed also the focus of my research questions, bringing the investigation of the role of faith and practice in post-disaster recovery closer to the exploration of peacemaking and placemaking in the transition from vulnerability and violence to resilience and peace. To illustrate these dimensions, I present the course and transcript of the conversation in full.

I began by asking Thais about her religious upbringing and the formation of her devotion to Our Lady. She told me that she was born and raised in New Orleans and grew up uptown, not far from the Shrine. She was an only child and her parents were Catholic, but during her childhood they were not active churchgoers. They saw to it, however, that their daughter had a “proper Catholic education.” As Thais described, “My father would bring me to mass every Sunday. It was not an option for me to miss it. He would drive me and then he would come back in an hour and pick me up. I attended Holy Name of Jesus, although I was baptized at Ava Della Rosa. But everything else, my confirmation and even my schooling, was at Holy Name.”

Her religious formation and devotion to Our Lady began at an early age: “I have always had tremendous faith and a very special devotion to Our Lady,” she said. “It goes all the way back to when I made my first communion. I’ll never forget it, you know the nuns give out holy cards to the students, but before the Sister distributed them she held up one, which was Our Lady of Perpetual Help, and she said “This is a very special holy card and whoever gets it, well the Blessed Mother will be with them in a special way all of their life.” And I was the one who got it, and I just treasured that holy card! As a kid you really take these things to heart. Also, my middle name is Marie so I guess I always connected with her and when it came time to make my confirmation I chose her mother, Ann, for my confirmation name. And it was just like having the perfect mother and the perfect grandmother. I mean, why do we have these special loves? It’s just always been there. Did that holy card have anything to do with it? I don’t know. But I’ve just always loved Our Lady because she’s so very special and because she loves all of us and tries to



help us all the time. She doesn't care who we are. We don't even have to be Catholic. She says that she's the mother of us all, and she truly is."

After finishing elementary and secondary schooling, Thais attended Loyola University, where she met her husband-to-be. Family life quickly became the priority and there was little time for religious participation. As she put it, "You know how you get married and have a whole bunch of kids and you still go to church but life is different? And even though I always had a tremendous faith and devotion to Our Lady, you just sort of drift away. It's not the top priority in your life, even though it is still very important." She paused then, looking down for a moment before adding -- "but twenty-one years ago my husband was murdered."

The statement was completely unexpected and it took me a moment to fully realize what had been said. A heavy silence settled over us and I expressed my sympathy for her loss, but it was only a moment before she continued: "But God is good. Because just before it happened, I had come back to the church in full force. I remember, it was St. Joseph's Day 1986 and I woke up and thought you know I just can't stay away from the sacraments anymore. I have to get up and go to confession and get fully back into the church, confession, communion and everything, and I did. Little did I know that just a few months later my husband would be dead."

"But like I said, God is good, because by then I had what I needed, the renewed commitment to my faith; I had what I needed to survive and to continue to raise my five children. I had questions for the Lord, mind you, I said you know I understand that this wouldn't have happened if it wasn't your will, but my husband was the one who earned

the money to keep us all going.<sup>23</sup> I mean the kids were still in school and I thought how am I going to take care of them? Well, God has been so good to me and he has provided at every step of the road.”

“The night that my husband was killed, it was just such a bizarre thing. The gentlemen who came to tell me actually had worked with my husband and we were religious friends also and he knew how I felt about the church and about praying, so he came to the house. That was a real blessing, because if this entourage from the company would have come, you know I just would have known that something terrible had happened to see all these men in suits and everything coming up. But later that night all of these people were coming to the house anyway, police and camera crews and everything, wanting to take pictures of the kids. So it was like a real zoo. Thank God some of our friends who were there were attorneys and they told those people to get out of there. So God brought the people around who needed to be around.”

I asked her if the tragedy had changed her faith or commitment to the Church in any way. She responded without hesitation, telling me that although she had questions for God, her faith never faltered, nor did her deep devotion and love for Our Lady. “That night, I knew that Our Lady was with me,” she said. “I had a vivid memory of that story about the holy card that I had received as a child, and I knew that she was there. Through all of it, I just knew. I didn’t understand what had happened and I wasn’t happy about it, but I knew that if it wasn’t God’s will then it wouldn’t have happened and for whatever reason that was the way it was. God would never give me more than I could endure. And I knew that. It was just as clear as it could be.”

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<sup>23</sup> Thais’ husband was a security supervisor with a major retail company. He was killed on the job in 1987 by unknown assailants.

Instead, after her husband's death, Thais' spiritual practice actually strengthened. "There was no questioning whatsoever, I just knew and had complete faith. And more than ever I made it a point to go to daily mass and to pray a lot more. Not that I didn't believe before, but I was more of a believer than ever. And faith just became, it became not the center of my life, but the *high point* of my life. I'm sure sometimes I got annoyed because my children couldn't always comprehend it, but I totally fell in love with God. Nothing else could fill that void. And it has taken me on quite a journey, quite a journey (*laughing*). I guess when you have lived through what I have lived through; you just know that God is in charge."

"The Lord is my constant companion and I try to surround myself with things that help to remind me of that. On my altar at home I have a picture of the sacred heart of Jesus and a few relics of the saints, and I have our lady of Mt. Carmel and a statue of Our Lady of Fatima and then the holy water font is right next to it. The grandchildren come through and bless themselves, and expect to be blessed. I know that sometimes people think that people are a little crazy when they have religious things around them all the time, but I think it helps to give us a focus because daily life can be not so nice sometimes and as you walk from room to room in your home and also go out in the world you are reminded that there is something greater here and my pettiness and my anger don't belong."

### **Praying for Peace**

Following this conversation, and on a subsequent visit to the Shrine, I noticed a small blue flyer on a table by the front door, next to the announcements and the schedule

of masses. It read, “Our Lady of Prompt Succor Peace Prayers. Come Pray with us New Orleans, for Peace, Recovery, and Conversions.” The details that followed, announced when and where the group would meet -- every first Monday at 1:00 pm in the Shrine. At the bottom of the flyer was the following request: “Please join us in our effort to renew our group, which began June 1995, until “Katrina.” New Orleans needs our prayers! Come and bring a friend.”

Thais, as it turned out, was a member of the prayer group and she invited me to attend. Initially thinking the group was focused on prayer for the overall protection of the city, I discovered at the first meeting I attended that their primary concern was the problem of violent crime and its impact on residents and the city. “By praying for *peace*,” one of the group members told me, “we are praying for people to stop killing each other.” Thus the prayer group was part, for Thais and others, of one’s devotion and commitment to non-violence and the process of moral and religious transformation in self and in others. It was believed to be the best hope for changing human conditions and bringing about a lasting peace.

I later spoke with one of the founders of the group to learn more about their history and objectives. The Our Lady of Prompt Succor Peace Prayer Group formed in 1995 in response to an alarmingly high rate of violent crime. As this founding member described, “At the time the murder rate here was about one per day, something like over 300 murders per year, and no one was dealing with it. I mean the police were trying. There was a new police chief, Pennington, who was trying to improve things, but he

eventually went to Atlanta.<sup>24</sup> The murder rate was so high and the situation was so far gone, that prayer was the only thing we could do.”

The group originated outside of the Shrine, and prayer sessions were held in members’ homes. A founding member described the earliest gatherings: “When we first started, we had a meeting at my house and talked about how to begin. There were about ten of us, we were all friends who had gone to college together. We wanted to have a day of prayer for peace, for stopping the violence. So we started to meet regularly. Eventually, and as more people were coming, I spoke about needing a larger space. The pastor over at St. Rita’s Church told me; “Well if you are praying for the city, then you belong at Our Lady of Prompt Succor.” So we asked the Sisters at the Shrine and they agreed to give us the first Monday of each month, and we’ve been there ever since.”

Initial interest and attendance was high, however, membership declined steadily over the years and the group temporarily disbanded after Hurricane Katrina. As one member explained, “Our first few meetings at the Shrine were filled. There were several hundred people! But things have settled to about thirty-five regular group members. Our members were mostly older and we have lost a lot of people because of illness and even death.”

During the months that I attended the prayer group, in 2007 and 2008, there was on average ten to fifteen people in attendance. The overall demographic was a mostly elderly, white, and female population residing in the uptown area not far from the Shrine. They were joined on occasion by some younger women and a few older men, typically the daughters and husbands of the regular participants.

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<sup>24</sup> Richard Pennington was the Chief of Police in New Orleans from 1994 – 2002. After losing the City of New Orleans’ mayoral election race to C. Ray Nagin in 2002, Pennington resigned and relocated to Georgia, where he is now the Chief of Police of the City of Atlanta.

Membership was especially low after 2005 when Hurricane Katrina dispersed nearly all the regular participants. However, the group reformed the following year and began to recruit new members. At every meeting I attended, the announcements concluded with the following request: “Please invite others to join us, because New Orleans especially needs prayers in this critical time of rebuilding and planning for our safety.”

The effort, based primarily on word of mouth, was not successful enough for the group to recover its pre-storm numbers. Members were slightly discouraged by the low turn-out but overall remained no less committed to the group’s purpose. As the founding member I spoke with expressed, “There is a verse that I find helpful, the one where the Lord says “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them.” Well, whenever we have a bad turnout, the nuns remind me of that.”

Each prayer meeting began with one of the members arriving a few minutes early to unlock the front doors to the Shrine, first wandering through the school and convent to find the particular Sister who was in possession of the key. Members then began to arrive, greeting each other outside or at the door, and then moving into the Shrine. After passing through the main doors, they immediately came upon a small table placed deliberately in the center of the main aisle. There were flyers spread out, copies of prayers to be read during the meeting, petition slips, envelopes, a few pencils, and a basket for placing petitions and donations.

Offering and petition making were generally the first order of business, before members continued up the main center aisle to find a seat among the pews. They sat generally spaced apart and towards the front of the Shrine when the group was small.

Some sat in silence, or knelt to pray before the meeting began, and others rose to light votive candles. On most afternoons the chapel was bathed in light, the air was cool and still, and the mood solemn and quiet.

The appointed leader for the month approached the pulpit to introduce the group: “We are the Our Lady of Prompt Succor Peace Prayer Group and we meet the first Monday of every month here at the Shrine from 1:00 to 2:00.” Following some general announcements, typically about schedule changes and the like, there was the invitation to invite others to join, and then remembrance of those members who were unable to attend or in need of special prayers. This included any recent deaths within the community. “Please remember all of these people in your prayers” the leader would say. After a brief period of silence, the group prayer began.

A long-term member of the group explained how the prayer sessions were organized: “We start by reading the message that comes out each month from Our Lady of Medjugorje.<sup>25</sup> After that we say the Miracle Prayer, then the prayer about violence, and then the prayer for the conversion of New Orleans, which was written by Father La France. Then after that we say fifteen decades, because Our Lady in Medjugorje says you need to say all fifteen, and interspersed between each set is a bible reading. Each month a different person leads the five joyful mysteries, followed by a scripture reading from the Old Testament, then the five sorrowful mysteries, followed by a scripture reading from the New Testament, and then the five glorious mysteries. We end with the prayer and hymn to Our Lady of Prompt Succor. And we do it all in one hour!”

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<sup>25</sup> Many members see their devotion of Our Lady of Prompt Succor, while valued for its specific Louisiana history, as part of a wider devotion to the Blessed Mother. They incorporate, therefore, religious material associated with other shrines, such as the shrine to Our Lady of Medjugorje in Western Bosnia and Herzegovina.

There was a distinct rhythm to the prayer here; the fifteen decades were said in unison with a steady tempo. It was a quick rolling murmur, punctuated only by changes in pitch and voice, subdued but not without feeling. Rather, there was a perceptible sense of urgency in tone and plea, a deep level of concentration and attention, and a seriousness in delivery undoubtedly linked to the critical nature of members' concerns and requests. I felt also a strong sense of support, based perhaps on a shared belief in the power of communal prayer. As one member later confirmed, "It's not just my prayer. It's my prayer joined with the prayers of many others that gives it strength and power."

The text of the prayers themselves shed additional light on the groups' primary beliefs and objectives. The first prayer, the "Miracle Prayer," asked for the forgiveness of sins.

#### *The Miracle Prayer*

*Lord Jesus, I come before You, just as I am. I am sorry for my sins, I repent of my sins, please forgive me. In Your Name, I forgive all others for what they have done against me. I renounce Satan, the evil spirits and all their works. I give You my entire self, Lord Jesus, now and forever. I invite You into my life, Lord Jesus. I accept You as my Lord, God and Saviour. Heal me, change me, strengthen me in body, soul and spirit.*

*Come Lord Jesus, cover me with Your Precious Blood, and fill me with Your Holy Spirit. I love You, Lord Jesus. I praise You, Jesus. I thank You, Jesus. I shall follow You every day of my life. Amen.*

*Mary my Mother, Queen of Peace, St. Peregrine the Cancer Saint, all you angels and saints, please help me. Amen.*<sup>26</sup>

This prayer was immediately followed by the prayer "To Whom Shall We Go?" which specifically addressed the problem of urban violence in New Orleans:

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<sup>26</sup> The written form of this prayer, distributed to members, also included the following: "Holding a Crucifix (any size), say this Prayer faithfully, no matter how you feel. When you come to the point where you sincerely mean each word, with all your heart, something good spiritually will happen to you. You will experience Jesus, and HE will change your whole life in a very special way. You will see." (attributed to Fr. Peter Mary Rookey, OSM, Intl. Compassion Ministry, Olympia Fields, IL).



*To Whom Shall We Go?*

*God of goodness,  
You know that the violence in our community is out of control.  
It is taking our helpless and innocent ones, it is taking our children.  
And, we confess that beyond the violence of the streets,  
is the violence in our own hearts.  
We contribute to a culture of violence whenever we give in to hatred,  
fear, indifference, and our own self satisfaction.*

*It seems that we are growing numb  
to the suffering, the loss, the indignity done to our sisters  
and brothers and to our earth.  
But in our hearts, and in the heart of our community,  
help us to value life and beauty over instant satisfaction,  
and to value sharing over greed.*

*Empower us to acknowledge and affirm our children, our spouses,  
our neighbors and see respectful solutions to our conflicts.  
Create through us a world where it is easier to be good.*

*Your spirit, given to us, is not timid.  
Therefore each of us can do something, person by person,  
family by family, community by community, to realize  
that we are one – one body, one people, one earth.  
By your design, we thrive or we perish together.*

*Holy One, give us the grace of hope  
Give us dedication to goodness and truth  
as we seek to restore our community to wholeness and life.  
Enable us in this way,  
to take back our city from the violence and crippling fear  
we find in our midst*

*Trusting that your desire for us is peace and not disaster,  
we pray this in your name. Amen.*

Together, these two prayers demonstrated how group members focused on healing and forgiveness at the individual and family level but also extended their concern and attention to the healing and recovery of the city and society. In the Miracle Prayer, for example, members acknowledged their sins and asked for forgiveness. This included

prayer for the capacity to forgive others who had sinned against them. The attention was thus placed first and foremost on the recognition of human frailties, shortcomings, and inactions.

In the second prayer, *To Whom Shall We Go*, the impact of violence within the community was recognized. The particular gravity of the situation for New Orleans was also stressed, for although violence certainly existed in the world, it was in the current time and place that it was “out of control.” In addition, members recognized the contributions they themselves made to the violence, on an internal level within the heart and mind. This was an intimate and deeply personal realization of emotions such as hatred, fear, and indifference. The prayer served as an admission, for example, that members were “going numb” to the suffering and loss impacting others. The realization of peace for the city and society, therefore, lay first in the healing and redemption of one’s self and others, the shifting of values, the renouncement of evil, and finally, in the empowerment and capacity to take action and bring about change.

### ***Prayer as Action***

Prayer group members were active participants in these processes, but they located the ultimate source of power in divine and holy forces. As stated in the prayer to end violence: “Each of us can do something, person by person, family by family, community by community, to realize that we are one – one body, one people, one earth.” Action, therefore, was grounded in the formation and strengthening of relationships, in service, and in fostering a sense of unity rather than division in order to ultimately take back the city from “violence and crippling fear.”

Successful action, however, was entirely dependent on divine will, intervention, and guidance. Members *prayed*, therefore, to be empowered and enabled in their efforts. The work to end the violence and bring about peace, therefore, essentially began and ended with prayer. As one member described, “Sometimes things seem dark and you wish things weren’t the way they were and that people lived differently and thought differently. But in the long run you know that God is in charge, and that we can change things by prayer. I am a firm believer in that.”

There was a specific emphasis also on the power of *collective* prayer. As another group member explained, “People ask me, “What do you think your prayer does?” Well I think not just my prayer, but my prayer joined with many other people who are praying, I think that it does change things.” The change, however, was not necessarily an external one; rather the process of prayer could be transformative in and of itself. As one member stated, “even if my prayer is not answered or doesn’t seem to change anything, well at least *I* am changed in the process.” While members realized that it was ultimately up to God whether they “thrive or perish together,” they continued on with their work, trusting that ultimately God’s desire for them was “peace and not disaster.”

### ***Moral and Religious Conversion***

One important aspect of group members’ prayers for peace in New Orleans focused on the moral and religious conversion of sinners and non-believers. As one member explained, “For years my prayer has been for the conversion of sinners and the salvation of souls because I consider that that was a tremendous gift for me and I would

like that for the whole world. I would like for them all to fall in love with the Lord because if they did then we wouldn't have the problems that we've had."

Immediately following the recitation of the prayer to end violence, therefore, group members recited the following prayer for religious conversion:

*Prayer For The Conversion Of New Orleans*

*Loving Mother, deliver us from the tide of evil threatening to drown our city by assisting us in reversing our rush to depravity which is daily becoming more violent and inhuman. Lead us in renouncing the false understanding of freedom which justifies every moral aberration by helping us repudiate styles that are increasingly indecent and provocative, opposing the press which publicizes evil, and combating entertainment which ruins morals.*

*Dear Mother of all, we rejoice in you as Queen of Heaven and Earth, and seek your reign as Queen of our hearts. Therefore, with the greatest confidence and complete abandonment, we consecrate and entrust ourselves to your Immaculate Heart. So entrusted to your motherly love, we pray that you lead us to sanctity, give us your capacity to love, and teach us how to live our consecration so that our humility, obedience and docility to the Father's will may defeat the enemy.*

*Heavenly Mother, avoiding the dangers of error that surround us, we also unite ourselves to our Pope and the Church – the repository of truth, so that we may all be united as the one Mystical Body of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.*

*Just as you are the Woman Clothed in the Sun standing on the crescent moon crushing the head of the serpent, so we invite you to rest your feet on the Crescent City and crush the head of Satan. We pray for a New Pentecost that the conversion of our city may be the first radiant jewel crowning the triumph of your Immaculate Heart.*

*Come, Holy Spirit, come by means of the powerful Intercession of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, your well-beloved Spouse. Center of Jesus the Lord.*

Based on the text of this prayer, group members viewed violence in New Orleans as closely linked to sin, depravity, and a lack of right morals and values. As one member expressed, "You can't get peace and cooperation and a decent lifestyle unless people have in their heads the right attitude." This member spoke also of a certain lifestyle and way of being that she felt had come to characterize contemporary social life in New Orleans. "People pride themselves on shocking you," she stated. "It's a little quirk, a

contentious way of interacting that has developed in the last thirty years or so, and now it's part of our personality. This has had a big effect on the community.”

This member cited the media as being partly to blame, as well as poor church attendance. Young people were particularly susceptible; as she asserted, “The children aren't getting any values, and instead it's all about money and who can look the sexiest. People here claim that this is part of our culture, that New Orleans is a place where anything goes. They act as if it's a positive thing but it's not. I mean you have to have some rules, ways of proper speech, guidelines for communication and helping people.” She was quick to stress, however, that her assertions were not about a particular segment of the population. She explained, “And I'm not talking about any one group. I'm not. It's not about race or a specific age group, or anything else. It's across the board.”

While moral and religious conversion was part of the group's mission from the beginning, members identified Hurricane Katrina as an important opportunity for change. Some members even felt that the opportunity was divinely orchestrated; a sign from above that something needed to change. As one member explained, “Our group started in June of 1995, so we had been praying for *ten years* almost to the month when Katrina happened. And just a month before that I was in the Shrine and it was during another powerful storm and the lights went off. And it just felt ominous, like a sign that something was coming. Looking back I think it was a trial run for Katrina.” This member spoke also about how the word “Katrina,” taken from the Greek *katharos*, means “pure”, “cleansed”, and “free from corruption.” As she stated, “We needed a catharsis, and Katrina delivered. But of course you don't want to see people suffer.”

In the recovery period, therefore, some members believed that the group had an opportunity to carefully and strategically rebuild and reform the city and society, and that through prayer they could emphasize and assert the specific morals and values they believed should define the future. “We’ve all been put here for a special reason and the main thing is to cooperate” one member stated. “And I continue to pray to Our Lady’s intercession that our city will be rebuilt, that she’ll continue to help in the rebuilding, and that in the end it will be a city that is pleasing to God. That we will all live as God wants us to live. That’s my hope and my dream.”

### ***Peace Prayers, not Politics***

Even with their emphasis on collective prayer, religious conversion, and the spiritual and moral redevelopment of the city, members did not identify themselves as connected to any particular form of social or political action. Prayer was active and transformative, but it was not seen as political. One member, who was a frequent leader of the monthly prayer meetings, stated emphatically, “I always try to stay non-political, because we are praying – so we are NOT identified as a political movement.”

The group, however, had been in the public view on more than one occasion; they were featured, for example, in the press and on a local Christian television station. At one time they even invited a noted public and political figure, Mayor Ray Nagin, to join them in prayer at the Shrine; his subsequent visit and remarks in 1995 were well publicized. I asked one of the group’s founders about this outreach and involvement. She explained, “When we invited Nagin it was to *pray* for him to help our city. It was not a political rally. Later someone wanted us to invite the chief of police and people from the fire

department. But I didn't want to do that. It was becoming too political. And we try to keep things non-controversial so we can pray.”

Her answer indicated a cautious distancing from political involvement with the implication that such involvement might bring unwelcome controversy to the group, thrusting it uncomfortably into the public view and detracting from the group's stated focus on prayer. While group members recognized the role of human action in the eradication of violence and in recovery overall, they firmly believed that the ultimate power for change rests with God. Group members, therefore, walked a fine line between private and public spheres, seeing human means, actions, and methods as only facilitated and supported by divine power and intervention.

### **An Uncertain Future**

Despite the prayer group's efforts to maintain a religious and non-political stance, their beliefs and activities connected them to a larger local religious movement which included groups like the Crusade for the Conversion of New Orleans, another prayer group which met once a month at St. Patrick's Church, and the annual Rosary Congress, an annual seven day prayer vigil focused on “life, reparation and peace in our city, state, nation and the world.” This collective membership has helped to sustain the group by providing a base of mutual support and shared mission beyond the small numbers at the Shrine. It was an important relationship, especially given the decline in the number of Ursuline Sisters in New Orleans and the inevitable change in religious and community life taking place at the convent and Shrine.

Up until Hurricane Katrina the Ursulines had maintained a constant presence in New Orleans, ever since their arrival to the city in 1727. Just after the storm, however, they were forced to evacuate – it was the first time in the history of the local order that there were no Ursulines in New Orleans. They left reluctantly; the nuns were initially committed to ride out the storm along with several other parishioners, community members, and their families, but left when the order to evacuate came from the provincial office.

Flooding was not anticipated, even though the streets around the campus are relatively low lying, especially when compared to other parts of uptown closer to the river. When the levees broke, however, the water came up and the lowest levels of the buildings were inundated. The group remained dry on the main and upper floors, and even when the water rose above the cars in the parking lot, they felt they had enough food and water to stay put. The few men from the congregation and community who were present kept watch from the roof, and the entire campus with its sturdy exterior walls and protected interior spaces, was for a time a relatively safe haven.

Spiritual life was uninterrupted. As Sister Damian described, “There was a seriousness about it that increased as time went on and the situation got worse. But somehow we sensed that this Lady knows what it’s all about, that we were in her hands. It was a supportive system. And we knew that there was nothing we could do except the best we could given the external situation. So overall there was a level of calmness and trust that was there.”

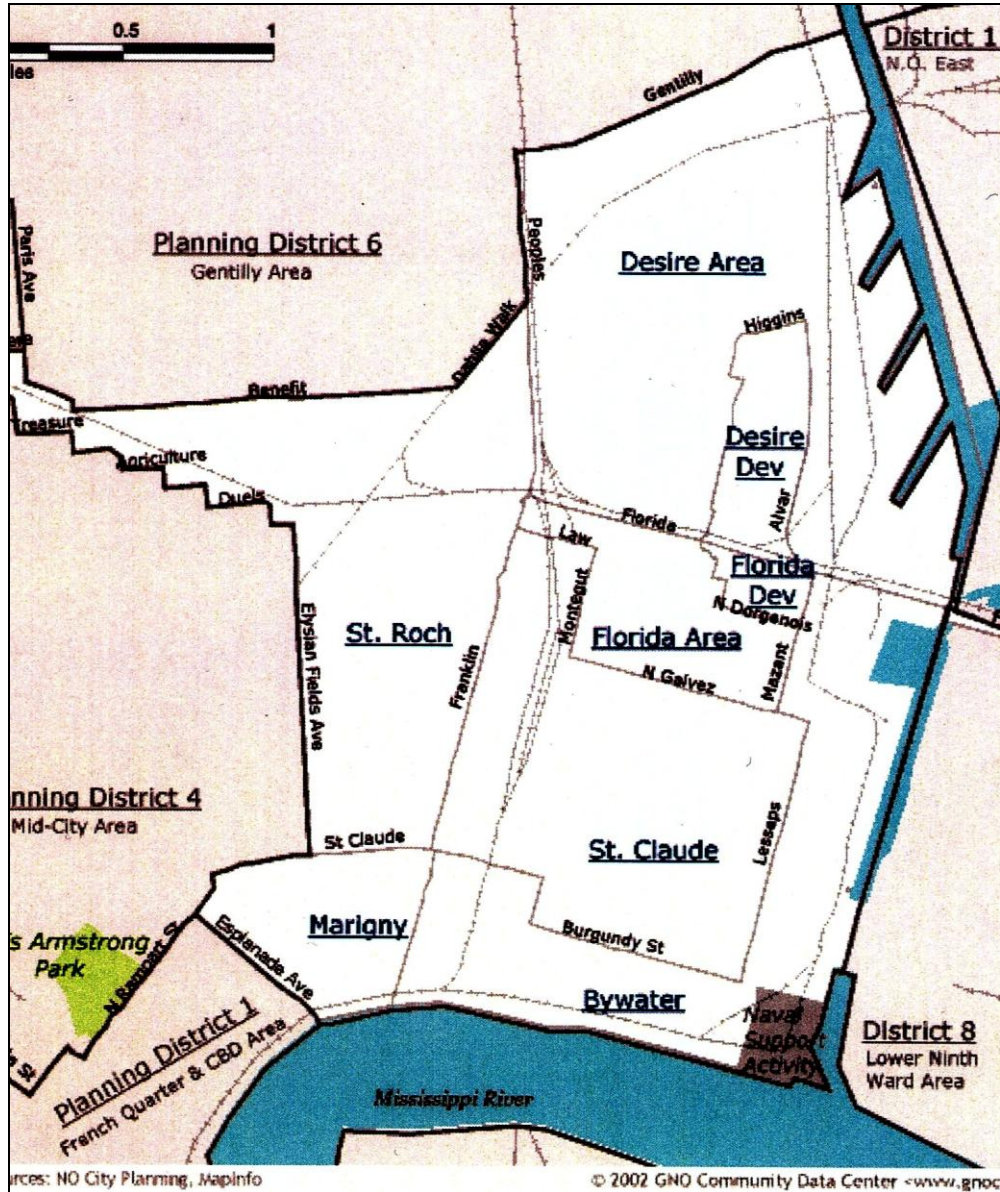
When the order to evacuate came, the Sisters dispersed, some going to be with relatives and others, especially those near retirement, taking the opportunity to relocate



permanently to the Ursuline Infirmary in Illinois. Sisters Joan Marie and Damian stayed with relatives in Louisiana before returning to the Shrine, but they moved to the infirmary just a few years later. The deciding factor was the busy hurricane season in 2008 with both the mandatory evacuation for Hurricane Gustav and the threat and near miss of Hurricane Ike. The Sisters were elderly and had worsening health problems, and the stress and continued vulnerability of the area was proving to be too much. As Sister Joan Marie described, “We got back from one storm (Hurricane Gustav) and another one was threatening (Hurricane Ike) and we said well let’s get out before that. We knew almost everybody up at the infirmary anyway.” Another nun, Sister Marie, already in her early nineties, had thought she would remain in New Orleans for some time longer. However, she moved to the infirmary shortly after Sisters Joan Marie and Damian left. The deciding moment was the day when she came down for lunch and was the only person there; the feeling that this was no longer ‘community’ was impossible to ignore.

At the close of my fieldwork, there were only a few Ursulines left at the convent in New Orleans. In addition to the Prioress, three new Sisters had just arrived with a specific mission to live and work among the poor. Plans were underway to find them a residence in the broader community. Our Lady of Prompt Succor and “Sweetheart” also remain at the Shrine. Although “Sweetheart” and the jeweled crowns for Our Lady were taken to another location during Katrina, they were never taken out of Louisiana. According to the Sisters, insistent on this point, they never should be. The devotion continues, therefore, to be at home in New Orleans, though her protection and care for the city, its inhabitants, and the world at large is believed to expand in all directions.

CHAPTER 3: “MAKE US INTO BETTER METAL”:  
 VODOU, ANTICRIME CEREMONIES, AND COMMUNITY HEALING  
 AT LA SOURCE ANCIENNE SOSYETE OUNFO



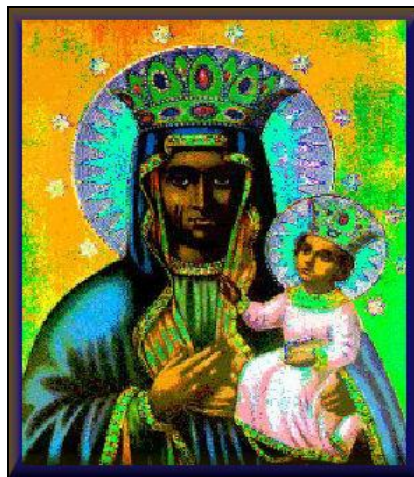
Map 8. Neighborhood Snapshot, Bywater. Source: Greater New Orleans Community Data Center.

## From Our Lady to Ezili Danto

One afternoon not long after my arrival in New Orleans, I found myself wandering along the community bulletin board at the back of a local coffee shop, reading announcements and learning about local events and programs. At the center of the board was a particularly colorful flyer; a small poster with an image of a black Madonna holding a child. Both were adorned with jeweled crowns and brightly illuminated.

It reminded me instantly of Our Lady of Prompt Succor, the statue of the Blessed Mother and Christ child that was enshrined at the Ursuline Convent in uptown New Orleans. Here was another Madonna and child, but this image had a totally different feel. While Prompt Succor appeared peaceful and serene, with eyes cast down and off to the side, this image had a sense of strength and determination, a scarred face, and an arresting stare. It was a direct confrontation that was simultaneously unnerving and engaging.

Below the image was an announcement for an upcoming “Hurricane Ceremony,” a public prayer ceremony to be held by a local Vodou society, *La Source Ancienne Sosyete Ounfo*. The flyer and the details of the ceremony appeared as follows:



**Image 12. Hurricane Ceremony Flyer.**  
Image Courtesy of La Source Ancienne Sosyete Ounfo.

## HURRICANE CEREMONY XI

*Public prayer ceremony dedicated to Our Lady of Prompt Succor (who has intervened historically on New Orleans' behalf when a hurricane has threatened) and Ezili Danto (also associated with Mater Salvatoris and Mount Carmel) to ask for protection from hurricanes*

**When:** Saturday, July 21st. 7:00 p.m.

**Where:** Achade Meadows Peristyle, 3319 Rosalie Alley (off of Rampart, between Piety and Desire)

**What to bring in offering:**

*For Our Lady: flowers, statues, candles, religious pictures, jewelry.*

*For Danto: Barbancourt Rum, Florida Water, candles, daggers, dolls dressed in red and blue with gold trim or calico prints, spicy black beans, peasant cakes, unfiltered cigarettes, pan fried cornbread with peppers, fried pork, white crème de menthe.*

**What to wear:** Please dress in white (the color of purity), with red head scarves, or all red (the color of Petwo rites).

The flyer confirmed my sense of a connection between this black Madonna, who I assumed was Ezili Danto, and Our Lady of Prompt Succor; the ceremony would honor them both, to ask for divine intervention and protection from hurricanes. Ezili Danto, as I later learned from the leaders of the ceremony is a powerful Petwo *Lwa* (spirit) in the Vodou tradition. She is a warrior; a hardworking woman who is also a fierce protector, especially of women and children including Anaïs, the daughter she holds in her arms.

The pairing made sense locally as well as historically: The advertised ceremony reflected the unique intersection of the diverse cultural and cosmological influences that shape spiritual life in the city. Our Lady, brought to the city by the Ursulines, is the patroness and protector of New Orleans and is believed to have intervened on numerous occasions to save the city from disaster. Her “counterpart” in the Vodou tradition, which

has a particular history and significance in New Orleans is Ezili Danto.<sup>27</sup> The ceremony was also a response to the particular vulnerabilities of the time and place, taking place near the beginning of the annual hurricane season, when both preparation for and anxiety about tropical weather goes into overdrive. More broadly, the event was an annual appeal and act of service, a way of asking for help from two of the most powerful and divine feminine forces influencing local social and spiritual life. For over a decade, the intent of this ceremony and the work of this religious community has been to honor and serve the spirit world, seeking their guidance and protection for all matters – and especially during times of imminent danger or crisis.

### **Hurricane Ceremony XI**

I decided to attend the ceremony to see what would transpire and how specific local concerns were addressed. I arrived on Rampart Street, between Piety and Desire in the Bywater neighborhood, at around 6:30 in the evening. I had some trouble finding “Rosalie Alley” as it did not appear on the map I was using. But it turned out to be a kind of wide overgrown driveway, visible from Rampart Street and marked with a small sign. No longer accessible to cars, it came to a dead end some fifty yards back.

It was a path that took me immediately off the main road and into the heart of the community, behind the back yards of the houses that fronted the street. There was a wooden fence lining the way, which was elaborately painted with murals of the Vodou

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<sup>27</sup> Our Lady and Ezili Danto have a historically close and overlapping relationship. Some say they “walk the same path,” others describe their identities as “conflated,” still others consider Ezili Danto as the “counterpart” to Our Lady. As Karen McCarthy Brown asserts however, in a review of research on Danto in Haiti, “the question is not whether Ezili Danto is the Virgin Mary. The answer to that is both yes and no. The real question is: “Which name for her should be used in which circumstance?”” This is the question, she argues, “that reveals the social class issues and the power politics.” (Brown 2001:180).

spirit world, so I knew I was in the right place. In the distance were a few people dressed in white with red head scarves, standing outside the entrance to a simply constructed building in bright turquoise, which looked from the outside like an elaborate garage. This was the Achade Meadows Peristyle, the home of La Source Ancienne Sosyete Ounfo. When I arrived at the entrance I was more or less at the center of a four block section of the neighborhood, with the houses around the exterior perimeter facing out towards the streets on all sides.

Preparations for the hurricane ceremony were still underway. The inside of the temple was dim, with the main source of light coming in from the two doors open to the alley and later from the many candles all around the room. I noticed immediately a large cement center pole running from floor to ceiling, around which were already placed a few



**Image 13. Fence in Rosalie Alley. Photo by author.**



**Image 14. Entering the Achade Meadows Peristyle. Photo by author.**

items: a pack of cigarettes, some rum. These were offerings, I assumed. In the far right corner was an elaborate altar, which I was told was for Ezili Danto and across the way in the far left corner was another one for Ezili Freda, who is a ‘sister’ to Danto or some say a “mirror,” but overall an opposing force and fierce rival representing love, beauty, and luxury. Both altars were elaborately adorned, practically overflowing with images of each *Lwa*, candles, and various offerings including money, folded and tucked in at various places.

The Sosityete members already assembled were mostly residents from the local area, part of the colorful artistic counterculture centralized in the Bywater and neighboring Marigny, St. Roch, and French Quarter neighborhoods. While the population across these areas was very diverse, the group gathered at the peristyle that evening was predominantly white. These were the regular members of the Sosityete, about ten to twelve individuals who formed the core of the local group. The rest of the crowd, now trickling

in, was made up of onlookers, curious observers, tourists, and a few additional researchers, reporters, photographers, and filmmakers – prepared, as I was, to document the evening. Since the ceremony was open to the public, it was an easy and accessible way for those who were interested to find out about Vodou. There were also several distinguished guests present, including a master drummer from Haiti who was visiting New Orleans and who had been invited to play with some of the Sosyete drummers.

The temple was now full, about fifty to seventy-five people, and the *Manbo* (Vodou priestess) Sallie Ann Glassman stepped forward to introduce herself and welcome the crowd. Inviting everyone to step inside and find a place around the center pole, she explained its significance:

*“The center pole is the spiritual highway and the spirit comes down and up the center pole. The floor here is the horizontal arm of the crossroads where worlds meet and this center pole is where all the magic happens. So when you come up to make your offering be a little aware of that. It can be an exciting experience. I’m sure tonight’s ceremony will be especially fiery with our master drummer here and the actual Haitian rhythms and songs. Everything that is experienced during the ceremony is coded and steeped with meaning, so all the rhythms, all the words to the songs, they carry the meaning and the history and the legacy of the whole Vodou story and what it means to us. It carries the entire story of how Vodou is wrapped up with New Orleans and Louisiana culture.*

*The ceremony that we are doing tonight to ask for the prevention of hurricanes is a little different than what you see in Haiti. We are calling on slightly different Lwa because historically in New Orleans when hurricanes threaten, the church fathers brought out an image of Our Lady of Prompt Succor and she has driven hurricanes away. In the Vodou pantheon the Lwa Ezili Danto corresponds to Our Lady of Prompt Succor and so we do the ceremony in her honor or in their honor, I should say. Ezili Danto is an especially fiery, big, intense spirit, just for example she was the spirit that was called upon at the commencement of the Haitian revolution and she inspired and helped sustain a fourteen year extremely bloody revolution, so that’s who we are calling up. In Vodou the Lwa are somewhat similar to what Catholics would think of as the saints, except they also correspond to forces of nature, so they are a little more than philosophic or archetypal figures. If we can imagine a force that can incite a revolution and we start thinking about hurricanes, well we can see the connection.*

*It’s my hope that Katrina stirred things up enough that it’s now possible for revolutionary things to happen in New Orleans, and so as we’re asking her for protection*



*we're also saying that we're willing to take up the challenge and be transformative in our culture and in our society to take New Orleans forward into a world of equilibrium and balance.*

*So, to that effect, we would love for everyone to participate. It's a big deal to call the spirit in from the invisible realm into the visible right here tonight, and it is our hope and our intention that she will come and bless us with her presence. It is one of those things where you have to be careful what you wish for because when she shows up she's a bit scary, but we're calling her up so if everyone would please give her a little something, if you don't have an offering for her just try to show up and give her some of your good intention, and give her your promise that you will do your best to take up whatever challenge she gives to us to heal ourselves.*

*Another real marked difference that you will see between what we do and what you would see ordinarily in Haiti is that we don't sacrifice animals in this house. We do, however, go around with these rattles which is the mark of authority of the priest and we will stir up everyone's energy into the mix. And if you don't want us doing then you just say so, otherwise we're going to put your energy into the mix too. Because part of the magic of the ceremony and part of the magic of creating community is that all of us who are here now tonight are going to make the reality moving forward. So let's begin."*

The drumming started immediately and soon the singers, members of the Sosyete choir, joined in with opening songs, that together in the enclosed and overcrowded space, sounded off-tempo and not well coordinated. Various members of the Sosyete stepped forward also to perform the opening rituals. There were flags carried in, a conch shell was blown, a machete was used to make a cross on the floor, more songs, some water passed around for people to anoint and cleanse themselves. The onlookers stood in a circle around the perimeter, with the newcomers like me trying to make sense of the meaning and purpose of what we were seeing.

It was not until I spoke with Manbo Sallie Ann, some days later, that I learned about the structure and significance of this and all ceremonies at La Source Ancienne. "It's an act of service rather than a worship kind of thing," she began. "The beginning of the ceremony is always drawing the crossroads for the *Lwa* Legba and opening the doors.

Then you bring in the flags which represent the might of the *Lwa* and their dominion. As the flags move around through the temple they are visually bringing the invisible into the visible and creating patterns where that energy can touch down -- you are really establishing that pathway. In fact everything that happens in the ceremony is really about how you bring the invisible into the visible. How you do it physically, how you do it spiritually, how you do it on every level. So the flags are very important and they obviously relate to warfare or standards being carried and the whole concept of the Haitian Revolution. We also use a machete along with the two flag bearers – we’re allowing the flags to lead the charge so that spirit can enter. Particularly when it’s a spiritual warrior like Danto that’s coming, we’re acknowledging and giving dignity and honor to that force.”

The flag bearers at La Source Ancienne created their own elaborately decorated *drapo* (*drapeaux*). In the peristyle they carried them around the center pole stopping at each of the four directions to pirouette one way and then the other. The machete was used to mark the crossroads on the ground for Legba, again in four directions. Then the tips of the flagpoles and the machete were placed together and passed around the circle for people to touch and bless.

The next step in the ceremony, Sallie Ann continued, was to “make offerings and consecrate the ceremonial items -- the water and the flame, and anoint and mark the crossroads for Legba. Then we start doing the opening *vévés*, to call in the *Lwa*.<sup>28</sup> There are four that are traditionally part of the Rada opening and they are important because

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<sup>28</sup> A *vévé*, as defined by Manbo Sallie Ann, is a “symbolic design usually drawn with cornmeal on the ground, which represents a *Lwa* and serves as a focal point for invocation” (Glassman 2000:217).

you always want to keep things balanced.<sup>29</sup> We do Legba first; then the Marasa, the twins who are the first children of God so they are the first ancestors and the first in; then Loko; and then Ayizan. Loko and Ayizan accompany Legba and they are the original priest and priestess and they make sure that you can handle the forces that you're bringing through and that you're not bringing through something that's going to destroy you. They are very important to the balance of the ceremony and the positivity of the ceremony especially if you're dealing with ferocious forces.



**Image 15. Drawing the Vévés. Photo by author.**

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<sup>29</sup> The *Lwa* are divided into several nations, although two of these nations have emerged as dominant – the Rada and Petwo nations. As Karen McCarthy Brown explains, the *Lwa* “were once divided into several nachon, “nations” – Rada, Petwo, Kongo, Nago, Ibo, and so on. In most cases, their names clearly indicate their African origins. This pattern is still used in some rural parts of Haiti. However, in and around Port-au-Prince, Haiti’s major urban center, two pantheons, the Rada and the Petwo, have emerged as dominant, largely by absorbing the other nations into themselves (Brown 1997:67).

After we've done the fourth vévé we sing a song for all the *Lwa*, any ones that haven't been mentioned and then we break into the Petwo part of the ceremony which is where the whips and the firecrackers come out and we're chasing away the negative stuff. Then the ceremony takes a very different tone, it becomes far more intense and about fire and change."

Indeed on the night of the hurricane ceremony, the transition to the Petwo part of the ceremony brought a different intensity – the drummers played louder still and the participants cracked whips and lit sparklers and small fireworks. The mood was one of anticipation and excitement that Ezili Danto or some other *Lwa* would arrive. After the Petwo songs were sung, the crowd knelt as the Manbo began to energize or "activate" the vévé for Ezili Danto.

The quiet and seriousness of the moment, however, was suddenly interrupted by a series of loud complaints from the master drummer from Haiti, who had been growing increasingly unhappy with the music, particularly the lack of coordination between the drummers and the singers since the ceremony began. He rather loudly expressed his displeasure, saying "*Please*. Try to be with the drummers, because if you sing one part and the drummers play another part then it is *cacophony!*" The mood in the peristyle instantly changed and some of the choir members became defensive, saying that they only recently learned some of the songs and only had a short time to practice together. The two complaints were equally true; the drummers were not at all in sync with the choir and often did overpower them. It was difficult to find the beat and when one did it hardly varied, no matter what song was being sung. In addition, many of the drummers

did arrive late to the ceremony so there was not much time for everyone to set up and prepare.

Throughout this entire exchange, Manbo Sallie Ann continued on in her work, kneeling on the floor by the center pole and blessing the now completed *vévés*. The crowd knelt also but the tension in the air was thick and as the ceremony proceeded, most of the onlookers filtered out. There was some question about whether or not the music should continue at all, but in the end the drummers appealed to their distinguished guest to stay and share his expertise and he reluctantly agreed. Their playing was stiff, but it did facilitate the close of the ceremony with participants dancing around the center pole. Afterwards the frustration and disappointment was evident; the visitor from Haiti apologized for the disruption but some of the *Sosyete* members were already in tears, with one woman saying, “We may not have everything exactly right, but our hearts are in the right place, you know?”

The incident, more broadly, raises some interesting questions about Vodou and, more broadly, Voodoo in New Orleans – its origins, particular manifestations, practitioners, and significance in the recovery period.<sup>30</sup> What are the dimensions of the New Orleans Voodoo community, both pre and post-Katrina, and how does this particular group fit in? What questions of origin and authenticity arise and how are they handled, especially as methods and groups diversify and change? Finally, how do groups

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<sup>30</sup> Fandrich gives a useful explanation of the terminology and various spellings of Voodoo: “We have at least four different meanings for this term: (a) Usually spelled *V-o-d-u-n*, it refers to the traditional religion of the Fon and Ewe people residing in today’s Republic of Benin, the former kingdom of Dahomey, West Africa; (b) spelled *Vodou*, it is the popular syncretic Afro-Creole religion of Haiti; (c) commonly spelled *Voodoo* (in the 19th century usually spelled *Voudou*), it addresses the Afro-Creole counterculture religion of southern Louisiana; (d) ... Voodoo is also the common term in American English for any African-derived magical or religious beliefs and practices, often associated with black magic and witchcraft” (Fandrich 2007:779).

and individual practitioners position themselves in relation to the conditions of vulnerability, disaster and crisis, violence, and recovery and redevelopment that characterize life in the city? What are their main concerns, objectives, and contributions? Ultimately, what are processes and frameworks of peacemaking and placemaking that develop within this local tradition and time?

### **New Orleans Voodoo in Historical Perspective**

A complete history of Voodoo in New Orleans is well beyond the scope of this chapter.<sup>31</sup> However, several aspects are important to note as they shed light on contemporary practices in the post-Katrina context. First, while the African roots of Voodoo are on the whole undisputed, there has been some confusion regarding the specific cultures and traditions that have shaped the way in which the New Orleans Voodoo community has emerged. One assumption, given the strong present-day influence of Haitian Vodou within groups such as La Source Ancienne, is that New Orleans' Voodoo is derived primarily from the Haitian tradition.

Recent scholarly work, however, indicates that the origins of Voodoo in New Orleans can be traced back to an earlier time – to the first days of the local African slave trade, which began in Louisiana in the early 1700s under French rule. Three primary

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<sup>31</sup> Important and influential contributions to the study of Voodoo in New Orleans include Zora Neale Hurston's study of Hoodoo in America, the validity of which continues to be debated by local Voodoo practitioners and others (Hurston 1931, see also Dutton 1993); Robert Tallant's *Voodoo in New Orleans*, also controversial for its sensationalized and negative portrayal of the religion (Tallant 1946); a later study by Blake Touchstone that attempts in part to counter some of Tallant's assertions (Touchstone 1972); a study of dance and religious performance at Congo Square (Donaldson 1984); research on spiritual merchants of New Orleans and perceptions of Voodoo (Long 2001, 2002); and comprehensive research on nineteenth century Voodoo priestess Marie Laveaux as well as the history and contemporary context of Vodou in New Orleans (Fandrich 2004, 2006, 2007). Sallie Ann Glassman, the Manbo of La Source Ancienne has also published a book and guide for Vodou practitioners entitled *Vodou Visions: Encounters with Divine Mystery* (Glassman 2000).

groups of African slaves, arriving in New Orleans at different times, are most influential in the development of the local Voodoo tradition. They are: 1) people from the Senegal River basin, including Woloffs, Bambaras, and Mandingos; 2) Mande-speaking people from the Congo River basin, which included “the former Kingdom of the Kongo, today’s Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (the former Zaire), and the Republic of the Congo (Congo-Brazzaville)”;

and 3) people from the Bight of Benin (Fandrich 2006:129).

The first slave ships to arrive in New Orleans, in 1719, were from Ouidah, which was at the time under the control of the Dahomeyan empire, in what is now Benin (Sublette 2008:57). However, most of the slaves that were eventually brought to Louisiana, approximately two-thirds of the total number, came from Senegal (Sublette 2008:57). During the French colonial regime (1699-1765), for example, “approximately 80% of the enslaved Africans in Louisiana were Bambara people from the Senegal River basin. Of the remaining 20%, the majority were Kongolese and Dahomeyan” (Fandrich 2007:786). Louisiana thus had “a marked Senegambian flavor, with some Kongolese elements blended in, until the end of the 18th century.” From the 1790s on and during the late Spanish and early American period, however a large number of Kongolese people arrived, creating a “lasting Kongolization of New Orleans’s African American community” (Fandrich 2007:786). Compared to places like Cuba or Haiti, the number of Yorùbá or Dahomeyans in Louisiana was very small.

The slaves arrived with their own religious beliefs, traditions, and practices. They included, for example, a two tiered sacred cosmology from the Senegambian and Kongo regions of Central Africa, consisting of a remote and sacred supreme being and the spirits

of the dead, who were in active exchange with the living. Also influential was a three-tiered cosmology from the Bight of Benin and Lower West Africa, which consisted of a supreme being, a pantheon of intermediary divinities, and the spirits of the ancestors (Fandrich 2006:129-130).

These traditions were infused into the new forms of African American religion that emerged in the New World, including the now locally distinct tradition of Voodoo in New Orleans. The range of cosmologies and traditions influencing Voodoo further diversified when thousands of refugees – a mix of whites, free people of color, and slaves – fled from Saint-Domingue after the Haitian Revolution. In 1809 alone, more than 10,000 people arrived in New Orleans, doubling the city’s population. The practicing *Vodouisants* of this group carried with them the beliefs and practices that were central to Haitian Vodou, a system with multiple influences including the Kongolese and Dahomean traditions of Central and West Africa, the Yorùbá tradition from southwestern Nigeria, and indigenous traditions of the Caribbean (2006:782; Glover, personal communication, January 16, 2008).

By the time the Haitian immigrants arrived in New Orleans, therefore, there was already a strong African American tradition of Voodoo in place.<sup>32</sup> This unique local form incorporated certain aspects of Haitian Vodou , but remained in many ways distinct (Fandrich 2007:786). For example, the pantheon of deities in New Orleans Voodoo was not as well developed as it was in Haiti and the role of the *Lwa* as intermediaries between

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<sup>32</sup> Gwendolyn Midlo Hall argues that the survival and development of African religious traditions in this area was aided by the geography. The waterways and thick swamps surrounding New Orleans allowed for mobility, escape, and protection for small communities and enclaves. Slaves were also allowed, particularly under Spanish rule, to maintain certain religious and cultural traditions such as music and dance. As a result, there developed an “unusually cohesive and heavily Africanized culture in lower Louisiana: clearly, the most Africanized slave culture in the United States” (Hall 1992:61).



the human realm and the spirit world was not as emphasized. Rather, New Orleans Voodoo more closely resembled the merged characteristics of the Senegambian and Kongo religious traditions, with its focus on a supreme God and emphasis on the spirits of the ancestors (Fandrich 2006:132).

Throughout this period, Catholicism continued to exert a strong influence on New Orleans society and all the forms of religious practice developing there. The religion of the colonizers and European slaveholders, Catholicism was incorporated by Voodoo practitioners to some extent as a mask that concealed their non-traditional beliefs and practices. It is, however, important to note that many of the Africans who came to New Orleans were already influenced by Catholicism from missionaries working on both sides of the Atlantic before the slave trade to the New World began. Catholic missionaries were present, for example, in the Kingdom of Kongo and in other parts of Africa as early as 1491 (Thornton 1984). Many of the Kongoleses later captured there and deported to the New World, were probably already practicing some form of Roman Catholicism when they arrived (Fandrich 2007:787).

The influence of Catholicism was so strong that some even consider the foundations of New Orleans Voodoo to be more closely related to Catholicism than to any of the West African traditions. Elmer Glover, for example, a current Voodoo priest based in New Orleans, asserts “the base of New Orleans Voodoo is not really African it’s *Catholicism*, with the saints given the attributes of the African deities.” By this account, the pantheon of deities typically found in Haitian Vodou that is largely absent in New Orleans, is replaced instead by the Catholic saints, many of whom have been Africanized

in this particular context and in accordance with the histories, realities, and needs of local practitioners (Glover, personal communication, January 16, 2008).

Whether New Orleans Voodoo is derived primarily from Catholic, Kongolese, Dahomeyan, or Yorùbán beliefs and practices, what remains clear is that the tradition exists at the intersection and interaction of several dynamic religious and cultural traditions, some that are distinctly African and some that are not. The end result is a complex belief system that gets even further diversified at the local level, due to the various agendas and objectives of groups and practitioners.

The question of origin becomes particularly significant when local religious groups compete for position and authority, and when related claims of authenticity or fraud are made and circulated. Such is the case in contemporary New Orleans, where what was once a religion practiced predominantly by Africans and African Americans has become increasingly an alternative American religion with broad appeal, attracting an ethnically and otherwise diverse set of practitioners. Some tension and conflict, therefore, exists over who is practicing, how they are practicing, and how the particular African history and legacy of the tradition is represented and communicated.

Ina Fandrich, a New Orleans based scholar of religion, gives some indication of the complexity of this issue when she describes Vodou as “a cluster of mystical religions with millions of followers throughout the world, most of them in West Africa, the Caribbean and North America...their religious beliefs and practices are creative hybrids, blending African, European, and Native American cultural and spiritual traditions. Yet, at their core, Vodou traditions have always remained African despite their amazing capacity to incorporate and assimilate elements from other faith traditions” (Fandrich 2006:126).

These various alignments and identities are continually refined and asserted, arising most frequently during periods of population and social-geographic change. They are especially relevant, for example, in the post-Katrina period as the Voodoo community, along with the entire city, works to recover and redefine itself. Voodoo societies and practitioners that were once prominent are no longer present and there are now new networks, groups, leaders, and initiates. New Orleans Voodoo is thus re-emerging, within the larger context of contemporary religious change, as urban recovery and redevelopment proceeds.

### **The Contemporary New Orleans Voodoo Community**

The contemporary New Orleans Voodoo community comprises a diverse range of societies and individual practitioners, some of whom are visible and accessible and some that are more private, clandestine, and not publicly advertised. The community is rather segmented with multiple groups and practitioners, each one directing its own activities and ways of spiritual service. It is difficult, therefore, to gain an overall sense of the scope, size, or structure of the religion.

Voodoo priest Elmer Glover explained this lack of cohesion: “This is what we have to realize,” he began. “Voodoo per se is a household folk practice, for those who remember it, and it’s kind of underground, you understand? What’s above ground is more or less the commercial thing. Now in a place like Haiti it’s more open. But even there Vodou is not a centralized religion. There’s no ultimate authority, no hierarchy, and each temple is autonomous. Everything depends on the creative ability and the track record of the priest. There is, however, a system and structure for initiation, priesthood, and a

diverse pantheon of deities. New Orleans really doesn't have that; instead the city has its own distinct environment and each temple believes in its own way of doing things. There are, however, several prominent individual practitioners and each one has a following, their so called God children.”

The list of key practitioners who have had particular influence on the development of the contemporary Voodoo tradition begins with the famed Voodoo priestess Marie Laveaux (1801- 1881), who is widely considered to be the architect or patron saint of New Orleans Voodoo. She gained notoriety for her work in magical and healing arts, and in Hoodoo or rootwork. Under her leadership the New Orleans Voodoo scene of the nineteenth century was one of spiritual societies or Voodoo “houses” (Fandrich 2006:141). Laveaux was known for conducting “spiritual ceremonies every Friday in her courtyard... and once a year, on Saint John’s Eve in June, she organized a gigantic festival near Milneburg along the shores of Lake Pontchartrain” (Fandrich 2006:138). She continues to have many followers; for example the devout and the curious go in search of her tomb, which is one of the most frequently visited attractions in the city, and offerings are frequently placed.

The era of Marie Laveaux and the Voodoo houses of the nineteenth century came to a close with the rise of Jim Crow and the systematic suppression of religious and other freedoms. As a result, most of the early Voodoo societies disappeared or went underground. In the African-American community, Voodoo was often subsumed into the black Spiritual Church, a unique religious tradition all its own and a fusion of Roman Catholicism, Spiritualism, Pentecostal, Hoodoo, and Native American beliefs and practices (Jacobs and Kaslow 1991). This shift was accompanied by concerns about how

best to preserve the legacy of Voodoo and continue its practice despite the social and political constraints.

While Voodoo continued to be practiced in protected and secluded settings, a more commercial aspect of the religion and practice emerged in the public sphere. This was the opening of several botanicas, stores, and cultural centers that catered to practitioners and tourists by selling spiritual supplies, giving tours, and offering educational programs. These establishments often counted on Voodoo's reputation and people's fascination with all things deemed strange and exotic, and they positioned themselves as providing access to an otherwise secret and clandestine community. Many of these establishments were owned and operated by white entrepreneurs who were fairly new converts to the Voodoo religion, if they practiced at all.

This process of commercialization ran counter to an African spiritual revival, linked to the 1960s civil rights movement, which saw many blacks reconnecting to and reclaiming their African ancestral and spiritual legacy. Some were even initiated into Vodou and other 'traditionally African' religious societies and practices. These processes and movements further fueled questions about the history, true ownership, and continued legacy of the religion. Emerging out of these concerns was an arguably narrow view of ancestry and authenticity, which argued that for one to be a true spiritual leader or practitioner of Vodou one must have a direct ancestral connection to Africa (Fandrich 2006:142, Glover, personal communication, January 16, 2008). As Glover stated, when asked about the continuation of Voodoo in the Spiritual churches and other enclaves of the black community, "The spirits of the dead they choose the people who are going to continue on in this tradition. They choose who they want to deal with, you know?"

These various trends and tensions have extended forward in time, contributing along with more general social and environmental change, to a contemporary Voodoo community that is an unstructured assemblage of old and new beliefs, ideas, and structures of practice. Certain temples and establishments, for example, have gone underground or have disappeared altogether. Some practitioners have died or have left town. Others carry on their work strategically and commercially, operating independently or from spiritual houses and businesses that routinely receive busloads full of tourists. Still others bring these more accessible temples, the Voodoo tradition, and the various forms of practice into full public view, providing spiritual and educational programs for all who are interested – including curious onlookers, representatives of the media, and new religious initiates.

One local Voodoo practitioner, a long-term resident of New Orleans, described some of these changes: “There was a Voodoo store right around the corner on Cleveland and Prieur, it was supposed to be one of the oldest Voodoo stores still existing in New Orleans, called the Cracker Jack Drug Store. Previously – back in the 1930s and 1940s – it was located on South Rampart.<sup>33</sup> Also, one of the most popular Voodoo workers at the time in the Algiers area was a man named Reverend Watson. He ran a Spiritual Church and as a matter of fact his son has a big church now that used to be on 1<sup>st</sup> street but he moved to St Charles and Napoleon (Watson Memorial Teaching Ministries). I guess he preferred to kind of go more as a Christian.”

Hurricane Katrina had a particularly devastating impact on the New Orleans Voodoo community. Almost all the Voodoo spiritual leaders, as well as the practitioners,

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<sup>33</sup> The Cracker Jack Drug Store was open from 1897 to 1974. During its time it was one of the largest local suppliers of hoodoo and Voodoo supplies and paraphernalia. Similar establishments, most active during the 1930s, were Ideal Drugstore, Dixie Drugstore, and John Hall's Novelty Shop (Long 2001).

were displaced from the city and many have not returned. The impact extended also to New Orleans' black Spiritual Churches as well as to many of the botanicas and related businesses supplying the Spiritual and Voodoo communities. Many of these establishments were destroyed by the storm or have otherwise been unable to sustain operations. As Elmer Glover described, "A lot of Voodoo people were displaced, I can think of several people – one guy in particular who had a good Voodoo store here. He was mostly servicing the Spiritual community in the 9<sup>th</sup> and Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Wards, and he shut down."<sup>34</sup> The only people who have resurfaced on a commercial level as far as having a shop have been the people in the French Quarter, like Voodoo Authentica, Erzulie's, and the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, but a lot of the major practitioners are no longer around.<sup>35</sup>

Ina Fandrich's research on the contemporary Voodoo community in New Orleans is arguably the most comprehensive. She presents the city's various Voodoo spiritual leaders and practitioners as a diverse set of traditions and lineages, with many initiations taking place outside of the United States, in places from West Africa to the Caribbean to Brazil. Her survey includes the late Charles Gandolfo, also known as "Voodoo Charlie," a white man who was the founder of the Historic New Orleans Voodoo Museum;<sup>36</sup> the Voodoo Authentica Collection and Cultural Center, run by Brandi Kelly, a white woman with a Wiccan background who is also a practitioner of Voodoo; initiated African American Voodoo priestesses Rose Frank (deceased) and Ava Kay Jones; Sallie Ann Glassman, a white woman who was initiated in Haiti and is now the Manbo of La Source

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<sup>34</sup> The reference here is to Mystic Botanica on St. Claude Avenue, which continues to operate as a mail order business.

<sup>35</sup> Glover fails here to mention La Source Ancienne and their associated Botanica, the Island of Salvation Botanica, located in the Bywater and run by Manbo Sallie Ann Glassman.

<sup>36</sup> The website of the Historic New Orleans Voodoo Museum still features prominently the story of Gandolfo's own spiritual lineage; his great-great-grandfather was reportedly raised in New Orleans by a freed slave and Voodoo Queen named Jacqueline;  
[http://www.voodoo-museum.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=48](http://www.voodoo-museum.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=48)

Ancienne; initiated priests Oswan Chamani (deceased) and Elmer Glover, “the senior-most initiated Voodoo priest in New Orleans”; and Priestess Miriam Chamani of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple, a consecrated Bishop in the black Spiritual Church (2006:142). This list, however, is already out of date. For example Ava Kay Jones was displaced during Katrina and has not returned to the city (Glover, personal communication, January 16, 2008).

Despite these shifts, and the relatively small number of visible spiritual houses and practitioners, there is evidence of some growth within the local Voodoo community during the post-Katrina recovery period. Fandrich cites two primary characteristics of this growth: changes in the ethnic and demographic makeup of Voodoo practitioners and new ways of communication that help to extend and maintain the community beyond New Orleans. She writes, “The majority of newcomers to the tradition in the Crescent City are presently members of white Neopagan and Wiccan groups, who feel drawn to African-based magical practices, spirit possessions, and ceremonies” (2006:144). New Orleans Voodoo is also increasingly accessible to those outside of the city, via virtual networks. As Fandrich asserts, “the internet and cell phones have become essential tools... Voodoo groups remain in contact with their dispersed members and clients everywhere through e-mail lists and information posted on their Web sites.”

Voodoo priest Elmer Glover also spoke of the growth of the New Orleans tradition. As he explained, “New Orleans is probably going to become the Voodoo capital because places like Haiti and Benin are so inaccessible. We have the hospitality, we have the jazz. Just like the Neo-African religions that are growing everywhere in the



United States today, Vodou in New Orleans is expanding, too, even in the post-Katrina era.”

Glover did not extend his prediction of growth, however, to the local African American community. Rather he asserted that the formal practice of Voodoo had dramatically declined within this community, almost to the point of disappearing. As he stated, “New Orleans has a very rich retention of African culture but I don’t think the descendents really, you know... they deal with it but they don’t give the full attention to what it really is. They just take it for granted and they don’t realize the importance of it. And you know, you mention Voodoo to people, especially African American folks now, and they act scared to death. Like everybody is sneaking around behind each other’s backs trying to get their little Voodoo thing going on.” In Glover’s experience, local African Americans who seek out Voodoo do so in specific, often secretive, and highly individualized ways, primarily because they value the service that Voodoo provides for the solving of personal problems, and are not necessarily in dedicating themselves fully to the religion. Thus they seek out community based Voodoo spiritual leaders, with a reputation for getting the job done, to address specific concerns.

### **La Source Ancienne Sosyete Ounfu**

Manbo Sallie Ann Glassman, the founder and spiritual leader of La Source Ancienne moved to New Orleans in 1977 at the age of 23. Glassman was a young white woman from a New England Jewish family, who was initially enticed by New Orleans’ vibrant art and jazz culture. Interested also in the history and practice of Vodou, upon her

arrival she immediately began informal study with several local practitioners. First residing in the uptown part of the city, she began to hold weekly ceremonies in her home.

In 1995, Sallie Ann moved from uptown to the far edge of downtown, into the Bywater neighborhood in the (upper) 9<sup>th</sup> Ward. At the time it was a very unstable neighborhood, plagued by poverty and violent crime. As she recalled, “When I first moved to this neighborhood the Bywater had the highest crime rate for three years in a row. I can remember it was just insane. I didn't have a car, I had a bicycle and I worked in bars in the French Quarter. I would bicycle home late at night and make a beeline for my front door. I had to have razor ribbon all along my outdoor walls. Everybody did. It was OK to be out in the daytime but you were out of your mind if you were out at night – I mean I've had guns and knives pulled on me. At the time it was so crazy, you really had to question your sanity for living here.”

That same year, Sallie Ann traveled to Haiti where she was initiated as Manbo by a Vodou priest, Oungan Edgard Jean Louis, known to her as Papa Edgard. Returning to New Orleans she opened a small botanica, the Island of Salvation Botanica, in part to invest in and help improve the Bywater through the presence and stability of a legitimate local business dedicated to serving the spirit. The botanica offered religious and spiritual items, supplies, and original artwork for sale. It was also a place where Sallie Ann met with clients for spiritual readings and consultations.

Sallie Ann continued to hold ceremonies in her Bywater home, eventually attracting a small group of regular attendees. The Sosyete went through a process of reformation in 2002, however, with the departure of some key members including Sallie Ann's former partner and the Sosyete was subsequently renamed. As Sallie Ann

explained: “At that point I wanted to rename the group and I wanted it to be something that referred to a more universal aspect. The name I chose, *La Source Ancienne*, is actually a reference to a poem by William Blake that praises ancient springs and the fountainhead of tradition and how that inspires creativity. Tradition isn’t seen as something that holds you down and keeps you stuck but instead it’s this well from which the inspiration comes. So that’s where that came from – and *source* in French means “spring.” I think it’s the right name for the group because it’s really come together so much more strongly since I renamed it. For example, that’s really when Edgard, my papa (initiating priest) in Haiti, started coming to New Orleans and it was right after that when my relationship with him really cemented and got much deeper. That’s when we started being able to do initiations here, because at first I was taking people to Haiti to do initiations.”

The initiations brought many new members into the group, and the number has not diminished substantially since Hurricane Katrina. “Right now there are maybe twelve to twenty people that come consistently on any given Saturday for our weekly ceremonies,” Sallie Ann stated. “Several of them are initiated priest and priestesses. Some went to Haiti, but most of them met with Edgard here and did it here. And there are really hundreds of people all over the country and all over the world that have been initiated in my house. They participate as much as they can, given that they don’t live here. And then in the city when we do public ceremonies and events there are hundreds of people that come, and they come pretty consistently. So it’s a growing family.”

Ceremonies were held weekly, on Saturday evenings. When the group became too large to be comfortably accommodated in Sallie Ann’s home, the Sosityete used the space

directly behind the house to construct a one room peristyle – the Achade Meadows Peristyle, accessed via Rosalie Alley. All of the ceremonies there remain open to the public and each week a different *Lwa* is honored. In addition the group offers several additional public ceremonies, including the annual Hurricane Protection Ceremony, the head washing ceremony at Bayou St. John (continuing the historic tradition begun by Marie Laveaux), and several ceremonies on the Day of the Dead. They participate also in many other seasonal and local events as requested. The Sosyete is also very active in community outreach and service; working within their immediate community as well as across the city to restore and “rebalance” spiritual energies in order to support the peaceful recovery and redevelopment of the city.

### **At Home in the Bywater**

The Bywater neighborhood is situated to the east of and “below” (downriver) the French Quarter. The neighborhood extends from Franklin Avenue at the Western edge and then follows the river’s edge to the Industrial Canal. It is a stretch of land that is bordered on the lake side by St. Claude and Burgundy Streets. At the Industrial Canal the rest of the neighborhood extends north towards Lake Pontchartrain, following the canal as far as Florida Avenue. This stretch of the Bywater is bordered to the west by Lesseps and Mazant Streets.

Land in this area was first granted to settlers in the early 1720s shortly after the city was founded. Developed primarily for the production of sugar cane, the area became home to a series of slaveholding plantations, each one a wide sliver of land extending from the river’s edge (Scott 2005:12). One of the earliest plantations was owned by

Claude Dubreuil. Purchased in 1743 the property “might have been the first successful sugar plantation on this land below the town;” it was certainly “one of the most important and extensive of Louisiana’s French colonial plantations... [comprised of] various buildings of the sugar mill, an old sawmill, the structures of the brickyard, the cabins and the camp for the Negroes...” (Wilson 1974:3, 6).

The land was eventually subdivided and sold in smaller partitions to accommodate the rapid population growth of the city. While primarily residential, a few important industries remained. These included a cotton press, a rum distillery near Clouet Street, and the Louisiana Sugar Refinery, a precursor to the Domino Sugar Refinery, which remains in operation in St. Bernard Parish further downriver.

The population that grew in this area was a diverse Creole community.<sup>37</sup> Some of the first ethnic groups and homeowners included “Spanish and French colonial families, a large number of free men of color, Italians, Germans, and a small number of Mexicans” (1974:xiv). The area was especially attractive to immigrant residents because the lots were small and affordable (1974:27).

The urban development of the Bywater followed a pattern similar to the rest of the city. Most desirable were elevated areas closer to the river, which were also close to accessible travel routes. Further out, in “back-a-town” areas lower in elevation, poor people and people of color primarily settled. The social geography was redefined further when the Industrial Canal was built, a long envisioned deep water shipping canal that connected the Mississippi River to Lake Pontchartrain. Dredging began in 1918 and forced the relocation of residents as well as the demolition of homes and other valued

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<sup>37</sup> “Creole” here refers to both free people of color and whites who made reference not to skin color but to European ancestry, born in the French and Spanish colonies (Evans 1974:26).

properties. The canal essentially split the Ninth Ward in half, into its now familiar “upper” and “lower” designations (Campanella 2002).

Despite these disruptions and dislocations, the area remained home to a diverse population up until the 1960s when public school desegregation prompted white flight to suburban areas. Large, mostly segregated, public housing developments were built around this same time, along the back edge of the neighborhood. The Desire Housing Project opened in 1956 near the Industrial Canal, and the Florida Avenue Development, which had been in existence since the late 1930s was expanded in 1953 (GNOCDC).<sup>38</sup>

Desire was a segregated housing project for low income blacks, which at its height was home to over 14,000 residents (Breunlin and Regis 2006:750). Over time, however, conditions in the projects deteriorated and the crime rose until the homes became unsafe and even unfit, some argued, for human habitation. The neighborhood, however, retained its importance as a seat of local black power, artistic, and musical movement. It was home, for example, to organizations such as the Free Southern Theater, established in 1965, and the Black Panther Party who established a base there in 1970 (2006:750). By 2003, however, the housing project had been completely closed and torn down as part of a HUD initiative to demolish and replace outdated housing structures (2006:755). A plan for reconstruction was in development when Katrina devastated the area. The damage was extensive and both the Desire and the Florida housing projects have now been razed.

This back part of the neighborhood flooded when the storm surge from Hurricane Katrina funneled up the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (Mr.Go), impacting the Industrial Canal, which breached in several places. The flood depth reached up to ten feet in this

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<sup>38</sup> <http://www.gnocdc.org/orleans/7/18/snapshot.html>

area, but dropped off steeply as the terrain rose gradually towards the river. Close to the river's edge, there was little to no flooding at all.

The area shows definite signs of recovery; for example the population estimate was 2,570 in June 2005 and 2,181 in June 2010 (number of households receiving mail), reflecting a rate of return of 85% (GNOCDC).<sup>39</sup> Key recovery initiatives include the Musician's Village, a Habitat for Humanity project of single family homes for the generations of musicians who remain in the city, and the efforts of a strong Bywater Neighborhood Association that works to maintain the status of the area as a National Historic District. The neighborhood has also become well known for its creative counterculture, with many local artists, studios, and other establishments. Post-Katrina concerns and agendas cover a diverse range of issues, from preservation, gentrification, creative grassroots development, housing, cultural redevelopment, crime, and the continued safety and sustainability of residents.

### **Serving the Lwa**

The overarching mission of La Source Ancienne Sosyete Ounfo, as described in their self published material, is: "to serve the *Lwa* and the community." This includes having "respect and honor to the *Lwa*, to the house, and to one another." It also includes a commitment one must make to the Sosyete as an extended and consciously created "family."<sup>40</sup>

When I spoke with Manbo Sallie Ann about the group and its objectives, she further described the mission in terms of healing and balance: "Voodoo is really about

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<sup>39</sup> <http://www.gnocdc.org/RecoveryByNeighborhood/index.html>

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.feyvodou.com/lasource.htm>

bringing things into balance... about healing and good health and getting the energy flowing and all the different elements working together. I know that people out there think of it altogether differently, spell casting and hexing and sticking needles in dolls and all of that, but that's in fact what it is.”

Each ceremony, as Sallie Ann described, “. . . is an act of honor and service, rather than a formal kind of worship. There are so many *Lwa* and they all embody different intelligent and natural forces. We work to build relationships with them, paying attention to them, feeding them, talking to them, and just really checking in and remembering that they are there for our guidance. It allows a person to stay in balance and remain at peace with him or herself, to not be so detached from the world, defensive and reactive to whatever circumstances are going on. It allows a person to step out of the ego self for a minute and focus on something beyond. The *Lwa* are there for the progression towards the general good, not just for some individual who wants to get something over somebody else. It's a wonderful exercise.”

Manbo Sallie Ann was initiated in Haiti and the Sosyete maintains a strong connection to the Haitian Vodou tradition as well as to “Papa Edgard,” the initiating priest for Sallie Ann and for most of the Sosyete members. The ceremonies at La Source Ancienne, however, differ in distinct ways from the Haitian Vodou tradition; for example the group does not participate in any form of animal sacrifice. Such deviations are not viewed, however, as changes from the “correct” way of doing things but are instead considered a valued process of creativity and innovation. As Sallie Ann explained, “There’s a lot of difference in what we do and how it would be done in Haiti. We’re actually a little more formal and literal, I guess you could say. In Haiti there would just



be a series of songs sung and these other events would be going on in concurrence with the songs and you'd serve a whole lot more *Lwa* at once. But it's not like it's a static thing and that we have our certain principles that we follow... it changes all the time. In fact every time I work with Edgard he does something a little differently and I learn more. It causes us to constantly change things up... and that's a good thing."

Sosyete member call on the *Lwa* for their unique ability to offer guidance and respond to a particular need or issue. The Sosyete is primarily concerned with healing at the level of the self and community but this also extends to a deep concern for the world, with the intent to bring about healing, movement, and empowerment from the local to the global sphere. Their mission statement thus continues, referencing in particular the history and conditions in Haiti as a source of inspiration for ceremony and service in the United States and elsewhere: "We are concerned with healing ourselves and healing a broken world. If Vodou's ancestors were able to persevere and maintain their faith in the face of slavery, then we can certainly stand up for what we believe... Vodou is all about the movement from slavery to freedom, from disempowerment to power, from fear into faith. We have incarnated at a time when the world is in dire need of healing. In Haiti, survival is so urgent that Vodou has to be practical and has to answer people's immediate, personal needs. We have it much better here in the U.S. We need to focus some of our energy on the needs of the world and of the planet. We can do this by asking for guidance and instruction from the *Lwa* when they appear in ceremony, by doing more public service ceremonies, and by doing street ceremonies without rancor or arrogance. It is the duty of human beings to repair, rebuild, and transform the world."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> <http://www.feyvodou.com/lasource.htm>

## Violent Crime and Urban Vodou

In their attention to local needs, the Sosyete has included, since 1995, a particular service and focus on the problem of violent crime. At the time, Sallie Ann had just moved to the Bywater neighborhood, which had one of the highest crime rates in the city. To address the problem, the Sosyete turned to the *Lwa*. The intent was to ask for the healing and empowerment of the people and the community, who were overwhelmed by local drug trafficking, organized crime, and corruption in local law enforcement agencies. The problems were so severe, that for Sosyete members and others it was clear that the situation was beyond human capacity to solve and correct. Group members looked, therefore, to the *Lwa* as higher and more powerful forces that offered a better perspective. As Sallie Ann explained, “They are really operating on a level that's a little higher than where humans operate. And I think it's significant that none of these *Lwa* are in fact Gods, they are intermediaries, and they were human once so they have some understanding of human conditions and where we are coming from, what our needs are.”

While local conditions have changed dramatically since the late 1990s, the Bywater still has its share of violent crime. This includes, for example, several unsolved murders that occurred in the first few years of the post-Katrina recovery period – among them Helen Hill (murdered January 2007) and Jessica Hawk (August 2008). Both women were killed in their own homes, and their deaths left the entire community deeply shaken. As Sallie Ann recalled, “The first year after Katrina wasn't so bad but it's gotten much worse the second and third year. It does seem to be reaching some kind of crescendo, but that always seems to happen at the end of the summer when the heat is so strong and people are not at their best. Especially if it's not somebody who you would expect to be

involved in murder, or drug trafficking, or whatever it is that somebody has got out there. It is hard to believe that a person can just get ripped out like that.”

Sallie Ann and other members of the Sosyete, however, have cultivated a personal as well as a collective sense of protection through the practice of Vodou. “There are things that you can do to ensure some safety” Sallie Ann explained to me. “There are guards that you can use, for example spirits capable of great violence and destruction. I keep Legba at my gates, and I feel really safe.”

The feeling she described, however, comes more fundamentally from the close relationships that she and other Sosyete members have developed with the *Lwa*: “I feel OK calling on them in this way, because I have a relationship with them, you know, built up over time. And I know they are walking with me. I even feel safe in the hurricanes, because I'm talking to Ezili Danto. So I have a basic belief that whatever is happening is the best thing that can be happening no matter how difficult it is. That's just the way I'm wired. It's all about growing our souls, not taking things personally and understanding instead the bigger picture. That's the opportunity here, and it's a way of life that I think Vodou is geared for.”

Even though they ask for help from the *Lwa*, seek guidance and solutions to problems, and work to restore order and peace, the group maintains that their intent is not to gain power or control over anyone else. Sallie Ann stressed the point emphatically, “We're not trying to punish or hurt anybody, and in fact we ask that even the criminals be included in the balance we seek. We're just asking the *Lwa* to please make us all into better metal. Help us to fix this and show us the way to fix it. My image of all of this is that as a society, if anybody is failing, then we're all failing. So it isn't about just picking

out or imprisoning the people that we don't like, it's about all of us figuring out where the imbalances are and how we combine the elements of ourselves and maybe heat them up or do whatever it takes to make those elements work together. So there's no vindictiveness involved.”

### **Anticrime Ceremonies**

The Sosityete held its first anticrime ceremony in 1995 at the corner of Piety and Desire Streets. The neighborhood was suffering at the time from a string of violent crimes and homicides related to drug trafficking, which was primarily directed and controlled by the Richard Pena gang. The situation was dangerous and complex, involving police corruption and cooperation with gang leaders. As Sallie Ann recalled, “For the first anticrime ceremony that we did, the police were so involved with the crime that it was really a case where our only option was to go to a higher power and to come together as a community. I mean, the corruption was extreme, it was really bad, and the police were in cahoots, they were warehousing the crack cocaine right down on Chartres Street. Everybody knew who it was. People had even seen their own stolen goods in the house and the police going in and out and not doing anything or just collecting money from the people there. It was a very bad time in New Orleans and the people couldn't go to the police, and even if they did it wouldn't matter.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Richard Pena is a convicted drug kingpin whose organization cornered much of the city's cocaine market in the mid 1990s. Former New Orleans police officer David Singleton, in one of the most widely publicized local corruption cases, confessed to being a Pena lieutenant, dealing kilos of cocaine and orchestrating a kidnapping of one of Pena's rivals. Pena and several key members of his organization are now serving life sentences; Singleton was given a lighter sentence of 15 years in exchange for his testimony (Perlstein 2004).

For the anticrime ceremonies, Sosyete members call on the *Lwa* Ogou. As Sallie Ann described, “In a neighborhood where there is terrible crime, you're going to address that directly and speak with Ogou, who is a warrior God and the God of police. He’s big, you know he’s a big spirit, and he's really strong and quite scary actually. So we turn it over to him. Ogou is really interesting because he’s also the creator of civilization and we all know that there are good points to civilization and things that aren’t so civilized about it. So he’s perfectly suited to address crime in the city. A friend of mine described him as kind of a kick butt urban *Lwa*, from whom no one is exempt. And given the situation at the time, I do believe that it was necessary to say, okay, we've got something stronger here, a *Lwa* who we can go to who is all about truth and justice, because you guys are fallible humans. And even though people were a little afraid of Vodou, they still had an awareness and respect for it and frankly the crime was so much more frightening. People were just sitting ducks and so in a way it was reassuring that there was this other force that everybody had to answer to.”

Shortly after the anticrime ceremony, there was a citywide crackdown on police corruption, which led to the filing of over 60 criminal charges and the dismissal of some 29 police officers.<sup>43</sup> Sallie Ann saw an immediate connection between the work of the *Lwa* and these events: “Somewhere in there I think it actually made a difference to go to a higher power” she said. More broadly, Sosyete members believed that the anticrime ceremony led directly to the stabilization of the neighborhood and a reduction in the

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<sup>43</sup> The investigation confirmed that as many as 29 New Orleans police officers were protecting a cocaine supply warehouse with over 200 pounds of the drug (Flaherty 2005). A six year investigation finally concluded in 1999, with Richard Pena’s conviction for murder and drug trafficking, the arrest of 35 other defendants, the closure of sixteen murder investigations, and the seizure of \$4 million dollars in drug-related assets (DEA Congressional Testimony, July 29, 1999, <http://www.justice.gov/dea/pubs/cngrtest/ct072999.htm>).

crime rate. As Sallie Ann asserted, “There were definite shifts, but it's completely different now. Just completely different, and it's really wacky because the only thing that changed is that we did the ceremony and I think within a few months we were listed as the second trendiest neighborhood in the United States or something like that. It was crazy, just wild.” While citing an overall drop in the neighborhood crime rate of 65%, she stressed that a crime ceremony isn't a final cure: “I don't expect that it's going to last forever. You need to reaffirm it and there are always new people coming in, so it will take everybody continually coming together.”

### *Calling on Ogou*

The decision to turn to a higher power such as Ogou in order to bring about justice requires a deep faith in the existence of a force more powerful than humankind and a trust in the ability and wisdom of that force to affect change. According to Sallie Ann, this has to do also with an acceptance of the moral judgment of the *Lwa* and what they determine to be required. As she stated, “We trust that things will be taken care of, but we have to realize that it's going to get taken care of according to the *Lwa*'s moral judgment. Like with Ogou, to acknowledge that we're at a point where we have to bother him, well I'm sure as hell not going to tell him what to do about the situation, and who to do it to, and what to adjust! I don't have that kind of control and it's sobering to realize that the outcome, whatever he decides to do, could be very intense. It could be real bad. I mean I can ask him not to blast us, but whatever he sees as justice is what it's going to be.”

The anticrime ceremonies themselves were typically conducted in the evening, out in the middle of the street and neighborhood. The ceremony begins with the traditional Rada opening and then transitions to Petwo songs and rituals. “That’s when we call on Ogou,” Sallie Ann told me. “Although the Ogous are actually not Petwo spirits they’re part of the Nago nation, but when we are doing the anticrime ceremonies we are looking at a very fiery Petwo-like aspect of Ogou.”<sup>44</sup>

Sallie Ann considered Ogou to be a “natural fit” for the anticrime ceremonies: “Most people when they think about Ogou envision a warrior, somebody who goes out there and slays people and loves bloodshed. But my sense of Ogou is that of a soldier who is out on the field of battle, he is just so aware of the costs of war.” She described then a whole family of Ogous, some that are very political with slick tongues, full of bravura, who stomp and storm around; some who are “crusty old soldiers, who act crass and get drunk and eat with both hands and fart a lot.” There is also a sad Ogou, one that “has to be carried around, he appears almost in a gesture like he’s crucified.” This is the “wounded Ogou,” who is especially aware of the cost of war. “He has seen so much bloodshed and loss that he’s just so sad. He’s been through too much. And then of course there is St. Jacques (*Sin Jak Majé*) who is very clearly a Knights Templar and you can tell that he’s a very spiritual being. There is also Ogou la Flambeau who is a big fiery spirit. So there are many different aspects and they are all still intimidating, fabulous warriors, and much bigger than we are.”

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<sup>44</sup> Ogou is of the Nago nation, but there are many attempts to classify him as Rada or Petwo due to the dominance of those two nations in Haitian Vodou. Scholars of Vodou argue, however, that he is neither one nor the other. There are so many different manifestations of Ogou that some of them align with Rada characteristics while others are closer to the Petwo nation. Karen McCarthy Brown, in her study of Ogou in Haiti, states that this characteristic is part of his mediating role: “Ogou’s ambivalence in relation to the dominant Rada/Petwo classification system is a significant dimension of his character” (Brown 1997:69).

“The ones we tend to work with are the ones that really know what it all means, and who’s dying, and what the cost is to everybody. They’re not in it just for the lust of destruction, they are really aware of the loss. And they do what they need to do. They have this tremendous responsibility and they also have this great sense of compassion. Ogou Achade is a big one that we work with, especially Papa Edgard. He’s pretty much on the Petwo scale of the Ogous, and he is also a Knights Templar so he’s like a warrior monk, a very spiritual guy but very much a sorcerer and very intensely magical. He’s also very protective of family.”



**Image 16. Beginning the Petwo Part of the Ceremony. La Source Ancienne. Photo by author.**



The Petwo part of the Vodou ceremony begins with Sosyete members singing songs to introduce the Petwo nation, starting with a call to Baron Carrefour, one of the barons of the Gede family (guardians of the dead). As Sallie Ann explained, “He is the baron of the crossroads in the Petwo ranks. So we call on him first and sing for him, and then also for Ogou and draw the vèvè for Ogou. For the anticrime ceremonies, I always draw the vèvè with gunpowder. I do use the cornmeal but I line it with gunpowder. We end up lighting it on fire and blowing it up. We also have pots of fire burning so the whole ceremony takes a fierce and fiery turn when we call on Ogou.”

Sallie Ann continued, “He is such a big spirit, a source of limitless power, and I think it’s really important for everyone to witness and experience. It’s one thing to tell people that he’s a really big scary spirit but it’s another thing when you’re right there and the energy is so huge. It’s especially important for the criminals themselves to witness, and they are usually at these public anticrime ceremonies.” For example, Sallie Ann recalled that after the first anti-crime ceremony in the Bywater, the next day some of the criminals showed up on her front door step begging for absolutions. “They were terrified, absolutely terrified. And I told them, “I can’t help you. We called up Ogou so go talk to him.””

Pausing to fully remember the event, she commented further: “So much about violent crime is about trying to renegotiate power, or having a misunderstanding maybe about who gets to own power. Because nobody gets to own it and there’s a real imbalance in our society where people think that to get power you have take it away from somebody else. So Ogou demonstrates this limitless power, and what we are asking him for is to help us take up that power, in a real and healthy way where we know it’s ours to

share and use for good. It's not like we're trying to hang the bad guys, but we do want to show that we are a community and this is a family. In order to temper ourselves we have to go through the alchemical fire and the alchemical furnace and we have to go to a higher power to bring reason and order and discipline.”

### ***On Possession***

At most of the weekly ceremonies I witnessed at the peristyle, the *Lwa* who is being honored makes his or her presence known by possessing one or more of the participants.<sup>45</sup> Typically the possession occurred near the end of the ceremony as the drumming and dancing picked up and as participants danced around the center pole. Eventually someone would fall into trance, and the other members would come up to respond and assist, forming oftentimes a circle of protection around them or guiding them away from harm. The person possessed would then assume the characteristics of a particular *Lwa*, most often the *Lwa* that the ceremony was intended to honor. When it became clear which *Lwa* had arrived, gifts were offered to welcome him or her and to make them as comfortable as possible.

When Ezili Danto arrived, for example during one Hurricane Ceremony (possessed by Sallie Ann), she picked up a pack of unfiltered cigarettes that someone had left as an offering near the center pole and began to smoke. She also picked up a sharp dagger and proceeded around in a circle, eyes bulging, and making stabbing motions in

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<sup>45</sup> According to research on Vodou in Haiti conducted by Karen McCarthy Brown, “The center of Vodou worship... is possession-performance. Singing and dancing are said to entice the spirits to possess a devotee. The *Lwa* is then said to ride the person like a horse. Once possessed, the *Chwal*, “horse,” is treated exactly as if he or she were the spirit. Acts of obeisance are performed, gifts are proffered, and the spirit in turn gives advice to individuals and general admonitions to the community” (Brown 1997:70).

the air. At various times she would approach people and whisper something in their ear, usually a piece of cryptic advice that participants would later work hard to decipher.

Other *Lwas* that arrived with some consistency included members of the Gede family such as Papa Legba and Baron Samedi, who wore a top hat and sunglasses and walked around demanding rum, cigars, and sexual favors.

There were some ceremonies, however, where no one became possessed. Then the mood fell flat until the music and drumming wound down. When asked about the importance of possession and whether or not the success of the ceremony depended on it, Sallie Ann replied, "Possession isn't absolutely necessary in order to feel that the spirit is there but it is very important. In fact it is the intention of the ceremony, it's what you're hoping is going to happen and what you're trying to make happen and what the drummers are working for and the dancers are working for and it *is* a little disappointing if nobody shows up. We start to think, well what did we do wrong? But actually we have not had that problem with any of the public ceremonies which is really interesting."

At the public ceremonies, Sallie Ann will first explain to those gathered the purpose and intent of the ceremony and what they should expect to see and experience. Describing how possession might happen is important, she maintained, "because it isn't all that far out of the realm of the possible that some newcomer is going to be possessed or that the possession will happen right next to them and it really is intense, especially when it's one of these bigger spirits like Ogou." I asked how people are chosen for possession, and her response was quick: "The *Lwa* pick who they pick. Well I'm sure there is a reason why they pick who they pick but I don't know what that reason is. Perhaps it's the people that carry Ogou on their head; you know where Ogou is their *met*

*tet*, the *Lwa* that sits on their head and rules over them. Then it's very likely that Ogou is going to come through them, but sometimes it's somebody that you're completely not expecting."

I also observed at ceremonies that the same *Lwa* had a different feel and character depending on the person being possessed. Sallie Ann confirmed that the *Lwa* typically appear with recognizable characteristics, but it is "always reflected through that person's subconscious. Ogou for example has certain theatrical characteristics that that you're not going to miss, but it depends on who's getting possessed. And that's how we talk about them actually: "Edgard's Ashade" and "Brendan's Ashade" are distinct manifestations. There is the big archetype and then a particular looking glass on that archetype."

She continued, remembering a particularly intense possession by Ogou. "One time we were doing a ceremony in my house and everybody was getting possessed. The Discovery Channel was actually there filming a show on Vodou, and oddly enough the film crew kept leaving the room when the possessions were happening, which was very fortunate because they were terrifying. All of us were so freaked out because Ogou showed up and Reverend Goat (a member of the Sosyete) kept getting possessed by him and was just screaming and screaming and screaming, and his eyes were really wide, and he just seemed so huge and terrifying, and he was running around with a machete smashing things, and everybody was so scared that all we could do was scream. It was a room full of people just screaming."

This same intensity also occurred when Ogou was honored at public anticrime ceremonies. There, "Ogou is just colossal, walking through the streets asking: Who's in charge here? Who thinks they've got the power? His force is so big that it's really a tough

possession to carry. When he leaves the person is wiped out. We had one guy who was possessed and his hands were on fire. He washed his hands in Florida water, which is very flammable, and then stuck them in the flame and it doesn't actually burn your skin but there he was and then the possession ended and the guy comes out of that while his hands are still on fire, and we are rushing to put the fire out, but of course that kind of thing really is not to be played with, it's really too strong."

At weekly ceremonies at the peristyle, I witnessed participants talking with the *Lwa* when they arrived, asking questions and getting advice on specific matters. I was curious, therefore, about what Ogou had said at the crime ceremonies and asked Sallie Ann about this. "At a lot of the ceremonies, when Ogou shows up he doesn't really talk to people so much," she replied. "Instead it's usually this intense fiery dance, jumping over the flames, dripping Florida water down his machete and lighting it on fire, taking rum and blowing the rum so that it will catch fire. Fire to Ogou is about purification and cleansing and empowerment. He also does a lot of magic; he makes magic items, items for protection, and he does a lot of guards, where he'll take fire and he'll anoint people with it in certain areas of the body for protection. Sometimes he'll put rum on the back of a person's neck and take a cigar and put the cigar out on the back of their neck and mark them to protect them that way -- oddly enough it doesn't leave a scar."

The impact on the person who gets possessed varied widely. Sallie Ann described several different "levels" of possession: "Certain spirits are a very light possession so often the person is aware of what they're doing but they just can't stop themselves from doing it. It can be kind of embarrassing. But for Ogou, it's pretty deep and it's almost debilitating. Afterwards you just feel crumpled. It also depends on whether or not the

person has been through Vodou initiation and to what extent they are able to just agree to it when it happens. Some will just flow right into it and start dancing in amazing ways. On the other hand, it is difficult to see people possessed who have no knowledge of how to go through it. They resist so strongly that it's almost like they're having an epileptic seizure."

Sallie Ann paused then, in the middle of our conversation and laughed. "All this stuff is just totally miraculous" she said. "And I really can't explain it. Besides, nobody believes you when you try. I always notice in all the articles people write about me they always say Sallie Ann "claims" that such and such happened. Well it really *did* happen but don't believe it if you don't want to!"

### **Restoring Balance and Order**

Before Hurricane Katrina, most of the anticrime ceremonies were performed in the Bywater, La Source Ancienne's home community. The territory was familiar for both Sosyete members and community participants – the ceremonies had been taking place there for nearly a decade and many people already knew about the group and supported its mission.

Outside of the Bywater, however, special arrangements had to be made. Typically anticrime ceremonies are performed in other neighborhoods only by request. Even then, one of the first questions Sallie Ann will ask in return is whether or not the whole neighborhood is supportive. As she puts it, "Will they embrace this and will we be supported or will they freak out and run to the police?" Successful public ceremonies, she argued, depend on this kind of mutual involvement and collaboration. A community must

see the need for intervention and residents must be committed to making things better, as well as open to the idea and practice of Vodou.

Sosyete members, therefore, went door to door well in advance of the anticrime ceremony, talking with residents and explaining what they hoped to do. Those who were supportive were typically the people “who are really fed up, and they are willing to do something different, you know, let's give this a try. At the very least the attitude is, well if I were a criminal and the whole neighborhood came out dressed in white and stood on my front doorstep and did a Vodou ceremony saying we know you're doing this, and you know you're doing this, and stop it now, well it would certainly get my attention. It might even intimidate me or perhaps make me realize that the community had now come together in a show of force and strength. It's strange to say this but to some extent it's almost helpful that Vodou has such a horrible reputation and people are so terrified of it. They see it oftentimes as something that's genuine and real.”

Involving the community also meant reaching out to the local law enforcement agencies including the police officers assigned to that particular neighborhood. Within the Fifth District, the local district for the Bywater, the Sosyete enjoyed strong police support. To illustrate, Sallie Ann gave the following example: “One time I attended one of the Bywater Neighborhood Association meetings on crime and they had brought the captain of the Fifth District in along with several of the officers. Everybody was screaming about how you have to hang the criminals and the police were at fault for not ensuring public safety, and I made a comment about how we really should not attack the police, we ought to thank them for putting their lives on the line. I then offered to do another ceremony and I expected the police to go “yeah, right” but instead the captain

said “I would support an action like that in any way that I could.” So that’s the kind of solidarity that it takes.”

The police in the Fifth District have provided security services for La Source Ancienne on numerous occasions and have been present at most of their anticrime ceremonies, although according to Sallie Ann it was not always clear “whether they were there to support us or just to make sure we were not doing anything terrible.” Most of the time, however, the officers seemed serious and focused: “They don’t have those fears about Voodoo and think that what we’re doing is evil. In fact most of the time the police join in before the ceremony is over. One time they got really involved and I could see them slapping their flashlights in rhythm to the drums. Another time they parked a block away to close off the intersection and they were standing by their squad cars at first but as soon as we started the ceremony they just left their cars and came and joined in. As they approached somebody got possessed by Ogou and was jumping over a huge fire we had in the middle of the street and went careening off into the cops. They didn’t know he was possessed and they were just trying to contain him and they couldn’t hold the guy. There were about four really big detectives and they couldn’t hold onto him. That just blew their minds. After the ceremony I usually scoop up the ashes from the fire and the gunpowder and the cornmeal and I put them in *gris gris* bags that people can wear for protection. All the cops wanted one.”

It was not until after Hurricane Katrina that the Sosyete began to regularly venture outside of the Fifth District, seeking community and police support in other areas for their anticrime and other ceremonies. They were responding, in part, to a new set of conditions after the storm, in their own community as well as around the city. Most



immediately, they faced the devastation in the Bywater, especially in the areas closest to the Industrial Canal and in the neighboring St. Claude neighborhood. And just across the canal was the near total devastation of the Lower Ninth Ward and St. Bernard Parish. While Sallie Ann's home and the Achade Meadows Peristyle did not suffer major damage, the Sosyete found itself in a strange transition zone, with still dry and desirable areas such as the Marigny and French Quarter on one side and poverty, blight, and increasingly unsafe conditions in neighborhoods on the other.

The Sosyete responded by arranging a series of "neighborhood healing ceremonies." Rather than returning to an explicit focus on violent crime, the group was concerned more broadly with the harmonizing of spiritual energies in specific locations, according to the needs of each community and place. As Sallie Ann described, "The first year after Katrina every month we did a public ceremony in the street somewhere and each ceremony was geared towards the neighborhood that we were in and what was needed most there. It started right here in the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward but then we went all over the city. We even got support from the City Council and we explained what we wanted to do in exactly those terms; saying for example that in some cases you've got to stir up the energy in order to let it start moving again."

I asked how the neighborhoods were selected and how it was determined what kind of healing was needed. "Well, certainly each neighborhood is distinct," she began, "but some of it is just from reading the paper and finding out what's going on in a different community and what it most needs. I also just go to the neighborhood and feel it out. I see what is going on there and which archetypal and natural force is needed. I do that well before the ceremony starts, so we can plan for what we want to do. For example,

in a neighborhood where there is terrible crime like Central City, well then we're obviously going to have to address that and speak with Ogou.”

Crime, however, is not always the primary focus. For example, “there are neighborhoods where it is more economically depressed and what the people really need is some good luck, some sense of expecting good fortune because they have been shut down in that way for so long that they are expecting bad things to happen to them. In other areas, the real problem may be emotional depression. The level of depression after Katrina is such a massive problem, with people feeling defeated. The negativity is really palpable so in some neighborhoods we need to bring in some air, some breath, some movement and positivity. Still, there are other areas where the people just seem kind of oblivious, like they are in a deep state of denial. There is this sense of privilege and good fortune that indicates that many of them aren't recognizing the suffering all around them. So we try to bring in energy that is more conscious and more compassionate than that.”

### **Wavering Support and Shifting Focus**

The post-Katrina neighborhood healing ceremonies took place over the course of one year, in 2006, and then ceased. However, La Source Ancienne continued on with all of its other activities, including the ongoing weekly ceremonies and other public events. They also moved forward with the development of several new collaborative projects focused broadly on community revitalization.

The anticrime ceremonies also lapsed. Over the course of my two year period of fieldwork, I had hoped to witness at least one anticrime ceremony but none were ever held. In fact, I learned that there had not been an anticrime ceremony since before

Hurricane Katrina, prior to my arrival. Although I did witness many other related ceremonies, my research on the group's specific anticrime initiatives was ultimately dependent on the descriptions and recollections of Sosyete members and not on direct participation or observation.

Mid-way through my fieldwork, I finally asked Sallie Ann if there was a particular reason why these ceremonies had stopped, and she assured me that the Sosyete was still very committed to the work. She thought in particular that an anticrime ceremony would probably be scheduled soon, because "it is getting pretty hellacious out there and people are starting to ask us."

I sensed, however, some hesitancy about going forward. Nonetheless, the following week she proposed the idea to the group. It was June and the summer was extremely busy with annual events and other matters, so the group had to decide what to prioritize. The anticrime ceremonies took time to plan, it was noted; a suitable location had to be determined; people needed to go door to door and make sure that neighborhood residents were committed; press releases had to be written; the police department needed to be notified and arrangements for security made.

Over the next few weeks I observed the group's extended discussion on the matter. The shared sentiment seemed to be that the schedule was already so full and there was only so much they could do given the limited time and small number of people. Still, all the members expressed their commitment to the issue and some even spoke about their personal experiences with local violence, demonstrating a personal connection and awareness of the problem.

One woman told everyone, for example, about how she was riding her bike in the Marigny when a car pulled alongside her and some men tried to grab her. She got away but they had a gun, shot after her, and missed. She was laughing as she recounted the tale to us, happy it was something she could look back on. Another woman, visiting from Europe, described how the first time she took the bus to the Bywater to come to the peristyle for one of the evening services, the bus driver, an elderly African American man, stopped her before she could completely descend and asked with all seriousness “Are you *sure* you know what you’re doing?” Others agreed that it was risky to walk by oneself at night, especially not knowing the area so well.

The conversation ended with a discussion about where to hold the ceremony should they decide to go forward. Sallie Ann was in favor of the neutral ground on St. Claude Avenue, a corridor undergoing much revitalization with an emerging community of small art galleries and a healing center to open in 2011, organized by the Sosyete in partnership with other community organizations. The headquarters of the New Orleans Police Department Fifth District was also temporarily housed in the building where the healing center would be. It was an interesting choice; just outside of the Bywater and in a community that Sosyete members knew well and were generally accepted.

The days and weeks, however, went by and the anticrime ceremony was never scheduled. I asked if this was because of all the other things that were going on – perhaps it was just not the right time for some reason. Sallie Ann explained that community involvement was absolutely essential before the Sosyete could even go forward with the planning. She stated, “One of the things about healing is that there is almost no point in doing a healing if somebody hasn’t asked for it and doesn't want to heal. It's not

something you can impose on anybody else. It really takes a lot of courage and will to acknowledge that something's wrong and that it's time now to do something about it, and then be willing to participate in the healing.”

While the reasoning made sense, I brought up the other public ceremonies that seemed to go forward with no problem and without needing the same amount of clearance from the host neighborhoods. What was different about the anticrime ceremony? “It's different than doing for example the head washing ceremony on Bayou St. John,” Sallie Ann explained. “At least that ceremony is part of the whole history of the place going all the way back to Marie Laveaux so there's not a lot for people to question. It obviously belongs there and I think people know that. So whatever they may think about it they can choose not to participate but it's the right thing to be happening there.”

And even the head washing ceremony had its initial opponents. Sallie Ann for example remembered how some people in the neighborhood were at first “really queasy” about the idea, and how uncomfortable this was for her and the other Sosyete members. “What we're doing is sincere,” she stated, “and we are really attempting in any way to connect with spirit, and you don't want people rolling their eyes and staring at you or refusing to step in and be part of it.”

The anticrime ceremonies, it seemed, were even more difficult to arrange. To begin with they did not have the same kind of historical precedence and so they felt particularly out of place outside of the Bywater. Beyond this, however, was the distinct impression I had that Sallie Ann and Sosyete members cared deeply about how they were being perceived and were sensitive to criticism and the sometimes outright hostility they

encountered. This explained to some extent why the group was hesitant to do ceremonies in full public view, particularly if they had not been explicitly invited or if they were not among open-minded and receptive people.

Sallie Ann continued, “We put ourselves on the line and you have to just be courageous and go out and do it. So a lot of the neighborhoods just can’t handle that. I also cannot imagine going to another city and trying to do this. This is such a small community where everyone knows each other really well. It’s really very neighborly here and to get everybody to agree to do this and to let it happen is just amazing. It takes a lot of effort and coordination to get out there and to do what we’re doing and to be transparent about it.”

### **Hope, Heritage, and the Healing Center**

While the frequency of the anticrime ceremonies has declined, what *has* emerged in the post-Katrina recovery period for La Source Ancienne is a new project, the New Orleans Hope and Heritage Project. Formed originally as a committee of the Sosite, the stated mission is “to support the efforts to rebuild and transform the city of New Orleans, while staying true to the unique heritage and culture of our beloved city. We will focus our efforts on rebuilding one neighborhood at a time by channeling the interest, support and resources of individuals and organizations worldwide who share our passion for authentic and inspired reconstruction. We recognize that with any crisis also comes great opportunity. Together we can realize the potential of the state of emergency caused by Katrina and related flooding to afford a mindful reconstruction, with an emphasis on environmentally aware, socially conscious urban planning.”

One of the project's primary initiatives is the construction of a cooperative healing center, scheduled to open in 2011 on St. Claude Avenue in the midst of the Bywater and St. Roch neighborhoods. The space will include a food coop, yoga studio, artist work spaces, a child care facility, and offices for alternative health practitioners. The intent is to promote sustainability on every level -- social, intellectual, physical, financial, environmental, and spiritual. As Sallie Ann asserted, "It's not enough just to give people a spiritual space to go to, you've got to do something about economic factors and you also have to do it socially, because we have so many social ills and there's so much anger and mistrust. And we have to rebuild community by re-envisioning what we think of as family."

Although the Hope and Heritage Project originated as a project of the Sosyete, La Source Ancienne or Vodou is not featured in any of the official literature. Other than a logo loosely designed to look like a vèvè and common knowledge of the organizers, there was no clear indication of the project's spiritual foundations. This was perhaps strategic; the project could thus enjoy wide acceptance and support and the Sosyete could still carry out its work, in more direct relationship with other likeminded community partners and organizations, and with a certain amount of privacy and protection.

### **Ancestry and Authenticity**

Despite the development of these collaborative relationships with other community groups and organizations, the Sosyete remained on the whole fairly isolated from the larger New Orleans Voodoo community. In part, this was the nature of the local tradition, made up of small enclaves and highly autonomous groups and practitioners.

However, in this case it seemed also to have something to do with the criticism and hostility that had been directed towards Sallie Ann and the group. “Before Katrina the environment was much more hostile and competitive,” Sallie Ann explained. “There were groups of people that could only validate themselves by disparaging somebody else. It was ugly. But it wasn’t everybody and I find that the ones who are still here are not that way and never have been.”

Much of the negativity directed toward the group was about race, since Sallie Ann and most of the Sosyete members are white and the legacy of Voodoo in New Orleans is historically black. Consequently, the group lacked credibility in some circles. Sallie Ann stated, “I think some of it had to do with race, but it was strange because a lot of these people I’m referring to are white. It was just bizarre having them scream at me because I’m white doing Voodoo and I’m like okay what’s *your* problem with that? I could see somebody else having a problem with that but what’s *your* problem with it? It was just weird and there were all kinds of power struggles.”

She continued, “At first it was really shocking to me – there was one priest in town that I thought was a good friend of mine and then I found out that he wanted me dead and hated me it was just horrible to just have to reframe everything. He actually came to a hurricane ceremony that was out on the street over here and was cursing the people that were in the ceremony, spitting on people, and threatening my life. It caused me to really explore my own racial stuck ups and to think about what I’m doing here. It made me walk through my own steps and get clear with myself.”

“For these and other reasons, I was always really happy to be in the Bywater just away from all of that. I’m just really thankful I’m not somewhere like the French Quarter



in the middle of that whole tourist thing and having to contend all the time with those kinds of accusations and questions. So my attitude is always that I'm just not going to engage, not going to go there, and not give into it. I'm focused on my affiliation with Papa Edgard in service to the *Lwa*. So I think I probably got a reputation for being aloof and not participating or something but it just seemed like the way to go for me. I wanted to be in a state of grace and not get into all of that. I think it's a lot better now. Like I said, a lot of those people are just gone or underground or something. I don't know if they're in town but they're not making any noise."

Attacks on the Sosityete also came from outside the city. Sallie Ann described, for example, accusations and threats she received from a Voodoo group in Philadelphia that came to town to do some public ceremonies: "They really put everybody down," she recalled. "They wrote letters to the Times Picayune about how screwed up it all is and that there's no real Voodoo in New Orleans and all these people are shams. They wanted everybody to get certified by their organization to be a priest or priestess."

Sallie Ann and other members of the local community were harassed repeatedly by this group, via threatening phone call and letters. As Sallie Ann recalled, "The woman insisted that I bring their brochures and their certification papers to Haiti and give them to Edgard because he might want to sign up to be a certification agency or something and I told her that Edgard is in his 80s and he's been a priest longer than you've been alive and I'm going to bring him this stuff and tell him he's got to get certified with you? Sure, okay. But I did. I brought the stuff to Edgard and he called a whole conference in Port-au-Prince with all these priests, and they had this big discussion about whether or not a white person can do Voodoo. They talked all about Vodou's great history and then they

declared that that doesn't mean that one can't be from any other history. You can be a Muslim and practice Voodoo, you can be a Jew and practice Voodoo, and so on. So they were all in agreement and were very pleased with themselves. The U.S is such a fundamentalist country -- we are such Puritans and it gets into everything and so I think the battle rages on. The word authenticity comes up all the time but if you say that to a Haitian person they will say, "What are you talking about, there are no rules here!"

### **Voodoo and a New African Consciousness**

To get a better sense of La Source Ancienne's place and struggle within the larger community, I made some comparative observations, seeking out other Voodoo houses and practitioners. For example, I met and spoke with a woman at a local book fair who was selling copies of a book she wrote about Voodoo. She was a practitioner who was formerly connected to the New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum but then moved out of town and did most of her consulting over the internet and phone, primarily to a European client base. She preferred to work on her own and was glad to be far removed from the Voodoo "scene" of the city. I also spoke with the priestess of a local Voodoo temple in the downtown New Orleans area. She made a point of telling me that my questions were really an attempt to try to steal her story for my own use, so why should she tell me anything at all? She said she was very much in the public view and needed to protect her own interests; the temple had a good sized following among locals and tourists that passed through each year. Both women expected payment for the knowledge they had to share; and they opened up to tell me only a little about their work after I purchased books and paid the standard consultation fees.

I had coffee with a friend who was fairly new to the city, who told me her story of meeting a self proclaimed “Voodoo doctor” who diagnosed all of her bad luck as being the result of a spell someone had cast on her. He said knew how to remove it; if she would come to his room that night to receive a special blessing in the form of an oil massage. She believed him enough to go there, but when he tried to turn the massage into a sexual encounter she protested, gathered her things, and got out. Unnerved, she visited a hoodoo woman who gave out remedies from the back of a local French Quarter coffee shop. There she was instructed to build a small altar to Legba for protection, to keep in her room by the door. She did, and the “Voodoo doctor” did not bother her again. All in all, it was an interesting mix of characters, each of them making specific claims to spiritual knowledge and expertise.

I attended also the annual “Voodoo Fest” organized by Voodoo Authentica, a botanica and cultural center in the French Quarter. It seemed a more ‘legitimate’ affair; there were presentations by local scholars and spiritual leaders, and Mama Lola, the now famous Vodou priestess from Brooklyn, was there as a distinguished guest. There, I met Elmer Glover, the resident Voodoo priest at Voodoo Authentica and according to Fandrich and others, one of the senior-most initiated priests still left in the area. Elmer was standing by a folding table signing copies of a local newspaper that featured a picture of him on the cover with a huge boa constrictor wrapped around his neck. He was a formidable presence, a very tall man with broad shoulders, who wore a large brimmed hat and a wide smile.

Generous with his time, he agreed to an interview at a later date. Our second meeting took place in a small coffee shop near the end of Canal Street, at the edge of the

Metairie and Greenwood cemeteries. It was an odd little place, at a busy intersection with the raised tombs of the cemetery visible on all sides. I later found out that Elmer lived right around the corner, practically in the middle of the cemetery.

Fandrich gives a brief biography: Elmer Glover “was born and raised in Southern Louisiana and is of African American and Haitian origin, but has traveled worldwide. He has multiple initiations, but considers his 1983 initiation into Haitian Vodou as priest (oungan) and magician (bocó) in the Bizango secret society in Archaie, Haiti, to be the most important step on his personal spiritual journey” (Fandrich 2006:143).

Elmer shared with me his view of the history and emergence of the Voodoo religious tradition in New Orleans. “If you look at the roots of Voodoo in African culture you can trace it all the way back to Egypt,” he began. “It’s the same force or energy but the name changes once it migrates to West Africa, where it blends to fit that particular culture. African Americans here, especially in Louisiana, are the descendents of West African people. We have distinct cultures along that Slave Coast. And that’s what came to the New World and to America.”

Voodoo emerged in the New World as an important and original belief system. As Elmer explained, “In reality all religions are belief systems created by a particular people, culture, and consciousness. They may be inspired by the creator but the creator is more of a spirit, or an energy force, or a state of consciousness. It’s not somebody up in the sky taking down notes about what you did good and what you did bad and whether or not you’re going to be condemned to hell. That’s bullshit to me. Heaven and hell are really conditions of *human* life itself -- you don’t have to die to go to hell (*laughter*). And the reality is that in Voodoo, we are multidimensional beings, living in a multidimensional

reality, dealing with a multidimensional infinite consciousness *called* God. The Devil is not a little man running around with horns and a little red suit with a pitchfork and a little pointy tail – the Devil is a Lucifer state of consciousness in *mankind* because people do devilish things!”

“I guess you could say that there are a lot of semantics and mind games being played on the public. But they have to realize the truth of what’s really going on, what’s behind this that and the other. That man is himself responsible for what’s happening on the planet. Not God. But we use religion as a safeguard to empower ourselves and to make life seem worth living. In other words, we cultivate the belief that there is something greater than us, and yes there is something greater than us, but we’ve personified it to where we can in some form or fashion comprehend it, connect with it.”

When asked to describe his role as a Voodoo priest he told me he worked “to educate and serve the people, to meet people’s needs and to resolve the problems of life. I’m patronized mainly because of my reputation. There’s no church, no services; I meet with people individually.” I asked him further about the kinds of problems that bring people to him, and he rattled off a list: “Relationships, bad luck, exorcisms, job situations, money – for example, there have been a few folks who are having problems with Road Home money and this that and the other, but most of it has nothing directly to do with Hurricane Katrina. It’s all about people’s personal problems and issues. I even consider myself a practitioner of gangster Voodoo. I work on criminal cases – sometimes I can even get drug dealers off – I’ll do whatever it takes to get the job done.”

Continuing, Elmer told me that he followed in the tradition of the Voodoo healers; “because that’s the kind of service that people want. I’m a spiritual doctor, and it’s a

much more economical way because the other population [referring to the white community] well they go to the psychiatrist, but we [the black community] can't afford that. So I show people what prayers they need to be saying, where they need to go to eliminate their problems. It's kind of like Voodoo therapy. I may give them an herb bath, or use a Voodoo doll. Some of it is for them to feel like they have some power. But essentially I am helping them to create their own reality because they don't know how to do it. I try to get them back on track and tell them to focus on God in your life and not man. Because a lot of them have been deceived, too caught up in the material world and they have no balance."

We continued to discuss Elmer's work and the Voodoo community in New Orleans more broadly. As a longtime local resident, Elmer could comment on many of the different changes that have impacted the community, especially since Hurricane Katrina. As we were reviewing the list of Voodoo practitioners still in town after the storm, he paused when I mention Sallie Ann Glassman and La Source Ancienne.

"She and I don't see eye to eye," he told me. I asked why. Elmer was matter of fact: "She doesn't want to give a black face to her practice. I told her she does not have an African ancestral line and that she needs to go and contemplate her own tradition, which is Kabbalah because ultimately the Jewish people have the same power. I don't feel like you can be a serious Voudouist unless it comes through your bloodline, because it's the ancestors who determine your destiny. Voodoo is not something you choose to be, the deities and the powers choose you. A lot of white practitioners are more into trying to copy the way the Haitians do it and they don't really understand the New Orleans tradition."

As a Louisiana born African American who is also of Haitian descent, Elmer claimed a particular ancestry and a related authenticity as a Voodoo spiritual leader. Beyond ethnicity, he argued also that many contemporary Voodoo and Vodou groups like La Source Ancienne didn't really offer the people, especially the people in his own community, what they need. He explained, "It's not about going to drumming ceremonies to dance and get possessed by the spirit, because that's not what the public here wants. They want magic and also belief, they want faith and they want to be given direction. Most of the people that I work with who cater to Voodoo are Christians who don't really want to be fully in the religion of Voodoo but they want the *service* that Voodoo has to offer to solve their problems. So what you have here is a kind of a clash. I wouldn't say it's a clash openly but it's a clash between Christian ideas and Voodoo ideas."

Elmer acknowledged the role of the black Christian church in the social and spiritual stability and growth of the community, but made a point to say that the extent to which this is successful depends a lot on the specific church – its organization, leadership, and management. "I'm not discounting them at all because they are a major focus," he was careful to add, "but it depends on what types of programs they have for helping people. You know there is spiritual counseling, other outreach services like feeding the hungry and giving donations of material goods."

The biggest problem, in Elmer's view, was that people "go to church four or five hours on Sunday, they praise God, they praise Jesus, and they have these emotional services but the biggest principle they violate in their daily lives is *love thy neighbor as thyself*. Because that same community that goes to church four or five hours on Sunday has some of the worst problems – the drugs, the killing, the overall level of distrust. It's

just madness. It makes you question what's going on in the church. Do they need to change their theology? I'm not sure how to say this, but I think Dr. King had good intentions with integration, but integration never really was the answer because we need to integrate amongst ourselves first, and love ourselves, and love and support each other – emotionally, socially, economically, politically. People put priests, preachers, rabbis, whoever, as the authority but the ultimate authority is really oneself. So they don't reclaim themselves and they lack knowledge of who they really are. They don't call on their inner resources. Instead, they are worried about somebody giving them what they want. So actually the plight of African Americans here is not so much to be born again Christians, but rather to be born again *Africans*, reclaiming our roots and having an African state of consciousness, which is based on spiritual consciousness rather than a complete reliance on spirit.”

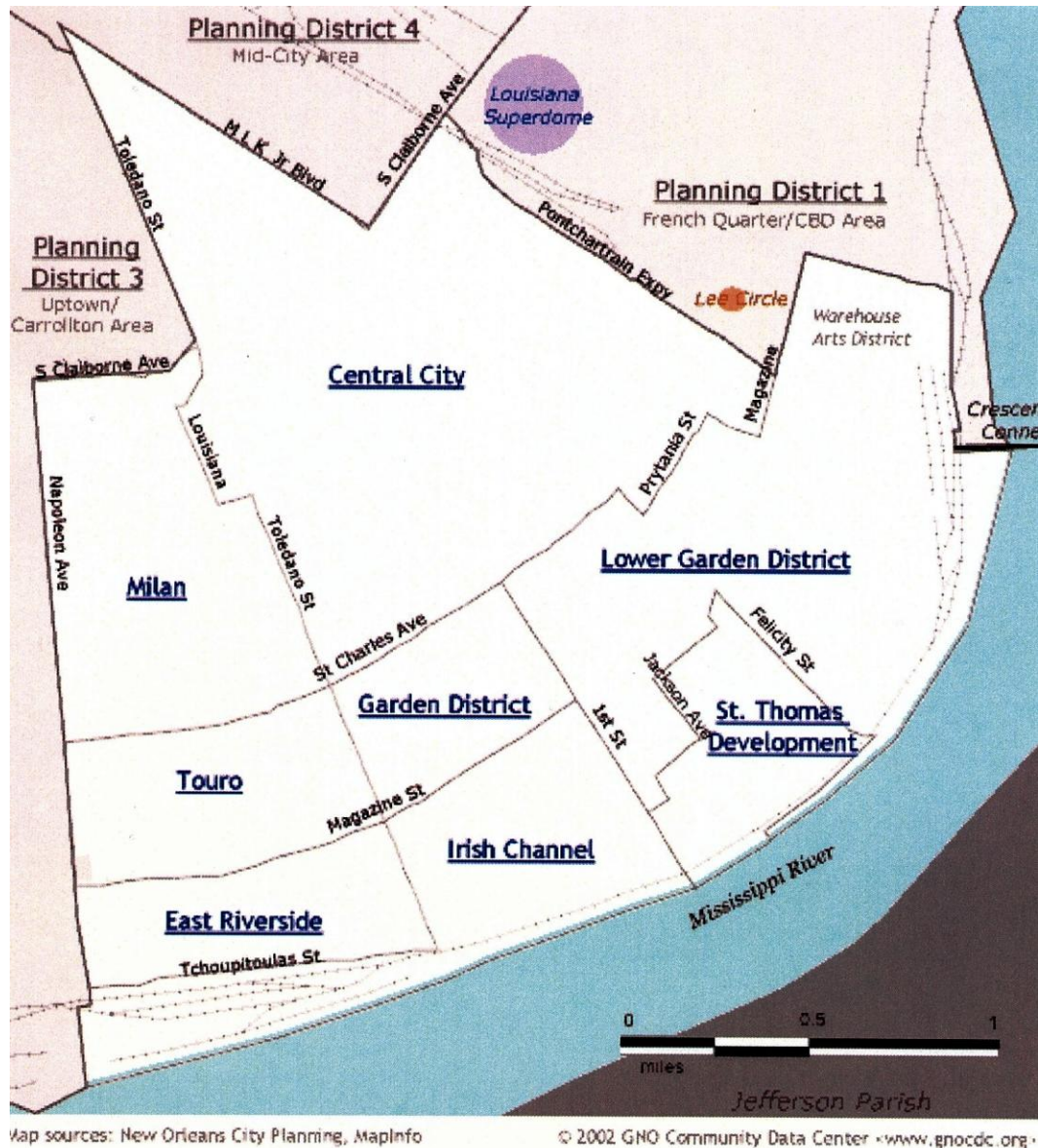
It was a fascinating conversation, which shed light on the nature of social and spiritual needs, the diversity of religious communities, and the related forms of religious leadership and engagement within and between these groups. It shed light also on the determinations and processes of religious authority and authenticity. This includes an awareness and consideration of who gets to make those determinations and how.

What seemed particularly relevant in all of this, especially for the moral and religious redevelopment of the city, is the way in which protective, defensive, and other kinds of boundaries develop around neighborhoods, populations, and religious forms, and the related determinations that come from within about what belongs and what (or who) does not.



These boundaries are distinctly local creations, tied to issues of race and class, processes of inclusion and exclusion, and states of dependence or autonomy. The intent of Voodoo, as a religious system, however, is to remain flexible and receptive. From the established and accessible forms and practices – the botanicas, curio shops, temples, and public ceremonies, to the informal dimensions of local problem solving in private settings, the religion has the capacity to extend into every corner of life and being. It can facilitate the simplest of transactions or the most profound moment of transformation, according to the needs and desires of those who choose to engage. It is thus a religion of peacemaking and placemaking, by and for the people, and a creative and open system for human development in relationship to the multiple beings and dimensions of the world.

CHAPTER 4: FROM KILLING TO CARING:  
NEW HOPE BAPTIST CHURCH



Map 9. Neighborhood Snapshot, Central City.  
Source: Greater New Orleans Community Data Center.

## **The Vigil**

On the last day of the year in New Orleans, New Year's Eve 2008, the local television stations were alive with information about the celebrations scheduled for the evening. There were fireworks planned in the French Quarter, a bonfire in Mid-City, and numerous other events scheduled in bars, restaurants, and other establishments all over town. The collective excitement was infectious.

On one channel, however, the mood was more serious. They were covering a different story, featuring a live interview with Pastor John Raphael of New Hope Baptist Church in the Central City neighborhood. Pastor Raphael was speaking about crime and violence in the city, a topic with particular relevance on New Year's Eve, given the dangerous local history of some residents occasionally using guns as firecrackers, shooting them off into the air at the stroke of midnight. There were thus two faces to this night and any night in New Orleans – one that was filled with the joy and passion for living for which this city was famously known; and the other, which revealed a critical state of insecurity and violence that threatened the future life and sustainability of people and place. For Pastor Raphael, it was the perfect opportunity to preach.

He announced a three day prayer and fasting vigil that would begin that very evening. The vigil would be fully in the public view; held outside in the middle of Central City on the “neutral ground” of South Claiborne Avenue. It was something the pastor felt spiritually called to do. While visibly stationed in the center of one of New Orleans busiest corridors, in an area where the incidence of violent crime is very high, he would spend time in prayer and quiet reflection. He was prepared to be there for three days and three nights, rain or shine.

I drove by the next day to see where the pastor had established himself. From the uptown part of the city I followed Louisiana Avenue to South Claiborne, turned right and headed downtown. Nearing the intersection of Felicity Street I saw a small group of about ten people standing on the neutral ground. They had set up camp in the center of the median on a small paved area. There were a few benches and lawn chairs with blankets and sleeping bags scattered about and someone had carried in a small metal fire pit, which sat smoldering with coals. The group was positioned at the base of the small monument that is there to Martin Luther King, Jr.; they were under the protection also of a few trees, which gave some shelter from the drizzling rain. It was a cold and wet New Year's Day, but they had built a small oasis of sorts, huddled together with three lanes of heavy traffic rushing by on either side.

Pastor Raphael was easy to spot; recognizable from the television interview. A tall African American man with a formidable presence and warm smile, he wore a black t-shirt and matching cap with "ENOUGH" printed across the front in large white letters. He was walking around, talking with people, shaking hands, and waving at the passing cars honking their support. I introduced myself and he welcomed me without hesitation, inviting me to meet the other church members gathered there. There were about ten people in all, mostly other African American men and a few women, positioned along the perimeter of the space and facing traffic. Many of them were holding printed and hand lettered signs which read variously: "I will NOT take a life," "I will not take the life of my brother," "Homicides in 2008: 178, Homicides in 2009: 0," and "Yes We Can."



**Image 17. New Hope Baptist Church Members, New Year's Day, January 1, 2008.  
Photo by author.**

Shortly after I arrived, the pastor called everyone together for prayer. We all stood at the base of the King memorial in a circle holding hands. Two Latino day laborers who had been observing the scene from across the street ran over when they saw the prayer circle form, which opened up to accommodate them. The pastor began:

*I want to thank you all again, those of you who have put up with this and been out here, you didn't have to be here but you were, and we came out here... well I came out here to seek God's face in relation to what needs to be done, but also to intercede for those parents who are suffering and grieving for losing their loved ones. And we certainly want to remember them. I don't believe that our being here has been in vain, and I believe that the Lord is gonna use this time to do even greater things in this community and I believe in this country. So let's pray.*

*Father we thank you once again for this blessed experience of focusing on you Lord, moving away from our attention on the problems and looking for the problem solved. Lord we lift up right now every mother and every father who had to bury a child in this city during the violence. Those siblings Lord who bear the pain right now (yes Lord Jesus) of a brother or a sister who will no longer be there. Even those small children (in the name of Jesus Christ) who had to see mother or father buried because of violence in this city (yes Lord). Oh Lord we thank you because we know that you are able to bring a change upon our communities and a change upon our hearts (yes Lord). Right now Lord we pray that you would comfort those who are grieving (yes Lord Jesus) but bring about*

*a state Lord that it won't have to be others that have to go down that path (yes Lord, in the name of Jesus Christ). We pray Lord that 2009 would be a year which you would work in a way that everybody would notice nobody but you Father.*

*We pray Father that you would touch the hearts of our young men our young ladies that they would realize the value of first of all their own lives (yes Father God), then the value of others lives (yes Lord Jesus). We pray that you would help us as a community to come together (thank you Jesus) with a sense of compassion and concern for one another Lord. We pray that whatever we do, we do it in a way that you are glorified. Lord, lift up our city leaders (yes Lord), that there might not be a spirit of competition, that they might complement one another working in a way that would make this the best city that it can possibly be (yes, yes). Now Lord we thank you for sustaining us through these days. I thank you for each and every one of your children who gave of themselves during this time. We bless you, in Jesus Christ's name we pray, Amen (Amen, thank you Jesus, thank you very much, thank you my brother).*

At the end of the prayer, the group members shook hands and embraced each other. As the circle broke apart, the two day laborers ran back across the street to wait again for work. "Vaya con Dios! Go with God." Pastor Raphael called after them, and they waved. "I have to start practicing up on my Spanish," he told me. "I'm going to be preaching in Panama in about two weeks, I've been doing that for about 2 years. It's something that I don't do well because I don't have an interpreter down there. But they love it and like to make fun of how I mispronounce the words. But I'm learning. We have Spanish services at the church now. I came out here after the storm and started seeing all those guys lined up over there (points across the street). Well we got them involved but it was hard. I can't keep up with it as far as doing it, but now we have a Spanish speaking pastor."

The rain was falling more steadily and a blustery wind had picked up. "How was it out here last night?" I asked the pastor. "Was it cold?" Pastor Raphael smiled broadly and shook his head, "I felt guilty... they actually brought a cot out here for me and set it up and the fire was going. I had two blankets, and I felt guilty. I thought, oh my

goodness.” “You actually slept?” I asked. “Oh I slept. I slept. I *wanted* to sleep because I wanted my mind to be fresh this morning so I could study, but I’ve gotten very little studying done. Well. I’ll just stay with it because this is a precursor to I believe something very huge in this city – something that *has* to happen. If we are going to survive as a people it has to happen. It’s just a matter of getting people who are not directly affected through violence or even economically to be concerned about people who are.”

“Why did you choose this corner for the vigil?” I pressed, wondering in particular about the memorial to Martin Luther King. Pastor Raphael responded without hesitation, “Well first of all because it’s familiar, but also because the Martin Luther King monument reminds me of what we as a people are able to do. It also reminds me of a tremendous debt I feel we owe. Not too long ago I preached a sermon about our obligation to others. And I was dealing with a biblical passage in the book of Hebrews where the Lord talks about the triumphs of faith, that this one by faith, and that one by faith, Abraham and Isaac and all the way down to Noah, and at the end of that passage it says and others of whom this world was not worthy and describes all of the things they went through. And I thought about it and even there it says others who gave their lives... I mean there are so many others, people who really died believing in their hearts that we would have better opportunities, and here we are destroying ourselves without taking advantage of the opportunities that they died for! And so I’m thinking how can we just sit by idly when this kind of battle is going on in our community?”

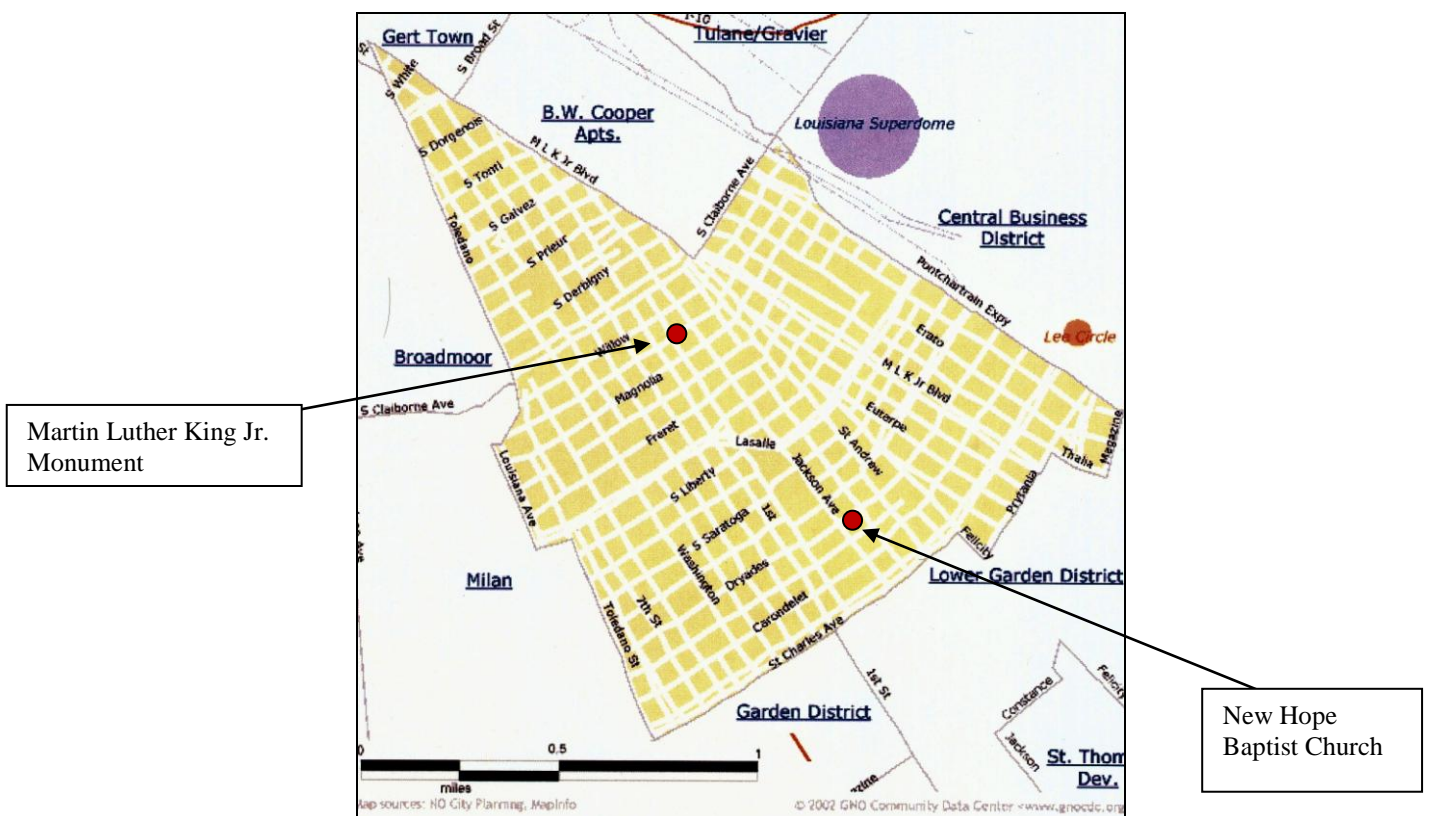


**Image 18: Monument to Martin Luther King Jr., Neutral Ground, Claiborne Avenue at Felicity Street. Photo by author.**

The pastor continued, “I just have to say also that these people (pointing around to those who had joined him in the vigil) motivate me too. Let me tell you, none of them have to be here. I mean, I made it easy for them not to be here.” I interrupted; “Yes, I heard you on the news and you were almost telling people to stay away.” “Yes, I was not asking people to come and I’ll tell you why. It was because *I* felt the need to come here and I was trying to strike a balance between getting the exposure, challenging the public about what we need to do, but at the same time being able to truly give time to prayer and



fasting at *this* place... and its hard sometimes, because I was out here one time before and a lot of pastors came out here with me and it turned into like a fellowship, you know everybody was like “Hey I’m glad you’re out here, I’m glad you’re out here.” And sometimes we would lose sight of *why* we were out here. So I said that to my congregation but some of them came anyway and they even spent the night out here with me. And I’m glad that they did.”



**Map 10: Location of Monument to Martin Luther King Jr. in relation to New Hope Baptist Church.**  
**Source: Greater New Orleans Community Data Center**

I looked around at the small camp that Pastor Raphael and New Hope congregation members had set up on the neutral ground. Following traffic on Claiborne in one direction, one would proceed directly uptown. Facing the opposite way, one could follow the cars up and over the overpass past the Superdome and into the Central

Business District. The Central City neighborhood spanned primarily to the right, but also extended to the other side of Claiborne between Broadmoor and the former site of the B.W. Cooper Housing Project, recently demolished in a controversial city initiative to tear down much of the city's public housing and rebuild new mixed-income dwellings.

It occurred to me then, standing there at the center of the neutral ground, that New Hope church members chose an interesting and significant crossroads for their work. I shared my observations with Pastor Raphael: "We're standing at the busiest of intersections, located in the heart of Central City but also in the change and transition that occurs along this corridor between uptown and downtown. I mean thousands of people pass through here every day, and *fast*. Does it mean anything to you spiritually or otherwise to be at such a place, at *this* particular crossroads?" "Yes," he replied. "Yes. You know, we have given out maybe 5,000 bibles at this intersection since Katrina. Because you know people were re-establishing their lives and everything, but everybody was replacing everything that they had lost except for their bible. So we started giving them away. And it's so funny because whenever you stand on the corner people assume you are trying to raise money. So they ask me: are you giving those away? And you say yes, would you like one? And they say yea, and then... *who are you?* They just can't believe that somebody is giving away something for free, and when you tell them you are from a church they are shocked. And I'm thinking, you're not supposed to be shocked if the church gives you a bible. I mean that's how far away we are from the Word and from where we want to be. If the church says we stand on the Word and if everything we do is based on the Word and salvation, then if we don't give out the Word then something is wrong there. So we've given away literally millions of tracts, even way before Katrina,

and we've had times when we've just flooded this area at *every* intersection; all the way down Martin Luther King (pointing to the left and right) and Claiborne (pointing behind him and to the front). It's always been impactful when we've sustained it."

When asked about the exact location of the church, Pastor Raphael gestured across the street – "About four or five blocks that way. Matter of fact, if you went down this street, do you see the back of that two story building right there? Well if you went over a block and a half from there you'd be in the back yard of the education center. You can almost see it; in fact I see a car coming out of there right now."

So as not to take up too much of the pastor's time, I asked if we might speak later about the church, its history, and mission. He agreed, giving me the number of an assistant pastor that I could call to schedule an appointment. I am also invited to stay for a while on the neutral ground with the group, talking to other church members and taking photographs.

I met several other individuals that afternoon, including a few who had been directly impacted by violence and had lost loved ones. One longtime church member, Ronald, shared his experiences with me and remembered his brother Dwayne who was killed in 1997. He told me, "Dwayne was a twin to my sister and he was 28 when he passed, when he got killed. He came to New Orleans from my little home town in New Iberia, that's where we was from. And my brother was in drugs, he used drugs, but he was very kind, very loving, very caring... he would give you his heart. In fact from my understanding, the guy who killed him – he knew my brother, and the night before my brother had fixed a meal for him and his family. But evidently my brother owed him \$25 and the next day came and they got in an argument. I don't know how the argument went

but it was over \$25. And the guy came back and shot him – *over* \$25. They arrested the guy because they had a witness, but the witness didn't show up at the hearing so they had to release him. And I can hear my mother's voice saying right now, just as clear as the day, "Vengeance is mine, said the Lord. Put it in God's hands and let him handle it. You don't have to do nothing . . . don't touch that." I can hear her saying that so clearly."

Ronald and others on the neutral ground described a sense of joy and healing to be able to witness so many people showing their concern, people honking their horns and waving their support. Some people pulled over, as I did, to get out to converse with Pastor Raphael and the others, joining in the ongoing sessions of prayer throughout the day and night. The church members there all expressed how moved they were by all the people who stopped by to interact with the group. "Different individuals come, they'll pray by themselves, they'll walk around and pray with others" one member said. "We often come together in a group and pray, and a lot of our church members will join us. Other ministers, city officials, people of all denominations, people of all races come by and talk with the pastor and meet with us. They come just to be among us, just to be with us, you know?"

Indeed, during the time I was there I witnessed a woman pull over with an unmistakable sense of urgency to talk to Pastor Raphael about her situation of domestic violence. She had seen him on television and wanted to share her concerns about the violence that takes place at home as well as on the street. There were many others; a man who had some ideas for stopping the violence in his neighborhood, a woman and former public school teacher who wanted to pray for the children, more day workers from the Latino community who came for prayer and went again, an unknown man who pulled up

in a car alongside the neutral ground and handed Pastor Raphael a check for \$1000, and the mayor of New Orleans himself, Ray Nagin, who dropped by unannounced to greet Pastor Raphael and give his support.

“Some people come by in the evening when they get off of work,” a church member noted, “and they’ll meet with our pastor and they’ll share some of their concerns and problems, their heartaches and pain and the tragedy that they went through. A lot of people just walk up for prayer; they just want to be prayed for. By the end of the day you find a sort of peacefulness with yourself in the cool of the evening and you can reflect upon who you talked with, who you met, the things that people said, what they have shared with your family.”

Pastor Raphael and his fellow church members saw their vigil ultimately as an opportunity to transform; a chance to mobilize and move from the tragic impact and concern about violence to a place of individual and shared action. They hoped, prayed, and worked for an end to the violence and for security and peace in their homes and communities. As one participant described, with genuine enthusiasm, “When you get people talking about something, then what’s the next thing? They are gonna get to doing something about it! And that’s the joy and that’s the hope that we have, that people not only talk about it, they start doing something about it. And if enough of us get to doing something about it, then we can turn this thing around with the help and the grace of God. We can make it, we can make it. Yes we can!”

### **Black Baptists in New Orleans**

There is a long history of social justice at New Hope, with a particular focus on urban violence. As Pastor Raphael explained, “New Hope has historically been involved in the community, not just this community but across the city, in a lot of outreach ministry. There has been a lot of violence and we would go out into all of those places and try to reach individuals out on the street. So when I became pastor in 1988 the church was already outreach minded and doing a lot of work, and I just tried to continue and build upon that which had already been established.”

New Hope is a member of the National Baptist Convention of America, Inc. (NBCA), a governing body with a rich history dating back to the earliest days of black religious organization in the American Baptist community. In the colonial period, American Baptists were primarily white immigrants and settlers from England, many of whom were escaping religious persecution to find refuge and freedom of religion in the New World. Primarily established in Northern colonies at the turn of the seventeenth century, Baptist preachers began to travel to other regions, following the wave of heightened religious activity during the First Great Awakening from 1730-1755. They converted both whites and blacks, with significant impact in the Southern colonies and states. The process continued through the Second Great Awakening from 1790-1840 (Glazier 2001).

The Southern Baptist Convention formed in 1845 after Southern white Baptists split with their northern counterparts, primarily over the issue of slavery and racial segregation. At about the same time, black Baptists began their own attempts at organization, focusing their campaign on unification and the development of a national Baptist congregation. This began with the formation in 1880 of the Baptist Foreign

Mission Convention in Montgomery, Alabama. In 1895, this Convention joined with two other black Baptist organizations: the American National Baptist Convention (1886) and the National Educational Convention (1888), to become the National Baptist Convention of the United States of America (Pius 1911:69-70).

In 1915, however, the new convention split, due to an internal controversy over the ownership and operation of the National Baptist Publishing Board. One group rallied around Reverend Ronald H. Boyd, who was instrumental in building the publishing board on the basis of his own financial credit and land holdings. This group supported the continued independence of the publishing board and rejected a proposed new charter that would give the Convention greater control. Boyd and his followers eventually withdrew from the National Baptist Convention and formed the National Baptist Convention of America, which was later incorporated in 1987. The NBCA kept the publishing board at the center of its activities, which also included domestic work and foreign service; “In addition to the issues of prohibition, evangelism, and education, the NBCA gave early support to civil rights organizations, urban social service programs, and the anti-lynching campaign” (Glazier 2001:209), as well as foreign mission work in developing countries such as Panama, Haiti, and Ghana.

Over the years, the NBCA has experienced tremendous growth. According to its self-published literature, the organization is headquartered in Shreveport, Louisiana and has an estimated membership of five million people. It is the second largest Baptist organization in the world, behind the Southern Baptist Convention. Their mission includes the objectives to “serve to promote and support Christian education, Christian missions, and church extension through the combined efforts of Baptist churches, and...

to cause the gospel, as understood and practiced by our Baptist faith, to be spread throughout this nation and to the foreign nations.” Overall the Convention seeks to “positively impact and influence the spiritual, educational, social and economic conditions of all humankind.”<sup>46</sup>

### **New Hope in Central City**

New Hope Baptist Church was founded in New Orleans on April 16, 1926. Initially known as The Original Solid Rock Baptist Church of New Orleans, the name was changed to The New Hope Baptist Church, Inc. in 1930. Early members, according to internal documents, described themselves as “loyal, God-fearing Christians with a vision of a church filled with the Holy Spirit.” The church grew especially under the leadership of Reverend Freddie Henry Dunn, Sr., elected pastor on September 29, 1952. During Reverend Dunn’s tenure, the congregation swelled to more than nine hundred members. The church outgrew its original location on Washington Avenue and moved in 1965 to its present day location on LaSalle Street in the neighborhood of “Central City.”

According to the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, the Central City neighborhood is designated by the following boundaries: Portions of South Claiborne Avenue and the Pontchartrain Expressway along the North/Northeast; St. Charles Avenue to the South; and Toledano Street, Louisiana Avenue, and a portion of Martin Luther King Boulevard to the West/Northwest. Other main arteries are Melpomene Street, a stretch of which has been renamed as Martin Luther King Boulevard; and Dryades Street, whose Central City span is now called Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard in honor of a prominent local activist and civil rights leader.

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<sup>46</sup> <http://www.nbca-inc.com/mission.html>



Central City has a diverse urban history, which begins in the late 1830s with the development of the “backswamp,” a region of the city lying some three to ten feet below sea level at the bottom of the downward slope that descends from the high ground and natural levees along the Mississippi River. Known locally as the “back of town,” the drained backswamp was developed for residential use beginning in the late 1800s. Most of the homes built were narrow ‘shotgun’ houses; single story frame structures raised two to four feet off the ground on brick piers. Over 95% of the housing was built as rental property and the residents were mostly poor immigrants and blacks, a newly formed “community of freedmen and their descendents, relegated to the city margins after slavery” (Campanella 2006:309).

The area continued to grow and condense in the twentieth century, particularly with the construction of several large housing developments, including the C.J. Peete and the Guste Homes built in 1941 and 1964 respectively. Central City became a thriving and diverse residential and business community. Much of the activity revolved around Dryades Street, which was home to over 200 businesses and establishments at the height of its development. People of all ethnicities and social and economic backgrounds frequented this corridor; for example at the time it was one of the few places that blacks could shop without fear of harassment. The area gave birth also to several important black businesses, including the Keystone Insurance Company and the Flint-Goodridge Hospital run by Dillard University. The neighborhood was also religiously diverse, with established Catholic and Protestant churches, as well as several synagogues and many Jewish establishments and businesses.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, <http://www.gnocdc.org/orleans/2/61/snapshot.html>

The community underwent significant changes, however, in the latter part of the twentieth century. White families and business owners, many of them opposed to desegregation and fleeing the growing social problems of the inner city, began to leave the area for the suburbs. As these families left, blacks living in the “back of town” moved closer towards the “front,” changing the ethnic makeup of the community. At the same time, integrated shopping venues opened up in other areas, especially in the downtown area along Canal Street, and residents began to frequent other establishments. Many of the Central City businesses and institutions unable to sustain these shifts began to close, and the area gradually declined. The population grew increasingly vulnerable to poverty, urban blight, unemployment, drug trafficking, and violence. The area never recovered.

Despite these very real concerns and problems, Central City continues to be a vital part of the New Orleans contemporary urban landscape in the twenty-first century. As Richard Campanella, a local scholar of geography and urban change describes, “A neighborhood still exists here, of course, filled with its own hopes and dreams” (Campanella 2006: 278). Many individuals and families consider Central City home, and their lives there are supported by schools, libraries, churches, and other social and spiritual institutions, which work to improve local conditions.

New Hope Baptist Church has played, and continues to play, an important role in the development and now revitalization of this community. Pastor Raphael, a former New Orleans police officer who answered a spiritual call to join the seminary, first came to the church in 1984. He described his calling, stating “At the time my wife to be was also a police officer and we met on the parade route. She went to this church and she invited me. So I decided to come one day, and from that Sunday on I knew that this was where I

was supposed to be. I mean I had been in church all my life and the pastor wasn't preaching any scriptures different from the ones I'd been reading, but for the first time I could *hear* it. The Lord just gave me the capacity to receive what he had been putting in front of me all my life. I committed myself to the church on that day, and after a year I let the pastor know that I believed I had been called to preach.”



**Image 19. Front Entrance, New Hope Baptist Church. Photo by author.**

Under Pastor Raphael's leadership, the size of the congregation doubled again to some 1500 members and new ministries and programs were created to address the particular needs of the church community and residents in the surrounding neighborhood. The list of past and current ministries and outreach and service programs was long, including "Beginning Vision 2000," a vision to lead 2000 souls to Christ by the year 2000; "Project Love," which feeds the hungry on Thursdays; "The Lion Tamers," which aids and counsels substance abusers; homework assistance, summer enrichment, and scholarship programs that assist local youth to continue their education beyond the high

school level; and annual retreats for women and men. These ministries were supported by internal church fundraising as well as church investments, such as the acquisition and maintenance of several real estate properties including the church structure itself, adjacent homes in the neighborhood, parking facilities, and an educational building completed and dedicated in 1985.

The congregation is primarily African American, and many families have been part of the church for several generations. New members are recruited from within the community, but others join after they hear about Pastor Raphael, the force of his leadership, and his specific concern for those who have been impacted by violence. As one new member, a young white man and newcomer to New Orleans, told me, “I caught him on a day that I was watching CNN, I caught his speech and that’s when everything united for me around these ideas of peace, love, and the future of New Orleans. I started seeing what was possible in the world. It was like feeling a world of thunder and thought coming together. I was amazed by the power of the singers and the community at New Hope and then I heard him speak and I was just in awe, it was really just a blessing to be there. I knew I was in the right place.”

New Hope has also played an important role in the rebuilding and revitalization of Central City in the extended wake of Hurricane Katrina. The impact of the storm was great in this part of the city; many people were displaced and the rate of return is slow. The 2000 Census, for example, reports 8,147 households actively receiving mail in the area but as of June 2009 the number was only 6233, or 75% of the pre-storm population (GNOCDC).<sup>48</sup> The progress of recovery is hindered especially by the controversial

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<sup>48</sup> Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, <http://www.gnocdc.org/RecoveryByNeighborhood/index.html>

demolition and slow reconstruction of public housing. There are, however, some signs of redevelopment. Along Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard, for example, are recently established art groups, community development and stabilization initiatives, and faith-based programs, such as the Ashé Cultural Arts Center, the Zeitgeist Multi-Disciplinary Arts Center, and Reconcile New Orleans – the social service and job development program with its featured culinary training institute and restaurant, Café Reconcile.

New Hope's work after the storm has focused in particular on the problem of urban violence, although the history of this work at the church begins much earlier. Violent crime is a real and everyday concern in Central City, and New Hope has been in the direct line of fire more than church members care to remember. One of the assistant pastors, for example, recalled a particularly violent Sunday in 2006, about seven months after Katrina: "One first Sunday, right after we finished with communion there was a gunfight right on Felicite and South Liberty. They were running up the street shooting each other and they came up all the way to LaSalle and the bullets hit our church right when the service was over and people were starting to come outside." Fortunately, no one was hurt but the congregation responded with 30 days of prayer, linking the vigil to the anti-violence outreach and ministries underway at the time.

Pastor Raphael described a similar but separate incident: "It got so bad at one point that it was almost like Satan was upset. I mean right outside this fence a young man got shot nine times. I had just got home that night from one of our evening services and one of the deacons called me. He said, "Raphael I got some bad news. Somebody just got murdered outside the back gate." I got in my car and drove back over here and some of the detectives were still out there. And the body was gone and the detective told me they

weren't sure if he was going to live. I said not sure if he's going to live? And they said no, he's still alive. You see, I thought he was dead. Well, about a month later that guy walked down the aisle and joined this church. I remember we got him in school in Delgado, but I haven't seen him since the storm."

New Hope parishioners have also been personally impacted and many have had direct experiences with violent crime. According to the assistant pastor, "We've had members to get killed with violence in the street, members to get shot up, stuff like that, so we have mothers and brothers and really a lot of our church members who have family members who have fallen victim to the streets."

### **Anti-Violence Campaigns and Grief Recovery**

The various programs at New Hope have coalesced into a broad-based moral and religious mission focused on the healing, security, and peaceful recovery of congregation members, community residents – especially within the African American community – and the city at large. This path forward has been shaped by three primary programs: 1) the "Thou Shalt Not Kill" ministry that attempted to re-educate the community about the moral and religious incorrectness of violence, 2) the "Enough" ministry, through which clergy and church members became more directly engaged via public demonstrations, vigils, and ceremonies; and 3) the "Yes We Care" ministry, New Hope's most recent initiative, which expands the church's work beyond Central City to all parts of New Orleans in a unified and shared commitment to replace killing with caring.

***Thou Shalt Not Kill***

New Hope began the Thou Shalt Not Kill ministry in the mid 1990s, during a particularly violent period of crime in New Orleans. The year 1994 was especially deadly, with 414 homicides, the highest annual per capita rate of homicides in the United States to date. The murders shook the entire community, especially in areas such as Central City where the incidence of violence was already quite high. While the church was already involved in social justice work, their work on the issue of violence took a new and urgent turn after two shootings took the lives of innocent neighborhood children caught in the crossfire. Pastor Raphael and other community religious leaders organized a public funeral procession that began in Central City. The event was attended by thousands of concerned citizens.<sup>49</sup>

The Thou Shalt Not Kill campaign was developed shortly thereafter, to continue to call attention to the problem of violence and to look for a way, guided by religion, to stop it. The ministry focused initially on a large commercial billboard that Pastor Raphael rented at the intersection of South Claiborne Avenue and Felicity Street; the very same intersection where the church was already distributing bibles and holding public vigils. The billboard featured a plain background with large bold lettering stating, “THOU SHALT NOT KILL.” There were no other words, images, or logos – not even the name of the church. It was visible to the residents of Central City and to traffic approaching the Central Business District from uptown.

In one of my first conversations with Pastor Raphael, I asked him to describe the early days of the ministry and how the billboard came to be. “The thing that gave me the idea for the sign was this” he explained. “It was during a local election, I don’t know

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<sup>49</sup>James Darby, a 9-year-old boy, was killed on Mother's Day, 1994 in a drive-by shooting as he walked home from a picnic. A few months later, another boy, 4-year-old Dwight "Mikey" Stewart, was also killed by a stray bullet.

which election it was, and I was living in New Orleans East and I would drive up here to this church. And on the way I was forced to see so many campaign signs that I really didn't want to see. There were so many, all over the neutral ground, on both sides. And I just got tired of seeing them everywhere you looked. So I said, I'm going to put up some different signs, with the same idea of reaching out to people. But I'm going to put up signs that will allow somebody to realize that what's going on as far as the violence in the city is *wrong*... and I'm going to make a statement throughout the community that first of all it was *God* who said that this is wrong."

The church maintained the billboard for three years, and the investment was great. Pastor Raphael detailed the cost; "We could only do one billboard. It cost almost \$1000 a month for that one, and that was a challenge to the faith of the church. Because there are many churches that will pay that kind of price for a sign if the name of the church is going to be up there, with a picture of the pastor and all that. But just to put a sign up with some words that say nothing about you and you're paying almost \$1000 a month? Well that took a lot of faith to do that for three years."

I spoke also with the assistant pastor at New Hope who agreed that faith was key to the success of the ministry. He told me, "You know, I was thinking that it was special first of all, like a lot of the things that Pastor does, that he had the idea for us to do that. And second of all that he had the faith of just using "Thou Shalt Not Kill," the Word of God, he had the faith that that could actually change something, you know, to bring about a change in people's hearts and in the community ultimately."

I asked Pastor Raphael why the billboard came down after three years. His response was somewhat surprising; it was due to a simple mistake. One of the church



officers, the person who takes care of the bills every month, was late sending in a payment to the billboard company. As Pastor Raphael explained it, “We were late just one time. And you know what? The company never said a word. I came to church one morning and I turned the corner and there was something else on that billboard. And everybody started calling me and asking me, why did you take the sign down? Why did you take it down?”

“You mean the company didn’t notify you or anything?” I asked. Pastor shook his head slowly, “Oh no, no, they wanted to get out from under that! I don’t think that the billboard company ever thought that we were going to keep renting it for that long. I truly believe that they thought we were only going to keep it for a couple of months or something. The original price they gave me was \$850 a month, which is nothing considering where the sign is located and how much traffic goes by there. And I think they wanted to get out from under that because they could be making a couple of thousand dollars. I mean some of the billboards in the city are four or five thousand dollars a month.”

I wondered out loud about other reasons for the termination of New Hope’s billboard lease, and whether or not the billboard company had been under any kind of political pressure. “Oh I’m sure they got inquiries,” Pastor Raphael cut in. “It’s a strategic location so I’m sure they got many calls about it. I remember that before I got it, there was a liquor thing there, I forgot who it was, Royal Crown, Crown Royal? And companies like that pay big bucks. So I’m sure after three years, the owners had to consider the financial benefits of getting us out of there and getting somebody else in. But I don’t know – I also know there were some people who were upset about the sign being

there, for business purposes and for the image of the city because they didn't want to give the appearance that we had a problem. They were concerned about the perception that New Orleans had a big crime problem, which it did, but they just didn't want to deal with it, you know they didn't want it to be nationally known. They would rather pretend everything is ok. So I'm sure there were some who wanted it down."

The Thou Shalt Not Kill ministry, however, continued on in a different way. It expanded across the city and more directly involved members of the church. Pastor Raphael printed thousands of smaller signs in the same bold design, with dark letters on a white background. Church members placed them all over town. Again, the financial cost to the church was great, particularly since the signs became extremely popular. As one member recalled, "we were nailing signs down everywhere, and giving so many away because people were saying, "Well I want one to put in my neighborhood." It was a lot of money that was invested. And there was no advertisement for the church on it or anything."

But for Pastor Raphael and the members of New Hope, the message those signs carried made the price worthwhile. It was in many ways like making an investment in the community, focused in particular on the moral and religious redevelopment of a city nearly destroyed by disaster and under the continued threat and impact of violence. Pastor Raphael spoke of the impact he hoped the ministry would have; "I thought to myself that the people may not want to see all of these signs but they are going to have to. And many people did."

Curious about the community's response to the ministry I asked Pastor Raphael what feedback he received. "People were generally supportive," he told me, "but I

remember getting a lot of responses from people who came up with all of these crazy ideas. There was even somebody who wanted to get some of the businesses together in order to help me put those signs all over the city. But it wasn't just local businesses; they wanted corporate sponsors so that we could earn some money and put signs out like: Popeye's Fried Chicken says Thou Shalt Not Kill! McDonalds says Thou Shalt Not Kill! It's one of the things I always have to be careful about, because it's easy for the vision to get muddied," he finished, laughing heartily.

The ministry instead took on a much more personal dimension, which directly involved church members in an embodied form of religious engagement and public demonstration. It sent New Hope congregation members all over town putting Thou Shalt Not Kill signs up, a successful distribution until the city sanitation department came through and took them all down. Congregation members thus "became the signs," going out to the street and standing shoulder to shoulder around the perimeter of the neighborhood, each person holding a Thou Shalt Not Kill sign. These vigils, and others like it, were successful at showing the unity and strength of the religious community. They helped also to engender a sense of safety and security, exemplified by the man who felt safe enough on South Claiborne to walk down the middle of the neutral ground, surrounded on both sides by congregation members, and up to Pastor Raphael to say so: "This is the safest I have ever felt in my life. This is the *safest* I have *ever* felt, in. my. life."

***After the Storm: ENOUGH***

New Hope's anti-violence ministries were severely disrupted in 2005 by Hurricane Katrina. Pastor Raphael had the sense that something horrible was going to happen – even before the course and direction of the storm was known. He felt it so strongly that he was spiritually called to do a public fast and prayer vigil for the city. The vigil was to be held at the now well-worn spot on the neutral ground by the Martin Luther King statue. As he explained it, “I was supposed to start that Monday, one week before Katrina was supposed to hit, and stay until that Friday. That’s what I believed the Lord wanted me to do.”

However, the vigil never happened. Just before its scheduled start, a former pastor of New Hope died and the funeral was to be held at the church. “It was the week that I was supposed to go out and be out on the street,” the pastor remembered, “I was not scheduled to be at the funeral, there were others who were going to take care of that, but pride crept in anyway and told me -- if you go sit on that corner, because everybody comes up Claiborne and turns on Felicity to come in, and these pastors and people coming to this funeral see you sitting out there, they are going to say Raphael done lost his mind sitting on this corner, and pride didn’t want to be laughed on or looked down on. So I let *pride* cancel what *God* had led me to do and I did not do it. The funeral was on Wednesday, we buried him that Thursday, and by Monday this city was just about destroyed by the storm. And I always, I mean I’m not saying I could have stopped it, but I always felt guilty about not doing what God had led me to do.”

Instead, the pastor had busied himself with trying to prepare the congregation for the evacuation and impact of the storm: “We had service at 6:30 that morning and it was a live radio broadcast from the church. There were about 200 or 250 people there, and I

was telling everybody you have to leave town. Then after the service was over, I was talking to everyone and about seventy people said, oh no we're not leaving, we're going to go home and try to ride it out. And I said you *can't* go home, trust me. You have to leave! But I couldn't talk them out of it. So I said, well look, if you're not going to leave then don't go home, go and get your stuff and come back to the church and I'll stay here with you. And that's what happened. I didn't want to stay but I did. We had about 70 people in that church. After the water came up I finally had to get the church bus and get us all out of there."

Many of the church members, including the group that rode out the storm, evacuated to Houston. "A lot of us were over there for a while," Pastor Raphael told me, "That's where we first came together as a group after the storm. Since then I've been trying to go back and forth, but it's been difficult with so many of our members still displaced. I finally had to assign another pastor over there. It's been very hard for them to accept that I cannot pastor two different churches in two different states."

As residents began to return to the city, Pastor Raphael focused on meeting the immediate needs of the congregation and those in the surrounding community. The post-Katrina recovery period brought also a slightly different approach to New Hope's ongoing mission to end urban violence. The work became closely and necessarily tied to the post-disaster recovery and redevelopment of the city. Religious leaders at New Hope as well as other institutions around the city, in addition to ongoing campaigns to end the violence, worked to create new moral and religious foundations for the city moving forward. The first two ministries launched by New Hope after Katrina were: "Enough" and "Yes We Care."

I asked Pastor Raphael about the shift to this post-Katrina work. “It was after the storm, when the homicides started back in New Orleans, and I just felt we had to get on that” he explained. “And at the time, it was more manageable. I hate to use that word, but the recovery was an opportunity for us to try to prevent at least that part of New Orleans from coming back. So I sent out an open invitation to pastors who had made it back in the city. We were prayerfully trying to look for ways to address the situation. And initially we were looking for some kind of statement to be made.”

Pastor Raphael continued, “Just prior to the storm I had made a few posters that said “Enough is Enough.” And I thought about having more of those made to put out, but one of the other pastors, I think it was Reverend Tilton, he said well let’s just use that one word, “ENOUGH.” So that’s where that came from. And we did some things. We got out on the street, got as many guys together as we could and we marched down to Martin Luther King Boulevard putting those “ENOUGH” signs out. Out of those efforts we also



**Image 20. ENOUGH Crime Walk by Men from New Hope Baptist Church.  
Photo Courtesy New Hope Baptist Church.**

formed an interdenominational coalition of pastors. The Lord laid on my heart that we had been back in this city and we had not really come together as a Christian community just to say thank you. And the city was starting right back down the same old path, and people's lives were upside down, and everybody was trying to build up but we were going right back into the deterioration of violence and drugs. I remember praying and I asked the Lord how could we, after all we saw against the backdrop of Katrina, I mean it wiped out the whole city and we get the *privilege* of being able to come back in, how could folks go right back to doing the same thing?"

"Well, the answer to that prayer came. As clear as the Lord could make it known to me, he told me that the reason why those people went back to doing the same thing they were doing before Katrina is because the church went back to doing the same thing that *it* was doing before Katrina. And I know we have to do things differently because we are not responding to the issue, we get so busy in our own recovery and our own church congregations, and if the homicides, or violence, or the drugs do not affect us personally and it isn't our family or a member of our church, well we really don't have time for all that. I just thought that Christians in the city would recognize the need at least to say thank you to God. I also knew that we as religious leaders were going to need wisdom to deal with this recovery process. So I took every penny I had and I rented the Superdome for an interdenominational Christian conference."

He paused, as if for effect, and I remarked, "I can't imagine how much money it cost to rent the Superdome." Laughing quietly, he shook his head, "You don't want to know, but I did it." The event brought together a diverse group of local Christian clergy, white and black spiritual leaders from various denominations. Although intended to

promote unity within the larger Christian community, Pastor Raphael remembered instead a conference that demonstrated by and large an inability to work together. He recalled, “It was almost like a competition between denominations. In the Baptist community we have about 25 different associations and all it does is keep us disassociated. But anyway, there was a big push for unity especially among the black Baptist clergy and the Pastors’ Coalition grew out of that.”

As New Hope leaders and parishioners worked to collaboratively expand their anti-violence and peace ministries, therefore, they immediately encountered the diverse leadership and other agendas of other Baptist congregations around the city. It was a source of some tension for Pastor Raphael, who sincerely desired unity but was fully aware of the obstacles to it – the struggles for power and control that unfortunately came to characterize much of the local exchange. He tried to explain the situation to me: “Any time you start an association or an organization you have set yourself up for competition with other groups. This is one of our weaknesses. People say, well I don’t like the way you are doing it, or I wanted to be in charge but I’m not in charge so I’ll go start my own group. Now I’m in charge and I declare myself president. So I’ve tried to avoid that. It feels sometimes like everybody is looking for a position, and many of them don’t really have the real desire in the heart to do something about the problem. Then there’s the money. Because if you get an organization then you can get some funding and get this and get that, and that is a temptation which often hinders us from being as effective as we could be.”

In his leadership of New Hope, therefore, Pastor Raphael walked a particularly fine line, following what he believed God had led him to do and avoiding the appearance



of self-appointed leadership that might be off putting to fellow clergy. When asked how he managed this balance he responded without a moment's thought: "It happens through prayer. And it happens through availability to God just to speak to your heart. I'll have an urging to do a certain thing and I'll have to wait and pray about it because sometimes it's my own desire. Sometimes it's just my own logic, things I want to do. And all I can do is wait until I'm convinced that this is what the Lord wants me to do. And I don't go around telling people that God told me this or God told me that, unless I'm sure that it's something the Lord told me. It's a real test of faith, and the problem is that I'm not perfect and nobody else is either, so I've got to deal with my own flesh and my own preferences and what I would like to do and what I would not like to do. I have to work through all of those issues. It's a serious struggle, for anybody who is in a position of leadership or spiritual responsibility. Because people look to you and you can kind of forget after a while that it's not about you. I remind myself all the time when I stand up in front of the congregation that the people didn't come to see me, and if they did well they're in the right place for the wrong reason!"

In addition to the increased exchange and dialogue between various congregations and the formation of religious coalitions and associations, New Hope also expanded its ministry through religious engagement and public demonstration against urban violence in areas outside of Central City. The church began, for example, to respond to instances of violence wherever they occurred, reaching out to the families and friends of victims and venturing out into other neighborhoods for public prayer and vigil, often at the site of the crime itself. After the horrific murder of a local toddler, for example, Pastor Raphael reached out to the family of the victim and led a candlelight walk and vigil through the

child's neighborhood to the park where his body had been found. The child's family participated, along with neighbors, friends, other community members, and congregation members from New Hope.

One church member described his experience of these vigils, "It just becomes so real. It's very much this way of seeing what happened. I remember being up in Holly Grove and there was a man who was shot and we were out there the very next day. There was a trail of blood along this abandoned road all the way down the street. It went on and on." He paused for a moment, in the middle of this description, and I asked him how difficult it was for him to be present at such a place. "I try to put all of that in prayer" he replied, "I just think about it through prayer and I hope the best for that person, even while thinking about the act that happened. We go into places and we go almost immediately into silence and prayer, so it's about digging deep and coming face to face with what happened. It cuts through a lot of the apathy and you get a sense of who that person was and what happened." For this parishioner, the experience of being in place brought forth the reality of the event as well as the humanity of the people involved, victims and perpetrators alike. As he explained further, "We typically distance ourselves from this kind of thing – we'll say "oh this person was just a drug dealer." But it's horrendous to allow this to happen just because someone has a problem with their pain and they deal with it in that way. So our prayer vigils cut through that and we start to see and remember these people as real human beings."

The vigils that took place outside of Central City tested the boundaries and reach of New Hope's ministry. Each neighborhood had its particular history, geography, and religious institutions and in many ways was foreign territory to the New Hope

community. Many people outside of Central City did not know Pastor Raphael and did not have the same relationship with him as Central City residents. However, the expansion of the ministry proceeded, and was part of Pastor Raphael's continuing desire to help build a unified front, especially in the African American community, against violence. He stated clearly that he did not consider himself the leader of this movement; rather his intent was to help foster cooperation and a shared commitment to security and peace. The vision was for a movement of religious engagement and transformation that would be led within the community by local religious leaders and residents, but would exist in partnership with city officials and other concerned parties and citizens.

### ***Mothers Hurting Because of Violence***

While overall the anti-violence ministries at New Hope addressed the long and difficult healing process for individuals and family members recovering from the impact of violence, there was a particular outreach to women, which had at its center an organized grief recovery, support, and prayer group: the Mothers Hurting Because of Violence Support Group. The idea for the support group was developed in 2005. The group initially came together just before Hurricane Katrina and reformed immediately after the storm as members began to return to the city. Initially the group held its weekly meetings at the church, but eventually moved across the street to the education building, a small auxiliary building opposite the main church.

Desiree, one of the group's key founders explained the setting: "When we were across the street [at the church] we had only one hour, because you know they had to turn the alarm on and clean up. And it was too short so I told Pastor that we need two hours,

and we do. And he said “Well when things get settled across the street I’m gonna let you in that building and you’ll be able to have group how long you want.” And I said, “OK Pastor” (laughter). And now we’re here on Thursdays and I have this little office here; and that just makes me feel so good to be able to do certain things you know, and have the group. But we still try to close out by 8:00.”

Desiree’s own direct experience with violence, through the tragic death of her son, was the driving force behind the establishment of the support group. As she explained: “On May 12, 2005 my son was murdered, which was very hard for me. My son was in the drug life, he was a drug dealer for 10 years and when he got murdered he was 32 years old. I always tried to help him to come out of drug life because I knew if he didn’t stop it was going to be jail or death. So even before he got killed I prayed and asked God to give me the strength when that phone rang. So God had prepared me.”

“Even at the funeral, it was just amazing how God kept me and helped me to stand in the midst of it all. Pastor Raphael was there, and later on he called me up and asked me about coming to share with the news media about the violence and different things. He said that he saw how strong I was, how God has given me the strength to deal with it. He said “Desiree would you mind speaking to the media about it?” And I told him sure. So the media came and asked different questions and we went out and put some signs up, some “ENOUGH” signs. I was just staying on the battlefield for the Lord to let the word be spread that there’s *enough* violence going on. As time went on I started getting other calls and I was like ok, everyone is calling me wanting to interview me and all that, but I know there are other mothers also who are hurting and their voices need to be heard too.”

“One day the media came to my house and they caught me at a time when I was feeling down and out. I was going through a grieving process with my son. I almost did not let them in because I just felt they wanted me to do their work, but I had to have a different mindset about it. So I got myself together and I started thinking, I said this could be an opportunity to reach another mother so I’m going to go ahead on and let them in. And when they came I asked them if they had any other mothers that they had talked to about violence and the lady said yes but none of them wanted to come forward and say anything, they are afraid to talk. I said ok, I can go to other funerals where I know other mothers are hurting and angry and they have something they want to share about their child’s death as far as justice being done. So I called up a couple of people that I knew and asked them if they wanted to come to a mothers hurting because of violence support group and they said yea we want to come. And I asked Pastor Raphael and he said that would be good, if that’s what you want to do, he said it’s needed with all the crime we got going on, and there is nothing like a mother’s pain.”

For his part, Pastor Rafael was also motivated by the opportunity to address and honor the humanity of the local victims of violence, who are overwhelmingly young African American men. As he explained, “I see how the world looks at these victims as not human beings. It is not only the community outside of the family and immediate friends who look at it this way, it is also the way the news media presents it and the way that the police handle certain cases. We’ve had six murders in this neighborhood since the beginning of the year [it was only the first week of January] and most of the time all we see on the news is an “unknown black male.” Maybe two or three days later the

identity is put there, but it's buried in the paper. So we need to do something here in the sense of restoring humanity.”

The women who regularly attended the group were mostly Baptists, but only a few of them were members of New Hope. The rest came from all over the city, finding out about the group through word of mouth and through the flyers that Desiree posted around town. The number attending each week varied, with sometimes just one or two people and other times up to ten or fifteen. “They were coming faithfully for a while but it has slowed down now” Desiree noted. “But I still keep in contact with everybody and if they feel the need to come they do. We just let people know that we're here. But one way that they really find out, is when I hear about a death, I go to that mother's house. I find out where it happened and go in that area and just ask anyone do you know where that young man lived that got killed? Something like that, and they say, “Oh yea, he lived right over there” because they know. And then I'll just introduce myself and I'll go and share with the mother.”

When asked if family members and neighbors were generally receptive to having Desiree stop by she replied, “Oh yes. Yes. There was a murder a couple of weeks ago on Louisiana Avenue and that grandmother called me up yesterday and we talked for almost an hour on the phone. She's never been to group, but she's got questions. And you know that fourteen year old child who got shot the other day? I spoke with his mother twice today. I've never seen her in person but I will see her tonight when I go over there. She called me because someone told her the other young man that killed her son was getting out. And she said the detectives are not returning her calls, they are not responding. She said “It's not fair, you know?” I told her, “You know, you are going to hear some things.”

And when I called back to see how things were, she said it wasn't true what she had heard. I asked her if she felt like coming out to group this Thursday so we can give her the support, but I usually like to wait until at least two weeks to invite the mother to come. Before that I like to at least try and meet with them at the funeral or make some kind of contact.”

The support group was anchored by four primary activities and objectives. The first was grief recovery and healing, which members explained happens primarily through prayer, worship, bible study, praise, and through the cultivation of a strong relationship with Christ and God. Second was support and fellowship. Members found strength in the sharing of their stories, joys and sorrows, and in the witnessing of each other's spiritual growth and transformation. In particular, the repeated sharing of stories and the testifying that happens in group served as a way to continually affirm one's faith and commitment throughout a difficult and challenging process of grief and healing. The third objective was to honor and remember the deceased; for example members recognized the birthdays as well as the anniversaries of the deaths of their loved ones. Finally, group members focused on outreach and advocacy, reaching out to other mothers who had lost loved ones to violence. They invited them to join the group for support and assisted in the navigation of the criminal justice system. Members accompanied each other to court, made phone calls on each other's behalf, distributed flyers around the neighborhood asking witnesses to come forward, and provided assistance with basic needs such as food, medical care, and shelter. To demonstrate these objectives in practice, I offer the following account of a support group session.

Support Group Session, July 3, 2009

I arrived just before 6:00pm and rang the back doorbell of the education building. Desiree came to the door and welcomed me inside. There were already a few people in the room, gathered around a long rectangular folding table. On a little table over to the side was a small sheet cake decorated with candles and blue and white frosting. It read: "In Loving Memories." Next to it was a folded card that said "Happy Birthday Terrell E. Riley," as well as a program from Terrell's funeral. There was a colorful bunch of



**Image 21. Celebrating Terrell's Birthday. Photo by author.**

balloons tied together and weighted down, a small dish of peppermints, a bag of potato chips, and cream and sugar for the coffee being made down the hall in the kitchen.

Desiree was rushing from room to room, getting things ready. She placed a sign-in sheet on the table along with photocopies of a prayer for the group to read. She seemed nervous and anxious, wringing her hands and looking at the clock. A few others arrived and gathered around the table. The radio played softly in the background; one of the local gospel stations.



At about 6:15, Desiree sat down at the table with the others and said, “Let’s go ahead and get started.” She explained that she was a little worried about one group member Ms. Joycelyn whom she had not been able to reach all day. Ms. Jocelyn was the grandmother of Terrell who was murdered just a few months ago. On this day the group was celebrating what would have been his seventeenth birthday. Knowing how difficult it was the first time the birthday of a deceased loved one comes around, Desiree was concerned.

Nonetheless, others were present and it was time to start. She began, therefore, as she began all the group meetings, with an opening prayer. “We start out with prayer,” she had explained to me earlier. Then I always try to have a lesson talking about different topics on recovering from the grief. We talk about expressing your feelings, and avoiding the abuse of alcohol and drugs. And we share about our experiences.” The prayer that day was focused in part on Ms. Joycelyn: “That we may be able to give her the support that we intend to give her... We are here to lift up the mothers and to celebrate these birthdays and anniversaries. So we pray and ask you Lord to guide us at this time. In Jesus Christ’s name, Amen.”

Introductions followed, and Desiree began: “My name is Desiree I’m the founder of the Mothers Hurting Because of Violence Support Group in collaboration with my church home the New Hope Baptist Church, Pastor Raphael, and the Yes We Care project in New Orleans. We meet here every Thursday. Today as you can see with the balloons and the cake, we’re here to celebrate Terrell’s birthday, even though his grandmother is not here, but that doesn’t stop us from celebrating his birthday. We are

also here to celebrate the first year anniversary of the death of Christopher Williams who is the son of Ms. Lynda and I'm happy to see her daughter here with her for support."

Her comments were interrupted by the doorbell. Ms. Joycelyn had finally arrived, accompanied by three other women. "Thank you Jesus, we were just praying for you!" Desiree seemed so relieved and happy, and went around shuffling chairs to accommodate everyone – "Ok, come on in and find a spot. We had just got through praying and I had started off by sending up a special prayer for you Ms. Joycelyn because I was just sharing with the group that I hoped that you were ok because I know it is a very critical time for you today, you know it's Terrell's birthday and grief can hit you at any moment when you want to do something and all of a sudden you lose your composure and the next thing you know it's a different story, so I just thank God you were able to make it." Ms. Joycelyn thanked everyone, and apologized for her lateness saying, "Yes, I'm here with my nieces and my good friend, and I thank God for them."

The introductions continued with a much more relaxed mood now that all expected members were present. However, rather than just giving one's name the introductions served instead as an opportunity to testify, allowing each member to share with the others about her loss and grief, recovery, and healing. It created an instant bond; the members were able to immediately know, understand, and respond to each other. "I enjoy sharing my testimony," Desiree had expressed earlier. "My testimony is where God has brought me from. I know if it wasn't for the Lord being on my side I'd probably be dead, or close to it." Desiree, a recovering addict who had been sober for over two decades, also saw the sharing of her testimony as vitally important to her continued sobriety and her commitment to health, well-being, and spiritual development. "Sharing

where God has brought me from is like having a degree” she described. “Because that’s all I have, I don’t have a high school diploma. And I really believe the reason why I haven’t relapsed in these twenty-one years is because I keep sharing my testimony. I truly believe that sharing here is my weapon as well as my medication.”

When Ms. Joycelyn’s turn came to testify, she was encouraged to take her time, since talking about her grandson would most likely be difficult. She began: “I lost my only grandson Terrell Riley on February 25<sup>th</sup>. He was sixteen years old. And when I lost him I lost everything. He was in my home for Carnival; he had visited me from Texas. I begged him not to come. I said please don’t come, they are killing people out here and it’s dangerous. But he said “Mama come on, I want to see the parades. I haven’t seen them since before Katrina.” So he came on up.”

“On Mardi Gras Day we had a good time. And later that night, he wanted to go out. It was about ten after ten and I told him it’s too late to go anywhere. He got a little mad and he kind of nudged me to the side, you know, and went on out. And he didn’t come home. And with me living alone, I didn’t have anybody to go with me to walk the streets looking for him. Because I knew he was only in the subdivision. I also didn’t go look for him because I was always a little over protective of him. One time before I had gone to get him at 11:00 and he was with all his friends and I think I embarrassed him. So I stayed home and waited for him. I kept calling his cell phone, threatening him, saying if you don’t come home tonight I’m going to report you missing to the police tomorrow -- because he always came home. 12:00? He’d be right home.”

“They didn’t find his body until 7:30 in the morning. I guess I must have fallen asleep, because suddenly everyone was knocking on my door and calling me and stuff. I

looked out the door and down the road and I saw the crime tape. And I just lost everything – especially because I had already lost my only child too, his father. He was a witness in a murder trial and he was gunned down only ten hours after he testified. And the only grandchild I ever had was Terrell.”

“My life will never be the same. I want justice. I want to go to court and find out who did this. I don’t want to go on until I find out, because he was a good kid. And he didn’t deserve to die like this. They shot him in his back. And it’s hard, but I thank God I have my family and so many people who are supportive, but even then sometimes I feel like I can’t go on. Thank God for Pastor Raphael. I really appreciate him for setting this up. And it helps to meet other women like this who understand.”

Desiree responded immediately, “I want you to know that you’re not alone, and we’re here for you any way that we can be. And anything that we can do to help you, you just let us know.” Ms. Joycelyn nodded, silently. The introductions passed next to Ms. Washington, one of the more senior members of the group who directed her comments in part towards Ms. Joycelyn in an attempt to help ease some of her pain.

Ms. Washington began: “I’ve lost my son and last year I lost my grandson but through it all I’ve really learned, because like she said when it first happened it’s so devastating and you don’t know what to do, but I have learned to lean and depend on God, because fighting his will, will only make you suffer longer. When I learned to accept his will it was like I could lay down with it. As far as I’m concerned, death will bring you closer to Jesus than anything I know. And there is nothing like the death of a child, because then Jesus is the *only* one who can help you. People look at me and they say, how do you do it, and you’re such a strong woman you done lost all your children....

well baby, it's not me (*yes ma'am, amen, that's right*). It's not me. He's got something good for me, because he didn't put me here for nothing and just leave me here."

In the middle of Ms. Washington's testimony, the doorbell rang again. Two women entered with an infant. Desiree stopped to greet them and found places at the table. The newcomers were asked to introduce themselves. One of them began, "My name is Grace and this is my daughter. So I don't know if you all heard about it but that was my son in law who got killed in his place of business, at that bar." Desiree knew the story – and turned to Grace's daughter, "That was your husband? Oh I'm so sorry. I heard that he was a *very* nice person and he didn't live that kind of life and that people really liked him."

Grace continued, "Yea, and the whole thing kind of shocked us because he was so humble. He had two children, my grandchildren, ages three and four and he would get them up in the morning, get them dressed, and take them to school. He did that every day of his life until he died." The young woman sitting beside her nodded in agreement but remained quiet, despondent. Grace looked at her, saying, "but the Lord is gonna make her strong and we're gonna make it through this. We heard about this group. I've been looking for something like this, but I just wouldn't take the time, and I really didn't know of too many places,"

Desiree responded, "Well good, we would be happy to have you. It's not many groups like this that is going on and actually in our community there is none. I don't say this to put myself on a pedestal or anything but I was told I was one of the first to start a group like this in the community area. When my son was murdered God laid upon my heart to start this group. And because I knew, and just like you said, that God is good, I

found myself just rejoicing because I have a group of people around me that need to express, need to share, need to know that they are not alone, and most of all to know that someone cares. And that is our purpose of being here today to help to lift that burden.”

“We know that the only person who can do the healing is the good Lord Jesus Christ. But we want to make this a safe environment where we can come and if we have to cry, or we need to mourn, or even if we just want to laugh and have a good time, then we can do it here and keep the memories alive. And some would say well how can I do this when my loved one has been murdered? Well God will give you the strength and give you the joy that you need to get where you need to be. And another thing, everybody grieves differently. For some it takes weeks, for others it takes months, it takes years. Since my son was murdered I have done so much research about death and I still say to God be the glory for his death, you know? It seems kind of funny to say that but it’s real, it’s not a lie, it’s real. God can bring you through anything, anything that you are going through.”

Desiree turned gently towards the young woman – “Would you like to share who you are? “I’m Latoya,” was all she could manage. “So you’re the wife, huh?” Desiree asked and Latoya nodded quietly, shaking with grief. “I am so sorry for your loss Latoya, and we’re very happy to have you with us. You’re a young mother, right? How many kids?” “Two kids,” came the reply. “And how old is the oldest?” “Four.” “I know it can be very hard for you right, because it’s only been a month huh?” “Yea.”

“Well I can assure you, you’re going to have some very hard times missing him and mourning him, but God will give you the strength that you need.” Latoya broke down and began to sob, burying her face in her hands. “He will give you the strength honey,”

Desiree's voice broke, and she too began to cry along with others in the room. She got up from the table to get some tissues to pass around, then remained standing. "You just have to trust and depend on him. And any questions that you have to ask the Lord, you can ask him, you know there's a difference between questioning him and asking him. But he allows us to go through things for whatever reason and we have to trust him."

"We wonder why bad things happen to good people. And I've learned that it happens because we have some bad people out here. They don't mind killing, they don't mind who they hurt, they don't think about our children, they just want to kill, kill, kill. And the spirit that is going around, and you gotta know it's a spirit because the bible tells us: *Not against flesh and blood but against principalities.*<sup>50</sup> And it's an evil spirit. Why else would someone want to take someone's life? But guess what? *God sits high and he looks low.*<sup>51</sup> Like Pastor Raphael says, if we believe in God for certain things, we gotta believe in him for everything. And he has the power to stop this killing. And I truly believe like I always share, that it's going to take us to come together. Let them see our tears, let them see our innocent kids, how they have left these children fatherless and motherless. It's not *fair* to the children. The community, society, has got to do something to stop the killing. Something has to be done. And if they don't hear our voices, nothing is going to be done."

"I say this here in a mighty way. If we had violence like this in the white community, much more would be done (*oh yes, that's right*). And I believe that more would happen, and you know why? Because they are going to step out and they are going to get more attention. And we want them to know that our children's lives are valuable

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<sup>50</sup> Ephesians 6:12

<sup>51</sup> Refers to Psalm 113:4

too. Our husband's lives are valuable, and guess what? We don't want this anymore. We have these children coming up. We want those children to go out and play. What happened to those days? I can remember some of them, I'm not that old. I'm 50, and I can remember my grandmother and them sitting out on the porch and there wasn't all this killing going on. So what in the heck is going on now? What is going on now? You know? We are tired of the media just coming into the community after someone has gotten killed. We need you to come now, *before* someone gets killed. And maybe there can be a change here. So we have to continue to pray and trust God to heal the land. He can heal the land. And sometimes we want to give up because the bible says we are living in the last days, which is true. But do you believe that he meant for this to happen in this way? I don't think so. It's not right. And we know one thing, God is not asleep. He's not asleep."

"I just want to encourage you, my sister, to be strong. I want you to know that these groups can be very, very helpful to you because you'll have a chance to express, a chance to ask questions. I don't have all the answers, but all of us together? We can come up with the answer (*yes we can, that's right*)! Your mother walked in here with the word of God (referring to the bible that Grace brought to the group) and that let me know one thing: I got another soldier coming through the door. We may not know everything in that bible, but we know enough to stand on the word of God, and that we can trust him. It doesn't matter how much we know, together we get in here and we praise God. We ask him to give us the strength."

"Because when I was in here earlier writing these happy birthday signs and getting ready? I broke down. I broke down. I mean how in the world... I'm getting ready



to celebrate the birthday of a sixteen year old *innocent* child who was murdered. You understand? (*yes*) That breaks my heart. I got weak (*I know*). I stopped and I started crying and then I had to meditate and I asked God to give *me* the strength so that when you walk through this door I can give *you* the support that you need. And God is going to use you to do the same thing in someone else's life. You have to be strong for the kids because if you break, and now they don't see Dad, well they definitely need Mama even more. And your strength is in the word of God. Your strength is in meditating, in coming among those who have walked in your shoes and crying with them because we know your pain. We know your pain. So I want you to know that I am very happy that you came. Just keep coming as long as you can."

Desiree took a long moment to catch her breath before turning back to the group. The atmosphere was charged and tears were flowing freely. But there was still one woman left who had not yet introduced herself. She was a regular member and a steady presence at the support group. She always came with her bible, which she described as an "old friend" – a well-worn edition with each page filled with notes and most of the text underlined to mark key passages. The front and back cover held sticky notes and phone numbers – it was a bible, planner, journal and phone book all wrapped up into one. She was a little embarrassed because it was so well worn, but told everyone how reluctant she was to get a new one because she didn't want to lose all of that good information.

Ms. Gloria began to tell her story. "I was saved, sanctified, and filled with the Holy Ghost and I thought that nothing like that could ever happen to me," she started. "But it did. Losing a child is the worst thing that can ever happen to a mother. A person who's never been through what we've been through can never relate. It's tremendous,

and a lot of times the enemy uses this to take us farther away from God. But you got to draw closer to God and if you don't know him you got to get to know him because that's the only way you can deal with it. Because anything else, you're popping pills you're doing drugs, you're doing whatever it takes to get through the pain. But there's no pain that Jesus can't feel, and there is no hurt *that he can't heal* (others joining in). He can do it but we have to surrender our hurt and our pain to him. A lot of the times we hold onto it, and it won't help us it will hurt us. We have to accept what God allows because what else can we do?"

"I was angry with God, but I knew I had no right to be angry. And I said to God, "You said that you wouldn't give me any more than I could bear." And God came right back at me and said, "and I am not a man, that I should lie." So I had to work this out, if he's not lying then this has got to be something that I can bear. But the fact was that I didn't *want* to. That was the thing that was standing between acceptance and denial – the fact that I didn't want to. But there was nothing else I could do. So when he said it like that, I knew I had to accept it, right at that moment, and I got total peace. I mean peace that, as people say, surpasses *all* understanding. Only God can give you that, only God. No pain pills, no medicine, nothing else, no drugs, only God."

"And then he let me know that this is not the end; you're going to see him again. Because he gave me Thessalonians 4, and I came to that conclusion when he said, "We don't sorrow like those who have no hope."<sup>52</sup> Hallelujah! Of course we are going to hurt, but we don't *linger* there, we don't stay there, because there is life after death. Even the bible says, "It is appointed for man to die once, and after this, the judgment comes."<sup>53</sup> So

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<sup>52</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians, Chapter 4, Verse 13

<sup>53</sup> Hebrews 9:27

“after this” tells you there is something else, it’s not the end. We shall meet again. But we have to get in that place where we can stand before God and he says “well done thy good and faithful servant. Enter in.” We don’t want to stand before God and have him say, “Depart from me thy worker of iniquity, I don’t know you.”<sup>54</sup> If he doesn’t know you, he *must* know you, and the only way for him to know us is for us to accept the free gift that he gave us, that we shall know Jesus. Jesus Christ. When we accept Jesus, we automatically come into the family of God. And we will stand before him one day and hear him say, “well done” and well done for what, not because of any goodness that you did, but because you had the sense enough to accept his free gift, which is Jesus Christ. Amen? (*Amen, amen*).”

“So Jesus brings us through whatever we have to go through. In this world we are going to have tribulations, but be of good cheer because I have overcome the world.”<sup>55</sup> And his father said he died for us and he left us an example that we should walk in his footsteps, we do what he did. Treat people like he treated people, love people like he loved people, pray for those who need to be prayed for. Amen? (*Amen. Thank you! Yes.*)”

After the testimony, it was time to celebrate the birthday and the anniversary. The mother and grandmother each said a few words about their deceased loved one. Accompanying family members and friends also shared. A cake was presented and the candles were blown out. A bouquet of balloons was given to each mother. Refreshments were brought to the table, the cake was cut and slices were passed around. The rest of the meeting was thus spent in fellowship, conversation, and informal sharing between members. At the end, the group headed outside and the mothers and grandmothers

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<sup>54</sup> Matthew 7:23

<sup>55</sup> John 16:33

released the balloons into the sky in memory of the deceased. When the last balloon had drifted out of sight, the women shared hugs and well wishes, and said their goodbyes for the evening.



**Image 22. Presenting Terrell's Birthday Cake to his Family. Photo by author.**



**Image 23. Preparing to Release the Balloons. Photo by author.**

## *Yes We Care*

One of New Hope's most important anti-violence ministries of the post-Katrina recovery period was the "Yes We Care" campaign. It was developed and started in early 2009, not long after Barack Obama's historic election as the first African American president of the United States. Pastor Raphael, like most everyone, still had the "Yes We Can" campaign slogan ringing loudly in his ears. The pastor was even preparing to travel to Washington D.C. for the inauguration. Obama was clearly an inspiration to the pastor; he had a large framed campaign poster on the wall alongside photographs of local church leaders, congregation members doing community service, and other inspiring figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. His voice betrayed a sense of excitement and motivation, as he hinted about a new campaign that he felt called to organize. "I feel that there's something we have to do that's much grander and on a larger scale in this city," he stated. "I kind of know what it is... it's the *how* that I'm waiting for. So I've kind of been holding back, but I want to call some pastors together soon. We *have* to do this. It's time"

Obama's successful campaign and the hope and change he promised to create, served in this instance as an inspiration for local change. In the spring of 2009, therefore, Pastor Raphael and members of New Hope joined with other African American religious leaders and practitioners to begin a new anti-violence ministry called "Yes We *Care*." The ministry was still focused on stopping the violence and the peaceful transformation of residents and the city, but the concern in this instance was on the particular burden that the impact of violence has had on the African American community, specifically the problem of black on black crime. Yes We Care was conceived of as a movement, on a

grand scale, that would allow African Americans to finally and firmly take the reins – owning and addressing the particular problems that impact their community.

The official literature described the mission as a “movement born out of the burden of the African American community of New Orleans due to the crime and violence in our city... We know that violence has a negative impact upon our entire city; however the African American community of New Orleans has been disproportionately affected by violence in our homes, our streets, and even our schools. African American families continue to face the violent deaths of family members at an alarming rate. Statistics show not only that African Americans comprise the majority of the victims of homicides in our city, but that the overwhelming majority of those responsible for those homicides are also African Americans.”

The movement addresses also the level of fear and despair felt by many residents living in areas plagued by drug trafficking and violent street crime. Many residents, concerned about reprisal and retaliation, have been afraid to come forward with information about the perpetrators. As the mission statement continued, “This silence has been interpreted by many as indifference. So we are coming together to declare that we do care about our friends, our families, our children, and our neighbors.”

Central to the Yes We Care movement was a written statement made and signed by participants, which acknowledged the value of every human life and the commitment that participants were making to publicly care for and protect one another. Participants pledged, for example, “to never commit the heinous act of murdering another human being.” The declaration operated in essence like a spiritual ceasefire agreement for the African American community. Residents had reached a critical point of no tolerance for a

level of violence that had long been out of control, recognizing the severity of the problem, the particular burden and impact it has had, and their own sense of responsibility to work for and ensure peace and security for their own families and communities. New Hope church members in partnership with other congregations set a goal to collect at least 10,000 signatures. Recruiters stood on street corners with clipboards and went door to door to spread the word. The declaration read as follows:

*Whereas the life of every African American, as well as every other human being, is the product of Divine creation, and whereas the life of every African American has been divinely instilled with purpose and potential, and whereas every African American life is worth more than the sum total of any and all material possessions, and whereas the value of the life of an African American is never diminished because of his/her economic standing, educational status, social state; nor because of his past, present, or future faults or failings, and whereas the invaluable life of an African American taken by violence can never be replaced, and whereas the taking of the life of an African American affects not only the individual whose life is taken, but also the lives of that individual's parents, siblings, children and other family members, and whereas the taking of the life of an African American is an offense against the African American community as well as the entire human race, I do hereby pledge this day that I will never commit the heinous act of murdering another human being. Signed \_\_\_\_\_, March 2009.*

Recruiters were still collecting signatures when the Yes We Care movement had its first public vigil, held in Louis Armstrong Park on the steps of the Mahalia Jackson Theater in late March 2009. They roamed the crowd and collected nearly 3000 additional signatures from the mostly African American attendees. All participants then settled in for an afternoon of speakers, presentations, and prayer, led by clergy and city officials. There was also music by the Yes We Care Choir and area high school bands, as well as fellowship with friends, neighbors, and supporters.

Several residents gave testimony of the impact that violence has had on their own lives. A young woman read a poem written for her deceased mother, a victim of domestic violence. A man told his story of being both the perpetrator and the victim, shot five

times in a robbery gone wrong by the very person he was trying to rob. A grieving mother spoke of the violent death of both her son and grandson. A father broke down on the stage, sobbing quietly as he remembered the life and death of his eldest son. Audience members stood close to the stage to lend their support and those on the podium huddled in around the speakers to offer a steady shoulder or arm.

The focus overall, however, was on transforming suffering, grief, pain, and anger and rebuilding the community. Thus religious clergy and even some of the city officials gave inspiring and rousing speeches. Even Mayor Nagin was there, focusing his speech on the problem as well as the solution for the African American community. He began: “We used to have a time when neighbors would raise other neighbors’ children. We used to have a time that when something went on in the neighborhood we knew about it and we talked about it, but more importantly we corrected the situation. Today something is missing ladies and gentlemen. What’s missing in my opinion is black love. Where is black love in New Orleans? Where is the kind of love that you want to stand up for your brother and your sister regardless of what’s going on? Where is black love where you will not hurt your brother and your sister? That’s what we have to come back to! (*loud applause and cheering across the park*).”

“I’ve had the pleasure of being your mayor for the last eight years and I’ve gone through Katrina and everything else. But now ladies and gentlemen I just came back from Washington D.C. where I had a chance to go in the White House --THE White House. And the vice president came out and it was nice and I was happy to see him. But then the president came out. President Barack Obama came out, and he had the presidential seal in front of him, Lord have mercy! And it just struck me that our country has moved to a



different place. And we now have a person of color who is the most powerful person in the world. And that puts the demand on all of us to be better. We can't just say now we have a black president and everything is all right. We must in our community step forward. All men must be better fathers and better men in their communities. All sisters must be better mothers and mentor the young ladies. And all children and young people must respect their elders. So ladies and gentlemen we are here to say, we care about each other. But let's not just rally today. Let's go out and do something tomorrow to make New Orleans a better place. We care, and I care about you, and God bless all of you. Thank you."

After several hours and numerous other speakers, Pastor Raphael stepped up to the podium to close the event. He began by saying that initially he thought he might not take the stage but he felt so moved by seeing so many people who really do care and who have a desire to make a difference. He decided, therefore, to take the opportunity to share some words with the crowd. Unfolding a piece of paper from his breast pocket, he leaned forward to deliver the closing speech and prayer:

*Painful reminders of the predicament in which many of our communities find themselves are both obvious and abundant. A t-shirt bearing the image of a fallen friend or family member, a crudely made sign or spray painted symbol expressing a desire that the one that we once held dear would now rest in peace. Tennis shoes strung across the telephone wires, or remnants of yellow tape, which once marked the boundary lines between observers of the lifeless body of someone's son on one side, and investigators of the cruel killing of someone's child on the other. It is a situation which refuses to be ignored, and yet one for which seemingly no solution can be found. Many frustrated by the inability of both law enforcement and the legal system to bring an end to the cycle of violence which continues to leave our streets stained with the blood of our children, have tragically come to the errant conclusion that because nothing has been done, that nothing can be done. They've resolved themselves to accept the unacceptable and to tolerate the intolerable by declaring simply that "it is what it is."*

*But we have come together today to declare that what has been must not then, cannot, and shall not continue to be. We have come to declare that the lives of our family*

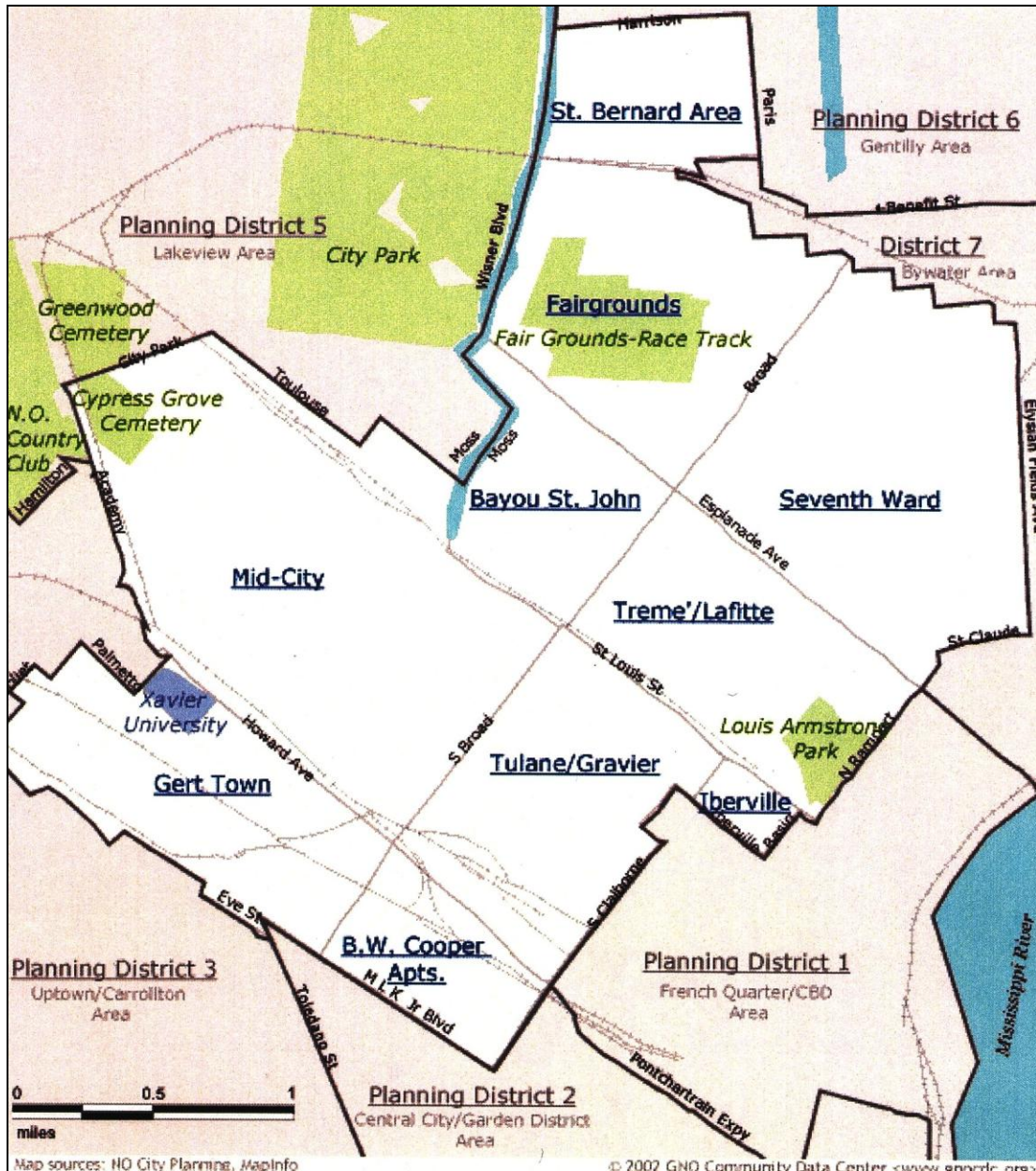
*members, our friends and our neighbors are too valuable to allow what it is, to remain what it was. Since a life taken could never be given back, then surrendering to the sorrowful soliloquy of "it is what it is," is not for us today an option. But the question that confronts us is... who is it that can possibly change what it is, to what it can be? Who is it that can cause our sons and daughters to realize that one life is worth more than every ounce of crack that flows across our borders and every bit of cash that flows through our banks? Well I believe that in the search for that who, we've all heard the answer, but we didn't always recognize the name. When we heard a grieving family members' crime scene cry, calling out: somebody has to do something or they have to stop the killing. We were hearing the answer but we did not recognize who 'somebody' was or who 'they' were.*

*But I am thankful to God today that 'they' finally they showed up. They are right here, in Armstrong Park. I'm glad today that they came from the Upper 9<sup>th</sup> Ward and they came from below the canal, and they came from the 7<sup>th</sup> Ward, and they came from Carrollton, they came. And I'm glad because a mother has been waiting for you, and a sister has been hoping for you, and a son has been looking for you, thank God today that they showed up, but we realize that they cannot do it by themselves, no. They need 'somebody' to help them. And the good news is that somebody is here also. Somebody came from Central City, and somebody came from Gert Town, and somebody came from Algiers, and somebody came from out front of town, and somebody came from back of town, uptown, and downtown. We heard the answer but we did not recognize the name. But it was because 'they' decided to meet with 'somebody,' that we are now joined in Armstrong Park...by the grace of God there is nothing we can't do when we come together!*

Participants began to leave the park, full of emotion and tired from the day, slowly making their way home in the late afternoon sun. Several days later I spoke with a few church members about the event. One of them recalled, "There was such a feeling of love, between different races and people of all faiths. We need times like that, where we show our unity. It's an absolute necessity and for us it was a new beginning, about a new movement that will connect us with other peace movements. But on Sunday, the very next day, there was a shooting right in our neighborhood in Central City. So we all came in that Monday and had a prayer circle at the crime site, right there at BW Cooper. So we know we have our work cut out for us. I mean we can talk and give good speeches but ultimately we have to show our unity in action, and so we are going about it. We didn't

think it was going to happen so quickly and right in our neighborhood, given all the work we did on the cease fire, but we are dealing with it. And it's still so refreshing to see so many people coming together; those who have the courage to take that first step.”

CHAPTER 5: MINISTERING THE MURDER BOARD:  
 ST ANNA'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND  
 THE MINISTRY FOR VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE



Map 11. Neighborhood Snapshot. The Tremé.  
 Source: Greater New Orleans Community Data Center.

## The Murder Board

Esplanade Avenue is one of the most beautiful streets in New Orleans, a wide tree lined corridor leading north and west from the far edge of the French Quarter. Tracing its path, one begins at the Mississippi River near the French Market, the site of an important Native American trading ground before the city was founded and a thriving and multicultural place of exchange today. From there the journey takes one along the edge of the French Quarter, beneath the oak trees and historic architecture all the way up to the expansive green of City Park. The area was originally developed in the latter part of the eighteenth century to accommodate the overflow of Spanish, Caribbean, Creole and other families, who moved into new residential areas on all possible sides of the *Vieux Carré*.

The route is thus a journey through history, but one that is also fully immersed in the concerns and realities of present day. During the time that I spent travelling this road, for example, it was impossible to ignore the gradual shifts in population demographics, architecture, and social life that occur as soon as one leaves the French Quarter. Rampart Street was an obvious dividing line; not only did it designate the transition from one neighborhood to the next, it also served as an unofficial yet clear line of separation from the relative security of the Quarter to the relative insecurity of Mid-City. It was the same road but new territory – a stretch along Esplanade between Rampart and South Claiborne where the people were somewhat more vulnerable to the impact of social and other problems, especially conditions of poverty and a high incidence of violent crime. This was the neighborhood known as the Tremé.



**Map 12: Location of St. Anna's Episcopal Church in the Tremé.  
Source: Greater New Orleans Community Data Center**

About halfway up Esplanade, before South Claiborne and at the intersection of Marais Street, one passed directly in front of St. Anna's Episcopal Church. The main part of the church was a brick structure facing Esplanade, with a small courtyard and parish hall connected to an older building with administrative offices and rooms for fellowship, outreach programs, and religious education. The full face of the church was visible from the street, and it had one particularly imposing feature – a large white sign affixed to the front wall. About six feet high and four feet wide, the sign was mounted next to the main entrance, clearly visible to those walking or driving by, and directly in front of me as I made the short turn up the stairs and into the narthex of the church.

At the top of the sign appeared: *Psalm 46: "God is our hope and strength. A very present help in trouble,"* followed by the heading: *Murder Victims 2008*. What followed was a long list of names – rows and rows of the names of all of the people who had been killed in Orleans Parish for the given year: 1/2/08, Terrence Handy, 27, shot. 1/4/08, Jose Francisco Ramos, 44, shot. 1/5/08, Kendrick Quinn, 18, shot.<sup>56</sup> Each person was listed by name, age, and method of death. It was an arresting sight, a sobering memorial to lives lost and a powerful public statement by this particularly religious community about the incidence and impact of violent crime in the city.



**Image 24. Front Facade of St. Anna's Episcopal Church with 2008 Murder Board. Photo by author.**

“We call it the murder board,” Father Bill Terry, the priest at St. Anna’s. told me. “It’s not a terribly pleasant name for it, and it’s not a terribly pleasant event. So I guess

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<sup>56</sup> These were the first three reported murders in Orleans Parish for 2008.

it's a little bit in your face but maybe we need to be in your face. It's part of our Victims of Violence ministry." I asked Father Bill about this ministry and how it began. His response came in the form of a story, a now familiar introduction to the church's focus on non-violence, peace, and social justice after Katrina. He explained, "It was the end of 2006 and we were moving into the next year, and there had been a horrible rash of murders, about 20 or 30 people killed in the span of a month or so. At the time I was mentoring and training a lady who was soon to be an ordained deacon. She lives uptown. And she was very frustrated, and very, very despondent about the violence. She came to me and said, "Father we have to do something, but it's sobering. Nothing we can do will ever have an effect. How can we change this?""

Elaine, the deacon Father Bill was referring to, remembered the conversation well. She had just come to St. Anna's in the fall of 2006. As she described, "I was in formation to be ordained, and we were placed in internships at different churches around the city. I was sent to St. Anna's. The idea was to create a program – something that will be up and running when your internship is over and you leave. Well, the congregation was already doing a lot of ministry, so I spent my time initially getting to know people and building relationships. But in December of 2006 Dinerral Shavers, a local musician and teacher, was killed in his car. It was a gunshot – probably not meant for him, probably meant for somebody else in his car, but he had picked up a couple of people including a relative to give them a ride home, and he was killed. And then maybe two weeks later, Helen Hill was killed. And both of those people were well known to some of the people at St. Anna's and they were all very concerned. Well, the whole city was concerned, especially because these were not your typical victims."



These deaths were indeed very devastating for family members, friends, and the city at large. Both victims were well known members of the local arts community, and actively involved in recovery efforts just after the storm. Shavers was a New Orleans native, a musician, teacher, and founding member of the Hot 8 Brass Band. He was killed on December 28, 2006, at the age of 25. Hill was a filmmaker and artist, a New Orleans transplant from North Carolina by way of Nova Scotia, and a local social activist. She was shot and killed during a home invasion on January 4, 2007. She was 36 years old. Hill's husband was also shot, but he and their small infant survived the attack. In addition to the deep loss felt by so many people in New Orleans and beyond, local residents were particularly alarmed by the brutal and senseless nature of these killings. It put all residents, in all parts of the city, on extreme alert.

It was within this climate of loss, mourning, and fear that Elaine came forward to speak with Father Bill. She described their meeting: "I went to Father Bill and I said we *have* to do something. We have to have a response to the murders in the communities. But *how*? How do you solve murder? The roots of it are huge, I mean it has roots in the family, and culture, and parenting, and education, and poverty, and where do you even *begin* to solve it? And he looked at me and said simply, "We don't have to solve it." And I went, ohhh... we don't have to solve it, we just have to call attention to it. We just have to honor the humanity of the victims, because no matter who they were or what their standing or behavior was, they didn't deserve to die."

For Father Bill, the conversation with Elaine was a moment that reaffirmed the church's mission of social justice. He explained; "I think it was by the grace of God that Elaine was put before us at St. Anna's with that question – how can we solve this? And I

remembered some wisdom that had been passed along to me by Dan Berrigan, a noted Jesuit social activist. He said that the charism of social justice should not be dependent on the outcome but rather on the *transformation* that takes place in the doing of social justice. And I shared that with Elaine and she found it extremely liberating. We didn't have to fix it. The burden was lifted off of her, off of all of us. We didn't have to make it all ok. What we *could* do is become active in the issue, and in our activity transformations would occur. That's very liberating for anybody that does social justice."

### **The Church on Esplanade**

St. Anna's Episcopal Church was founded in 1846, established during the earliest period of local growth for the Protestant Episcopal Church, which began in 1805 with the founding of Christ Church (Reinders 1999:117). According to internal archival material, the church was originally named St. Peter's Seaman's Bethel, founded by the Reverend Charles W. Whitall. It was located near the beginning of Esplanade Avenue, close to the French Market at the edge the French Quarter. From the start, the church identified itself as an Episcopal "high church" in the Anglo-Catholic tradition. It was also the first "free church" in New Orleans, meaning that it did not charge pew fees and had open seating for all, though some seats were specifically reserved for seamen. Efforts of the early clergy were primarily focused on this population; for example the Reverend Herman Cope Duncan, registrar and historian of the Louisiana Diocese of the Protestant Episcopal Church during the late 1880s noted that at this church, "many Bibles and prayer books and thousands of tracts were distributed to the sailors of the world" (Duncan 1888:147).

Residents from the local community, however, were also welcomed, and eventually “a congregation of a somewhat permanent type was established” (Duncan 1888:147-148).

The church operated as a mission church until it received parish status in 1869. At that time the church property was sold and construction began at a new site further northwest along Esplanade Avenue in the newly developed Faubourg Tremé. According to church archival documents, Dr. Newton Mercer, a wealthy Army surgeon and prominent citizen, gave \$10,000 for the new building, and the church was renamed St. Anna's after the mother of the Blessed Virgin Mary and in remembrance of Dr. Mercer's deceased daughter. The focus of the relocated parish changed from its earlier outreach to seamen to become a ministry that addressed the social and spiritual needs of the local, permanent, and expanding population.

The redirected ministry continued its commitment to service, initiating several early projects. Under the leadership of the Reverend Amos D. McCoy and Deacon John Francis Girault, for example, the church opened a parish school in 1870. Around the same time they also established an orphanage to care for children during the yellow fever epidemic, which remained open until 1940.

By the late 1800s, the church had a large and well established membership; in 1888 there were four hundred and fifty confirmed persons in the parish and two hundred and fifty-nine pupils in the Sunday school (Duncan 1888:218). The early growth of the church, however, was not without hardship or controversy. The structure was nearly destroyed by natural disaster on several occasions, suffering damage from a fire in 1876 and a tornado in 1915. There was also some controversy with the church leadership, with accusations of financial misdealing that caused the church to fluctuate between parish and

mission status from the late 1890s to the early 1940s. Long-term stability returned in the 1950s under the leadership of Reverend Arthur Price, followed by the Reverend Louis Parker.

### **On the Edge in the Tremé**

The Tremé was once a swamp filled area whose development, beginning in 1725, occurred along an important topographical feature – an elevated ridge and dry portage route overland from the Mississippi River and French Quarter to Bayou St. John, which led eventually to Lake Pontchartrain and the Gulf of Mexico. Later known as the Esplanade Ridge, this was an important trading and transportation route long before the first European settlers arrived. It played, however, an important role in Bienville’s decision to site the city at its now French Quarter location (Campanella 2006:58).

Despite the diverse players and parties interested in the early acquisition and development of this area, much of the land ownership can be traced to Chevalier Charles de Morand, a French settler and employee of the Company of the Indies. Morand was one of the earliest long-term settlers on Bayou Road, where he established a brickyard and plantation. After his death in 1756, much of this land was sold off or otherwise distributed to invested parties. The property was eventually acquired by another French settler, Claude Tremé, who continued to subdivide parcels for commercial and residential development. The move coincided with increased interest and access to the area, particularly following the 1794 development of a more convenient canal from the French Quarter to Bayou St. John. The first private purchases quickly gave way to public auctions, and in 1810 Tremé sold the remainder of his land to the city of New Orleans for

\$40,000 (Toledano et al 2003 [1980]:13-16). The Faubourg Tremé thus became the city's first subdivision.

The Tremé was a thriving multi-cultural community with a mix of French and Spanish families. It was also an important residential and cultural center for Creoles, free people of color, and former slaves who managed to buy or otherwise negotiate their freedom. Many of these new residents were also able to purchase property. For example, "Enumeration of thirty-seven persons who bought lots in the Faubourg Tremé between 1798 and 1810 reveals a pattern of purchase by free people of color, French, and Spanish colonial settlers, and recent immigrants" (2003:15). After Claude Tremé's death, his plantation house was eventually purchased by a Frenchwoman named Jeanne Marie Aliquot who turned the facility into a school for free colored children. The ownership and management of the school was subsequently transferred to the Ursuline Sisters and finally to the Sisters of Mount Carmel (2003:17).

Over time, however, and as described below, the population demographics changed, and the Tremé became one of the oldest and most historically significant African-American communities in the city and nation. The neighborhood was home to the "*Place des Negres*," later known as Congo Square, an open market where slaves, free people of color, and others gathered to engage in commerce and social exchange. The interaction provided an important opportunity for people of African descent to practice and preserve many of their cultural traditions including music and drumming, dance, and religion. The first references to such gatherings date back to the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, however the most heightened period of exchange was in the 1740s and 1750s (Johnson 1991:125, see also Donaldson 1984).

Louisiana's distinct civil codes provided important economic opportunities to slaves; in particular they allowed for manumission by slave-owners or through self-purchase with slave-owner approval (Schafer 2003). Once emancipated, blacks purchased property, adding to the existing landholdings of African Americans and people of color. By 1860 the citywide value of black personal property holdings was estimated at \$655,820 (Blassingame 1973:68). The Tremé in particular became a primary seat of black upward mobility populated by businessmen, doctors, laborers, servants, poets, painters, musicians and composers, and others (Johnson 1991:139). The housing was a mix of double shotgun homes and cottages, interspersed with commercial properties. The cultural diversity of the area continued to develop with the establishment of free black schools, churches and other religious institutions, benevolent societies, social aid and pleasure clubs, and music and literary societies. The long and rich musical tradition that springs from the Tremé contributed to the rise of many diverse musical forms, including the New Orleans traditions of brass band music and jazz.

The Tremé was not simply a site of economic and cultural mobility and advancement; the population there was also politically sophisticated and focused on the principles of freedom and social equality, including rights to land, education, and citizenship. The movement was fueled through the publication of the nation's first black daily newspaper, *L'Union*, which started in the Tremé in 1862 (Bell 1997:223). Their issues and concerns reached a critical point with *Plessy v. Ferguson*; the legal case that developed following a carefully orchestrated act of civil disobedience, carried out in 1892 on a segregated Louisiana railroad car.

The act was organized by a citizens committee that was formed in the Tremé, and in many ways it set the stage for the nonviolent civil rights protests of later years, in New Orleans and across the United States. Plessy v. Ferguson was ultimately tried before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1896, where the constitutionality of racial segregation and “separate but equal” treatment was upheld. The decision dealt a devastating blow to the morale of the African American community, especially in the Tremé – in fact many residents have said that the community never fully recovered. It was a sense of disenfranchisement that would linger; despite the gains that were made in civil rights in later years.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the struggle for social, economic, and political equality was made even more difficult with the onset of Jim Crow and the rise to power of Democratic white supremacists (Bennett 2005:2). Newly developed suburbs outside of the city’s center fueled the flight of many of the area’s wealthy white residents. In addition, as the neighboring French Quarter advanced as a valued historic, cultural, and tourist destination, it lured away much revenue and resources from the Tremé and other adjacent areas. Local businesses suffered and unemployment, poverty, and crime set in. Over time, the area succumbed to the stress of competing processes of urban development and decline, becoming as one resident put it, “a strange mixture of old traditions and modern problems.”

The city initiated several projects in an effort to revitalize the area, but these were ultimately counterproductive. In 1929, for example, the construction of a municipal cultural complex around the site of Congo Square began, which forced the relocation of hundreds of families. The complex, not completed until the early 1970s, grew to include

Louis Armstrong Park and the New Orleans Theater of the Performing Arts (now the Mahalia Jackson Theater). The landscape was also drastically changed by the construction of Interstate 10, begun in 1963, with its long overpass set on massive cement support columns running the length of North Claiborne Avenue through the heart of the Tremé. Many residents view this project as the main cause of the disruption and decline of the community. Claiborne Avenue had been a wide and well traveled boulevard lined with live oak trees on either side of the neutral ground. The site of countless local gatherings and events, in many ways it was the geographic center of social and cultural life for the community.<sup>57</sup>

The current and generally accepted boundaries of the Tremé extend from North Rampart Street to North Broad Street, and St. Louis Street to Esplanade Avenue.<sup>58</sup> According to U.S. Census figures from the year 2000, the population of the Tremé/Lafitte neighborhood was 8,853.<sup>59</sup> At that time the neighborhood was overwhelmingly African-American; approximately 92.4% of census responders self identified as black or African-American, compared to 66.6% in Orleans Parish overall. Other characteristics of the Tremé, also from year 2000 Census data, were an average annual household income of \$19,564, compared to \$43,176 in Orleans Parish overall, with 44.3% of Tremé residents

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<sup>57</sup> The original proposed route of the I-10 overpass would have taken the highway along the river near the French Quarter. However, French Quarter residents and historic preservation organizations lobbied successfully against the plan and the Claiborne Avenue corridor was chosen as the second best alternative. The residents of Tremé also protested, but the predominantly African-American population did not have sufficient political clout to prevent the project from going forward.

<sup>58</sup> More broadly the region is considered part of the Mid-City area/Planning District 4, which included Mid-City, Tulane/Gravier, B.W. Cooper, Gert Town, Iberville, Tremé/Lafitte, Bayou St. John, Fairgrounds, St. Bernard, and the 7<sup>th</sup> Ward.

<sup>59</sup> Tremé/Lafitte referred to the geographic area of Tremé, with the inclusion of the Lafitte Housing Project. After Katrina, Lafitte was demolished by the City of New Orleans. Approval for the demolition, part of the city's controversial redevelopment plan for public housing, was contingent on the promise of a one-to-one replacement of lost housing units. In late August 2009, ground was broken at the Lafitte site for the construction of mixed income housing. The project promises 134 on-site affordable rental units by December 2010, with an additional 57 affordable homes by March 2011.



earning less than \$10,000. Over half of the population was living in poverty and unemployment was high at 10.2%, compared to the national rate at that time of 3.7%. The education level was also poor, about 40% of adults over the age of eighteen had not finished high school.<sup>60</sup> In addition, violent crime was a real problem – the Tremé was considered by many to be one of the most dangerous areas in Orleans Parish, primarily due to a high level of drug trafficking taking place there.

### **Katrina’s Local Impact: “Like Reconstruction All Over Again”**

Hurricane Katrina dealt a severe blow to this community, making an already bad situation that much worse. The area was in the path of flood waters from the levee failures along the West side of the Industrial Canal. The flood depth varied throughout the area, reaching to about two to three feet along the Esplanade Ridge (Campanella 2006:58). However, on either side of the ridge, in the sixth ward (Tremé), seventh ward, and across the rest of the Mid-City area, the flood depth ranged from two to seven feet.

There was, however, another level to the impact of the storm in the Tremé. This was the widely shared perception and feeling by residents that they, along with other members of the city’s most vulnerable, predominantly black, and low income population, had been abandoned by the State. The delayed, and in many ways failed, rescue effort that many residents here experienced was in some sense a test of their enfranchisement and citizenry. The significance of this was key for Tremé residents, who already carried with them a history of marginalization and oppression. One resident, for example, even described the aftermath of the storm as being “like Reconstruction all over again.”

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<sup>60</sup> <http://www.gnocdc.org/orleans/4/42/snapshot.html>

The area has been slow to recover. Before the storm there were 3556 households actively receiving mail in the Tremé/Lafitte area. In June 2009 the rate of return for the neighborhood was 64%, with 2291 household receiving mail. This was the lowest number in all of Mid-City. A year prior the rate of return had been higher at 71%, but it dropped the following year. The exact reasons for this shift are unknown, although crime, unemployment, and the poor condition and rising cost of housing have been cited as probable causes.<sup>61</sup>

There have been, however, some visible signs of recovery, thanks in part to the hard work of many local residents who are dedicated to preserving the neighborhood's rich cultural history. The neighborhood is home, for example, to several active church congregations such as St. Anna's and St. Augustine, the oldest African-American Catholic church in the city. Other important organizations included the Backstreet Cultural Museum, the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival and Foundation, and the New Orleans African-American Museum. Renewed interest in the area has also led to some gentrification, though primarily limited to the oldest architecture near Esplanade and the streets closest to the French Quarter.

The City of New Orleans has also worked to revitalize the neighborhood in the post-Katrina period, for example through the refurbishing of the Mahalia Jackson Theater and renovations at Armstrong Park. During the time of my fieldwork there was also support for another local initiative: the removal of the Claiborne overpass. The project, part of the September 14, 2009 draft of the New Orleans Master Plan. would go a long way to help restore the geographic heart and soul of what continues to be a socially, culturally, economically, and geographically dislocated community.

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<sup>61</sup> <http://www.gnocdc.org/RecoveryByNeighborhood/index.html>

## **A House for All Nations**

Although the Tremé was historically a multi-ethnic community, St. Anna's church was established with an almost all white clergy and congregation. Over time, however, and as the Tremé became increasingly African-American, the church population began to diversify. The value of diversity is even incorporated into the current mission of the church, which includes the following statement: "St. Anna's expresses Jesus' friendship by nurturing a diverse community that is neither black nor white, straight nor gay, poor nor rich, woman nor man, child nor elder. It is the vision of St. Anna's to be a house for all nations."

One long-time African-American parishioner described what it was like for her to join the church and shared some of her earliest memories of the congregation: "I came here in 1972 and at the time there was only one other black family in this church. I came on my own the first time and they were so glad to see me. A white lady who welcomed me here was from a very prominent old New Orleans family. She came up and said "Hon, I'm so glad to see you!" and then she asked me if I had a garden and I said, "Uh huh" and she said "Well do you want to swap plants?" (*laughter*) I had never heard of an Episcopal church before I came to this one."

The membership of church was stable and active up until Katrina. The impact of the storm caused church attendance to fall dramatically, as many members were displaced. This was the situation in late 2006 when Deacon Elaine arrived for her internship. As she recalled, "It was just a year after Katrina, and at that time we only had a congregation of about 25 people. In fact one of Father Bill's concerns was that we had

not come back from the storm.” However, the membership gradually improved, with many returning and new parishioners attracted by new ministries and community programs. By 2007 the average number of people in attendance for Sunday services had doubled to about forty-five parishioners and by the spring of 2008 it was up to seventy.<sup>62</sup>

### **Ministries and Programs after the Storm**

Particularly since the storm, the parish has envisioned itself as a grassroots neighborhood church, “vibrant with an awareness of the needs of her members and visitors alike.” As stated on the church’s website, and part of the “Vision of St. Anna’s Faith Community”:

*We are a grass roots church that is making a difference in the lives of our neighbors and community members. As a result we endeavor, with the resources available to us, to engage in acts of mercy, social justice, and hospitality. Our vision has been clearly focused since the devastation Katrina visited on our city. Our vision includes support from a broad network of parishes throughout the United States. The particular ways we fulfill our vision are currently focused (in 2006/7) on St. Anna's Medical Mission, St. Anna's Mission to Musicians & Community Supper, and creating a worship environment that heals and provides hope and restoration for body, mind, and spirit.*

In addition to the mobile medical mission and the ministry and outreach to local musicians, since late 2006 St. Anna’s has developed two additional ministries: worship and outreach programs for New Orleans growing Latino community, and the victims of violence ministry, of which the very visible “murder board” is a part. The ministries have in turn helped to grow the congregation. As one current member affirms, referring to the murder board, “I can’t tell you how many people have come to St. Anna’s as a result of that. It’s a visible sign that this church is doing ministry and many people are attracted by that and want to participate.”

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<sup>62</sup> [http://www.stannanola.org/pdfs/AnnaJournal\\_Lent-08.pdf](http://www.stannanola.org/pdfs/AnnaJournal_Lent-08.pdf)

## *The Ministry for Victims of Violence*

### Rough Beginnings

I asked Father Bill about how the Victims of Violence Ministry got started. Given the history of violence in New Orleans and especially in the Tremé, and given St. Anna's long-term presence in the area, I wondered why the ministry only began right after Katrina. Father Bill cut my question short, slightly agitated: "Because that's when we started!" he said. "That's when the deacon came in and said we should be doing something. Should we have been doing this in 2003? Yea. Should we have been acutely aware of it in 2004? Yea."

He paused for a moment, regaining composure before continuing. "I'll tell you what happened. In July 2005, about a month or so before Katrina, I was sitting in my living room one evening and the news came on and there had been two or three murders that night. I turned to look at my wife and she asked "Well, where were they?" And I said, "Oh thank God they weren't in our neighborhood." Well, the very next night a kid was murdered about 25 feet from my front door. It happened right around midnight with automatic weapon fire, it was a drug deal gone bad."

"His girlfriend, fiancé, whatever, was there as a witness. I heard her scream for three hours. It was a wail, the most mournful sound I have ever heard. The police would not let me go and give the boy last rites or touch him because they couldn't contaminate the crime scene. So there was no spiritual outreach to that dying soul. But you know God's gonna do what God's gonna do. He doesn't need me to do it for sure. But they wouldn't even let me approach his girlfriend until two in the morning, for fear of

contaminating the witness. You know? So it was pretty harsh, and my view of violence changed after that. I now had ownership, and I realized that a kid getting shot in Central City is as important to me as a kid that gets shot in the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward, where I live. So it shifted my perspective. And my awareness as a minister here has been, since that time in 2005, very sensitive towards murder and urban violence.”

### Katrina as Opportunity?

Clergy members and parishioners also saw the impact of Hurricane Katrina as being an important factor in the formation of the Victims of Violence ministry as well as other programs. According to one church member, Katrina exposed all of the poor conditions and inequities that existed within many of New Orleans’ communities. As she explained, “It exposed the stuff that maybe people had forgotten about, and certainly conditions about which others outside the city were on the whole unaware. New Orleans has so many social problems – we’ve got one of the highest poverty rates in the nation, problems with our education system, crime, housing, underemployment... I mean it was hopeless! But Katrina threw everything up in the air. Out of chaos comes creation and suddenly there was hope. And in the rebuilding people were not satisfied with the status quo. We knew that it was broken and we had to do something. We knew that it couldn’t go back to the way that it was.”

She continued, “The veneer was ripped off of the city, and I think that if other cities paid attention they would know that there is a veneer for them too, because the problems that we have in this community are in every American community. Before the storm, people knew that the leadership in this community was failed, but I think there is

much less tolerance for that now. People saw where that got them, and they didn't like what they saw."

Other parishioners commented on the greater impact that violence has had on the community since Katrina. As one woman expressed, "We have always had a high rate of murders, but I believe that coming back from Katrina we are so sensitive now. We aren't the same. We left out of here one way and we came back another, as people who have suffered a loss. And I believe that the murders now are that much more poignant to us. Our skin has gotten very thin, and still we are losing. I think our city is full of wounded people, not just wounded in their bodies, but wounded in their minds and wounded in their spirits. The perpetrators seem more defiant. I think they are wounded too."

This parishioner continued her reflection: "You know when Katrina came, I remembered that tsunami that occurred about a year before and they had horrid devastation. And I wondered, is this what the aftermath of a horrible disaster is like? You know – the lawlessness with the strong taking from the poor and the weak, the women and the children? Is this what the aftermath is like, when a whole city is disillusioned? I wonder if that's why it's happening here."

#### SilenceIsViolence and the March on City Hall

On January 11, 2007, approximately 5000 concerned citizens marched on City Hall. Called a "march for survival" the idea for the event came from founding members of SilenceIsViolence, an anti-violence campaign formed in the wake of the Dinerral Shavers and Helen Hill murders. Numerous community and religious groups participated, including New Hope Baptist Church in Central City and St. Anna's Episcopal Church in

the Tremé. When the march arrived at City Hall, community and religious leaders from across the city addressed the crowd.

Father Bill participated, along with several other members of St. Anna's congregation. Deacon Elaine, the deacon placed at St. Anna's at the time, chose not to attend. When I spoke with her about it, I got the sense that she thought the whole thing was counterproductive. As she described, "There was a march on the mayor's office, in which I did not participate, I think Father Bill may have, but I did not. And it ended in a pretty angry sort of situation, blaming the mayor down at city hall. It made a big splash in the news. And after it was over the murders continued."

Part of Elaine's frustration had to do with the fact that the mobilization was sparked by two high profile murder cases – both cases where the victims were innocent people seemingly caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. There were, however, so many other victims of violence and many of those deaths did not trigger the same outraged response, in fact they seemed to have the opposite effect, having been largely ignored by the media and greater public. "Very often in the paper I was noticing that these other murder victims were being dismissed" she explained. "The articles were buried on the second or the third page of the metro section, and it was dismissed as druggie killing druggie. A lot of times they would even include a long history of the victim's rap sheet. To me that was missing the point. So I, along with some other people within the St. Anna's community, we were concerned about the ongoing murders and the fact that everybody wasn't getting the same kind of attention that Helen Hill and Dinerral Shavers were getting."



The concern was a central part of what prompted Elaine to speak with Father Bill, to ask what could be done. His response was not to be overwhelmed by the scope of the problem, for the task of solving it rests with God. What they could do, however, was to call attention to the problem and to recognize the humanity of *all* victims of violence no matter their position, status, or social standing.

### Restoring Humanity

This focus on humanity was not a new one for St. Anna's; it followed directly from the teachings of the Episcopal Church. The baptismal covenant, for example contains the following question and response: "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?" The answer: "I will, with God's help." The ministry for Victims of Violence, therefore, was a new way to uphold this obligation in relation to one's faith, the overall mission of the church, and the ongoing recovery and renewal of the congregation, city, and society.

Father Bill described the ministry in this way: "You know one thing about murder in this city and in all cities where violent crime is high, is that people think in terms of murder rate: how many victims there are, rather than *who* they are. They also tend to make the victims anonymous, especially if they are poor, and they seem to dismiss or even justify the death depending on what the victim was doing. Somehow a drug dealer is not nearly as important as Helen Hill because we put social priorities on the value of people. That sounds harsh but it's true." Another parishioner shared in this view, stating, "This is mostly a generalization, but my sense is that the murder rate is so high in this

city that folks don't... that a lot of the city just doesn't care about the victims. That is sort of the perception, that there is this criminal element in the city that is killing itself."

Father Bill and the parishioners at St. Anna's focused, therefore, on acknowledging and responding to *every* life that was lost to violent crime in the city. To recognize and restore a sense of humanity, the Victims of Violence Ministry focused on four primary programs: the rose ministry; the naming of the dead (through the murder board, scrapbook, recitation and prayer); the creation of a permanent healing space and memorial to victims of violence; and community outreach and advocacy, particularly focused on ministry to youth. In these efforts, the role of religious belief and faith remained central: "Certainly our faith teaches us that life is so precious and so valuable that the unnatural loss of any human being is a loss to all human beings and to the kingdom of God," Father Bill stated.

### The Rose Ministry

The rose ministry was one of the first programs to begin shortly after the march on City Hall. Deacon Elaine led the initiative, recruiting a few other members within the congregation to participate. Each week, members counted the number of murder victims in Orleans parish and then assembled several bouquets of roses – each flower in each bouquet representing a person who was murdered that week. The bouquets were then delivered to city government offices – including the Mayor's office, the Police Department, City Council chambers, and the office of the District Attorney.

I asked Deacon Elaine about the history and organization of this particular ministry. "None of this was my idea, I won't take credit for any of it," she responded.

“People came to me and suggested different things and I just put things together. Somebody said “this is terrible and what are we going to do?” Someone else said, “Well we had a march on the mayor’s office, but why don’t we march on the mayor’s office every week?” My husband said, “Well if you’re going to march on the mayor’s office you ought to take something when you go.” So out of that came this synthesis of ideas and the first step of it was delivering flowers to the mayor’s office every week. I think that started around February of 2007. I started to keep track of the names of the victims and every week we would take one flower for each victim that week. We would accompany the flowers with a note that would list each victim by name, age, and how they were killed and then it would say, “The people of St. Anna’s congregation are praying for these victims of murder, for their families, and for you our mayor.” And we delivered that every week. Week after week.”

One of the first people to join Deacon Elaine in the rose ministry was Deacon Joyce. Both women had been in the same ordination class and were placed in each other’s home churches for their internships. Elaine came from St. Andrews Episcopal Church uptown to St. Anna’s in the Tremé, and Joyce went from St. Anna’s to St. Andrew’s. At the end of their training the two deacons met to discuss the initiatives that were started. As Deacon Joyce recalled, “When we came back after the internship Elaine and I talked, and we went through the process together, of all the social justice programs that had been started. She was continuing the rose ministry at her church and I said, well I’ll complement whatever you do over here.” Thus, the ministry that was begun at St. Anna’s became a broader initiative – taken up at St. Andrews and eventually by other Episcopal churches in the New Orleans area.

I asked Deacon Joyce to describe her participation in the ministry, particularly her experience of delivering the roses. “The first time I was very nervous,” she told me. “I almost thought that each rose was a little person and I was holding each one, you know how you just feel things like that? Well each rose does *represent* a person and you feel almost like a pall bearer really... you know we are carrying these people, these roses.”

“When we first started off I was taking a rose for every person murdered for the week” she continued. “Some weeks we would take four, sometimes as many as eight, and I was taking them to the mayor’s office. But as our program grew, and people became sympathetic to it and heard about it, we began to go to the NOPD and deliver them to the police chief which was good because we were able to strike up a rapport with the ladies that worked in the office.”

I asked about the reception of the group at these city offices. “We just show up,” she told me. “At first there was some skepticism because I think they thought that we were bringing the roses to criticize them and tell them that they weren’t doing a good job. But then we talked to them and explained that we were bringing the roses to give all of these people who were murdered a face. We wanted to put out the message that this was someone’s son, someone’s brother, or cousin, or uncle. That each of them has a mom, that each one is a person created by God. I believe that all people have a chance to repent. They are still children of God and we still pray and hope that the change comes, that they will learn to be respectful of life and find a new way.”

“One time Father Bill and I met Police Chief Riley at a rally, and we let him know that we were the ones that were bringing the flowers. And he was very cordial. We explained to him that the flowers were not meant as a criticism – and that we were really

praying for the victims, the perpetrators, the victims' families, the perpetrators' family, the police chief, his staff, and all of law enforcement. We were keeping them *all* in prayer.”

At the police station, the group delivering flowers was typically met by the receptionist. “She knows us by now. And as we leave the flowers we always say, “We hope next time we don’t have *any* to bring.” I asked what typically happened to the flowers after the group left and Joyce replied, “Well, they put them where the police chief can see them. Up until a month ago Vicky (Father Bill’s wife) and I were bringing them every week so Chief Riley would always see them you know? One time we put an extra one in. It was a young boy; I think he was about nine years old, who found his mom’s gun. He and another child were playing with it and it went off and he was shot in the head and died. Well, we wanted to memorialize him by giving him a rose. But the people at the police department saw his name on the list and they told us, “Oh no, this one doesn’t belong to us! The boy lived in Jefferson Parish, not Orleans. So they took out one of the roses out and gave it back to us.”

The incident gave those involved in the ministry some encouragement. As Joyce described, “I know now that he [Chief Riley] sees them and that they compare our records to theirs. We give them a card with the listing of everyone’s name and age and the date they were killed. And he does go over that list to make sure that we don’t include someone that doesn’t belong there you know?” Deacon Elaine, when reminded of the story, agreed, “Well they were obviously paying attention to how many they have. And they knew the names of who they had and who they were responsible for. I thought that was kind of cool.”

The ministry was also well received by the New Orleans City Council. As Elaine described, “Some members of the group from Grace Episcopal Church take care of those deliveries, but the Council doesn’t meet every day. So we are always met by a representative who takes the flowers the rest of the way, and puts them up in Council chambers. They are right there for everyone to see and they tell people what they are for. And now they know who we are; one of the Council members has even said if Grace Church brings anything just come to us because we have a relationship with them because of what they are doing and what they’re about. So that’s a good response. All of it helps. We just started delivering to the District Attorney’s office, so we’ll have to see how that goes.”

### Naming and Honoring

Also central to the Victims of Violence Ministry was the acknowledgment and recognition, *by name*, of each life lost to violent crime. In order to generate a weekly list of murder victims, and because official homicide rates were typically declared once a year, congregation members compiled their own data. They used a variety of sources such as the local news, community reports, and police records. According to Deacon Elaine, the tracking of victims’ names was initiated by Father Bill who expressed early on a desire to create a kind of permanent memorial to remember and honor the victims, while also taking a visible stand against violence in the community. As Elaine recalled, “He said, “We are trying to remember and honor these victims so we need something like a memorial, what about something like the Vietnam wall?” And I said, “We can do that, you know?” And he said, “Well I’ll put up a sign, and that way everyone on Esplanade

will see it, tourists will see it, residents will see it, and it can be an embarrassment to this community that we tolerate this!”

The first ‘murder board’ was erected in the winter of 2007. To begin, clergy and volunteers from the congregation researched all of the murders from the beginning of the year, then wrote out by hand the names on the board, along with age, and method of death. When the year was over, the church had the information transferred to a more permanent sign that was displayed across the iron fence in front of the small courtyard by the parish hall. The same thing was done with the 2008 murder board and all the ones after that; however the gender of the victim was added to the information that was listed for each person.

This process of naming and remembering the victims of violence extended into several other activities. As Deacon Elaine described, “When the murder board started, I thought we also needed a scrapbook too – some place where we could put more detailed information about each victim, based on the pictures we could find, or articles in the paper. Well I started putting that together, and it has expanded as you can see. It’s one of the first things you see as you enter the church.” Father Bill, proudly mentioned the scrapbooks also. He stated, “We keep these very large books in our church of newspaper clippings and photographs of the victims of violence, obituaries and things like that, because we want to put faces and stories to the names. We want to remind people that these are human beings.”

However, with hundreds of victims to keep track of each year, the task of assembling a detailed portrait of each victim was daunting and difficult. It was hard, for



**Image 25. Victims of Violence Scrapbook. Interior of St. Anna's Episcopal Church. Photo by author.**

example, to find accurate information about each person, and there was a noticeable and difference between official city crime statistics and community reports. In addition, the process of sorting through and collecting the names was often emotionally challenging. Father Bill, for example, described it as “dredging,” stating “There are some very dedicated and lovely women who go through the papers and dredge through, and it *is* dredging. It takes research to develop information about every name.”

While the research was not intentionally set up as a gendered practice, the women were primarily the ones who collected the names. Deacon Elaine was one of them and I asked her how she handled the ongoing emotional impact of so many stories of violence



and death. Her response came slowly, “I don’t know the answer to that. It is troubling and it is sad, but I have been lucky in that I have been successful in continuing to place it all in God’s hands.” I pressed for more information, asking if there was a particular routine or method to how the information was gathered. “Yes,” she replied, “I do it every morning, first thing. I get up and I read the paper from cover to cover. Because you can never tell where the article is going to be hidden; it’s not always in the obituaries. So I do that first thing and then I go exercise. After that I cut out the articles from the previous day’s paper and put them in the scrapbook. And then I go to work.”

She paused again, softening. “I’ve been successful at it, I have to say, and I’m not bragging on myself but I’ve lived a long time and I have a lot of emotional strength. I’m just a real sane kind of a person. I can feel sad, but without having to feel depressed about it, without having to carry it all day long. And I feel like, I feel... see for me it’s *hopeful*, it’s not depressing. It’s because we are *attending* to it in the way that we are meant to attend to it. We’re supposed to pay attention. So it’s hopeful.”

Every week Deacon Elaine also sent out an email to all the churches involved in the ministry, which listed the names of those killed so everyone could incorporate the same information into the various ways and methods of naming and remembering. Peter Gray, then an associate priest at St. Anna’s, was among those who received the list and he used it to routinely update the murder board. As he described, “I think she usually sends that out every Thursday morning or thereabouts, and I keep that email in my inbox until the day that I update the murder board which is usually Tuesday morning.”

A relatively new addition to the city and the community at St. Anna’s, Father Gray was brought on board initially to develop the Latino Apostolate. Not long after he

arrived, however, he became responsible for writing the names on the murder board. I asked him how that happened and he laughed, saying, “It was really pretty simple. The way things operate around here is that you are thrown into the fire immediately. I arrived here for work on my first Monday, after starting work the day before on Sunday. There was another intern here at the time. We were having a staff meeting and in the middle of it Father Bill looks at me and asks, “How’s your handwriting?” And I kind of shrug and say, “Well, it’s OK.” And then he says, “Tomorrow morning why don’t you get here and update the murder board.” And so I did, well Rob the intern and I did it together. I climbed up on the ladder to write and he read the names. It had been a couple of weeks since it had been updated so we had quite a few names to put up there.”

After that, Father Gray formally took over the task. As he explained, “I asked Father Bill if it would be OK if I kept doing it. A lot of it was just because I am a very pattern oriented worker, more so than I think a lot of the folks that work around here are. I like to make little schedules for myself and so it was easy for me to include this part of the ministry, to remember to do this every Tuesday morning or whatever. But I also felt like it was such a simple and easy thing for us to be doing. I didn’t want us to forget about it and let it fall into an irregular schedule of being updated. I wanted to keep it moving and keep it active.”

One Tuesday morning, I observed Father Gray update the murder board. He first checked his email to get the most recent list of names. On this week, however, the identity of one of the victims had not yet been released and Father Gray tried to search for more information, rather than have to write “John Doe” or “Unidentified Male” on the board. He printed out the list, took a large black permanent marker and a ruler from his

desk drawer, and walked down the stairs to the main office. There he asked the church administrator about the unidentified victim in question but there was no additional information. So he proceeded as planned with the other names, stepping into a supply closet in the hallway and pulling out a tall ladder. Turning to me with a resigned but somewhat sad expression he said, “Actually the names are getting low enough at this point that I might not even need the ladder to reach them.”

I followed him outside of the church’s administrative building, down the stairs and over to the front wall by the main entrance to the church. It was mid-morning and Esplanade Avenue was busy with traffic between the French Quarter and Mid-City. Father Gray moved quickly and silently, walking with purpose up to the murder board and setting up the ladder. Climbing up with the list of names in one hand and the ruler and marker in the other, he spaced down a little under the last name that was there, used the ruler to level off, and began to write. It was slow and deliberate, his face only a few inches from the board, peering intently as each letter was placed – the downward stroke of the “T” in Terrence, the short crossing stroke across the top. The marker squeaked loudly. After all the names were placed, he capped the marker, climbed down, folded and picked up the ladder, and with a “well that’s that” walked past me, back up the stairs, and inside the building.

In a later conversation he was contemplative about the act and the experience. “I think what it does” he said, “is create a connection between me and the folks whose names I am writing. It’s hard to explain how that sort of manifests.” He paused for some time before continuing. “From time to time, maybe before or after services, I find myself looking through the scrapbooks in the back of the church that have the newspaper

clippings in them with the pictures and obituaries of people. And I am already feeling a connection to those people because I've already written their names, and in many ways I am then interested in knowing what the person looks like and more about them."

"Particularly with the folks within the last couple of weeks, their names are sort of floating in my head as I look at the computer and try to figure out if we have everyone listed, and as I walk past the murder board to go into the church. This happens a lot because I'm outside of the church a lot. It's not an immediate thing, but I'm reminded by something Elaine said. She was talking about one aspect of the work that she is doing which is delivering the roses. And she talked about how we're not really expecting the change to come from the politicians or the police chief. The change happens in the people participating. I think it's an incremental change, but I do think it's real."

There was one additional aspect to the naming and remembering of murder victims that extended beyond these material forms and practices. It was the worship itself; specifically the prayers that were offered for all the victims in a given week, and the recitation of each person's name, age, and method of death. Typically this occurred during the "Prayers for the People" section of the Holy Eucharist service. At St. Anna's the service was held twice weekly – on Sunday morning and Wednesday evening. The prayers, led by a deacon or associate priest, came after the Sermon and the recitation of the Nicene Creed and just prior to the confession of sins and the exchange of peace, leading into the Communion.

As Deacon Joyce explained, "Whenever we meet and pray we always list all of those victims and we ask for God to give us guidance, and for some healing to take place in the city." Father Gray further described the process: "We do the whole Prayers for the

People, everything that's in the prayer book. We pray for the sick, the military, the church leaders, and the last thing we do is pray for the victims of violence in this city. But not just the victims, we also pray for the families of the victims, for the perpetrators and their families, for the police, and then we read the names, we read the exact same information that's on the murder board."

Hearing the names read during the service often elicited a powerful emotional response. Father Gray, for example, talked about hearing Deacon Joyce read the names and the impact it had on him. "It's something about the way that she says the word "shot," it just rings in the church" he stated. "And you know given the level of gun violence we have in this city probably about 95% of the names that are on the board are victims who were shot, and so if you have five names in a week and you hear "shot" five times (*snapping his fingers sharply five times*), it's just so powerful, the force of that word. And it's so visceral for me, that I actually try to give it the same sort of staccato pronunciation that she gives it when I read the names myself."

"So it has to do with the way she enunciates the word?" I asked for clarification. "I think it's something about her voice," Father Gray replied, "My best approximation is she says, "Shot." No. it's even sharper than that – "*Shot!*" Something like that. She reads, "John Doe. 37. *Shot!*" And there is something, the starkness of it, the pause of it, and the fact that she has to do it four or five times in a row. The great thing about Deacon Joyce is that she is transparent to how she is feeling and that emotion really comes through. One of my first weeks here we had only one murder that week. And she offered a spontaneous prayer of thanks to God that we only had one murder. So that's a significant part of this

ministry for me, hearing her. She is really an outstanding presence, with her bright eyes and big smile. She carries some force with her.”

“But I don’t know,” he finished, “maybe it’s just a different thing when you are a member of the congregation listening. It’s a very different experience carrying that burden of reading the names compared to actually listening and participating in the worship itself. So I don’t know how much to attribute to her or to my being a participant rather than a leader.”

Other Episcopal churches in the area also began to include the names of murder victims in their own Prayers for the People. Deacon Elaine, for example, who led the prayers at St. Andrews Episcopal Church described her approach, “I try to slow it down. I try to always honor the fact that that person was loved. That person has a mother, and that person has a life. So I try to keep that in mind when I say the names. I try to always say it with feeling, to not just rattle them off.”

I attended several services at St. Anna’s before I was finally there on a day when Deacon Joyce led the Prayers for the People. It was Sunday, October 12, 2008 and there had been eight murders in Orleans parish over the past week. Deacon Joyce came down from the altar to the center of the main aisle and then turned around to face forward along with the congregation. She began the prayer:

*Father we pray for your holy catholic church.*

*That we all may be one.*

*Grant that every member of the church may truly and humbly serve you.*

*That you may be glorified by all people.*

*We pray for all bishops, priests, and deacons. Remembering especially Roland, Archbishop of Canterbury; Catherine, presiding bishop; and Charles, our own bishop.*

*That they may be faithful ministers of your word and sacraments.*

*We pray for all who govern and hold authority in the nations of the world.*

*That there may be justice and peace on the earth.*

*Give us grace to do your will in all that we undertake. Especially bring the good news to this neighborhood and beyond.*

That our words may find favor in your sight.

*Oh Lord the hope and giver of all protection, we humbly ask you at the intercession of the blessed, glorious, and ever virgin Mary, mother of God, that New Orleans and the entire Gulf Coast may be spared from inclement weather during this hurricane season, so we may perpetually rejoice in your kindness and loving care for us. Father as you continually renew the face of your creation, pour out your holy spirit upon our own efforts for renewal and restoration at St. Anna's Church, that our words may find favor in your sight, spread your kingdom, and stand before all as a tribute to your abundant grace. Have compassion on those who suffer, from any grief or trouble. Remembering especially the homeless.*

That they may be delivered from their distress.

*Give to the departed eternal rest, especially (individuals named)*

Let light perpetual shine upon them.

*We now name our dead (congregation members contribute names)*

*We praise you for your saints Anna, Mary, and Joseph, who have entered into joy.*

May we also come to share in your heavenly kingdom.

*Let us pray for our own needs and those of others, for the sick and in need of our parish family (individual names mentioned).*

*For all expectant mothers, especially (individuals named), for those linked to us, for healing (individuals named), for strength (individuals named), for continued sobriety (individuals named).*

*We pray for all service personnel, sacrificing their time and life for their country (individuals named).*

*We pray for all foreign aid workers and social service organizations, working throughout the world.*

*We pray for all innocent victims of war and strife, especially the children.*

*For all the blessings of this life (individuals mentioned, anniversaries, birthdays acknowledged)*

*For our youth, especially (individuals mentioned).*

*For our seminary and seminarians at Seabury Western Theological seminary*

*We pray for our partnering churches (mentioned one by one, along with the corresponding diocese).*

(a brief silent pause)

*We pray for the victims of violence in our city.<sup>63</sup> The families of those killed. The perpetrators and their families. Our police department and all who are affected by these deaths. We remember especially, Herbierto Montoya, shot. Harold J. Stanwod, 24... Shot! Durrell Pooler, 23... Shot. Kendrick Sherman, 18, Shot. Vernon Johnson, 35, Shot. Albert Clinton McClebb, Jr., 29, Shot! Unidentified male, 21... Shot. Derek Lacombe, 20, Shot....*

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<sup>63</sup> Deacon Joyce's voice slows at this point, it is an audible shift in pitch and timing, and there is an added heaviness, a perceptible weight that settles over the congregation. The rest of the prayer is spoken with a measured and determined cadence, and there is a mix of anger and sorrow in her voice. Except for Deacon Joyce's voice, the church is very quiet.

Silence followed, except for the sounds of children unsettled and a person coughing in the back. Then Father Bill's voice came forth in chant with the invitation to confess sins. The congregation knelt.

### **A Difficult Process**

“Sometimes there are so many that are the same age, the same race, and with the same issues. It can be hard sometimes.” Deacon Elaine was talking about her experience reading the names. I asked her if there were some cases that stood out above the rest; thinking that stories of particular victims might resonate with different people for different reasons. “Like the girl from McMain High School who was killed this week,” Elaine offered. “It just breaks my heart that she was killed.”<sup>64</sup>

Deacon Joyce gave a similarly emotional account of her experience reading the names: “I feel an overwhelming sorrow for the young life that’s been cut short” she began, “because most of the people on the murder board, most of them are under 35 years old. Things happen so quickly.” She then added, “And sometimes I feel that I am angry, all these young people dying, and I’m reading now that there are more women and girls being killed. It’s just such a tragedy. Sometimes you read that they were stabbed, or strangled, or that they were victims of robbery. Two Sundays ago there was a victim, a man who was 72 years old...,” she left the sentence unfinished, shaking her head in disbelief and fighting back tears.

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<sup>64</sup> Deacon Elaine refers to the murder of Danielle Rainey, who was 18 and a senior at Eleanor McMain High School in New Orleans at the time of her death in late September 2008. Rainey, who is not believed to have been the intended target, was sitting in a car with a friend when the two were gunned down in a drive by shooting.



Father Bill spoke more broadly about the challenges of doing social justice work, particularly with something like the ministry for Victims of Violence where one hears so many stories of pain and suffering. As he explained, “Doing this every day for the past two years, well it wears on a person and it gets to be hard after a while. So I don’t go out of my way looking for murder stories. I look at the news every day, so it’s not like I’m sticking my head in the sand or anything, but even my own soul and spiritual ability to deal with this stuff can only take so much.”

For Father Bill, the capacity or incapacity to handle so much suffering had to do with human nature but also with one’s own spiritual nature. He continued, “I mean think about the Blessed Mother. How much heartache and pain could she take, how much pain can I take? And we ask how much can we take, but what’s the alternative? I mean there is no alternative, it’s *there*. The alternative is how much am I *willing* to let in? How much can I deal with in my life?”

I asked him then, “What are some of the negative implications of taking in too much, what do you think would happen?” Father Bill did not hesitate: “Clinical depression for starters, or living a very dark day or week. It’s probably not a lot different than what some police officers have to live with. I’ve talked to police officers a few times here and in the community. Their world is pretty dark and things tend to be black and white. The reason the citizens and police officers don’t get along is because the only time they see each other is under exigent circumstances. The only time the cop sees the neighborhood is when someone gets killed. And the only time the neighborhood sees the cop is when somebody gets killed or there’s trouble or there’s been a fight. It’s never in a peaceful harmonious setting, you know? In the same way I think if you are up to your

eyeballs in murder, well you want to start watching how much you take in because you don't want to turn and project that experience onto the world.”

In his own experience, Father Bill reached a point where he felt he needed to turn the management of the murder board over to someone else. He explained: “I used to go up there every Monday and put the names up. I did it for a year and a half, but I found myself putting it off and putting it off to where I would have to put a bunch of names up once a month. So I no longer do that. Now we have a young new priest associate and guess what he gets to do for his spiritual discipline? And I know he takes it very seriously. One day I said, “Look I just can't do this today, you guys get the joy of putting those names up.” And I said it sarcastically. But then the following week our new priest says to me, “you know I would really like to take that over, you know if you'd let me, if you want me to.” I didn't get into a big long discussion about it. You know, I just said OK. I think you just kind of have to let people be where they are and take it as a sign of grace, so I did.”

For some members of St. Anna's Church, participation in the victims of violence ministry had a particularly personal dimension. Deacon Joyce was one such example; her son miraculously survived a drive by shooting just a few months after Hurricane Katrina. She willingly shared her story: “I came back from the hurricane just a few months after it happened, it was around Halloween in 2005” she started, “and my son was here also and he went out to attend a wedding at a place over on St Bernard Avenue, not too far from here. He was the best man. Well around 1:30 in the morning they were moving their little procession across the street to a nightclub and someone drove by with a gun and just

sprayed the entire crowd. My son was shot about five times, the young man behind him was shot four times, and there was a girl who was shot once.”

“I was home sleeping and all of a sudden there were people just knocking on my door, yelling “Come on Ms. Joyce, Steve’s been shot! Steve’s been shot!” I was horror stricken! I was in my jammies, no shoes, just racing down the street. I could see the lights, the reflection of the lights of the ambulance and the people’s cars. And people were everywhere. And then I could see my son’s hair. I looked in the back of the ambulance and I could see his hair because he has real curly hair. And the deputy said, “Miss, don’t approach the car” and I said “but that’s my son in there!” He told me to please step back, but another deputy, one of the ladies, she winked at me at she said they are taking him to Elmwood Hospital in Kenner. And they rushed him there to the emergency room.”

“God was with him. God rode with him in that ambulance. He was shot in his middle, and they say they usually bleed out before they get to the hospital. We had to go all the way to Jefferson Parish because after Katrina there were no hospitals open here in the city. He was in surgery most of the day. And because he was shot even in his bowel, he had about three more surgeries after that because he developed a lot of ulcers. He was also shot in the hand, and that bullet shattered. So there were fragments that had to be removed.”

Deacon Joyce smiled broadly, “But you know what? He’ll be 26 this year and he’s doing fine. He went back to work and he’s a chef, a cook. I told him, you know the Lord preserved you to stay here, to do something very special. Even to talk to young people. But every time I see a person around his age who got killed, I see their name up

there on the murder board and I see their age; it gives you a funny feeling inside, it's almost like you want to throw up. I think of all of the mothers whose sons die on the scene, or the ones that sit in intensive care and they are taken off the respirator, you know when they are brain dead. I recognize what they feel. It's a tragedy, the waste of all these young lives. So here we are, naming all of the victims. The police call it the roll call of the dead, all these young men."

She paused again. "I recently saw a picture, I think it was about two weeks ago, I was browsing the internet and it showed the Pieta, Jesus in his mother's arms after he was taken down from the cross. And to me that says a lot about many of the mother's here in New Orleans. They are holding their dead sons, just as the Virgin is holding Jesus' dead body, you know full of anguish and sorrow and probably terror, that violence can come so close, so close to their homes, so close to them."

### **Social Justice, Transformation, and the Model of Christ**

The emotional toll of the ministry was so great for clergy and congregation members that worship included prayers and appeals for divine intervention and healing. Members took solace in the belief that they could be relieved of the burdened they carried by falling back on faith and trusting in the process of divine healing and transformation. As one member explained, "We feel that violence is a burden on us and we take that burden to the Lord. Cast all your cares upon the Lord, all your burdens. Because he cares about us and he loves us. When we bring those prayers in front of the congregation we are crying out to the Lord to have mercy, to intercede, to *do* something, you know, to come among us, to *heal* us!"

Healing and transformation also occurred through the practice and ‘doing’ of social justice work. Father Bill and others drew inspiration here from the life and mission of Jesus Christ. As Deacon Elaine commented, “Father Bill is strongly committed to social justice. But he is not just committed to it as an idea. He is committed to it because of the transformation it brings, you know, the religious and spiritual transformation. He believes that the church is about Christ and when you become about Christ, you can’t turn your back on the world. So he grounds all of this in incredible spiritual faith and gifts that grow the care and concern for the world.”

Father Bill explained his view further: “The model of social justice is precisely the model that Jesus used, if you think about it. I mean, what was his end outcome? At least as far as his ministry was concerned? It was a total disaster. His flock was scattered, he was murdered – state sanctioned but murdered nonetheless – on trumped up charges. You know, thrown in a borrowed tomb at the last minute and just under the wire. His whole cult had turned against him and called for his very crucifixion, and those that didn’t call for his crucifixion denied even knowing him, except for a handful of women, which I always find interesting. And so the model of social justice follows the model of Jesus, and is based in truth telling irrespective of the cost and being present with the sin. Not running away from it and living in an idealized little world apart from everything but being very much in and active within the world. So from a faith perspective, doing social justice should always be identified with our faith. And from a Christian’s perspective it’s perfectly cohesive with the lifetimes and teachings of our Lord.”

Speaking more directly about the ministry of the church and the sacred duty of religious engagement, Father Bill offered the following: “I can go and pray or I can go

outside and put names up on the murder board. Which is truer to the gospel of Jesus? To treat the dignity of a human being that has lost their life to violence, by honoring them and remembering them and writing their name? You know? Those names are very sacred. And writing those names becomes a sacred trust, a sacred duty. Writing the names becomes a form of prayer itself. It's kind of a Benedictine view – work is prayer.”

Another congregation member described a sermon that Father Bill gave, which made the connection clear between the life and death of Christ and the anti-violence ministry of the church. “It was on the feast of Mary Magdalene” he recalled, “and Father Bill was talking about Mary Magdalene’s witness and her ability to stand at the foot of the cross with the rest of the women. And then he tied that to standing at the foot of the murder board and being able to sort of look at that, at the horror of all of that. I think that’s right, that’s the parallel, and just like any devotion to the cross I think it should push us into greater solidarity with those who suffer and give us more energy for seeing and working for change.”

The murder board and all the related activities were also transformative for members of the broader community, even from the first day that it was put up. As Father Bill described, “The story about it hit the newspaper on Friday, I remember it was raining, and by noon I had about fourteen phone calls from mothers who actually saw the name of their kid on the murder board. It was probably the most difficult day of my life.” “What did the mothers have to say?” I asked. Father Bill replied, “They said things like “Thank you for remembering,” “I didn’t think anybody cared,” or “I thought my son was forgotten.” One man called up angry but extremely grateful, saying “You know my son

was shot and murdered the day the Saints made the playoffs and this is the first time I have seen his name in print anywhere!”

Father Bill continued, “I always wish I had one of those outdoor security cameras, you know? So I could see people respond. In fact just two days ago I was leaving work about five o'clock and I saw a car stop in the middle of Esplanade and pull over into the driveway. Three young ladies get out and go up to the board and you can see they are trying to find people. They flipped open their cell phone cameras and took pictures. So it's doing something. You know, there's always the possibility of being transformed and changed. And sometimes it's an uncomfortable transformation, but in the end it's good. It's all good. So God is present in all that we do. God's telling us that these are my children whom I love and you need to approach them in that way. God's in that. At some point if our voices keep speaking, there will be a response.”

### **Entering the Mission Field**

There was a long wooden sign that was horizontally displayed above the main door of the administrative building at St. Anna's, visible only as one was exiting the facility. It read, “You are now entering your mission field.” I noticed it one afternoon and asked Father Gray about it, who pointed out that the sign appeared above *every* exterior door of the church. They were intended to serve as reminders to those leaving the church to continue to do social justice work at home, in families and neighborhoods, and everywhere they travelled within the larger community.

At the time of my fieldwork, the Victims of Violence ministry was only a few years old. Its scope and mission, however, was just beginning to expand. Projects in

development included a proposal to create a permanent public memorial and garden for victims of violence, and an outreach and gun buy-back program for local youth. In addition, there was an initiative at work to address violence and restore the humanity of victims and perpetrators alike by developing a response to capital punishment. All of these proposed programs related also to an effort to expand the ministry by involving other churches and religious organizations, both within and outside of the Episcopal faith and tradition.

### ***A Public Memorial for the Victims of Violence***

As the murder boards and scrapbooks continued to fill with names, Father Bill and others at St. Anna's saw the need for a more permanent memorial. As Father Bill explained, "I'm trying to raise money to build something more dignified. Our intent is to turn the courtyard in front of the parish hall into a contemplation garden and memorial that would be fully accessible to people. They don't even have to come into the church. I want to put a couple of seats out there. Have some nice little plantings. In fact take that whole cement wall and turn it into a fountain, so that the water is just running down. Because let's face it, there is nothing more serene and soothing than running water and across many faiths it's a sign and symbol of purity and cleansing and new life and things like that."

Father Gray was also excited about the idea: "I can't think of a better way to use our courtyard than to try and provide a place for folks to sit and find some peace and have some time for contemplation. I don't want to make gross generalizations about the city that I'm just getting to know, but it's a pretty crazy city in terms of energy and the way



that people operate. It's very fast paced, not in a way that a city like New York is fast paced, but it's kind of frenetic. We know that folks use the narthex of the church as a place to pray from time to time, so we leave that open so that people can go in. So what better thing to do with our courtyard than provide a place of prayer and memory? For me it's just an obvious connection. But still, if you are going to talk about finding peace in the city it's got to be more than just spiritual peace. It's got to be something that feeds us so that we can actually transform the culture that's killing folks."



**Image 26. 2007 Permanent Murder Board. Courtyard for Proposed Memorial Garden. St. Anna's Episcopal Church. Photo by author.**

### ***Community Outreach and Youth Ministry***

Members of St. Anna's expressed a responsibility they felt to stay engaged with and active in the community, particularly in the aftermath of Katrina. As Deacon Joyce asserted, "I think the answer has to come from us. I think we must become more reverent

towards life, more concerned with our young people, and we have to take an active stand with them. I think we have to do things in our society to encourage them to turn away from the bad things that they are doing and to do things that are more creative, to choose life over killing and death.”

One such initiative was a recently launched program, The Horns for Guns program, which was a partnership between St. Anna’s Church, the local police department, several other community enrichment organizations, and local musicians. The goal was to reduce the number of guns on the street and get youth involved in creative career development opportunities. In exchange for turning in a gun, local youth were offered free music lessons and other artistic and professional development opportunities. While turnout was low the first year, the program received a great deal of support from the community and plans were in develop to continue its reach and impact.

### ***Attending to the Perpetrators: A Response to Capital Punishment***

Another initiative extending from the Victims of Violence ministry was a more conscious focus on the perpetrators of violence. This was a population even more neglected and dismissed – but considered by members of this and other congregations to be, in many ways, victims of violence themselves. Deacon Elaine described the evolution of this initiative: “The ministry needed to go somewhere but I couldn’t figure out where. Father Bill went on with the Horns for Guns program. That’s great, and he tried to get me to come back and work on that. He’s been a great ally and a great friend, and I will be at that congregation always. But I didn’t feel called to do that, I just knew that wasn’t where I was supposed to be. And so this other piece, the capital punishment piece just fell into

my lap. I feel that we have honored the humanity of the victims through this continuing murder ministry, and now it's time to honor the humanity of the perpetrators. So we are beginning to try to develop a response to capital punishment." Plans were in development, for example, to meet with Sister Helen Prejean, a Louisiana native and author of *Dead Man Walking*, to discuss the development of local initiatives and programs. In addition, since Deacon Elaine was based at St. Andrews Church, the initiative was more broadly seated within the larger Episcopalian community and not associated with one particular congregation.

#### **A Shared Mission?: The Participation and Non-Participation of Fellow Churches**

Members of St. Anna's Church worked also to expand the ministry for victims of violence by soliciting the participation and involvement of other churches. While much of the growth was initially within the Episcopal community, other religious denominations and institutions later joined. The hope was for a shared ministry extending beyond the Tremé to the larger community and city.

The weekly email list of murder victims' names, for example, was sent out to the local Episcopal community and individual congregations were encouraged to participate. At the end of 2009, there were about eight or nine churches participating, however not all aspects of the ministry had been adopted. Most commonly, churches incorporated the recitation of victims' names during the Prayers for the People section of the Holy Eucharist service. Forms of this prayer were also most readily adopted by churches and other religious institutions outside of the Episcopal community, including the recent addition of a Baptist and a Lutheran church.

In addition, several churches joined with St. Anna's in the distribution of roses to various city offices. Volunteers from St. Andrews, for example, delivered roses to the mayor's office and the district attorney's office; the group at St. Anna's still took roses to the Chief of Police; and members of Grace Church were taking roses to the City Council chambers.

There was, however, some reluctance on the part of several churches to adopt some of the other aspects of the ministry. For example, to date St. Anna's is the only church that has a "murder board" displayed anywhere on its premises. Other churches, when approached with the idea, decided that it would be too controversial and "bad for business." This was the response especially for the churches that were connected to an elementary or secondary school and for those congregations actively trying to recruit new members.

One member of the Episcopal community shared her ideas about this refusal. She stated, "Some rectors have very, very conservative congregations. And conservative congregations tend to focus on personal salvation; they are not really focused on the world out there at large, although they might be involved in some charitable activities. But that's not the kind of transformative work that social justice work is about."

In addition, the reluctance to participate in certain aspects of the ministry was attributed to a congregation's direct knowledge of violence. As one resident stated about the impact of violence in her neighborhood: "Violence? It's not a lived reality. Most people up here probably don't know anybody that's been a victim of violence. There are some, but the way that people around here think about crime is – well they think most of it is drug related. So they don't really care that much. Like I said, social problems are not

a lived reality. Unless it's their maid, there is probably nobody they know that has any social problems. Nobody they know is poor; nobody they know has trouble getting access to health care. Nobody they know has any trouble paying for the private school that they want or getting into the magnet school that they want. It's not a lived reality; it's not part of their everyday existence."

I asked several people, therefore, if the ministry at St. Anna's Church was limited in its reach, given the reluctance of some churches and members to participate. Perhaps it would only go so far, impacting primarily the home community of the Tremé. Deacon Elaine gave this response: "But it hasn't. And that's the miracle of it, it started out at St Anna's with a congregation of about twenty members and now we have at least nine or ten churches participating. And that's been only in the past year. And beyond that we don't know what impact it's having. A lot of people talk about it and come to see the murder board and participate. Where it's going to end up is anyone's guess and besides it's not our job. We are faithful and we do what we can but really, it's in God's hand. It's in God's hands."

## CONCLUSION: THE BLESSED PLACEMAKERS

*“Blessed are the placemakers, for they shall be called the children of God”*  
-- Matthew 5:9, The Geneva Bible, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1562

### **“Making a World with the Right to Stay”: The Beatitudes of Peacemaking and Placemaking**

In the second edition of the Geneva Bible (1562), there is a small printing error appearing in the Matthean Beatitudes, the opening verses of Christ’s Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3-12). These verses comprise a list of the most valued inner qualities for humankind; the characteristics of true disciples. The cultivation of these traits is believed to carry with it the promise of God’s favor, blessing, and reward.

The printing error appears in verse 5:9. Instead of “Blessed are the *peacemakers*, for they shall be called the children of God,” an “l” is mistakenly substituted for an “e,” turning “peacemakers” into “*placemakers*.” The edition is commonly known as the “Placemakers Bible.”<sup>65</sup>

Far beyond its significance in the sixteenth century, the Placemakers’ Bible has an interesting, although unintended, contemporary relevance. It highlights an overlapping relationship between peacemaking and placemaking and makes the moral and religious

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<sup>65</sup> The Geneva Bible was first printed in 1560, produced by a group of Protestant scholars who fled England during the reign of Queen Mary I (Mary Tudor). During the Marian Exile, the quest to restore England to Roman Catholicism was accompanied by the deadly persecution of religious reformers. Many Protestant scholars found refuge in Switzerland; a group there began work on an English translation of the Bible in 1557. Its completion and distribution to England and Europe after the end of Queen Mary’s reign, and to the New World with settlers who preferred its Calvinistic theology to the more “modern” King James Bible, fueled “a sturdy and articulate Protestantism” in Britain and within Anglo-American culture more broadly (Metzger 1960:352).

dimensions of both processes abundantly clear. This is an important intersection for New Orleans, as my research findings reveal; a city where these processes have particular weight and influence, especially in the current and critical moment of continuing urban violence and in the midst of post-disaster social reform and urban redevelopment.

Scholars of the bible theorize that each proclamation of the Beatitudes serves as a challenge or summons; a call to the faithful to develop specific characteristics and to engage in right conduct, thereby joining the ranks of the blessed and entering the Kingdom of Heaven (Guelich 1976). Some take the argument even further, suggesting that the Matthean Beatitudes go beyond character and conduct to successively outline the path of moral and religious transformation. Along this path, the faithful servant is transformed; it is “In the “hearing” of Jesus’ proclamation [that] one experiences his desperate need (Matt 5:3), one experiences and reflects God-like mercy (Matt 5:7)... one experiences a new allegiance of his person (Matt 5:8)... and, in experiencing the undeserved an unexpected *šālôm*, becomes himself and agent of same (Matt 5:9)” (Guelich 1976:433).

While the transformation from the experience of peace to the act of peace-making is made clear here, the extended relationship between peacemaking and placemaking is less explicitly defined. However, relevant theoretical and theological work exists that links peacemaking with processes of social reform. Minister and Harvard theologian Francis Greenwood Peabody, for example, wrote of peacemakers shortly after World War I. Referring to the Beatitudes in the post-war context he states, “The Peace-Makers are not merely peaceable. They are not merely celebrating an armistice in war, but [are] committed to a continuous and creative task. They are not rejoicing in the world as it is

but rebuilding the world as it ought to be. They are not concerned with congratulation but with construction. That is what makes them “children of God,” or gives them “the rank of sons of God.” They are having a part in God’s creative work. They are the people who, accepting the world as it is, with all its crudity, brutality, and even horror, propose to make a world which has the right to stay” (Peabody 1919:52-53). For Peabody, the work of the peacemakers – in making “a world which has the right to stay” – constituted “a comprehensive and continuous task of political reintegration... social regeneration... and of moral restoration” (Peabody 1919:56).

So too is the work of New Orleans’ peacemakers, who dwell in a city with a similar war torn feel, from the extent of recent hurricane damage, to the persistent conditions of social and environmental instability, to the violent crime that continues to destroy local lives, families, and neighborhoods. Despite, or perhaps because of all of these problems, the majority of New Orleanians, as they envision their collective future, are forging a path to peace. As peacemakers they seek also to make and remake place – imaginatively promoting and developing the morally grounded, resilient, and non-violent conditions that they believe will sustain the lives of individuals, families, communities, and the city at large. I present the key findings of my research, therefore, with a view of these “blessed placemakers,” following the paths that they themselves take towards the transformation of people and place.

### **Summary of Key Findings**

The case studies of moral and religious community presented in this dissertation provide a detailed and intimate view of peace and placemaking. The data is embedded



within the rich and detailed descriptions of human dwelling in specific populations and places. This includes description and analysis of social, political, and environmental history, current conditions, as well as daily life, worship, and service. Findings shed valuable light on the course of life and death in the urban delta -- the decline and devastation, the vulnerability and violence, as well as the social and cultural richness, the progress and recovery, and the hope for the future.

The case studies reveal further how the members of these moral and religious communities work to bring about transformation and change. The data provides, for example, an up-close and intimate view of group members' beliefs, motivations, capacities, and concerns; and reveals what they do to address these concerns. Ultimately the transition from vulnerability to resilience, from insecurity to security, and from violence to peace is understood. What results in particular is a comparative understanding of *how* these processes proceed; the challenges that arise along the way, and the kind of peace and place they are able to create.

I summarize here my key findings. My research reveals that there is a distinct liminal quality to everyday life in the urban delta and specifically in the post-Katrina moment of urban redevelopment and reform. Residents exist in this context in a more or less suspended state, held "in-between" the threat and state of vulnerability or disaster on the one hand and the possibility of resilience and peace on the other. This liminal quality is built even into the landscape itself, where the elements and geographic boundaries are variable and difficult to discern. In this interanimated view, people and place are mutually constituted and in close relationship and dialogue.

My findings thus demonstrate the particular dimensions of ‘deltaic lived experience.’ Drawing on Victor Turner’s characterization of liminal and marginal people or “edgemen” (1969:128), I argue that the people of the urban delta are uniquely positioned on the edge – in this case the margin or cusp of social and environmental change and reform. There they work creatively and imaginatively to transform the vulnerable conditions and circumstances that surround them, thus remaking lives and social worlds from the bottom up.

A close examination of their methods and forms of peacemaking and placemaking reveals four primary aspects and approaches. First, these processes are geographically situated and specific, tied to and emerging from within distinct communities, institutions, and places. Furthermore, to the extent that people are integrated with and embedded within these geographies and landscapes, peacemaking and placemaking unfold through the body, moving fundamentally forward through sensory exploration, perception, and being in place.

Second, it is in these places and embodied relationships that people work to access and connect; finding and developing in particular the larger sources and bodies of knowledge that frame and guide non-violent, peaceful, and sustainable recovery and redevelopment. Thus I argue that the cultivation of ‘wisdom,’ as it is variously conceived and understood, is at the center of urban social change in this vulnerable setting. In particular, my research finds that the practitioners and groups that make up these case studies develop and share certain moral and religious narratives. These represent the state and significance of the place and the people: stories about what has happened, who was involved, and why it matters, as well as related frameworks on how conditions can be

remade – particularly the sources of moral wisdom and power that will best carry self, city, and society forward.

Third, these moral and religious stories and forms of ‘wisdom’ are then developed and shared through ritual, ceremony, and other varieties of worship and devotion. These practices vary according to the specific theologies, cosmologies, and belief systems of the groups as well as according to social-geographic, cultural, and political histories, which specify needs and motivations. My findings offer a comparative perspective on these processes and practices. One commonality is that through these forms of religious engagement practitioners continually reaffirm identity and belief, as well as formulate and refine the moral and religious messages that they then put forth for the congregation and larger community.

Fourth, peacemaking and placemaking extends from these urban moral geographies, ‘wisdom places,’ and ways of being to the larger city and society. Narratives and frameworks are shared more broadly, fueling the formation and organization of moral and religious communities which operate as new forms of civic engagement in the post-disaster recovery period. New Orleanians thus work to secure their lives and worlds, end the violence in their communities, and bring about social and spiritual reform at the local and regional level.

My research finds, however, that these processes are challenging and difficult and as much as there is the potential for unity, order, and the convergence of ideas, there is also the potential for disunion, conflict, separation and difference. In the post-disaster space of urban redevelopment, many religious and other groups vie for center stage, competing for limited resources and opportunity to voice their concerns. Despite the

efforts that have been made at interreligious communication and cooperation, New Orleans remains in many respects a very parochial city. While this is somewhat unexpected for a city where geographic and cultural boundaries are so generally blurred, research findings reveal nonetheless definite lines of demarcation, separation, and even exclusion around and between neighborhoods, ethnic groups, religious denominations, and congregations.

Finally, my research shows that the success or failure of these groups is ultimately not measured by their ability to reduce crime, convert non-believers, educate the public, improve general conditions, or come together in a unified way. Ultimately, their “success,” according to religious clergy and practitioners themselves, is in the personal and spiritual transformation that results from participation and engagement. Even if there is no measurable outcome, one is potentially transformed through the process of worship, service, and otherwise doing the work. Whatever transformation occurs at the individual or community level is believed to have an ultimately broad impact.

I detail these findings in the sections that follow, providing examples and linking back as much as possible to the data presented in the case studies. I also spell out both the broader contributions of this work and the additional research questions it generates. Finally, I give some attention to the process of doing ethnographic and documentary work; considering for example the challenges and rewards that accompany the study of people and place, particularly when immersed within vulnerable and violent conditions.

### **The Urban Delta as a Liminal Space and Experience**

My research demonstrates that there is a liminal and in-between quality associated with the experience of life in the urban delta. As each of my case studies shows, residents contend on the one hand with a social and environmental state of vulnerability marked by conditions of disaster, devastation, and continuing violence. My findings reveal in particular the history, political-ecology, and social-geography of these conditions and settings. In each case study, for example, I assessed the specific dimensions of urban development, including the stratification of city life along ethnic and economic lines, the competition for resources and access to dry land, and the disenfranchisement of certain populations, particularly poor people of color who remain most vulnerable to disaster and who suffer a higher incidence of poverty, blight, violence, and other social problems.

On the other hand, however, residents progress towards an envisioned but not yet realized state of security, protection, and peace. If vulnerability is considered over time, particularly its chronic and cyclical nature, then its lived experience must also be a continual process of orientation and reorientation in relation to continuously changing social and environmental conditions. This process of mutual adjustment and response, between one's way of being in the world and the changes taking place in the landscape and world at large, constitutes peacemaking and placemaking at its most basic level. The ultimate objective is the peaceful transition and transformation from one social and spiritual state or way of being to another.

### **'Edge-People'**

The four case studies presented in this dissertation feature the stories and situations of many peacemakers and placemakers – from religious clergy and

practitioners, to city officials, and community residents. Each of them has something important to say about the conditions in which they find themselves and the opportunity they feel they have, or do not have, to bring about change. I consider these individuals and groups as ‘edge-people,’ existing on the margin or cusp of transformation in what remains a liminal and unsettled place. Not accepting of current conditions, they work to creatively and imaginatively move away from the edge, refashioning their lives and social worlds.

The post-disaster setting, in this case the extended post-Katrina recovery period, is considered by many to be an ideal time for this work and movement. Some residents argue, for example, that the impact of Hurricane Katrina has provided a “clean slate” – upon which to lay down the physical, social, and moral foundations that will shape the future. Others maintain that the social, environmental, and other boundaries that exist here have become more blurred in the wake of the disaster. This perhaps creates space and opportunity, for example by opening up established communities and networks, into which people can more easily insert themselves and become involved.

These liminal dwellers and ‘edge-people’ proceed, therefore, with the work of peacemaking and placemaking. And their work is in turn shaped by the particular visions they have for the world they seek to create. Overall, this is a world that is peaceful and non-violent. There is no more killing, no misdealing or corruption, and no further battles for power and control. People live in a harmonious way with respect for each other and the surrounding environment. Safety and security is ensured. Social problems are eased and there is increased freedom and access to resources and services. The structures of society are working for the people, with good representation, leadership, and forums for

citizen participation and engagement. The city and society overall, is one that has survived and transformed in such a way that it is even and especially pleasing to the higher powers of the world as they are variously conceived: God, the ancestors, the *Lwa*, and other divine forces. Thus people and place, from the past to the present and to future time as well, are holistically, social-geographically, morally, and spiritually envisioned and aligned.

### **Ways of Peace and Place Making**

#### ***Embodied Experience, Embedded in Place***

A key finding in my investigation of peacemaking and placemaking is that within the liminal space of vulnerability and at the threshold of change; residents access, acquire, apply, and promote certain moral ideas and frameworks to guide recovery and redevelopment at the individual and collective level. I argue that these ideas and frameworks can be more broadly understood as forms of ‘wisdom,’ set in urban places. Inspired by and expanding on existing literature on moral geographies and indigenous forms of ‘wisdom,’ for example among the Western Apache as described in Basso’s *Wisdom Sits in Places* (Basso 1996), I argue that residents in New Orleans work at specific sites within a radically changed and still changing landscape to both understand and refashion the meaning and significance of place and experience.

Their work is shaped largely by their understandings of vulnerability – in particular the history, impact, and experience of disaster and violent loss. Furthermore, to the extent that the social-geographic dimensions of local dwelling unfold and people are

fully embedded within the landscape in interanimated relationship, peacemaking and placemaking are embodied processes and practices. As such the knowledge and the ‘wisdom’ that is gained at these places and shared more broadly happens through the body and the senses, through movement and perception and being in place.

To provide some concrete examples of these processes, I return to the case studies of my dissertation, beginning with the first moral and religious community I encountered, the Our Lady of Prompt Succor Peace Prayer Group. The work of peacemaking and placemaking that emerges within this group is geographically specific, intimately connected to the Shrine. This is the spiritual home of Our Lady, the place where members and other devotees gather, and the place where petitions are made or sent. At the Shrine one can most directly access the sources of divine knowledge and power to which Our Lady is intricately linked.

The Shrine also facilitates and supports the growth and work of this moral and religious community, providing a space where people can gather to participate in collective prayer and other forms of worship. Community and shared belief is thus reinforced, and one’s constant presence and membership is also possible, symbolized by the lit votive candles and petitions one leaves behind. In addition, the way in which group members connect and participate at the Shrine is an embodied and sensory experience set in place; illuminated for example by the sound of voices in unified prayer, the cadence and pitch of religious recitations, and the sensory experience of the Shrine itself, complete with the blessed statues and other materials dedicated to Our Lady.

The members of La Source Ancienne Sosyete Ounfo engage in peace and placemaking from their home base of the peristyle – the small temple situated behind the



residence of Manbo Sallie Ann Glassman, in the protected and interior space of the neighborhood. In many ways the temple is an extension of the home, located essentially in the spiritual leader's back yard, demonstrating the often intimate nature of these urban moral geographies. The group, however, is not bound by this location and they venture out into the community, extending the reach of their work to specific intersections, sites, and neighborhoods across town where the need is perceived and assistance is requested.

The ceremonies and other forms of honor and service that emerge here are inherently embodied experiences and practices. Participants work to open the spiritual doorways in all directions and dimensions in order to convene with the spirit world, thus inviting and accessing the sources of divine knowledge and power they possess. Spiritual possession, when it occurs, is an embodied experience connected to place and to spirit. It represents the ultimate union between the body, earthly concerns, the vulnerability of specific people and places, and the divine knowledge and power for healing, balance, and transformation that comes through interaction with the *Lwa*.

At New Hope Baptist Church, much of the peacemaking and placemaking activities occur at the main site of the church in Central City. However, in many ways New Hope is a moral and religious community whose geography is broad and sited in numerous locations. The site of the Martin Luther King Jr. monument at the intersection of South Claiborne Avenue and Felicity Street, for example, is significant for the historical and ancestral body of knowledge it represents and the visibility and interaction it provides for church members and ideas across a wide cross section of city residents. Peacemaking and placemaking also extends to specific sites within the community, such as the geographic boundaries of high crime areas as well as specific crime sites.

At all of these places, processes of peace and place making are embodied and sensory experiences. This includes the inspiration that church members feel in worship, the perception and movement within church buildings or around the neighborhood, or the rush of traffic on either side when standing on the neutral ground. It also extends to the emotional experience and memory of violence and death – including the vigils and crime walks through dangerous neighborhoods, the prayer that takes place at specific crime sites, and the immense, powerful, and embodied emotional states that accompany the loss of a loved one.

Finally, the members of St. Anna's Episcopal Church are similarly engaged, working first from their church home on Esplanade, where the murder board, the scrapbook for victims of violence, and the ongoing worship, prayer, and outreach for congregation members and extended community are all sited. The moral geography of this group, however, is also broad, including the other churches that have joined in the ministry, related community organizations, and the offices of city government, where peace and place making activities also take place. The embodied and sensory nature of peacemaking and placemaking is demonstrated across all ministries and geographies, seen for example in the carrying of the roses to city offices, where each rose represents a murder victim and the carriers themselves feel like pall bearers. The process of naming the dead is also an embodied and sensory experience situated in place, demonstrated by the writing and recitation of the names of murder victims and the rhythm and ways of enunciation. More broadly, participants look for the transformation of the body and spirit in carrying out these ministries and in doing related social justice work.

### *Sources of Infinite Knowledge or 'Wisdom': Telling Moral and Religious Stories*

My research findings further reveal that it is at these specific geographic sites that group members access and connect to the larger sources of knowledge or 'wisdom' that guide peacemaking and placemaking. These moral and religious narratives and frameworks represent the messages and meanings that religious groups and practitioners give to their circumstances, experiences, and views of the world. They are intricately connected to everyday lived experience, emerging out of the history, social-geography, and relatedness of local congregation and community members. Ultimately, these moral and religious stories work to frame and reframe the context of social and spiritual life, carrying self and society forward, from the bottom up and through recovery and redevelopment. Thus these sources of knowledge and 'wisdom' work to emplace voice and vision from the margins of society to the center of social change.

To illustrate this aspect of peace and placemaking, I return once again to the date of my case studies. The main narrative emerging from the Our Lady of Prompt Succor Peace Prayer Group, for example, is a story of miracles, devotion, and quick help that is told and retold in such a way that it further substantiates the devotion and reaffirms people's faith and sense of security. The story comes up especially in times of crisis, for example when hurricanes threaten the area, when there is violence, or whenever someone is in need. Embedded in the specific place of the Shrine, and the spiritual home of Our Lady, the story is also one of care and protection for the City of New Orleans and its inhabitants. The more it is told, the more believers have faith in the divine power and intervention of the Blessed Mother, to watch over them in times of trouble. More broadly, devotion and prayer to Our Lady works by extension to connect group members to the

larger body of divine knowledge and the teachings of the Church, including the moral guidelines for behavior and conduct, the understanding and confession of sin, repentance and forgiveness, the power of divine moral judgment, and the hope for eternal and new life. The ‘wisdom’ they envision is a state of being, a city, and society existing in direct accordance with the divine laws of the Church.

The Vodou Sosyete tells a similar story of divine intervention. Their story is of the power of the *Lwa*, who provide guidance and restore balance and order. Particularly relevant for the anticrime ceremonies they perform; the Sosyete tells and retells the story of the *Lwa* Ogou. His is a narrative of power – its abuse, its infinite source, and its redistribution in ways that in turn empower the people. As the story is shared and performed among practitioners and residents, the unchecked nature of violent crime in particular locales is reframed as a story of moral and spiritual authority and correction, for a situation out of hand and a people currently powerless to affect change. Residents ask for guidance and transformation, that they be made into “better metal” – a state of ‘wisdom’ where power is equitably shared, where the spiritual energies of the world are balanced, and where everyone works with honor and respect for the common and collective good.

The moral and religious story that emerges at the New Hope Baptist Church is one of salvation, redemption, and healing through love, worship, and the Word of God. In regards to the problem of urban violence, the story connects through the larger body of Christian religious knowledge to focus on the cultivation of love for self, family, and neighbor; the value of every human life, regardless of ethnicity, age, gender, or social standing; and divine precepts of right and wrong conduct. Furthermore, the story is

developed and shared at specific times and places, for example at a particular crime site, key intersection, or street within the area. Congregation members follow the violence wherever it occurs, telling and retelling along the way the stories of the deceased and the care and support available to family members. Thus they work to creatively and spiritually refashion the community, turning places of violence into places of healing and ‘wisdom’ – one homicide, crime victim, crime site, or impacted community at a time.

Finally, St. Anna’s Church also tells and retells the stories of murder victims, simultaneously developing a moral and religious narrative concerned with the restoration of humanity, as a way to honor and remember *all* those impacted by violence in the city. The message is that each of these lives has value, regardless of the victim’s background or involvement in illegal activity. The story is thus directly connected to a larger body of knowledge – the mission of social justice work and the model and life of Christ. Group members focus on *attending* to and caring for all those who are impacted – victims, perpetrators, family members, law enforcement, and others. Trusting ultimately in the power of God to heal, transform, and ultimately solve the issue, they look primarily for the ‘wisdom’ and spiritual growth that comes through being, participating, and doing.

### ***The Everyday Access and Application of ‘Wisdom’: Worship, Ceremony, and Ritual***

These moral and religious narratives and frameworks are primarily developed and shared through ritual, ceremony, and other forms of worship and activity. As detailed in the case study on the Our Lady of Prompt Succor Peace Prayer Group, for example, the focus is almost entirely on prayer. Group members consider prayer as a powerful form of social and spiritual action and it is performed to affect change in several key areas –

especially to ask for protection and to bring about an end to violence. Prayer meetings, however, are not limited to these concerns. Members address instability and insecurity in all realms, including health and family matters, career, financial problems, and other issues. The data reveals also a regular pattern, structure, and rhythm to prayer here, which perhaps provides an important routinized framework through which these concerns are repeatedly addressed and through which moral and religious frameworks are developed, asserted, and shared.

For the members of La Source Ancienne, the focus is on service to the *Lwa* and the community. For the group this occurs primarily through their regular weekly ceremonies, concerned with making the invisible visible, inviting and interacting with the spirits, and accepting their guidance, wisdom, and power to affect change more broadly. In addition, a distinct moral and religious story emerges at each ceremony, depending on which *Lwa* is being served, the extent of possession, and the particular needs and questions of the community. The presence of the *Lwa* thus reinforces and perpetuates a particular story and moral viewpoint, enhanced by the messages they bring regarding the state of the city and society.

At New Hope Baptist Church the focus of worship is primarily on salvation and religious transformation. The main moral and religious story that is preached and shared among congregation members and the broader public is that once one commits one's life to the church and to God, then dark and evil forces cannot prevail. In the face of any adversity or tragedy, therefore, New Hope members fall back on the Word of God, engaging in a variety of activities including bible study, prayer, support groups, and praise worship to reconfirm their faith and trust in God. Particularly for those who have

been directly impacted by violence and especially those who grieve the loss of a loved one, members state that this salvation and close connection to God is the only thing that will transform suffering and bring one to a state of acceptance and peace. Programs like the support group for mothers provide a weekly space for prayer and testimony, where the story of God's power to heal and save is also perpetuated and demonstrated.

Finally, the moral and religious narrative that emerges at St. Anna's Episcopal Church focuses on the restoration of humanity for all victims of violence. This is a narrative that is told and retold through several forms of worship and related ceremony. These include the continuous updating of the murder board, the weekly delivery of roses, the updating of the scrapbook, and the prayer and recitation of murder victims' names during Holy Eucharist services. These activities are scheduled throughout the year, essentially becoming part of the church calendar. Thus they are routinized and integrated to such an extent that the moral messages they carry are embedded within everyday church life and worship.

### ***The Formation and Growth of Moral and Religious Communities***

The development and sharing of these moral and religious stories fuel the organization and growth of larger communities. These communities often begin in people's homes and local neighborhoods and then expand through their establishment or link with more formal religious institutions and settings: churches, temples, specific denominations, and other forms and sites of spiritual collectivity and significance. In many ways these places and institutions shelter, support, and facilitate the growth and work of the community. And in some cases religious organization extends even further,

through the formation of coalitions, partnerships, and other cooperative relationships. Thus moral peacemakers and placemakers expand and move from the local level into new and more communal arrangements.

The Our Lady of Prompt Succor prayer group, for example, began with a series of meetings that took place in one of the founder's homes. As the number of participants grew, the group began to search for a more permanent location, a larger institution through which they could support and grow their mission more formally. Their particular moral and religious narratives about the safety and security of the city, and their devotion to the Blessed Mother, linked them to the Shrine of Our Lady of Prompt Succor. The Shrine thus became a sheltering institution and home for the group, supporting their slow but consistent development as a moral and religious community.

The Vodou Soysete also began in a private home, with small ceremonies organized and hosted by the founder and *Manbo* of the group. A peristyle and temple was eventually built behind the Manbo's residence, which offered a more permanent space for the community, one that could be open to newcomers and the general public but also one that could remain somewhat secluded and sheltered from full public scrutiny. The moral and religious community that continues to develop grows also through the impact of public ceremonies, which serve to educate residents about Vodou and attract additional members. Local members stay connected through weekly ceremonies, choir and drumming rehearsals, and service projects. Those out of the area keep in touch through telephone and electronic communication via the group's list serve, until they return and are able to participate in person. The growth of the community happens also more broadly, through public education as well as more subtly, through related collaborative



work on community revitalization. Finally, the growth of the Sosyete is also supported through their connection to Haiti, particularly their historic relationship with Papa Edgard, a respected Oungan, and the authority and credibility he lends to the group.

The moral and religious community at New Hope Baptist Church is one of the largest in the city, with some 1500 members. Membership has grown steadily over the years, primarily because of the charismatic spiritual leadership at the church, the lively nature of the worship services, the wide variety of spiritual and service programs offered to congregation members and the public, and the very visible commitment the church has made to non-violence and the improvement of human conditions, particularly within the African American community. The church's anticrime ministry is also one of the oldest. While the numerous activities and programs strengthen the bonds between congregation members and clergy, the community has also had more time to form and develop these interconnected relationships.

They group has also been able to establish strong relationships with community and government entities, which provide additional support and legitimization of the church as a valued partner in the fight against crime as well as in other issues. The community works also to position itself in cooperative relationship with other religious groups, as it attempts to build unity and coalitions across the city. Thus they work to develop a broad and unified front in the form of a larger African American moral and religious movement that reaches beyond the boundaries of specific sites and congregations.

Finally, the community at St. Anna's Episcopal Church has grown in large part because of the visibility of their ministry for victims of violence and the active role that

church members take in social justice and outreach work. Many new members are attracted to this kind of community involvement, inspired by the commitment made by spiritual leaders and parishioners alike. Religious organization on a broader scale is seen in the efforts of church clergy and members who work to recruit additional parishes to participate in the ministry. In the span of four years since the ministry began, for example, eight additional churches – the majority of them from the Episcopal community – have incorporated aspects of the ministry into their worship and service. This has created a broad and mostly unified religious community of Episcopalians and other Christian groups who embrace social justice work and are committed to ongoing work that calls attention to the problem of urban violence. In many ways, the various programs of their ministry have become portable, facilitating their adoption and incorporation by other churches and religious groups. As these stories and programs circulate, the scope and strength of this moral and religious community continues to grow.

### ***Morality, Civic Religion, and Urban Reform***

Finally, as these communities and local moralities organize and develop, I argue that they operate as new forms of ‘civic religion’ – focused on urban reform and redevelopment. Each of these groups extends from their beliefs, practices, and forms of ‘wisdom,’ to situate themselves in direct relationship with processes of social change, oftentimes entering and existing in the public sphere as active players in the overall reframing and reconstruction of the city. The degrees to which they step forward, however, and their approaches, vary considerably.

While the Our Lady of Prompt Succor Peace Prayer Group does not self identify as a political group, they are nonetheless extremely connected to the issues and concerns that shape recovery and redevelopment. Their primary focus is on the future of the city, and they ask specifically what can be done, and to whom shall we go, to end the violence and “reclaim” New Orleans in line with the teachings of the Catholic Church. Given this concern, their emphasis on collective prayer makes sense; it is considered as the most powerful form of action and appeal for a situation that is “out of control.” Thus group members are holistically engaged in the work and process of social and spiritual reform. Their additional emphasis on moral and religious conversion fits also within the context of civic religious engagement as they work to bring about the reform of values and beliefs more broadly.

The Vodou Sosyete has gone through an interesting shift since Hurricane Katrina, placing civic religious engagement almost at the center of their mission and activity, alongside their service to the *Lwa*. The Sosyete has become more directly involved in grassroots community organizing, focused in particular on several neighborhood revitalization initiatives including a community healing center scheduled to open in 2011. In this work the Sosyete has partnered with other local community organizations, local government, non-profit agencies, and other entities. The core beliefs of Vodou are not featured explicitly or exclusively as part of these activities; instead the Sosyete has helped to create a diverse interfaith community united around a set of shared moral principles. These include the search for balance and harmony, mutual honor and respect, and a concern for the environment. As a form of civic religion in the recovery period,

they work to actively and collectively participate in the healing and transformation of the city and society.

The New Hope Baptist Church has very consciously positioned itself as a civic religious movement, closely engaged with social and political concerns. Their standing and work in the public sphere is well established, in large part because of their numerous public worship services, neighborhood vigils, prayer walks, and demonstrations. Their position as leaders of civic religious engagement is enhanced also by their well established connections to other community organizations and city government. They enjoy close ties, for example, with the New Orleans Police Department, the Mayor's Office, the District Attorney's Office, and many members of City Council.

Representatives from these offices routinely attend and support New Hope's larger events and programs, to show their support of the church's antiviolence ministries and campaigns. The church works in turn to maximize these relationships, thus merging their spiritual and civic obligations to address the problems and poor conditions impacting the community.

Finally, the ministry at St. Anna's Episcopal Church can be similarly described as a form of civic religious engagement, which has emerged in response to the problem of violence in the recovery period. Congregation members, however, take a more centralized position in regards to their worship and work. While they are extremely committed to community service, advocacy, social justice work, and other activities for the improvement of local conditions, they do not assume the burden and full responsibility for the outcome. Instead they turn to God, trusting him as the ultimate source of power and authority. Members feel that their role is to simply but profoundly

call attention to the problem through a wide array of methods and activities. Thus, the group exists as an engaged form of civic religion that is active in the public sphere, but focused in their commitment to social justice on the transformation that results from the process rather than a particular or measurable outcome.

### ***Obstacles and Challenges***

Despite the broad scope, visibility, and impact of their work, these peacemakers and placemakers face distinct challenges in their work. For example, their reach and influence is somewhat limited by the sociocultural, religious, political, and other boundaries that exist locally, which often complicate interreligious cooperation and exchange. As one member of the clergy described, “uptown doesn’t know what’s going on downtown, the black community doesn’t know about what’s happening in the white community, this congregation is doing its own thing and so is that one. New Orleans is a very parochial city.”

These boundaries are surprisingly strong, especially in a place known for the integration and interaction of people, cultures, and geographies. The Our Lady of Prompt Succor Peace Prayer Group, for example, works hard to maintain a boundary of privacy and separation, keeping their distance from political affairs. Congregation members from New Hope Baptist Church, however, try to break through boundaries yet are met with some skepticism in neighborhoods outside of Central City, where the church and its mission are not well known. Similarly, members of La Source Ancienne are reluctant to hold their anticrime ceremonies in neighborhoods that do not specifically invite them, for

fear of being seen as outsiders imposing their ways on a community determined to be “in need.”

While these groups express a desire and hope for a unified and shared moral vision of the city, there is a definite lack of consensus on exactly which moral frameworks should be included and who should be the main author and architect. This is a situation and a frustration expressed by clergy and parishioners at New Hope Baptist Church, for example, when attempts at coalition building lead to competition over leadership roles as well as division and factions within and across congregations and associations. Tensions also exist within the larger Episcopal community, as some churches have declined to take on some of the more “public” and “controversial” aspects of the ministry, expressing concern for example about the “negative message” a murder board placed outside their facility might send.

Finally, these tensions also have to do with strong emotions such as jealousy and anger that exist between groups. For example, if one group steps forward as the ‘authority’ on a particular religious tradition or practice and other groups are left behind. In part these tensions have to do with access and transparency. Groups that are open to the public, for example, invite more media attention, while others remain more closed and inaccessible. For spiritual leaders such as Pastor Raphael, for example, who is featured often in the media, it is situation of some concern and discomfort. In Manbo Sallie Ann Glassman’s case, her popularity has benefitted the growth of the Sosyete but it has also exposed her to threats and accusations of wrongdoing, based primarily on questions of race, ancestry, legitimacy, and authenticity.

### *Issues of 'Race', Ethnicity, and Class*

In fact many of the boundaries that exist between these moral and religious communities are boundaries based on notions of 'race,' ethnicity, and class. These issues are particularly prevalent in New Orleans, given the historic and current configurations of people and place, and the correlation between social-geographic vulnerability (to disaster or violence) and ethnicity, economic status, and other social factors. Issues of 'race,' ethnicity, and class are also at the center of recovery and redevelopment efforts, given the level of suffering that Hurricane Katrina revealed, as well as the unequal access to rescue, relief, and other services. One end result is that many poor people of color have not been able to return since the storm, thus changing the post-Katrina demographics of the city to a wealthier population with a lower percentage of certain groups, especially African American residents.

These same issues underlie peacemaking and placemaking processes in the recovery period. They are evident, for example in the particular views held by the members of these groups regarding the current and future state of the city, and in one's understanding of and response to the problem of violence and processes of criminalization. As people talk about, envision, and work for an end to violence and the reform and redevelopment of city and society, they reference 'race,' ethnicity and class in tacit or explicit ways. The association is almost unavoidable; connected, for example, to the information that is shared about the perpetrators and victims, who are mostly African American males; the designation of neighborhoods where the incidence of crime is most high and where poor people of color comprise the majority of the population; and the identification of contributing factors to violence such as poverty and poor education,

which have their greatest impact in New Orleans on vulnerable and marginalized populations.

To talk about crime in New Orleans, therefore, is to talk, directly or not, about the African American community – the people, their values and behaviors, the impact and the amount of suffering they bear. Furthermore, as people talk broadly about what needs to happen to solve the problem, they are in essence talking about what they perceive should happen within the African American community, be it the creation of more opportunities for education and employment, better parenting and mentoring, or moral and religious redevelopment.

The case studies provide some useful examples of this referencing and discourse. I focus first on the extent to which religious groups approach (or distance themselves) from the topic in distinct and perhaps strategic ways. At the Our Lady of Prompt Succor Peace Prayer Group, for example, members speak openly and frankly about the immoral conditions they perceive to be at the root of urban violence. They are quick to say, however, that they are not referring to any particular community or ethnic group, and they generalize instead to a New Orleans cultural influence that impacts all people equally. Group members seem cautious in this respect, and they work to maintain a broad focus on the city and its residents as a whole. Members do recognize their tendency to deny and distance, and the position they maintain relatively far away from the impact. In addition to prayer to end the violence “out there,” therefore, they also turn inwards to address the judgment and violence that exists in one’s own heart and mind. In the process they become more aware and responsive to violence wherever it occurs and whomever it impacts.



Issues of ‘race,’ ethnicity, and class are raised frequently in relation to the peacemaking and placemaking activities at La Source Ancienne. They emerge primarily from people outside the Sosyete who disapprove of the groups’ white leadership and membership, as well as the public attention it receives. These tensions are demonstrated in numerous ways, seen for example in the displeasure of the visitor from Haiti that the ceremony was not done “correctly”; in the threats made to Sosyete members if they continue to practice; or in the claim that one has to have African ancestry in order to be an authentic and true Vodouist. Sosyete members in turn respond to this tension and criticism, for example in their reluctance to conduct anticrime ceremonies in neighborhoods unless they’ve been invited; in the declaration by the group of priests in Haiti that anyone can practice Vodou; and in the location of the temple at a relatively safe distance from the overtly public and scrutinized Voodoo “scene” of the French Quarter.

Within the predominantly African American congregation at New Hope Baptist Church, issues of ‘race,’ ethnicity, and class are addressed directly. Clergy and parishioners, for example, speak openly about the burden of violence on the African American community and problems of black on black crime. The congregation responds through programs and campaigns that aim to unify the community across religious and other boundaries and get citizens involved and committed to the principles of non-violence and the overall betterment of local conditions. The work serves, in part, as a way for the community to assume responsibility for both the problem and the solution, working in partnership with supporting organizations and government agencies. The congregation responds also to what they perceive as a lack of value placed on human life, and African American lives in particular, who in this community have often been

dismissed, left behind, ignored, and otherwise forgotten. New Hope members are thus responding through religious and civic demonstration, declaring that the lives of black New Orleanians are just as valuable as any other – and the loss of life just as tragic.

Of all the religious groups in this study, St. Anna's Episcopal Church is the most racially diverse, and members work to integrate and address issues of race, ethnicity, and class in all aspects of their worship and ministry. The church actively positions itself as a place where all are welcome and it maintains a distinctly urban and progressive atmosphere supportive in particular of marginalized populations in need (for example the homeless, battered women, recovering addicts, and the family members of murder victims). Similar to New Hope Baptist Church, one primary focus for St. Anna's is to recognize and value all victims of violence – regardless of 'race,' ethnicity, 'class,' or social standing – and to restore humanity through processes and activities of honor and memorialization. Members of St. Anna's also work to bring the stories of all victims forward, featuring them prominently on the murder board and in the scrapbooks that are kept in the front of the church. The impact of this work extends far beyond the congregation; upon seeing the murder board and related ministries, community members often contact the church to express thanks – in some cases acknowledging the occasion as the first time the deceased loved one has been formally recognized.

### *Measures of Success*

An important question in the analysis of this data has to do with how effective these groups are, despite the challenges and obstacles they face. Do they succeed in their attempts to stop the violence and reform the city and society? While the question is

important to consider, consistent and reliable measures of success, so defined, are difficult to find. One important measure, cited frequently by the groups themselves, is the rate of violent crime. Group members look for signs of improvement and try to assess the impact of their programs and initiatives. At the end of my two year period of field research, however, the overall crime rate had not significantly declined and city residents remained vulnerable. Furthermore, in some cases the rate of crime had actually increased for certain neighborhoods, given the demographic and geographic changes that occurred after the storm.

The members of the Peace Prayer Group at the National Votive Shrine of Our Lady of Prompt Succor, for example, keep a close watch on crime statistics. They watch primarily from a distance, as crime has not been as bad in the neighborhood surrounding the Shrine, but they continue to pray for an end to violence around the city. The continuing violence, however, is not seen as a sign that their methods are failing; rather it reaffirms on some level their belief that the situation is so far out of control that prayer is the only thing left to do, and that eventually the transformative power of their collective efforts will make a difference.

Members of La Source Ancienne Sosyete Ounfo, for their part, often cite the decline of violent crime in the Bywater, which they associate with the anticrime ceremonies they have performed. Demographic and socioeconomic changes are noted as well; particularly the transformation of the Bywater from a crime-filled and dangerous part of the city to “one of the trendiest local neighborhoods.” Sosyete members thus see a direct link between their ceremonies and service to the *Lwa* and these identified successful outcomes of crime reduction. The association is also shared by some residents

in the extended community, demonstrated by the fact that when the crime rate goes up, the Sossyete is more frequently called upon to perform an anticrime ceremony to restore balance and order.

The clergy and parishioners at New Hope Baptist Church are also very watchful of the crime rate, in order to keep track of progress but also so that they can respond directly to each and every homicide impacting their community. Their response is immediate, sometimes faster than the police, with prayer walks and vigils to the site of the crime or visits with the victim's family. These activities are seen as deterrents to violent crime; for example clergy and parishioners remember and frequently cite the drop in homicides that occur during their weekly street vigils in the Thou Shalt Not Kill campaign. Their results, however, have not been consistent and the crime rate has remained high. Even with their most recent ministry, the "Yes We Care" program, the cease-fire agreement has been undermined by the ongoing murders occurring in the immediate vicinity of the church. The disappointment that members express about these events indicates the expectation and hope they have for success and change.

St. Anna's Episcopal Church is similarly focused on each and every murder that occurs, as they work to honor and remember all victims of violence. However, the group is not overly concerned with the rate of crime, trusting ultimately in the power of God to solve the problem. While they look primarily for the transformation that accompanies social justice work, they remain nonetheless committed to the ministries and programs they have, working to ensure their success and benefit for the community.

It is also difficult to assess the progress that these groups make towards the creation of a unified and shared vision of nonviolence and peace, within the religious

community as well as more broadly. While groups express a desire for cooperation, communication, and shared vision, the city remains in many respects divided. Some religious groups have started to build bridges, improve relations, and begin collaborative work, but others still struggle with certain prejudices, assumptions, and conflicting agendas that keep people separate and delay progress forward.

However, even if these problems continue, these religious groups have had and will continue to have an impact. In many cases their work facilitates a personal social and spiritual transformation, one that takes place at least within the hearts and minds of practitioners, if not within the broader community. As one participant described, “even if my prayer doesn’t change anything, well at least *I* am changed in the process.” Many practitioners also report their arrival at a personal state of healing, acceptance, and peace, through their own spiritual practice as well as through their commitment and participation in more public forms of civic religious engagement. In some cases, the neighborhood follows suit, with families and fellow residents coming together for the betterment of local lives and conditions.

### **Broad Impact and Contributions**

This research project has broad impact, expanding knowledge on several interconnected themes within the discipline of anthropology and in related topics and fields such as disaster studies, urban studies, religious studies, and studies of placemaking and resilience building. The research also has an important applied benefit, with specific relevance for the City of New Orleans and similar settings.

By timing and location alone, the research contributes to the anthropology of disasters, particularly to investigations of the long-term impact of catastrophic events. It considers the period of long-term recovery that follows such events as a liminal space and experience, and sheds light on the processes of navigation, orientation, and change that occur as people work to make (and re-make) sense of their environments and social worlds.

The research has special value for its focus on disasters in urban settings and for its investigation of urban violence in the recovery period. It thus contributes to the field of urban studies by looking at city dwelling, beginning at the level of the person then extending to family, home, community, and more broadly. It considers in particular the experience of life in the urban delta, identifying a gap in the literature on the social and cultural life within deltaic and port cities. The research works to fill this gap by providing valuable data on the specific vulnerabilities that exist here as well as the processes of social and environmental change underway.

The research contributes further by demonstrating the particular incidence and impact of urban violence in this setting and in the recovery period following a major disaster. As a long-term ethnographic study the project gives an important voice to those who are literally on the front lines of this issue. Rather than focusing on a particular crime such as murder, or broadly on criminality, the research explores the experience of suffering and loss and the opportunities and activities of healing and recovery. Such in-depth and anthropological examinations of urban violence are few, especially in the City of New Orleans, where there has not been a recent study.

The research is thus valuable for the overlapping relationship it sets up between placemaking and peacemaking, seeing the transformation from vulnerability and violence to resilience and security as essential and vital to the long-term sustainability of people and place. By focusing on peace and placemaking in this regard and in this setting, the research views the city as a transformative space, a dynamic and generative site. The research also contributes by expanding on theories of placemaking, developed by Basso and others, to examine site specific moral and religious stories – “wisdom places” – in the urban context. The study of the local moral and religious forms of ‘wisdom’ is valuable; it reveals, for example, how moral and religious communities form and how they develop and promote specific frameworks for redevelopment and reform more broadly. It reveals also the obstacles that exist in this work, for example the racial, socioeconomic, cultural, and geographic divisions and the conflict and competition of religious ideas.

Tracing the formation and the work of these moral communities and frameworks, the dissertation takes the examination of religious peacemaking and placemaking a step further to investigate their role in urban redevelopment and reform, through the emergence and work of new forms of civic religious engagement. The research thus contributes to a reinvigorated inquiry in anthropology and the humanities more broadly on the connections between religious ideas, practices, and social and political change (Levine 1992, Tole 1993, Harris 1999, Gifford 2004, Lincoln 2006).

It is here that the project has particular local relevance, contributing to applied work in New Orleans on urban crime, healing, and local forms of justice as the city continues to rebuild. While New Orleans will never be the same city, its new identity and existence are not yet fully determined. The research, therefore, provides an important

comparative understanding of the kinds of religious grassroots initiatives at work at this critical time, and their influence in reframing and remaking the city and society.

The research also contributes to applied work in settings beyond New Orleans, an important contribution given the integrated nature and reality of violence in everyday urban places across the nation and world. Findings are also relevant given the steady urbanization of the world's population, and the increasing vulnerability of urban dwellers. Overall the project will be useful for community and religious leaders, scholars, policy makers, government officials, and others who are concerned with processes of urban renewal, the motivations for civic participation and social change, and the long-term sustainability of vulnerable and marginalized communities.

### **Remaining Questions and Future Research**

In addition to its theoretical and applied contributions, the success and value of any research project is also measured by the additional questions the research generates for future inquiries and projects. This research project connects to several sets of related questions. They are relevant for additional research in New Orleans as well as representative of broader concerns and inquiries across disciplines and settings.

First, the dissertation in its comparative structure, takes a necessarily wide stance to examine the social-geography, history, current activities, and mission of four different religious groups. While the focus is primarily on the narratives, beliefs, and practices emerging from within these communities, the broad scope of the project limits the extent to which individual stories and experiences can be examined and presented. Additional research, therefore, could expand and extend interviews with clergy, parishioners, and



others, perhaps following specific families, victims, cases, or crimes, to understand at a deeper level the processes of civic religious engagement and transformation over time.

Questions also remain about the role of religion in the transition from vulnerability and violence to security and peace. While the research shows that moral and religious stories are central to the process of peace and placemaking, additional research could usefully compare these processes outside of the religious sphere. One would ask, for example, if there is something particular about religious belief or practice that makes these kinds of navigations and transitions possible and what in particular a moral or religious orientation provides.

Research might explore, for example, whether or not religion provides a larger and supportive framework and system of beliefs which offers guiding principles helpful for restructuring lives in the wake of disaster, tragedy, or crisis. In a place so devastated, there may be a sense that everything needs to be rebuilt, even the basic tenets and values of life that structure behavior, social lives, and relations. Research could also explore the nature and impact of crime itself. Particular crimes such as murder might be so impactful that they generate fundamental questions of right and wrong, thus connecting readily to moral and religious concerns. Related research could also take up questions of religious authority, for example the processes that determine who gets to speak about and designate what these values and moral concerns are.

Given the diversity of opinions and agendas, and the lack of a unified voice among the religious community in New Orleans, questions remain about how far peacemaking and placemaking can proceed in this interreligious urban space. Its impact, for example might be limited in scope and influence due to the number of competing

viewpoints and concerns. For progress to occur on a broad scale at the level of city and society, therefore, religious groups must ultimately adjust and shift accordingly in support of cooperation, dialogue, and shared vision. Research on whether or not they do this, and how they do this would be valuable.

Further research is also needed about the boundaries that exist around populations and neighborhoods as well as the extent to which issues of 'race,' ethnicity, and class are submerged or at the forefront of processes of placemaking and urban redevelopment. Is the formation of moral and religious communities really about the promotion of a general sense of transformation and change, or are these processes more directly grounded in the associations and feelings that people have about 'race,' ethnicity, and class after the storm? Who, for example, does one envision living alongside in the new New Orleans?

Finally, this dissertation has focused primarily on Christianity, with the one exception of Vodou, although one might argue that the close relationship between New Orleans Voodoo and Catholicism makes even this case not so far removed. Additional research, however, could usefully explore processes of peace and placemaking among other religious traditions. Such research would shed light on civic religious engagement in settings where the religious diversity is greater, or where Western and Christian influences are not so prominent. Research might also expand to include non-believers, perhaps comparing religious to non-religious forms of engagement and reform. Such research might answer a related question about whether or not what is taking place in New Orleans can be seen in other cities, or if New Orleans is a unique case because of the history of disaster there as well as the particular configuration of religious belief and practice.

## Leaving NOLA

I left New Orleans in the late summer of 2009. After two years of fieldwork, I had hoped for the opportunity to remain, longing to write my dissertation in the midst of all of the people I had met and the place and the landscape with which I had become so familiar. But it was not to be; the funding for dissertation writing that I received required residency at a university outside of the area. So I left, full of mixed emotion, and with no idea of how I would come to make sense of my time there, or when I might return.

The move turned out to be a good one. The distance from the city gave me some much needed space to breathe and digest, and begin to analyze the data I had collected. Over the course of the year that followed, I listened closely and repeatedly to the interview recordings I had made, processed and poured over the many photographs I had taken, and continued my study of the history and configuration of people and place across the city and region.

The first and most immediate insight that I had was a realization of just how exhausting it can be to live and work in New Orleans. So much of life there is in limbo; at times it seems like everyone around you is trying to sort it all out. No one is settled. One minute there is cause to celebrate – an event or some measure of progress; the next minute there is tragedy -- another murder, an approaching hurricane, some other kind of devastating news. This is the experience of a city and society that is neither completely disrupted nor destroyed and far from recovered and transformed. The stress takes its toll, as many residents had told me, and as my now comparative distance confirmed.

However, as I began to sort through all of my data, the second insight was a strong reminder of the commitment and perseverance demonstrated by the people I encountered over the course of my two years there. These include the people in the four religious groups that make up my study; however more broadly it involves the many additional contacts, friendships, and family connections I made and strengthened while I was there. From a distance and in my analysis, I began to see and understand the various stories and narratives that individuals and groups developed to navigate the space of transition and change. I began to more fully understand and appreciate the experience of life in a state of vulnerability and violence, and the processes by which people worked to make and remake their individual, social, and communal worlds.

My research findings, therefore, tell the story and experience of social-spiritual change, situated in the center of the change itself. The process is ongoing and the outcome remains uncertain. Yes, there are perceptible signs that change is at hand – small glimpses and currents of progress that promise a better, safer, and more balanced existence. Residents are getting themselves and their communities together, planning, and testing the waters with new ideas and visions for the future. Just as quickly, however, it can be business as usual – and it feels like the city just can't get back on track. Vulnerability and violence are on the rise and confusion and corruption continues to mar the best efforts of local community and government institutions.

It is a challenging place from which to draw firm conclusions about anything. However, the stories that emerge from the case studies feel quite valuable, and their comparative analysis sheds light on the ways in which people orient and navigate this

city. They reveal how people sort out and address their circumstances, and what proposals and actions they make to affect change.

### **Becoming an ‘Edge-Person’: Musings on “Death Work” and Ethnography**

Somewhere in the midst of my two year residence, I had coffee with a man who worked as a chaplain within the local criminal justice system. Funded by a non-profit institute that places chaplains in various local institutions, his job was to provide pastoral care and consultation to community members, mostly family members of murder victims, as they navigated the court and correction systems. He spoke frankly about the rewards and challenges of this work, although the challenges seemed to far outweigh the rewards, and described in particular the role his own spirituality played in the management of difficult emotion and frustration on behalf of his clients. The situation was so grim that he described what he did as “death work.” He was watchful for problems of co-victimization – “when seeing someone else’s loss means that you lose as well.”

His description of “death work” gave me pause. In many ways I thought it was an interesting term for any endeavor that takes one so close to the difficulties and the darkness of life. It is indeed a challenging thing to surround oneself with people who have experienced such a tremendous loss and who are still suffering, grieving, and struggling through.

With time, however, it became apparent that “death work” can have many kinds of moments and dimensions. It can be a process, depending on one’s faith, spiritual orientation, or view of the world, which takes one up close and personal not only to the difficulty and darkness but also to the moment and experience of transition, change, and

illumination, as things become clear. It is through the continued experience and the witnessing of change that one comes to understand that “death work” is not only about darkness and difficulty – eventually, if one is lucky, one gets to witness the transformation and passage to that which the experience of liminality ultimately leads. A death worker, therefore, also rests on the edge – between immersion in vulnerability, devastation, and despair and the space and place of healing, repair, and renewed hope.

Victor Turner’s descriptions of liminal or marginal people again come to mind – the religious prophets, artists, poets, healers, and other “edgemen” who thrash about and thrive in the middle, “seeking vital relations with other men in fact or imagination” (1969:128). These “liminal thinkers” deal with processes of change and transformation, even becoming “possessed by spirits of change before change becomes visible in public arenas” (Turner 1974:28). Thus they are, according to Turner, “the unacknowledged legislators of mankind” (1974:28).

To witness these processes in New Orleans was a privilege. The city is full of marginal and “edgy” people; not a coincidence in a town known for its artists, musicians, writers, and prophets. I was inspired by them in my work, and hoped that I might one day be able to place myself among them, as a writer and liminal thinker. Certainly I shared the experience of the in-between in my time there. My inquiry unfolded in the midst of personal and family tragedy, recovery, and new hope – a search for peace and security that swept me up in the city’s own trajectory. In many ways it was a shared journey.

Ethnography, therefore, became a vehicle for investigation as well as personal exploration. As Michael Jackson writes, “Ethnography throws one into a world where one cannot be entirely oneself, where one is estranged from the ways of acting and

thinking that sustain one's normal sense of identity. This emotional, intellectual, social, and sensory displacement can be so destabilizing that one has to fight the impulse to run for cover, to retrieve the sense of groundedness one has lost. But it can also be a window of opportunity, a way of understanding oneself from the standpoint of an-other, or from elsewhere."

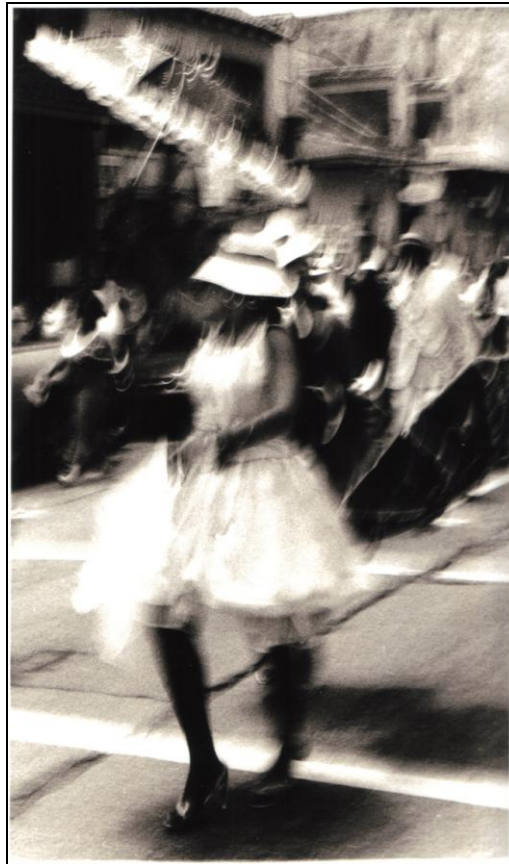
"This is not to imply that one can enter fully into the lifeworld of others, standing in their shoes, as we say. Nor does it imply the possibility of ever understanding the human, for that would require a comprehensive knowledge of how the world has appeared to everyone who lives and has ever lived. Ethnographic understanding simply means that one may glimpse oneself as one might be or might have been under other circumstances, and come to the realization that knowledge and identity are emergent properties of the unstable relationship between self and other here and there, now and then, and not fixed and final truths that one has been privileged to possess by virtue of living in one particular society at one particular moment in history" (Jackson 2009:233).

My research in New Orleans paralleled my own family's process of recovery and healing, and my individual quest and search for balance after adversity in an increasingly unstable world. The people I encountered along the way have in many ways been teachers, and for their guidance I am extremely grateful. It seems only fitting, that some of their many words of 'wisdom' be the words that accompany the hopefully temporary leave I take of this place:

*I thank Katrina. As much as she took away from us, she has done for us. Because the path that we're on is such a wonderful path. I feel better... I feel freer inside. I feel confident knowing that tomorrow will be better*  
(R.B.).

*Faith is what sustains you and faith is what helps you get out of bed in the morning and say oh look, the sun is shining! Look at that! I guess I'll get out of bed today. I guess I'll get out of bed. And then you say, thank you God, and then at night when you're totally exhausted and your praying is going and going and going and going, you put your head on the pillow. And you can say Goodnight God. Thank you for another day. Goodnight mother Mary, help me sleep through the night helping have a good night's rest, so tomorrow I can start all over again (B.M.).*

*I have often considered the philosophy of the jazz funeral—of sadly grieving the loss of life and joyously celebrating the beginning of its glorious resurrection. My old life has ended, but a new one has begun. Though the road ahead will be difficult, I look forward to this new beginning. I anxiously wait to see down which paths this new stage of my fortunate jazz life will lead (Michael White, 2007:827).*



**Image 27. Second Line on Rampart. Photo by author.**



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