

Getting Ready description of New Orleans: January 2009

“Do you know what it means to miss New Orleans?”

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FRAMING THE QUESTIONS: *It might help to keep this New Orleans time-line in front of you as you read the following speech. Also, as you read the following speech, please keep in mind the following questions:*

1. *What were the historical challenges and tensions that seemed to shape New Orleans into the unique place that it is?*
 2. *According to the Dr. Lawrence Powell, how might these historical challenges and tensions of this place called New Orleans benefit our entire country?*
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NEW ORLEANS: AN AMERICAN POMPEII?

The following is a speech given by Dr. Lawrence Powell of Tulane University at the University of Michigan on September 29, 2005.

Let me be clear about the title of this talk. It was never my intention to argue that New Orleans is fated to become a lost city in the literal meaning of that term. New Orleans will be rebuilt because cities in the modern period, as Laurence Vale and Thomas Campanella have pointed out, are resilient places. Every major urban area devastated in the last 300 years by disasters, manmade and natural, from London to Lisbon, Chicago to San Francisco, Tokyo to Hiroshima, Warsaw to Berlin, down to and including lesser-known catastrophes like the earthquake-toppled city of Tangshan in Maoist China and the lava-consumed metropolis of Goma, in the Republic of Congo—every single one has been rebuilt except for the city of St. Pierre on the French island of Martinique.

So New Orleans will be rebuilt. But will its recovery result in one of those “lost cities” that have been restored solely as sites of tourism and myth?¹ No less troubling is the possibility that New Orleans will be demographically unrecognizable after its reconstitution: whiter, smaller, and less diverse than when I evacuated two days before Katrina stormed ashore, literally bereft of the African American roots that have seeded so much that is authentic in American popular culture. The new service class could very well be Latino judging from the clean-up crews that have been trucked in from Texas.

I don’t know how to get this point across without being blunt, but white supremacists have dropped the pretense of code-speak and are saying flat-out, “don’t let them back in,” using the n-word for emphasis. These raw words echoed at the police blockade on the Mississippi River bridge connecting New Orleans with the West Bank of suburban Jefferson parish, where policeman from Gretna, a notoriously racist town, fired shots over the heads of Convention Center evacuees as they walked toward the on-ramp pursuant to instructions that buses were waiting on the other side to carry them to safety. A friend who rode out the storm in Uptown New Orleans tells of witnessing gas station owners urging the military to keep blacks out. Several Uptown swells and white-shoe lawyers who huddled in the Hyatt Hotel across from the crowded misery inside the sodden and unsanitary Superdome were almost jubilant about the ethnic

¹Laurence Vale and Thomas J. Campanella, eds., The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3-4.

cleansing wrought by Katrina, so friends in the media report. Republican Congressman Richard Baker, representing a prosperous area of Baton Rouge, said this of the storm's aftermath: "We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did."

Of course, many of the African Americans against whom some white Louisianans want to bar the door are the most marginalized members of the community, dispersed and more voiceless than ever, hardly in a position to contest the optimistic narratives of the powerful and well-born. The media and a few uncomprehending volunteer aid workers instinctively focus on the criminality of black gangs—the "soljas"—or some of the admittedly surly refugees housed in Houston shelters. But I would put it to them and to New Orleans' governing class: can a real New Orleans be rebuilt without black folk? Or maybe I should reframe the question: Can a diverse New Orleans be rebuilt without reproducing the awful inequities of the pre-disaster past?

Our indicators of social misery are simply awful. We are last, or nearly so, in every category in which we should be first; and first in every category where we should be pulling up the rear. Children in poverty, illiteracy, infant mortality, school dropout rates—it's a depressing litany. Louisiana has the highest per capita rate of incarceration in the nation, which is to say the world. Prisons are our fastest growth industry, creating new jobs in depressed rural parishes. So where do we go from here? Can a new New Orleans be rebuilt that is diverse as well as equitable? I wish I could join the chorus of optimistic resilience. The unvarnished truth is I'm confused and uncertain, my guarded optimism struggling against sober realism.

While water covers most of the world it also reveals a lot, too. Katrina revealed our poverty and racial inequality, along with the social disorganization that they spawn. It exposed our environmental slothfulness and vulnerability to natural disasters. But one thing Katrina couldn't reveal is the history that has produced this most improbable of American cities. I want to spend the rest of this lecture doing that for you. For history is not just about the past and the present; it is also about the future. And one way that the future is controlled, as George Orwell famously wrote, is by controlling the past, which is why now is a propitious moment to think hard about the ownership of New Orleans' history, and about how the conceiving of the past might guide the re-visioning of the city's cloudy future. This is a tall order.

The history of a storied community like New Orleans is too lengthy and variegated to impale on a few pointed highlights of a single lecture. I therefore want to try a different tack: a quick glance at a series of snapshots gleaned from the pages of the [New Orleans Times-Picayune](#) in mid-October 1900, on the eve of the hydrological revolution that drained the backswamp for commercial and residential development, that is, back to the period when the city still hugged the natural levee to which it recently contracted when Lake Pontchartrain suddenly extended its shoreline. These flashbulb memories from a century ago reveal as much about the city's problems as did the waters of Katrina, offering striking glimpses that reflect backward and forward in time, and resonate even today.

A look back

The social structure of New Orleans, on both sides of the racial divide, from top to bottom, is shot through with playfulness. We leap at the chance to throw a party, invent a new festival tradition, and dance in the streets. We relish our reputation as the libidinal safety valve for Bible belt America. I doubt the musical form we call Jazz could have evolved in any other place but the hinge culture of New Orleans, for reasons I'll try to make clear later in my lecture.

When the last sludge-coated piece of debris is loaded on a dump truck and hauled out of New Orleans, you can be sure someone will hire a brass band, secure a social and pleasure marching club, and organize a second-line, maybe escorted by plumed and sequined Mardi Gras Indians, their spy boys and flag posted to the front and scouts out on the flanks. Already

mounds of trash are popping up on neutral grounds, as media strips are called in my adopted hometown, bearing handmade signs “Toxic Art. This Exhibition Will Kill You!”² We’re pretty creative in our profanity, too. The latest local brush-off is: “Go FEMA yourself!”³ Any community still capable of laughing at epical misfortune will surely bounce back in one form or another. New Orleans is like a low-grade fever. Once the place gets into your bloodstream, it is hard to recover from its seductive charms.

Dirty water

But, as Katrina has lain bare, there is more to the Crescent City than its delight in whimsy and love affair with pleasure. The city has problems, big ones, and always has. Its hygienic and environmental challenges are daunting, and they have been around for a long time. A banner headline I stumbled across in the 1900 edition of the Picayune puts the problem in perspective. The story concerned a decision by the Louisiana Supreme Court exempting the privately-owned Water Works Company from paying taxes to the city, thus virtually releasing it (to quote the daily New Orleans Picayune) “from any obligation to furnish any water to the city for any purpose or on any terms whatever.”

This was an alarming decision, for despite the city’s being surrounded by water, very little of it was potable. One reason was an ill-advised experiment with privatization. Because the city couldn’t service its bonded debt following the Civil War, it farmed out its water and sewage service to private companies, and they don’t appear to have taken their contractual obligations very seriously. Twice a year the private firm that had landed New Orleans’s waste disposal contract was supposed to empty the city’s 65,000 cesspool and privy vaults. The understanding was that the noisome filth would be hauled downstream by tugboats and dumped there, allowing the river to dilute and disperse the feculence into the Gulf. But the tugboat captains thought this was a waste of time and dumped the filth midstream, directly facing the downtown area, where the human excrement drifted over to the pilings close to the intake pipes of the city’s water system.

As for the privately owned Water Works Company, it couldn’t be bothered filtering the river water. Its profits came from supplying fluids to industrial users, largely to power the hydraulic elevator systems in downtown office buildings. The general population soldiered on as best it could; passing up the muddy public water supply for precipitation collected in private cisterns, despite the “wiggletails” that crenellated the surface. Or they turned to alcohol. Beer consumption soared during the summer months, because it was deemed safer to consume than the public water supply—potation habits that are still very much with us. And they died in great numbers, especially African Americans. “Between 1890 and 1900 the death rate in New Orleans dropped from 25.41 to 23.80 per thousand for white people [which is still staggeringly high] ; but the Negro death rate meanwhile climbed from 36.61 to 42.40—almost twice that of the whites.”⁴ [Hair, 89]

Disease

Not all of the high mortality—and morbidity—can be blamed on the defective water supply. For much of its organized existence New Orleans lived on the shores of a pestilential sink called “back-o-town,” as the bowl was known before it was drained in the early twentieth-century and

² Gwen Filosa and Michelle Krupa, “Rita Washes Away Signs of Renewal,” The New Orleans Times-Picayune, September 24, 2005.

³ James Bennet, “From Oil Refinery, Directing Parish’s Efforts to Recover,” The New York Times, September 20, 2005.

⁴ William Ivy Hair, A Carnival of Fury: Robert Charles and the New Orleans Race Riot of 1900 (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1986 edition), 89; Joy Jackson, New Orleans in the Gilded Age: Politics and Progress, 1880-1896 (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1969).

dubbed [Mid City](#). *Aedes aegypti*, the yellow fever mosquito, bred here in great profusion. Yellow fever was the scourge everyone dreaded. In 1853 alone it carried off more than 11,000 residents (eight percent of the total population). But as late as 1897 a mild outbreak of the disease claimed nearly 300 victims, and 60 died the following year. Less storied plagues also assaulted the health of New Orleanians—diseases like malaria, typhoid, cholera and dysentery, which were far more common than yellow fever. And these epidemics did have to do with foul water—and inadequate waste disposal—as well as a legacy of environmental sloth whose modern-day consequences we are witnessing today. The contaminated ooze now coating post-Katrina New Orleans was partly leached from soil gradually built up by ecological indifference, as though a toxic epidermis had seeped through its asphalt outer garment. As one historian has written, New Orleans at start of the twentieth-century was a “hygienic nightmare.” In fact, it was “the only major community anywhere in the Western world without a sewage system. ‘You are dirty,’ a plainspoken sanitation expert informed New Orleans in 1899. ‘Nature has not been kind to you in topography, and you have returned the compliment, and with interest.’”⁵

Conditions eventually got better: the city a short time later won its suit against the Water Works Company, municipalizing both the water and sewerage service and putting them under a state agency that still operates as the Sewage and Water Board. But the present day system remains badly compromised, and public health and environmental safety still falls well below national standards. Privatization—the delivery of public services on the cheap that the poor once paid for with their lives while the wealthy fled to the salubrity of ocean-cooled summer resorts—was no solution then and is no solution now.

Immigration

I also ran across a series of stories about Italian immigration: ships docking with over 2,000 Sicilian passengers, and their processing by immigration officials in the grueling heat. These were equally revealing glimpses into the historical realities of New Orleans. I half expected to find such reports. For New Orleans was America’s first melting pot city, its first multicultural metropolis. A major entrepot to the Mississippi Valley, and between 1812 and 1840 the fastest growing urban area in North America, the Crescent City by 1860 boasted the highest percentage of foreign-born white persons of any urban area in America—45 percent, a figure that is probably too low. And if you factor in the native-born children of these immigrants, unquestionably a majority of the white population self-identified as hyphenated Americans. Most were Irish and German—in fact, two-thirds were. But there significant ongoing additions from France and the West Indies (about 20 percent of the freeborn), plus a rich smattering from Belgium; from China; from Denmark and Sweden as well as from England and Scotland; from Greece; from Russia and Poland; from Spain, Sardinia, and Portugal; from Switzerland.

It was a veritable Calcutta, and remarked as such by travelers who marveled at the human variety they encountered in this overnight sensation of a port city. Furthermore, what made this impressive immigration unique is that newcomers here, in contradistinction to their countrymen elsewhere in the young republic, were obliged to assimilate to a different European cultural base. It wasn’t Anglo-Protestant, as was true of New York City, Philadelphia, Baltimore, or Boston. It was Gallic, Latin Catholic, with markedly different ideas about labor and leisure and race. It was, in short, a European City and retained this vestigial identity long after other immigrant cities had shed theirs; as late as 1918, for example. New Orleans had more public markets than any city in the country: twenty-eight were operating at the time, nine of them quasi-public.⁶ The Sicilians, who started arriving in the 1880 initially labored on sugar plantations, but quickly established truck and strawberry farms across the lake, and got control of the grocery business around town and down near the docks. Many settled in the [French](#)

⁵Hair, [Carnival of Fury](#), 87 and 69.

⁶Sauder, “Origin and Spread of the Public Market,” [Louisiana History](#) 22 (Summer 1981), pp.?

[Quarter](#) (A little Italy) as well as in Tremé, where Germans, blacks, and Creoles were thoroughly mixed together.

Race

Then there were a couple of revealing 1900 news items about crime and the state of race relations in the city at the time. One was a letter to the editor about how to reform the so-called “vicious classes” and stem the violence that often wracked the city. I wasn’t surprised at finding this complaint, either. Like environmental degradation, our crime problem is not a recent phenomenon. The New Orleans Police Department has never been known for its professionalism; our social contract with the men in blue pays them substandard wages in exchange for winking at their shakedowns of local vice interests.

What is fascinating about the letter is what it reveals about the black community’s ethnic diversity. On the one hand, there was the American black community, overwhelmingly Baptist, and mostly residing in a part of the city called [Uptown](#)—that is, above [Canal Street](#). Many initially arrived by way of the interstate slave trade that boomed during the rise of the Cotton Kingdom from 1812-1860—a sort of domestic Middle Passage, as newly constituted African American families were once again torn asunder by the compulsory labor demands of tropical agriculture. New Orleans was the slave mart for the Old Southwest. About 750,000 of the one million slaves sold from the Upper to Lower South during these years passed through its slave pens, nineteen major ones altogether, scattered hither and yon across the cityscape, a few sited where major banks (whose capital was collateralized by human flesh) now loom up.

Even the big hotels, the Sheratons and Hyatts of their day, used to host slave auctions in the rotunda—for the fancy trade—while bar keeps hustled up customers. Some of our pleasure has always rested on racial oppression. After emancipation, especially during the dislocations of Civil War, these ex-slaves began the chain of urban migration that would mount as the century drew on.

On the other hand, you also had this sizeable Franco-African population: free people of color, [gens d’couleur](#), Afro Creoles, who spoke French and practiced Catholicism. Fourth-fifths were from Haiti (Saint Domingue), and were lighter-skinned by virtue of their kinship with the white Creole population, who often openly acknowledged that kinship. Compared to more numerous free blacks in, say, Baltimore or anywhere else in America, for that matter, they were prosperous, skilled, educated, cultured, and sophisticated. They formed the urban middle class. They had their own philharmonic society and poetry journal. They operated their own schools and often sent their children to be educated in Paris or New England. They were a third rail—a third caste—in contradistinction to the duo-chromatic system that prevailed elsewhere in the American South, and North. They were politically and intellectually self-confident, too, asserting the rights of citizenship for themselves and the ex-slaves during that new birth of freedom Abraham Lincoln called emancipation. The Louisiana Constitution of 1868, arguably the most racially progressive piece of organic law the nineteenth-century produced in the way of bold assertions of equality, bore their imprint through and through.

What must be remembered about racial interaction in late nineteenth-century New Orleans is the sheer amount of mixing and merriment. For this was when the city’s Afro Creoles succeeded in desegregating, to an astonishing degree, the city’s streetcars, theaters, saloons, even schools. Black musicians were now performing in white concert halls, sometimes before integrated audiences, even doing pieces by [Edmund Dédé](#), the Afro Creole composer who moved to France before the Civil War to direct the Bordeaux Symphony. On Fat Tuesday in 1871 according to the black-owned *Louisianian*, “every shade of complexion, natural, political

and Religious, all mixed in one indiscriminate procession and paraded New Orleans from early morn till long after the shades of night had closed over us.”⁷

The interracial commingling was still going strong in the waning decades of the nineteenth century, when Italians started throwing down roots, and ex-slaves began pouring in from the rural areas of Louisiana and Mississippi, settling on an edge of the back-o-town we now call [Central City](#), where [Louis Armstrong](#) and [Buddy Bolden](#) lived. Racial and ethnic boundaries were not hard and fast, nor were the neighborhoods exclusive, for reasons I’ll give in a moment. And so the mixing and meshing continued: not just in the demimonde precincts of brothels, barrooms, and bordellos, but at sporting events in this most sporting of towns: at cockfights and dogfights and boxing matches, at race tracks, even in baseball parks, where black and white teams played before black and white spectators. The 1880 census listed 205 mixed marriages in N.O. (interracial marriage had been legalized during Reconstruction), and this figure fails to include the number of cohabitations, which were extensive. The polyglot principle even governed labor relations along the docks. Black and white dockworkers albeit in segregated unions, divided up work according to the 50/50 principle; went out on General Strike together in 1892; and—naturally—paraded together on Labor Day.

But by the turn of the century, as the nation assumed the white man’s burden in newly-conquered imperial possessions and the forces of hard racism gained ascendancy, the racial fluidity of reconstruction was swamped by a storm surge of anti-black violence and reaction. This was the social and political realities that the last editorial letter writer had in mind. 1900 was actually a nadir. By then the separation of the races in public institutions and accommodations, including the ballot box, had gotten fixed in law, and would soon become entrenched in custom. In 1890 state lawmakers enacted a separate car law, and in 1892 imposed [Jim Crow](#) on Crescent streetcars by requiring the installation of a moveable screen. At the 1898 Constitutional Convention, white supremacists used a variety of literacy and property tests to disfranchise black Louisianans (and many poor whites as well).

By 1904 black registration fell from 130,000 to 1,342. Ten years earlier Louisiana prohibited interracial marriages. Soon state courts would adopt “any traceable” admixture of African blood as the litmus test of negritude—whereupon countless courthouses went up in flames throughout south Louisiana. Racially mixed sporting contests—baseball, boxing—ceased. Racial unrest disrupted dockworker solidarity: in 1895, when British shippers replaced white workers with black workers, violence broke out along the docks. Even performance opportunities in white society dried up, as white groups supplanted black Creole orchestras and bands.

And all of this was played out against the backdrop of menacing and pervasive racial violence, increasingly heralded by apocalyptic language. Henry Hearsey, for example, the editor of the [New Orleans States](#), once used the “N” word 28 times in a single editorial. In the summer of 1900 he penned an opinion piece titled “THE NEGRO PROBLEM AND ITS FINAL SOLUTION.” If northern agitators continued their agitation, there will be a race war, he argued, and although there would be some white casualties, there would be this consolation: “Then the Negro problem of LA at least will be solved—and that by extermination.”⁸ Vigilante justice was becoming all the rage. Between 1882 and 1903, Louisiana ranked third in the nation in the number of lynchings (285) but not every victim was black. In 1891, during the so-called “Mafia Riots,” a silk-stocking mob comprised of Crescent City’s property and respectability lynched eleven Italian immigrants who had just been acquitted of the charge of murdering the police chief. It created an international incident between the United States and Italy. Yet the worst violence, always and anon, was racial, culminating in the bloody Robert Charles Riot in the

⁷Robert Somers, 32.

⁸Quoted in Hair, [Carnival of Fury](#), 91.

summer of 1900. Charles was a refugee from the post-Reconstruction political violence in Copiah County, Mississippi, who became a convert to black emigrationism (he favored repatriation to Liberia) in protest of lynching. On July 23, 1900, after exchanging pistol shots with a police sergeant and two policemen who tried to rough up him and friend, Charles took refuge in a two-story house in Central City, carrying with him a repeating Winchester rifle. Surrounded by a furious crowd of 1,000 men, Charles coolly dropped 28 of them, killing seven, including four policemen. The enraged mob, now grown to an estimated ten- to twenty-thousand men, finally flushed him out by fire, and then stomped his body into mush before proceeding to ransack black neighborhoods throughout the city. Black New Orleanians beyond numbering fought back against this assault on their human dignity with any means at hand.

Hear Louis Armstrong: “There is something funny about those signs on the streetcars in New Orleans. We colored folks used to get a real kick out of them when we got on a car at the picnic grounds or at Canal Street on a Sunday evening when we outnumbered the white folks. Automatically we took the whole car over, sitting as far up front as we wanted to. It felt good to sit up there once in a while. We felt a little more important than usual. I can’t explain why exactly, but maybe it was because we weren’t supposed to be up there.”

Politics

Finally, I ran across an illuminating series of stories in the Sunday “Society Pages.” Again, no surprise. That section of the paper brimmed with debutante news. The late nineteenth-century was when the marriage of carnival and the social season based on vows of religious and racial exclusion got consecrated, and social anti-Semitism—the idea that Jews couldn’t be gentlemen—had enveloped the carnival structure. (The first Rex, as the King of Carnival is called in New Orleans, was Jewish. There hasn’t been another Jewish Rex since.) New Orleans’s commercial elite has always felt entitled to rule at home.

During its Golden Age when cotton was king and steamboats carried the riches of the world’s most fecund watershed through the Crescent City drain plug near the river’s mouth—roughly the period reaching from the Louisiana Purchase to the Civil War—these princes of cotton and commerce commanded broad economic and political power. But even at the apogee of their power, their claims to political entitlement did not go unchallenged. Merely to get control of their own tax base they had to arrange for New Orleans to be carved into three quasi-autonomous municipalities, only to quickly lose political control to a recently-empowered immigrant-based, working class machine after financial reality compelled the city’s reunification. The business princes reacted with great distemper, mobilizing the nativist mobs that plunged New Orleans into an orgy of political violence during the 1850s. In fact, that’s when they became addicted to the habits of conservative revolution, to what elsewhere I’ve described as “silk stocking vigilantism,” organizing generations of young gentlemen from the [Garden District](#) to carry out armed forays into the political arena. During Reconstruction they overthrew the Republican state government by such means, in a storied battle at the foot of Canal Street in New Orleans. Almost every quadrennial city election from 1877 through the early twentieth-century witnessed armed confrontations between the swells of Uptown and the political gendarme of the immigrant-based machine. The “Mafia Riots” of 1891—the lynching of eleven Sicilian immigrants—was a product of this tradition. So was the assassination of Huey Long in the hallway of his skyscraper state capitol in Baton Rouge in 1935.

The city’s commercial elite are still New Orleanians, however, inflected by its peculiar ethos. Like the successive waves of European newcomers to the city, they, too, were immigrants and had to assimilate to a different culture base. It took them a while to adjust, though. At first [Mardi Gras](#) struck them as “a relic of European barbarism,” and they tried to abolish it. But after thirty years of failed cultural imperialism they decided to throw in with carnival and organize it around the [krewe-parade structure](#) that for more than a century-and-a-half has specialized in throwing

annual free parties for visitors and locals alike. New Orleans Mardi Gras is unlike any carnival tradition you'll find elsewhere: No rites of reversal here, like you find in Europe. New Orleans' version is an occasion for exemplifying the status regime, not inverting it. In truth, it is an admission that their mastery of the city's ebullient cultural life is no more secure than their control of its political life, a fact that not even the black flambeaux carriers they hire to illuminate their nighttime parades can completely obscure. Every year on Fat Tuesday, [Zulu](#), New Orleans' premier black carnival krewe, likes to rub it in by creating a traffic jam on St. Charles Avenue early in the morning, forcing Rex and his consort, together with their horse-mounted Dukes, to cool their heels farther back on the parade route.

Diversity squeezed together

There are a lot of theories for New Orleans' emergence as a mecca of American and African American popular culture, but I think Katrina starkly revealed one of them. It's the way in which the forces of water and nature compelled human settlement for more than two hundred years to hug the banks of this meandering and tightly-coiled river. Those riverbanks are what geologists and geographers refer to as the [natural levee](#), the high part of the city that seldom floods. At its highest elevation, hard by the river, the natural levee soars to an alpine-like fifteen-foot above sea level and then gradually tapers toward the lake. Over the eons this high ground was built up by successive spring floods, as the sediment-rich Mississippi River overflowed its banks with the snowmelt of the upper valley, and literally lifted its shores higher and higher (levee means to lift in French) by depositing heavier silt close to the banks and the microscopic muck farther away. If you did a [cross-section of the land](#) it would look like swollen veins on the back of your hand, like welts, and human settlement attached itself to these welts.⁹ Or, it would look like a shallow clay saucer filled with warm jello, with population clusters clinging to the saucer lip.¹⁰ You can still observe vestiges of this bank-hugging pattern along the bayous of south Louisiana, where some main streets run for 40 miles on either side of the sluggish stream.

Today the natural levees have been crowned with manmade embankments. At first they were three to four feet in height, then ten feet, then twenty feet, until today those earthen berms climb to a height of fifty feet and run for hundreds of miles along both sides of the river, as long as the Great Wall of China, but twice as high and, at their base, ten times as thick. By incapacitating the river's land-producing powers, this diking of the river has proven problematic—a huge subject in its own right. In any event, the way in which cumulative flood events have shaped south Louisiana's landforms also [reveals](#) something about this special seam in American culture.

Because habitable land was so scarce, the population of New Orleans had to squeeze together, cheek-by-jowl—upper-class gents next door to or one street over from raw-boned stevedores, Irish next to German, black next to white, in a salt-and-pepper pattern that still baffles visitors to the city. New Orleans never had ethnically- and racially-pure enclaves until modern suburbanization began slotting the population into segregated subdivisions. The [Irish Channel](#) has always been home to a lot of Germans and African-Americans, and still is. The super blocks defined by grand avenues such as St. Charles, Louisiana, Magazine, and Napoleon are admittedly overwhelmingly white along their perimeter, but the inner core is black, or both black-and-white. And still is. My Tulane colleague Steven Pierce aptly described this patterning as “checkerboard co-existence.” Moreover, as the city grew geographically and demographically, subdividing one sugar plantation after another into faubourgs, it marched simultaneously upriver and downriver, always hugging the banks of the natural levee. Fortunately, an innate sense of playfulness did not permit the construction of high-rise tenements, or even cramped row

⁹[McPhee, Control of Nature]

¹⁰[Pierce Lewis]

houses, to shelter the urban working-class, as happened elsewhere in urban America at the time.

New Orleans turned to an import from Africa by way of Haiti: [the shotgun house](#), twelve-feet wide by 100 feet long; or the double-shotgun if two of these structures were conjoined; or a double-shotgun with a [camelback](#) if a second-story was added halfway back, to avoid densifying residential streetscapes. Between 1850 and 1910 local contractors and artisans built such structures by the thousands in the Tremé, the Bywater, the Irish Channel, and Faubourg Marigny, on narrow lots earlier laid out by French and Spanish surveyors. The residents added stoops and candied up the exterior with gables and French louvered doors and ceiling-high windows as well as assorted architectural gingerbread, and occasionally gimcrack, indulging what a local architect calls New Orleanians' "deep-down operatic instincts."¹¹ On a warm evening people sat on those stoops and front porches. And because of river-enforced propinquity and the absence of impermeable ethnic enclaves, and because New Orleanians of many hues lived together in a culture that has always prized performance and self-display and dancing, and more dancing, the inhabitants couldn't help but share recipes or steal musical licks from one another. Everything happened out of doors, as though on competitive display. Marching brass bands, military funerals (the precursor of the jazz funeral), second lines that snake and sway.

When Buddy Bolden uncorked his trumpet at Lincoln Park (in present day Gerttown) it wasn't African American ears alone that perked up. You could hear his vamps as far away as the Irish Channel. There was, in short, a lot of friendly competition and borrowing among Jewish, Italian, African American and Afro-Creole musicians. It occurred at [West End](#) (now obliterated by Katrina), in Storyville, and on the street, in sidewalk festivals and at brass band affairs. It could be something simple like a Jewish kid coming home from his drumming lessons and repeating the lesson for his black neighborhood friend (Louis "Old Man" Cottrell). Or the adaptation of Sicilian "ear training" techniques by black musicians, or the patterning of a Sicilian musician's "tailgate" trombone style on the black trombonist music he heard on the streets of his adopted city.

Simply stated, it is hard to imagine, and quite futile to try, the hybrid American art form called jazz originating in any other city but New Orleans. It hardly mattered now that [de jure segregation](#) tried to squelch this interracial creativity. As Louis Armstrong once said, —"Ain't it stupid. Jazz was born there, and I remember when it wasn't no crime for cats of any color to get together and blow"—particularly in the ubiquitous brass bands.¹²

Rebuilding

Well, who owns New Orleans' history and what does that history tell us about how the city should be rebuilt? One thing is clear: no single group possesses exclusive title to its history and culture, although a case can be made that people of African descent have larger claims than anyone else. Another obvious point is that that you can't rebuild the city along old lines. [New Orleans is sinking](#), the coastal marshlands that formerly buffeted Gulf-driven hurricanes are disappearing at an alarming rate, forty-square miles per year at last count, and the rate is accelerating, due to the rise in sea level. The river's land-producing powers need to be unleashed once again through controlled flooding. But whose land should be returned to nature? The assumption is that it should be culturally rich places like the [Ninth Ward](#), the home hearth of [Fats Domino](#).

¹¹Quoted in S. Frederick Starr, "The New Orleans Shotgun: Down But Not Out," [The New York Times](#), September 22, 2005.

¹²Quoted in Reid Mitchell, [All on a Mardi Gras Day: Episodes in the History of New Orleans Carnival](#) (Cambridge, MA and London, Eng.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 149.

We need to stop and catch our breath before land speculators fire up the bulldozers. The housing stock here, 85 percent resident-owned-and-occupied by members of the black and white working-class, and constructed of water-resistant cypress and cedar, may be hardier than many people recognize.¹³ Then there's [New Orleans East](#), which got hit especially hard. This is where much of the city's black middle class live. Should it be surrendered to swamp reeds and duck-grass? Or [Lakeview](#), where several Holocaust survivors built new American lives, only to have them destroyed by yet another world-historical tragedy? This whole subject is a tangle of tradeoffs between equity and the environment. Who is so bold to say whose interests should be sacrificed for the collective good?

The real challenge, though, involves restoring the city's diversity without reproducing the inequities of the pre-disaster past. It should be clear from my quick flyover that a New Orleans bereft of African Americans is a city without soul. You might be successful at restoring a facsimile of New Orleans, but it will no longer be a place where brass band creativity gushes forth from the street.

And what of all those African American residents scattered hither and yon, some camping in cotton fields in Missouri, others stranded in domed stadiums and makeshift shelters? Some probably shouldn't bother to return. The city and state have failed them miserably. But, despite a recent [Washington Post](#) poll taken not long after the evacuation suggesting that fewer than half of the evacuees hunkering down in Houston shelters intended to return to New Orleans,¹⁴ there is no dearth of working- and middle-class African Americans who want to go back and help rebuild their stricken community. They have the will as well as the skill. And if they are lacking in skills, they should be afforded on-the-job training opportunities to develop those employment assets, along with creative work-site literacy assistance to address their basic education deficiencies. But how should we go about giving them voice? How do we protect the voting rights of these temporarily stateless persons? How do we protect the property rights of small homeowners from predatory lenders who might foreclose on their mortgages, and sell their land to speculators?¹⁵ How do we attend to the public health and hygienic needs of the frail and infirm? And what about the trauma and grieving many evacuees are doubtless experiencing not merely from a close brush with death but their abrupt removal from spatial environments that provided a sense of self and continuity and the feeling of having a place in the world?¹⁶

But simple honesty obliges that I own up to a possibility that personal feeling has kept me from facing. The City of New Orleans as I've summarized it here may never be rebuilt. It was—and is—the product of a unique history, of a distinctive conjunction of economic and social forces, of imperial neglect and commercial ambition, of demographic movements and upheavals never to be repeated, and of class and racial and environmental injustices that should never be repeated either. Earlier, while noting en passant the sheer awfulness of our poverty, I commented that we were last in things that matter most.

A couple of close friends, Steven Hahn and Patrick Maney, have reminded me that New Orleans may not be not so unique after all, that we might be first in some things that should matter to the rest of the country. Granted, we are sinking into the Gulf and the subsidence might be irreversible, but perhaps we are merely the first city to sink—or to be fallen by natural disaster—and cities on the east and west coasts, which have been equally heedless of the

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Richard Morin and Lisa Rein, "Some of the Uprooted Won't Go Home Again," [The Washington Post](#), September 16, 2005, A1.

¹⁵See "Katrina Mortgage Relief Unfairly Denied to Many Homeowners," at Acorn.org

¹⁶Marc Fried, "Grieving for a Lost Home: Psychological Costs of Relocation," in James Q. Wilson, ed., [Urban Renewal: The Record and the Controversy](#) (Cambridge, MA. and London: MIT Press, 1966), 359-79.

future, are next in line. Granted, Katrina revealed for the entire world both our poverty and our environmental neglect, but, again, perhaps we are merely like the rest of the country in this respect too—only more so, at least for the time being.

It's hard to see silver linings in the hurricane feeder bands that recently inundated south Louisiana, but I detect one. It's the possibility, maybe slight, that Katrina will shift the political discourse away from things that matter little if not at all, to things that matter a great deal—like poverty, racial inequality, environmental degradation and global warming, energy conservation, the proper boundaries between the public and the private, and the role of government. If the national conversation takes a turn toward these subjects, it won't necessarily restore our losses but it will lift our spirits.

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ENGAGING QUESTIONS: *New Orleans has an interesting and, at times tumultuous history.*

1. *How does Powell's speech on this history change the way you think about New Orleans?*
2. *Does it increase your sensitivity to this place and her people? To their historical plight for justice?*
3. *Will it cause you to think and act differently when you are in New Orleans? Why or why not?*

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