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Remaking

New
Orleans

Beyond Exceptionalism and Authenticity

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*Local, Native, Creole, Black**Claiming Belonging, Producing Autochthony*

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The tension between autochthony's apparent self-evidence and its receding qualities in practice comes again sharply to the fore.

—PETER GESCHIERE, *The Perils of Belonging*

We aren't Houma Indian on both sides or full-blooded Tangipahoa. So we really can't go on and rant about how we're Natives, and they're not, you know?

—DAVIS, *Ex Machina*

You get on the boat, you lose your indigeneity.

—SAVANNAH SHANGE, *Gallery of the Streets*

How do you know a local when you see one? Who counts as indigenous in the diasporic spaces of New Orleans?

Here I consider several ethnographic moments in my personal engagement with the public culture of the city, following parading clubs, studying festivals, and working with cultural nonprofits and grassroots organizations. I also draw on experiences shared by friends, neighbors, and other chroniclers of the city to explore how ethnoracial categories, articulated with cultural heritage, are wielded by anthropologists, activists, artists, journalists, festival producers, and others working in the cultural industries of New Orleans. The examples in this chapter explore how New Orleans residents and visitors evaluate each other, drawing lines around what constitutes real belonging and cultural citizenship. They also raise questions about how scholars—as researchers, community organizers, and collaborators—become complicit in enforcing boundaries of belonging, indigeneity, and autochthony. What are the ethical and practical issues faced by cultural workers in these institutional border zones? How does the wielding of categorical identities and the policing of social and cultural borders play into the dialectics of New Orleans exceptionalism?

New Orleanians these days are obsessed with belonging. The issue is widespread, particularly among young professionals who have relocated to the city since 2005, notably those coming to work in the nonprofit sector and cultural industries. These newcomers are simultaneously applauded and criticized for the rise in housing costs, the proliferation of STRs (short-term rentals), and what some are calling the “gentrification of the culture.” The discourse of belonging in New Orleans is complex, stratified, and racialized. And yet this is not a uniquely local phenomenon. Many of the

local patterns of wielding categorical identities reflect global trends heightened through neoliberal governance.¹ However, the intensity and complexity of this discourse in New Orleans, its ubiquity in city life and its internalized rankings, reflect a distinctive sense of place and peoplehood. Indeed, it may be said that belonging in contemporary New Orleans is exceptionally contested. While there has been a noticeable intensification of racializing practices in the city since the floods of 2005,² these are practices with a long history, predating Katrina, levee failures, FEMA, HOPE VI and historic districts, redlining and interstates, suburbanization, white flight, and gentrification. Others have explored the intensification of identity-work and the linkages between these and the struggle for citizenship rights.³ Through examples drawn from the 1970s to the post-Katrina era, I suggest that we consider these practices as part of a wider (and longer) discourse of autochthony in New Orleans, and as a moment in categorical claims making about ethnoracial identity, cultural heritage, and social belonging. This is a discourse that is still evolving and that reflects (or reacts to) contemporary social and political realities, and thus the examples offered here can only illustrate moments in its unfolding, which are already, as of this writing, history.

Both long-term residents and newcomers to the city wield categorical identities like “local” and “transplant,” “gentrifier” and “community” member, “indigenous” and “newcomer,” terms that are often implicitly or explicitly racialized in their usage. While indigenous and indigeneity are now part of the New Orleans vernacular, *autochtone* and autochthony are not. In fact, the latter terms are more widely used in francophone contexts to refer to First Nations or aboriginal populations in contrast to settlers, migrants, (post)colonials, or expats. I strategically draw on the literature on autochthony emerging from francophone sub-Saharan Africa to highlight the political and economic dimensions of identity claims making in contemporary New Orleans.

These examples, from sites as diverse as community gardens, bars, festivals, hurricane anniversaries, and theatrical performances, show how residents and visitors interpolate each other, assert their own claims, and assess each other’s claims to belong. For heuristic purposes, I’ve grouped them into four categories, reflecting four of the major ways in which belonging claims are made. These groupings are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. First is the outsider gaze of tourists, journalists, and researchers—exoticizing, orientalizing, or colonizing and inevitably shaped by their agendas, imaginations, and longings to connect across social divides. Our visitors project their desires onto a city and population that have undergone a flood of mass media coverage, tourism (including disaster tourism), faith-based missions, service-learning classes, and community-engaged research.⁴ These visitors make determinations about which residents they wish to interact with and how. Over time, these encounters have shaped how area residents understand their own identities, whether through affirming, resisting, or confronting the outsider’s gaze. Second, as residents we rank each other’s belonging as more or less central to the city’s identity through our claims to indigeneity and autochthony, as well as cultural property—all of which often leverage familiar tropes of ethnoracial identity. Third, the deployment of time scales allows for an endlessly evolving ranking as degrees of belonging are asserted based on length of residence in the city. A fourth, performative claim to belonging operates through highly valued activities recognized as socially and culturally salient and as transformative, such as festivals, Carnival, and parades. These distinctive ways of asserting belonging may operate simultaneously and are highly context dependent and temporally evolving. While all of these are widely observable in everyday conversations, they may not all be accepted as valid by any specific individual or collectivity.

Claims to belonging are ubiquitous in the social life of the city, and New Orleans residents are undergoing evaluations of their claims all the time. One example underlines the quotidian nature of these discussions. Barbara, a white professional woman in her fifties, was in conversation with a Lyft driver who asked her, “Are you from here?” “No, but I’ve been living here for over thirty years,” she answered. “Thirty years! Well, you’re from here then,” he affirmed. “Now, you know that’s not true,” she replied. He laughed, “Oh yeah, you mean you can’t answer the question about where you went to high school! That’s what it’s all about in New Orleans.” This exemplary exchange involves two people playing with each other and their delight in their shared knowledge of the game, even if it positions them in different locations in the social landscape. The friendly banter between the driver and the passenger can even be read as a marker of conviviality—of pleasure in acknowledging each other’s participation in a shared social world. Even as the rider acknowledges her own outsider status (not being from here), she claims a community of practice through her knowledge of the rules of discourse. The driver simultaneously offers belonging (“Thirty years? You’re from here”) and laughingly acknowledges that such status is ultimately elusive (the high school question). The driver’s inclusive gesture is especially generous since, as other writers in this volume observe, many New Orleanians take it for granted that their city is special, if not exceptional. They may well assume that visitors and newer residents often very much want to belong. A startlingly similar scene is enacted by performance artist Dante Anthony Fuoco in his one-man show *Transplant*. In Fuoco’s version, the new arrival to the city gushes about his eagerness to participate in his first second line, while an Uber driver, portrayed with a Siri-like computer-generated voice, challenges the young rider with the history of the destruction of the North Claiborne corridor by Interstate 10 as she drives him to his Tremé-area rental. “Wow. I didn’t know that,” the young rider concedes in a subdued tone. “White privilege,” the Siri-like voice replies, “means you don’t have to confront uncomfortable histories.” Whereas Barbara, in the above example, is a longtime resident who frankly acknowledges that she’ll never be a native, the young and earnest Teach for America worker in *Transplant* is caught up in a profound longing to belong and has yet to confront his role in the evolving societal structure of the city. Fuoco’s play confronts revanchist capitalism, the crisis in affordable housing accelerated by the influx of young professionals, and white newcomers’ longing for acceptance.

But in addition to the evident struggles of the émigré, there is also a fragility to belonging for many people who appear at first glance to belong to the city unequivocally. And this fragility bespeaks a certain vulnerability. Ruth, an African American writer from New Orleans, recently told me that although she is an accomplished cook, she does not make classic New Orleans recipes like gumbos and étouffées, because, while she grew up in the city, she doesn’t come from a long line of Creole cooks. Thus, while she is clearly from here in many ways, she lacks both a long line of local ancestors and specifically Creole ones. This example illustrates how belonging and cultural property feed into each other, as she suggests that gumbos and étouffées somehow are not hers—they were not transmitted to her in the hearth, as it were, from one cook to another. And not being Creole, as others have written, brings with it an awareness that some New Orleanians will not claim you as theirs.⁵ Not completely.

“Will There Be Hurricane Survivors Here?”

The year is 2006. The location is a community garden in the Seventh Ward. As members of the Porch Seventh Ward Cultural Organization gathered for a workday in the garden, a visitor working on a book about hurricane survivors asked one of the gardeners, “Will there be hurricane survivors here?” The gardener was stunned. Clearly, the visitor assumed that the gardener’s whiteness meant he was not a survivor—or at least, not an authentic one. This visitor was later found in a remote area of the garden, tape-recording an interview with an African American child about his traumatic experiences during the storm.

The writer’s own whiteness may have informed her understanding of survivors as distinguished from other residents and workers as people whose bodies bore the visible marks of oppression. This understanding was no doubt shaped by weeks and months of totalizing media representations of Katrina victims as both poor and black—images that have been thoroughly critiqued.⁶ But it also brings to light two additional dynamics in postdisaster landscapes of the city:

1. White volunteers and activists’ desires for contact with black victims and a related search for cathartic experiences in which they might both exorcise white guilt and reach out to people most visibly and brutally affected by neoliberal revanchist capitalism
2. The mediating role for black-led and black-centered nonprofits in providing access to poor black residents for white or middle-class individuals, organizations, or foundations and cultural activists, disaster workers, or volunteers of all stripes

Elsewhere, I’ve explored how public cultural events like the Jazz Fest mediate black folk cultures for middle/upper-class consumers seeking communion and transcendence,⁷ as do a variety of nonprofits laboring in the postdisaster landscapes of uneven development and reconstruction. While this particular nonprofit in no way intended to provide this service, we found ourselves complicit in this process. As an anthropologist who is also a longtime resident of the neighborhood and a Porch member, I found myself facilitating this practice, to my dismay and frustration. While I confronted the journalist about the ethics of interviewing children, I was left with the feeling that our efforts at community building could be exploited in ways that we had not anticipated, as progressive journalists and policy wonks who wanted to meet real people (meaning: not middle class and not white) would come to our events and meetings. In their search for unmediated encounters with black subjects, they subsequently often erased our multiracial organization from their representations.⁸

Some took pains to show the complexity of Katrina. For example, Spike Lee’s 2006 film *When the Levees Broke* is notable for showing white victims in various states of abjection alongside black victims. Luisa Dantas’s 2011 film *Land of Opportunity* takes an even more expansive view, including architects and planners among her featured characters, alongside middle-class residents of Gentilly, public housing activists, and community organizers in the Lower Ninth Ward. She also portrays migrant workers from Brazil who came to the city to find work, and she tracks their aspirations and disappointments side by side with those of other city residents looking to create a viable future for

themselves and their families. Other representations from the mainstream media seemed to focus almost exclusively on black victims and white affluent residents who manage to escape the worst. Adolph Reed has warned of the limits of the race concept for addressing pervasive and growing social inequality in the United States (see chapter 14, this volume).⁹ As Cedric Johnson and John Arena have argued, racial identity politics can be self-defeating as a foundational political strategy.¹⁰ Dwelling on blackness feeds into both the poverty industries and the culture industries that commodify blackness as a signifier of both social suffering and redemptive creativity. Black-run, black-centered, and small-scale nonprofits active in the postdisaster landscape had the potential to create meaningful and potentially transformative experiences and initiatives for those involved. But with the systematic dismantling of public institutions (including schools, hospitals, and libraries), these organizations were put in an untenable position.¹¹ They could not rebuild 100,000 homes or replace public schools or public libraries or after-school programs. They also risked being used as poster children for neoliberal triumphalism. The emphasis on self-help and autonomy in grassroots organizing and nonprofit organizations recalls the pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps capitalism of Booker T. Washington—strategies that resonate with all those disheartened by the failure of public institutions but that are ill-matched to either the depth of long-term structural violence or the geographical scale of an unnatural disaster like a Katrina.¹²

I began by highlighting the usage of the terms “indigenous” and “survivor,” which are clearly at play in a discursive field that includes the terms “local,” “native,” “creole,” and “black” (in uppercase and lowercase variations). The meanings of these terms depend, of course on the context in which they are uttered—both social and temporal—and they always imply their others. “Indigenous” has always distinguished those who came before from those who came later. In the Western Hemisphere, indigenous people as a category came into being with the arrival of Columbus and the virulent diseases and genocidal practices that soon followed. The term “Creole,” which once distinguished New World Africans and Europeans from those born in Africa or Europe, was repurposed after the Louisiana Purchase to highlight the cultural resistance of francophone New Orleanians, including free people of color, to the processes of Americanization.¹³ As it became increasingly associated with Creoles of color, the term was later rejected by white Creoles.¹⁴ The Civil War, Reconstruction, and the brutal institutionalization of Jim Crow and disenfranchisement of thousands of African Americans became pivotal moments of crisis and resistance that galvanized a heightened discourse of cultural belonging alongside claims to citizenship. The nativism of Louisiana Creoles in the face of American incomers is legendary.¹⁵ With the rise of Jim Crow in the 1890s, Louisiana folklorists used the collecting of folklore—especially African American folklore—as a way to clarify and reinforce their own identity claims as members of a high-status group of intellectuals who were both white and Southern.¹⁶ In post-Katrina New Orleans, “natives” came to distinguish those who were born there from the newcomers who came after the flood as insurance adjusters, contractors, workers, or volunteers to be a part of the rebuilding. The term “local”—a more inclusive term than “native”—was increasingly claimed by pre-Katrina arrivals whose return to the city after the flood concretized their commitment to place.

My argument here is that the local—rather than being apparent or organic—is just as problematic as all the other terms that have come before, like Creole. It was precisely produced by the disaster and by the experts (like the journalist) who came (and continued to come) in its wake with their desperate need to consume or create local knowledge, local perspectives, and local partners.

Community, Neoliberal Capitalism, and Autochthony

In his book, *The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe*, Peter Geschiere examined the resurgence of discourses of autochthony in neoliberalizing contexts—especially in West Africa and Europe—including Cameroon, Ivory Coast, and the Netherlands. In an American Anthropological Association conference panel, he remarked,

The neoliberal is always the celebration of the market and the celebration of community. And because they never define what they mean by it, this creates a situation where members of local populations have to fight it out to determine who belongs in this community. Despite being told that we now live in a cosmopolitan world, more and more people have begun to assert their identities in ways that are deeply rooted in the local. These claims of autochthony, meaning “born from the soil”—seek to establish an irrefutable, primordial right to belong and are often employed in politically charged attempts to exclude outsiders.¹⁷

While Geschiere’s analysis of African identity politics might seem misplaced in an analysis of New Orleans, I would suggest that the mix of economic, political, and cultural crises engendered by the ongoing manmade disaster that followed the 2005 floods are not entirely dissimilar to the crises that have unfolded in post–Cold War African societies, with the advent of political and economic restructuring catalyzed by the Washington Consensus, also known as the “neoliberal vulgate.”¹⁸ As Geschiere writes, “the tension between autochthony’s apparent self-evidence and its receding qualities in practice comes again sharply to the fore.”¹⁹

Working in a similar vein, Achille Mbembe has discussed the troubling role of funding agencies in the realm of arts and culture in Africa. Mbembe is well positioned to speak about the policies of funders in Africa. He ran a major research institute for several years, in which his primary role was cultivating relationships with philanthropic agencies and developing projects. He calls attention to several troubling trends, including

the conflation of African art, culture and aesthetics with ethnicity or community or communalism. The dominant but false idea—shared by many Africans and many donors—is that the act of creativity is necessarily a collective act; that African artistic forms are not aesthetic objects per se but ciphers of a deeper level of the “real” that is fundamentally ethnographic and expressive of Africa’s ontological cultural difference or “authenticity.” *It is this African “difference” and this African “authenticity” donors are keen to find, support and, if necessary, manufacture.*²⁰

This manufacturing of authenticity and difference is also observable in other locations that have been positioned, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot would have it, “in the savage slot.”²¹

In a 2009 article, Rachel Breunlin and I analyzed the tendency of funders working in New Orleans to seek to affiliate with the grassroots, the real, and the marginalized, oppressed, and radical constituencies, who are most easily identified by their own discourse of alterity, indigeneity, victimization, and community empowerment. Multiracial alliances and organizations with a less obviously indigenous aesthetic can be sidelined or distorted by these dynamics. Journalists who have worked in New Orleans post-Katrina have displayed similar tendencies, as my first example illustrates. But it is important to recognize that scholars working in New Orleans have been engaged in similar practices—including some academics involved in service learning and other forms of community-engaged teaching and research—practices that intensified and proliferated after the flood. As a city resident, teacher, and researcher, I have participated in these engagements from both sides.

With limited time in the field and a strong desire to craft articles or research agendas that are clearly aligned with social justice imperatives and the authenticity of blackness, scholars tend to reify and reproduce black/white and rich/poor binaries that significantly underestimate the presence of middle-class African Americans, Creoles, Vietnamese, Hondurans, multiethnic workers, and un- (or under)employed anarchist or radical whites. The overrepresentation of the Lower Ninth Ward and the near erasure of adjacent mostly white St. Bernard Parish and more affluent Lakeview in scholarly works reproduces media fixation with blackness as victimhood. The invisibility of black middle-class neighborhoods like Pontchartrain Park and economically diverse and mostly black and Latino New Orleans East in the public transcript heightens social suffering and perpetuates sensationalizing accounts that obscure real structural processes in times of crisis as in ordinary times.²² Antoinette Jackson, in her 2011 essay “Diversifying the Dialogue Post-Katrina,” points to the blatant disregard of those she calls “boring black people,” people who did not participate in second-line parades or mask as Indians but were nonetheless city residents.²³ As Jackson demonstrates, many black professionals struggled (and sometimes hesitated) to return in the precarious landscape of post-2005 New Orleans, yet their struggles were often overlooked. As one former public school teacher told me, speaking of her mostly African American colleagues, “The teachers I worked with at a public school—they felt invisible. They’re middle class. They had good incomes. They mostly had stable marriages. None of them belonged to Mardi Gras Indian tribes or Social and Pleasure Clubs. I remember talking with one of them about the second-lines and she said ‘Our families just didn’t do things like that.’”²⁴ The symbolic violence of this kind of invisibility afflicts communities that have been largely ignored by scholars (including urban sociologists and anthropologists) until recently as well as the mainstream media.²⁵ They have long been underrepresented in the popular culture’s obsession with and commodification of insurgent and creative blackness.²⁶

In a series of blog entries, Catherine Michna has written insightfully about the hunger for authentic black culture in postdiluvial New Orleans. She is onto something here. This desire for an idealized and essentialized blackness, which is imagined to be somehow outside of capitalism and outside of history, is a profound motivator for many. And this obsession with authentic black working-class street culture has other consequences in erasing other experiences, other subjectivities. The former teacher reflected, “What the white middle class and the black middle class have in common in New

Orleans is our invisibility. Our stories are not told. Or they are marginalized as unimportant.” The accompanying fetishization and reification of black vernacular countercultures and the links between this process and the reemergence of forms of ethnic absolutism and fascism has preoccupied Paul Gilroy, who writes,

We can appreciate the hunger for cultural forms that stand outside the immorality and corruption of the overdeveloped world, but imprisoning the primitive other in a fantasy of innocence can only be catastrophic for all parties involved. This danger is compounded when the interests of the romantic consumers begin to converge with those of people inside minority communities who want to enforce another definition of invariant (and therefore authentic) ethnicity for their own dubious disciplinary reasons.²⁷

Under the gaze of outsiders, including tourists, journalists, and anthropologists, certain cultural identities have been made hypervisible and valorized, even as those who create second-line parades and brass-band music and others working to create the highly desirable cultural commodities promoted in tourism brochures continue to struggle with the structural violence of depressed wages, aggressive and uneven policing, and restricted access to good housing, education, health care, and transportation.²⁸

Part Two: Cultural Property as Belonging

New Orleans is often proclaimed to be the most African city in America,²⁹ and the discourse of heritage in institutions like the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival is highly attuned to a diasporic analysis of the city’s contemporary cultural and musical productions.³⁰ When Jazz Fest initiated a series of international pavilions in the early 1990s, the first year was devoted to Haiti, the second year to Mali. Participants in these cross-cultural exchanges were encouraged to consider historic linkages and ancestral connections between their countries and Louisiana—linkages often conceived through a black Atlantic/African diasporic lens.³¹ In the 1990s, a member of a Jewish marching krewe was told by a festival producer that his organization would not be invited to parade at Jazz Fest because “Jews are not indigenous.” If the festival context could be said to be one where talk of diaspora is hegemonic, why then this usage of the term “indigenous”? The vernacular discourse of New Orleans festival workers and producers reflects American multiculturalism, so it is understandable that the folk whose heritage is on display at the festival primarily come from historically marginalized, excluded, or oppressed groups—and in New Orleans today, the festival worker is clear: that means not Jews.

To unpack this example, we need to look back at the narratives about the origins of New Orleans’s distinctive culture, particularly in one place, Congo Square. As one scholar put it, “All that New Orleans *is*—is a result of Congo Square.”³² The mytho-history of Congo Square attributes the distinctiveness of New Orleans’s Afro-Creole culture to the social, cultural, and economic exchanges and performances that took place there in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This place is remembered as a sacred site and a powerful cultural cauldron, from which emerged all of

American popular music and dance—from jazz, blues, and eventually rock and roll, to the city’s Mardi Gras Indian traditions and iconic second-line parades. Forged from African and Native American traditions, but made into something new, the city’s distinctive culture—and indeed American popular culture—came out of the earth in this place. Of course, this myth, like all myths, has a history.³³ This canonical narrative about the square and its generative influence as axis mundi, omphalos, and genealogical fount was produced in specific historical moments, including critical moments in the jazz revival of the 1930s and ’40s. Matt Sakakeeny critically examines the process through which the centrality of Congo Square was enshrined by music writers and musicians themselves. Writing about the creation of this narrative, he explains that specific contemporary practices are imagined to link—in a sacralized time-space portal—back to their origins: “More precisely, jazz funerals and second line parades have been reimagined as a conduit that links jazz back to the celebrated slave dances at Congo Square and, by implication, to Africa.”³⁴ Sakakeeny’s analysis suggests that Smith and Ramsey, the authors of *Jazzmen*, had a large role in shaping that claim. “In New Orleans,” they write, “you could still hear the bamboula on Congo Square when Buddy Bolden cut his first chorus on cornet.”³⁵ Evidence presented by Sakakeeny is suggestive of a long dialogue between writers, musicians, dancers, and other narrators, who both claim and shape the genealogies linking contemporary art forms to the mytho-history of Congo Square.

The centrality of Congo Square in Black Arts poetry and literature out of New Orleans almost seems inevitable. But historically, it was the result of a concerted effort by public intellectuals, notably Tom Dent and Kalamu ya Salaam, whose work as writers, educators, and organizers with the Congo Square Writers Union, sought to place black history at the center of the city’s public culture.³⁶ They were among a group of African American activists who fought to create their own structures of curation and their own standards of belonging in the city and the festival. One of those structures was the Afrikan American Jazz Festival Coalition.

The Afrikan American Jazz Festival Coalition

In 1979, the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival program book announced the creation of Koindu: A Place of Exchange, a new section of the festival making its debut at the fairgrounds:

KOINDU seeks to correct a legacy of paternalism which had non-Blacks speak for and determine the authenticity and work of African culture. At KOINDU the creators of African and African-American culture will perform, explain and evaluate their own cultural works. Everyone is welcomed to share, and no one is allowed to dominate.

KOINDU marks the continuation of the conscious affirmation of the importance and quality of African contributions to world culture.³⁷

In his oral history, Koindu founder Hajj Khalil remembers the early Koindu marketplace as an immersive experience in which one could sample crafts, food, music, and dance of a continent that was much misunderstood. Cofounder Bilal Sunni-Ali describes the Koindu area as a place for

“intensified” experience of black/African culture, in contrast to the rest of the festival where this experience was “dispersed.” What’s at stake for Khalil and Sunni-Ali is the Koindu area’s capacity to educate, to raise consciousness, to politicize, and to activate people through exposure to African and African diaspora culture, art, and music. The fact that Koindu was run by coalition members concretized a specific goal of the Black Arts Movement—control of the means of cultural production. Though others were welcome to visit, Koindu was made by and for black people. The curation, production, performance, and commerce were in the hands of African Americans.

How a Black Arts space came to be created in the middle of a (mostly) white-run festival is a story that is not widely known, and one too rich and complex to fully recount here (see Regis 2013; Regis and Walton 2008). In brief, it came about through struggle. As the festival grew and became more successful in the 1970s, critiques of its production structures circulated among intellectuals and political activists. A number of craftspeople were complaining that they were being rejected from the festival’s marketplace, and others objected to what they saw as underrepresentation of African Americans among those profiting from this festival. One of the organizers, Muhammed Yungai, recalled how they understood the problem: “The Jazz Festival is an institution whose reason for being is basically the culture of Black people in America. So it’s founded on Black culture, but the Black artists, artisans, and people that were actually making a living selling things that we made, were pretty much being rejected.”³⁸ Building on intersecting citywide networks, with hundreds of residents attending their meetings, the coalition activists were poised to disrupt the festival in 1978. Festival producer George Wein recalled a tense meeting with a group of black activists arguing, “You have been ripping off black culture. The community is not benefiting nearly enough by what’s happening.”³⁹ Koindu was an immediate result of these negotiations. It became not only a marketplace but a social and cultural space for music, dance, poetry, and self-representation. The coalition also achieved an increase in community representation on the board of directors and an agreement that a portion of festival proceeds would be reinvested in the African American community through grants and public programs. The physical presence of Koindu in the festival landscape and the coalition’s gains on the board provided a platform to push for ongoing structural changes in hiring practices to bring more black professionals on staff, and to work toward a pragmatic model of governance, which Bill Rouselle called power-sharing.⁴⁰

All of these developments grew out of activists’ vision of the links to be made between culturalist claims and political and economic goals. The coalition advanced a persuasive claim to jazz and jazz heritage as the cultural property of African Americans. But it was their political capacity to disrupt the festival that brought festival producers to the table. As a result of the agreements that emerged from those meetings, the coalition members’ views became a part of the festival’s governing structure. Their push to place black people, as well as black music and heritage, at the center of the festival began to shape the processes of curation and production beyond Koindu. Ultimately, the coalition’s creation, Koindu, was assimilated into the festival’s central production structures and renamed Congo Square in 1989.

The Afrikan American Jazz Festival Coalition's intervention in the public culture of the city complicates our understanding of indigeneity/autochthony as they simultaneously claim belonging in the city and in any major event going on in the city, and made a claim to ownership of jazz as a collective cultural property. These developments illustrate how claims to belonging in place can work and what's at stake in claims to autochthony and indigeneity. Claiming jazz as cultural property, African American activists effectively made the claim that they belonged at Jazz Fest—not only on the stages as musicians but also as producers, curators, and artists, and also as professional members of the staff, trained technicians, contractors and vendors, decision makers, and members of the festival's board of directors. Ultimately, the coalition claimed the right to curate their own culture. The culture belonged to them and therefore they belonged to any institutional structure that claimed to represent it. Autochthony here works to underwrite a political strategy. And it worked. At least for a time.

The festival producers' long encounter with politicized cultural activists shaped their usage of the term "indigenous." Coalition activists saw the current predicament and potential futures of black New Orleanians as being linked to colonized people everywhere.⁴¹ Indigenous, in addition to its connotations of rootedness in place, underlines the commonalities of black and indigenous peoples through their historical subjection to settler colonialism and enslavement, displacement, violence, and dispossession—including the theft of their culture and the prohibition of their cultural practices and religious practices through colonial lawmaking. So black folks in New Orleans are indigenous in that they were (and perhaps still are) colonized and struggling to create their own social and cultural spaces under the weight of (post)colonial cultural economic and political systems not of their own making. This usage of a term—analogueous with subaltern—may function as a decolonizing move. But my observations suggest that when this term is redeployed in the context of festival productions, it is depoliticized and figures as both a euphemism for race and a way to make the festival seem more attuned to cultural nationalist concerns than it actually is. The category indigenous also brings with it all manner of problematic cultural baggage, which is the legacy of early twentieth-century anthropology, including the assumption that cultures are bounded and isolated from each other and that they have a purity and authenticity that can be identified and cataloged. This concept empowers scholars (notably anthropologists themselves), curators of culture, and the most prominent proponents of revitalization while it marginalizes the everyday practitioners of subaltern cultural groups, even as their cultural productions are idealized and praised by the experts.⁴²

It would be a mistake to conclude from these examples either that we all want to belong or that drawing boundaries is ridiculous. Claims to belonging are being made in situations of vast power inequality. By juxtaposing them, there is a risk that even making a comparison across them implies a leveling. Because social and cultural claims are made in such profoundly unequal conditions, the stakes may be quite different. This critical engagement with moments of (top-down) curation and festival production are meant to expose the distorting power/knowledge dynamics in play with claims to belonging. Any critical examination of the claims to autochthony that does not clearly demonstrate what's at stake for those making bottom-up claims to belonging and cultural property risks reproducing a strictly culturalist argument that further erases the structural oppression and violence black cultural activists are working against.

Part Three: The Timescales of Autochthonous Citizenship

In the aftermath of the floods of 2005, and the massive forced migration and long-term displacements that resulted from levee failures and local, state, and federal policies that followed, the claims to indigeneity made by (and on behalf of) black folk in New Orleans took on a whole other cast. In the spring of 2006, with the mayoral campaigns in full swing, the question of who belonged in the city and who could or should vote made the political implications of “local” clear. As city maps were being redrawn by expert planners and revanchist fantasies evoked wiping the slate clean and reconstituting a smaller, whiter, and more affluent city, citizens sought to assert their claims to the city in unambiguous categorical terms, as Arnold Hirsh has argued in “Fade to Black.”

As Campbell Robertson, writing for the *New York Times*, reflected on the occasion of the tenth anniversary: “As of 2013, there were nearly 100,000 fewer black residents than in 2000, their absences falling equally across income levels. The white population decreased by about 11,000, but it is wealthier.”⁴³ Robertson quotes Michael Hecht of Greater New Orleans Inc., a group concerned with economic development, about the significant brain gain in the city since the floods:

“New Orleans attracted some of the best and most passionate people in the world after Katrina to help rebuild,” Mr. Hecht said. “You just had a talent influx. A lot of people saw New Orleans as the Peace Corps with better food.”

Framing New Orleans as a Peace Corps destination underlines the common experience of visitors to the city that they have somehow exited the United States to enter an adjacent Third World country. But as Kristin Koptiuch has argued in a classic article, “Third-Worlding at Home,” the profound inequalities and disinvestment in public institutions and infrastructure are in fact integral to contemporary US society rather than exceptions.

An Anniversary in Fragments

The year is 2015. On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the levee failures, a black feminist collective creates ECOHYBRIDITY: LOVE SONG FOR NOLA, a series of performances and site-specific installations, which they called “a visual [black] opera” staged at sites throughout the city.⁴⁴ At this moment, the city was once again inundated by national media and major players from national nonprofits and funders to reflect on the state of affairs and assess the achievements, failures, and ongoing challenges of the unnatural disasters. The intervention of this intriguing and elusive group of black feminist activists and artists speaks directly to the malaise around place, identity, and belonging that was gripping the city. A short film posted by the collective features

cultural anthropologist Savannah Shange, a participating artist, speaking directly to the uses of indigeneity as a trope for thinking through displacement, gentrification, and structural violence in contemporary North America.

You see, to me the idea that everyone is indigenous, by definition does not apply to Black people. So Blackness is made by the lack of indigeneity, otherwise we'd be Igbo, otherwise, we'd be Kikuyu. We ain't, we Black. That's the whole fucking thing. See, Black people ... you get on the boat, you loose your indigeneity. And any gesture toward erasing that is getting caught up in this story, that we want to be like them.⁴⁵

With this in mind, lead artist Kai Barrow proposes ECOHYBRIDITY “as an art and organizing hybrid, that looks at decolonizing the imagination.” She explains, “Ecohybridity is the idea of how we as Black people are constantly hybridizing, going from one location to another location, from the middle passage to the prison industrial complex, to Jim Crow to current-day displacement around spatial inequity.” The project considers the importance of Katrina, “looking at one of the most important events that impacted Black Life in the last century,” and asking, “what does this mean for us in terms of questions of home, questions of just Black existence period?”⁴⁶

Elsewhere in the city, other events focused on the Latinx role in the rebuilding. Casa Borrega, a Mexican tavern in Central City, hosted an event saying “thank you” to those who rebuilt the city and supported the Right to Remain movement. The Congress of Day Laborers and their allies had called for a moratorium on deportations. Located across the street from the Ashé Cultural Arts Center, Casa Borrega has often hosted black/brown dialogues around human rights issues as well as musical performances. This event circulated an ethical claim—advanced by the labor activists affiliated with the Congress of Day Laborers and the Workers’ Center for Racial Justice—that reconstruction workers had earned their place in the city and should be exempt from deportation. Just two years earlier, the congress had won a significant victory as Sheriff Marlin Gusman, then the lead official in charge of Orleans Parish jail, agreed to cease cooperating with US Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials on August 14, 2013.⁴⁷ As *Colorlines* writer Aura Bogado put it, “New Orleans is the first jurisdiction in the South to opt out of Secure Communities [S-Comm], a federal program that critics say tears immigrant communities apart.” The project, piloted by the George W. Bush administration and expanded under President Obama, was intended to focus on deporting dangerous criminals but was instead “sweeping up a broad swath of nonviolent offenders and even citizens.”⁴⁸ One local resident, a member of the Congress of Day Laborers, was “held in a New Orleans prison for six months” for not paying a fine. Cities around the US were refusing to participate in S-Comm, but New Orleans was the first city in the South to do so. A video released by the Congress of Day Laborers showed the sheriff “listening to harrowing stories” from people who had been unfairly detained. Moved by what he was seeing, the sheriff helped to close out the meeting, donning a Congress T-shirt and chanting, along with the assembled community, “No papers! No fear!” As Bogado concludes, “That a sheriff in the deep South is shouting a slogan coined and used by the immigrant rights movement indicates just how much work has been done to change the way at least some in law enforcement are thinking about immigration.”

Conversations throughout the city reflected on expert panels, rituals, plays, and documentary screenings marking ten years of reconstruction. One such conversation happened in my backyard with Antonio Garza and Kayla Andrews, writers and English as a second language teachers who think deeply about culture, race, neighborhoods, and borders of all kinds. Antonio also holds a special place in the parade history of the city as the organizer of the first Latinx Carnival krewe in the city, Los Amigos de los Amigos.⁴⁹ Its first annual parade, pointedly held on Cinco de Mayo, was titled A Marching Fiesta, and it moved from Tremé to the French Quarter, with a stop for “debt payment,” and into the Iberville area, where a wreath was laid at the feet of revolutionary Benito Juárez, the first indigenous president of Mexico. The parade route self-consciously crossed the social terrain of the city from front of town to back of town, French Quarter to the projects, with pointed references to class, race, struggles for freedom, and ongoing structures of oppression.

When I met with Antonio and Kayla, I had just been to the Theater at St. Claude for a performance titled *Be a New Orleanian: A Swearing-in Ceremony*. Written and performed by Jim Fitzmorris, it was a reflection of the city’s obsession with belonging and cultural citizenship.⁵⁰ Kayla and Antonio launched themselves into the conversation about place, neighborhood, and belonging with enthusiasm. “I’m so tired of it,” Kayla said. “It’s like, when people ask you where you’re from or they start to quiz you to figure out how long you’ve lived here or how New Orleanian you are,” she said. “I call it measuring our New Orleans dicks. It’s like, let’s all pull out our dicks and measure them and see who’s more of a New Orleanian.” We all paused, letting that image sink in a moment. Then Antonio jumped in:

It’s always the pre-Katrina arrivals, who are trying to haze you as a post-Katrina arrival. There was [a] party at Molly’s [a bar in the French Quarter] the day after the anniversary and they had an event set up like a quiz show. The whole thing was like a hazing ritual, where the sophomores were those who arrived pre-Katrina and the freshmen were those who arrived after Katrina. The sophomores were hazing the freshmen on their knowledge of the city.

As Abram Himelstein writes, “Like most of America, there is a current, near-evangelical pride in the hyper-local. But most of this pride is manifest by the *arrivistes* (to disparage in the hyper-local way of 200 years ago).”⁵¹ Thinking along similar lines, Ronald W. Lewis, cross-cultural educator and curator of the House of Dance & Feathers Museum in the Lower Ninth Ward, has observed that many newcomers to the city, full of excitement and enthusiasm for the African American cultural practices of New Orleans, are “Columbusing.”⁵² Just because you stumbled into it doesn’t mean you own it—or have the right to police its borders. As Trey, a devoted second liner, told me years ago, reflecting on the zeal of white second-line converts who seek to immerse themselves in the black culture of the city: “They think they’ve discovered the second line, but guess what? It was already there.”

Part Four: Claiming Belonging through Performance

City residents have long used parades to claim the city as theirs and to assert their right to belong.⁵³ Parades create an embodied citizenship that is not necessarily indigenous or grounded in claims to autochthony. Parading opens a space for participation. In the book *Coming Out the Door for the Ninth Ward*, members of Nine Times Social Club explain how they came into the parade tradition from a neighborhood, the Upper Ninth, that was not inhabited by parades in the same way as the Sixth Ward, the Seventh Ward, or Central City. In fact, many of the members' families came from the country—the sugar-growing parishes up the river from New Orleans—and moved into the city, where they were assimilated into neighborhood cultures. As Nine Times members trace how they were mentored about parades by friends, neighbors, godparents, and other teachers, they demonstrate that parading is a form of embodied knowledge that can be learned. Troy Materre recalls that when Nine Times began to parade, its members wanted to make their own contributions to the parading traditions in the city: “We wanted to put our feet into the circuit of parades.”⁵⁴ They're not from here. But they made their claims to the city through parading.

In this sense, members of Nine Times are not entirely unlike other public figures whose identity claims are grounded in their experiences of parading. As I've argued elsewhere, numerous public figures, including musicians and music festival producers who were not necessarily born into the culture of parades, were nonetheless socialized into it.⁵⁵ Parading, in part, made them (or dare I say us?) who they (we) are. As an ethnographer working in the city, and in over twenty years of following parades, I've seen how parades have their own pedagogy and ontology—they teach us about the city, and they also theorize the real: This is the city. We are the people.⁵⁶ As a transplant to the city with roots in France and Texas, I have personally experienced this citizenship of parading. I also understand its citizenship as provisional, providing a doorway to more enduring friendships and alliances.

My own work comes out of fertile dialogues between musicians, parade makers, photographers, and anthropologists: in doing ethnography over decades, the work of documenting and living with (and participating) in living traditions, you can see that these practices are not timeless, self-contained, or disconnected from history and the larger society. If culture is a house we dwell in, it is not a house without doors and windows. It is porous, and we learn a lot from what (and who) passes in and out of these openings. This work is part of a conversation with parade makers and parade theorists, including musicians, neighbors, filmmakers, songwriters, and anthropologists.

Conclusion

How does the wielding of categorical identities and the policing of social and cultural borders play into the dialectics of New Orleans exceptionalism? The current obsession of New Orleanians with belonging, indigeneity, and autochthony stems from a specific political and social history. From the colonial period to Reconstruction, the boom and bust of the oil industry, the intensification of tourism, the massive displacements engendered by post-Katrina policies, and the current housing crisis accelerated by short-term rentals, each moment has engendered its own claims to autochthony. The shape of these claims continues to shift, along with political circumstances and specific social movements emerging from them. The provisional observations suggest that culturalist and

materialist arguments intersect as claims to belonging are used to underwrite vastly different personal and collective agendas. Claims to belonging may advance a moral claim to reside in the city or to participate in social, cultural, economic, and political institutions. The stakes vary widely. The member of the Congress of Day Laborers and the Teach for America transplant both are migrants to the city; both came for work; both claim to belong. But only one risks deportation.

The claims to autochthony made by political organizers in the 1970s sought to break the economic stranglehold of mostly white festival producers over the festival (a de facto monopoly on the profits generated by Jazz and Heritage). When those same logics are wielded by festival producers forty years later, they may be evacuated of their political and economic meanings and carry a strictly culturalist force. Such usage may only empower those few who now hold producer positions and have the decision-making power to decide who gets in, who is excluded, and how. As claims made from the bottom up are taken up by institutions and wielded from the top down, they may have very different consequences. In such conditions, it may come to be that those most invested in identity claims and in policing the boundaries of autochthony are those whose own cultural activism (whether they are working in the public, the for-profit, or the nonprofit sector) or entrepreneurial role requires them to assert their own legitimacy or authenticity as arbiters of taste, as curators of public displays, or as producers of public culture. When do claims to belong strengthen or undermine social movements for human rights or social equality? And when do they reinforce the social and cultural power of established institutions or the social capital of specific individuals or groups?

While artists, musicians, and small nonprofits are rarely in the position to articulate their discontent with the categories and essentialized identities invoked by producers, curators, and philanthropic institutions, surely public anthropologists, folklorists, and others can find a way to include an analysis of these trends as part of a project to “study up” in the contemporary realm of cultural production. All too often, we find ourselves complicit in established practices whether we are working as allies with or participants in organizations that are deeply invested in notions of autochthony and indigeneity.

Notes

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- 1 See Geschiere 2009.
- 2 See Hirsch 2007.
- 3 See Domínguez 1986; Hirsch and Logsdon 1992.
- 4 See Thomas 2014.
- 5 See Smith 2003.
- 6 See Barrios 2011; Breunlin and Regis 2009; Jackson 2011. Victims are alternatively attributed exaggerated agency and blamed for making bad choices (e.g., “they chose to stay”) or abject victimhood without capacity to act.
- 7 See Regis and Walton 2008.
- 8 Breunlin and Regis 2009. See Jordan and de Caro 1996.
- 9 Reed 2016.
- 10 Johnson 2007; Arena 2012.
- 11 See V. Adams 2013.
- 12 See V. Adams 2013; Johnson 2011; Arena 2012; and T. Adams 2015. For a comparative perspective, see Gundewardena and Schuller 2008.
- 13 As previous scholars have demonstrated, the term “Creole”—whose meaning was contested through much of its history—was instrumentalized during the nineteenth century to distinguish Catholic and French/Creole-speaking people of New Orleans, those who were here prior to Americanization, from the English-speaking newcomers. Those who claimed Creole identities were doing so in part as an act of resistance to the growing hegemony of Anglo-American social norms, economic power, and political institutions (see Domínguez 1986; Hirsch and Logsdon 1992). In the early twentieth century, usage of the term “Creole” came under pressure from Jim Crow as racial segregation became the law of the land. The term increasingly became the property of people of color and was abandoned by white Creoles in favor of French identity.
- 14 Tregle 1992, 132–41.
- 15 Tregle 1992, 138.
- 16 Jordan and de Caro 1996, 41.
- 17 Geschiere 2009. See also Joseph 2002.
- 18 Geschiere 2009, 68. See also Bourdieu and Wacquant 2001.
- 19 Geschiere 2009, 69.
- 20 Mbembe 2009.
- 21 Trouillot 1991. See Breunlin and Regis 2009, 135.
- 22 Jackson 2011. See also Patillo-McCoy 1999 and chapter 9, this volume. This is not to suggest that wealth and poverty are not racialized (they clearly are) or to question the value of researching the intersections of multiple oppressions.

Rather, research agendas shaped by a culturally overdetermined desire for authenticity at those intersections can enact colonizing moves, reifying racial difference and undermining multiracial organizing.

23 Jackson 2011.

24 Personal communication, March 2016.

25 Duneier 1992.

26 See also Patillo-McCoy 1999; Barnes 2016; Carter 2014.

27 Gilroy 2000, 253.

28 These contradictions are incisively explored and critiqued in Matt Sakakeeny's 2013 ethnography of brass-band musicians.

29 Cf. Hall 1992a; Evans 2011; Becker et al. 2013; Himmelstein 2015; Watts and Porter 2013, 5.

30 Himmelstein (2015) quotes Kalamu ya Salaam, calling New Orleans "the only African city in North America."

31 Regis 2013.

32 Tommye Myrick, Center for African and African American Studies, Southern University at New Orleans. This phrase was part of a call for papers for a conference reflecting on the cultural history of Congo Square.

33 "Myth" here refers to a foundational narrative that conveys a cultural truth about how things came to be. In this sense, myths are true stories.

34 Sakakeeny 2011b, 292.

35 Ramsey and Smith 1939, 5.

36 Dent 2018.

37 Festival Program Book 1979, 60.

38 Yungai 2015.

39 Yungai 2015.

40 For Rouselle (2009), who joined the board during the coalition's organizing push and went on to become its president, it represented "the most democratic sharing of power that exists in this community" and became a model for other nonprofits in the city and region.

41 See Regis 2013.

42 See Povinelli 2002.

43 Campbell Robertson, "10 Years after Katrina," *New York Times*, August 26, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/08/26/us/ten-years-after-katrina.html>.

44 The founder and artistic director of Gallery in the Streets is Kai Lumumba Barrow (2015), whose blog details the project.

45 ECOHYBRIDITY Collective 2015.

46 See also ECOHYBRIDITY: *Tiny House, Moving Installation*, which was a participant in the commemorative second line on August 29, 2015. The house façade was inscribed with the affirmation "housing is a human right." "ECOHYBRIDITY: Site-Specific Performance and Installation at Orleans Parish Prison in New Orleans, LA"; "ECOHYBRIDITY: Direct Action/Performance at the St. Roch Market, New Orleans, LA."

47 “The Sheriff’s Office shall decline all voluntary ICE detainer requests except if an individual is charged with first degree murder, second degree murder, aggravated rape, aggravated kidnapping, or armed robbery involving a firearm” (“Sheriff Gusman Revises ICE Policy,” Orleans Parish Sheriff’s Office, August 14, 2013, www.opcso.org, http://www.opcso.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=367:sheriff-gusman-revises-ice-policy&catid=1:latest-news).

48 Bogado 2013. See also Quigley 2013.

49 The parade, inspired by Krewe du Jieus and Zulu, uses self-parody as an intervention in Carnival politics, deploying Mexican and Latinx ethnic stereotypes of the sombrero, the piñata, and the Carmen Miranda headdress (and her embodiment of the minstrelized and sexualized Latina entertainer; see Breunlin and Button 2000).

50 Fitzmorris 2015.

51 Himmelstein 2015.

52 See Breunlin and Lewis 2009.

53 Boll 2009; de Caro 2010.

54 Nine Times Social Club 2006, 111.

55 Regis 2011, 2013.

56 Regis 2009b.

Federal Aid and Downtown Development in the 1970s

MEGAN FRENCH-MARCELIN

The proliferation of new scholarship on New Orleans has linked patterns of exclusion to trends in US urban political development that have been occurring since the early 1970s. In the Crescent City, these trends include the removal of low-income people of color to make way for speculative real estate projects (most recently through the destruction of public housing); the reconstruction of public spaces as exclusive sites of consumption (typified by the erection of walls around Louis Armstrong Park); the increased reliance on public-private partnerships for urban economic development (as realized by groups like the Business Council and the Downtown Development District); a market-first approach to low-income housing (exemplified by federal programs like the HOPE VI “revitalization” of public housing); and the privatization of social service delivery. These processes have reshaped the city through practices that are now commonplace in US municipalities. None are new; none are exceptional. The reorganization of cities throughout the United States as a result of deindustrialization, stagflation, and subsequent federal disinvestment was shaped by policies that placed a premium on reclaiming a lost middle class. As such courses of action necessitate uneven development, proponents of these urban strategies have become more and more adept at silencing any political opposition attempted by those who do not derive benefits from this growth.¹ Despite the presence of protest movements, this brand of urban development has continued relatively unabated throughout the nation.

Since Hurricane Katrina, private developers have taken advantage of disaster to reimagine the city through extreme variations of these trends. When real estate mogul Joseph Canizaro described, with glee, the appalling aftermath of Katrina as a potential “clean sheet,” he invoked a narrative that has been reiterated frequently by those who see the forced removal of low-income people of color as an opportunity for profit making.² Thus, for future neoliberal modes of urban development, New Orleans has become a laboratory of the Frankenstein sort.³ With the move toward an all-charter school system—a process that has removed education from the public sphere, initiated the firing of more than seven thousand teachers, circumscribed access for children with special needs, and facilitated a gold rush of education profiteering—it very much appears that New Orleans will be a garrison from which to cultivate and refine mechanisms of privatization. If left unchallenged, these forces will—and have begun already to—overwhelm voices of opposition and eliminate whole sections of the city.⁴

This chapter contributes to the movement away from relying on tropes of exceptionalism by detailing the centrality of the Crescent City’s local leadership in the innovation of pro-market governing strategies now central to urban governance. However, whereas studies often situate the genesis of neoliberal urban development practices in the 1980s under the reign of Ronald Reagan, I argue that transformations in federal urban aid policy that occurred during the Nixon administration, and were reinforced under President Carter, facilitated the rise of these methods. As the decimation of antipoverty structures coincided with the federal devolution of urban aid initiatives and concurrent capital flight, cities were charged with balancing the dual crises of urban poverty and fiscal solvency. Because the Nixon administration’s rhetoric articulated these crises as necessitating

opposing solutions—and because solutions for the former were no longer realizable given the assured decline of federal urban aid—mayors across the nation abandoned redistributive antipoverty projects in order to enable broad private-sector urban revitalization.⁵ New mechanisms of federal urban aid—which sanctioned citywide use and local discretion—permitted local governments to dramatically and intentionally reorganize city power and urban economies in ways that precipitated neoliberal approaches to urban development. By the mid-1970s, civic and business leaders alike articulated clearing the way for private-sector enterprise as the primary function of local government.

Such action was necessitated, mayors then argued, by the mismatch of expanding demands on municipal revenue and the inability of low-income residents to contribute to city coffers.⁶ If governing officials wanted to revitalize their municipalities, the doctrine went, they must direct resources to reclaiming a fleeing middle class.⁷ Accordingly, new political ideologies proffered that cities should ensure the unmitigated autonomy of private development interests now believed better suited than federal agencies to encourage renewal.

In cities across the nation, private-sector sovereignty was organized around consumption-oriented investment and the rapid redevelopment of central business districts, tourist attractions, and waterfronts. New development reimaged downtown districts as urban playgrounds for the rich and white while, in the South, suggesting that touristic growth was a critical function in assuring the New South was an integrated South. Though local governing officials were well acquainted with the limitations of such strategies for the majority of current residents, poor and unskilled, they nevertheless promoted the idea that private-sector-led economic development was essential to remaking the city's landscape. Thus, in New Orleans, as in cities across the country, local officials deployed new federal urban aid in ways that provided private-sector developers with the insularity necessary to conduct development in ways that excluded low-income residents from a share in the city's economic future.

The transformation of federal urban aid was at the center of facilitating this approach. As the centerpiece of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974, the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program exploited the request of mayors for local decision making to refocus federal urban aid activities around citywide physical revitalization and blight prevention.⁸ The new program gave mayors autonomy over a broad range of physical development activities, while narrowing redistributive programs and cutting more comprehensive antipoverty programs. As local administrators pursued speculative economic aims, CDBGs had direct influence on this agenda. Officials certainly appropriated funds for activities in low-income neighborhoods, but CDBG funding as it was most commonly deployed—private housing rehabilitation, street-paving programs, playground construction, and day care support—offered few opportunities to expand political or economic inclusion for low-income residents. Additionally, neighborhood-based development eroded links between and among low-income sections of the city, diminishing the capacity of residents to mobilize around broader issues of inclusion, community participation, and access.⁹ Residents, while all too cognizant of this potential impact, felt compelled to make demands within the framework of community development so as not to risk neighborhood divestment altogether.¹⁰ While many mayors were frustrated with this limitation, it also ensured that

community-level action would not jeopardize the ability of private-sector interests to pattern the city's economic development agenda without opposition.¹¹

Thus, as the efforts of local administrators to alleviate conditions through these incremental place-based fixes gave an impression (at least to some degree) that governing officials were doing what they could, the grants reinforced a clear bifurcation between community development as neighborhood maintenance through public money and economic development as revitalization through private investment. While this delineation clearly protected economic development interests from community involvement, it did not prevent developers from laying claim to funding designed to address community issues. By the end of the decade, federal aid—originally enacted to assist low-income community economic development—was being used to leverage private growth.

While President Nixon had long declared the urban crisis over, the economic crisis in cities across the nation was in full force. Federal devolution and disinvestment coincided with global economic transformations that brought about the flight of industry overseas, coupled with growing stagflation, which undermined any sense of security or permanence cities like New Orleans had once touted. Tourism took on new economic importance in New Orleans, as it did in Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York during the early 1970s.¹² Tourism thus dovetailed with the quick real estate fix approach being pursued in other cities such as Boston and New York.¹³ With reports predicting a budget deficit of over \$45 million by 1975, the city—under the direction of recently elected Mayor Landrieu—began organizing downtown interests in an effort to grow the Central Business District and foster gentrification in surrounding neighborhoods.¹⁴ Officials envisioned a downtown centered on “office jobs, hotels and tourism,” where new development—including a skating rink, bowling alleys, and a riverside fencing club—would attract new human and capital investment.¹⁵ While early internal reports stressed that an overreliance on tourism would have detrimental repercussions on the city's poor residents, detailing the potential that tourism would only create thousands of dead-end jobs, the mayor made clear his intention to provide broad managerial latitude to private developers in the process of initiating downtown projects.¹⁶

From the outset, Mayor Moon Landrieu, elected on a platform that linked the civil rights agenda with new forms of economic growth, went out of his way to champion development interests. “We are going to be here supporting those projects,” he told reporters. They are going to get nothing but support from this administration—they are not going to find obstacles in their way.”¹⁷ For those young developers who had backed his campaign in the previous year, Landrieu created new cadres of social capital, appointing the developers to important municipal boards and commissions.¹⁸ In remarkably transparent fashion, the mayor held a 1971 press conference in the unfinished Lykes Center, a twenty-one-story skyscraper financed by the young and boisterous Biloxi-born developer Joseph Canizaro. Canizaro, a former chair of Landrieu's campaign, had used his new appointments to several major city boards and commissions to become one of the city's most important new businessmen in a matter of just years.

Flexing his mayoral muscle in 1973, Landrieu propelled a land swap through the City Council, thus allowing Canizaro to aggregate land parcels along the city's coveted riverfront for a megamall development project at an appraised cost that had curiously been lowered by some \$3.3 million between the city's first assessment and the deal's final estimation of value.¹⁹ Moreover, the city expanded mechanisms to entice further private investment. By 1972, the city had formed an

industrial revenue board authorized to issue tax-exempt bonds to developers (importantly, without the public referendum required by municipal bonding) and began a comprehensive zoning evaluation designed to facilitate the concentration of growth in the downtown district.

At the suggestion of Wallace, McHarg, Roberts and Todd—a planning firm that had managed redevelopment of Baltimore’s Inner Harbor and New York’s South Street Seaport—the city pursued the creation of a special tax district downtown to concentrate control of the area’s economic strategy.²⁰ The firm would later design the city’s application to replace St. Thomas public housing with a HOPE VI project that would signify for many the beginning of the end of public housing in New Orleans. Yet, in 1974, though rejecting the city’s attempt to enact a progressive municipal income tax, the state legislature authorized the nation’s first business improvement district in downtown New Orleans.²¹ The board of the new Core Area Development District (CADD) was composed of businessmen appointed jointly by the mayor and Chamber of Commerce. The chamber, which had by the early 1970s been transformed by the introduction of out-of-state financiers and entrepreneurs, appointed by Landrieu, had taken its place as the unofficial economic development arm of the city. Operating on the principle that private-sector interests could better direct the efficient management of the area, the board immediately assumed authority over capital investment decisions and strategic design within its boundaries. With the district’s jigsaw-like perimeter conveniently skirting all nearby public housing, local officials explained that growth was best accomplished in areas organized around homogenous interests. Though leadership of the nascent public-private partnership insisted that growth of the area would benefit all residents, the omission of low-income neighborhoods (and the opinions of their residents) from the growth zone ensured that redevelopment and redistribution would not be coterminous.²² Indeed, if the local state promoted their role as facilitator to a new free market, its method was not a simple deference to business. Rather, the exclusion hinged on boundaries wherein a predominantly black, low-income labor force denied unionization was also criminalized in those spaces when not operating as labor. Therein, growth was maintained by making certain spaces, places, and people subject to the threat of a police state.

Nevertheless, the board’s capacity to ensure development at a time of fiscal insecurity gave it powerful leverage to make demands on public resources. By the mid-1970s, the city’s participation in antipoverty programs had established a cadre of professionalized planners and analysts who were now equipped to deploy sizable development projects in a city whose elite had undermined touristic growth since the 1920s. Quickly, the Landrieu administration marshaled the resources of several of the former antipoverty agencies to participate in the downtown plan. While agencies like the Community Improvement Agency, the city’s urban renewal wing, offered management and planning expertise, the windfall in affiliating the downtown with these government entities was the potential to open state and federal aid to the area.²³ The city promised that as an improvement zone, the CADD could make claims to the new community development funding as well.²⁴

Though CDBG was a program conceived to benefit low- and moderate-income areas, the ambiguous language within the legislation actually facilitated the proposed diversion of aid. The legislation’s rhetoric, which replaced poverty with blight as the central enemy of cities, was deployed throughout the act without definitional clarity.²⁵ If seemingly innocuous, the shift in vocabulary

reinforced the notion that addressing economic inequality was no longer critical to the survival of cities so much as the restoration of a physical environment reflective of a consumer class. As a result, blight and its attendant symptoms assumed a political malleability: Blight could be anywhere. Thus, city community development plans defined their project scope in language that ranged from environmental and physical to sociopsychological and pathogen-like. In New Orleans, as elsewhere, local officials seized on this “terminological inexactitude” to shepherd resources and manpower into the downtown. New Orleans city officials thus felt justified in advocating for reapportionment, arguing that the imminent fiscal crisis necessitated utilizing funding where programs could generate a “major multiplier effect.”²⁶ Diminished federal aid and shrinking municipal revenue streams required local officials to develop a program whose success would be “gauged in large part by the amount of private sector resources it is able to generate.”²⁷

Thus, it caused little shock when the Community Improvement Agency reported blighted conditions throughout the downtown area: broken windows marred the retail corridor along Canal Street; sidewalks were deteriorating; a skid row was attracting vagrants of all kinds; and historic buildings were being allowed to waste away in disrepair. Agency planners detailed that symptoms of blight were not only rampant, but “retarding the Central Business District’s overall ability” to function in the economic interests of the city’s citizens. To formally blight the area, opening it up to federal and state aid, was imperative to the “preservation of the city’s tax and economic base.” Improvement agency officials suggested that access to community development funding could begin to “induce improvements where market forces alone [were] not sufficient.”²⁸

Leaders of the CADD invoked this report when, in 1977, they solicited the local government to divert community development funds to the area. Approaching the city government after public hearings on CDBG allocations had concluded, the CADD board of directors requested funding for a range of development projects they wished to complete. Though the group was scheduled to take in more than \$1 million from its district tax, members attached a five-year projection budget anticipating subsidies totaling \$17 million from city government and \$16.2 million in federal aid. Business leaders argued that community development could cover a broad range of beautification activities that included repairing sidewalks, construction of transit shelters, and landscaping, all of which were vital to encouraging the area’s successful turnaround.²⁹

Core Area Development District director Warren Berault expressed disappointment that the city had not already directed CDBG funds into the commercial area. Clearly, while trying to uphold the “integrity of the act,” the city had neglected the “importance, function, dynamics and special needs” of business leaders, CADD members contended. If nothing else, the funds were justified “because they [were] used throughout the country in this fashion”; to disregard their request would put the city at a competitive disadvantage.³⁰ Reminding city leadership of the Central Business District’s centrality in generating employment, CADD made the strong suggestion that it was the responsibility of city officials to sell the downtown as a legitimate community development zone. If Berault’s scolding of the mayor was not enough, Canizaro followed suit, imploring the mayor to see that CADD’s needs trumped those of low-income neighborhoods throughout the city. Plus, he added, the downtown projects would not only attack blight, but “correct flight” and stabilize the city’s tax base.³¹ Within days, city officials sent word to CADD that its request for CDBG funds

had been approved.³² Though the funding was minimal, it signified the willingness of local authorities to reallocate urban aid to serve the purposes of development.

Exploiting the CDBG program's undetermined flexibility, local authorities approved projects that did not directly benefit low-income residents. The support of central business districts, rehabilitative middle-income housing, and beautification projects aimed at gentrification became popular CDBG activities nationwide.³³ In Rochester, New York, urban planners recommended the city focus on directing aid into transitional neighborhoods, a program that would exclude the poorest areas of the municipality.³⁴ An official in Cleveland reported using similar strategies to regenerate neighborhoods that were still considered "salvageable."³⁵ Far from exceptional, the diversion of federal aid in New Orleans to projects aimed at spawning middle-class growth was commonplace.

As early as 1975, analysts for the National League of Cities (NLC) suggested that the opportunity to repurpose community development funds to expand the resources and amenities available for middle-class residents in central cities demanded consideration from the nation's lawmakers.³⁶ Cautioning a narrow antipoverty focus for grant delivery, analysts for the NLC argued that while needs of middle- and upper-income residents were not as dire as those of low-income residents, to not meet those needs, cities would "once again lose the sector of society which contributes economic and social stability to the area." Community development aid, the NLC proposed, could—with careful planning and effective management—be utilized to encourage the "return of the more affluent to the city." Since aid intervention would fail to make a significant difference in low-income neighborhoods, according to the NLC's reasoning, such strategies were not only necessary but offered the only means of turning cities around.³⁷

As local administrators continued to articulate a vision of the functional city as requiring the middle class to return, it became clear that few municipalities interpreted the new funding system as an extension of antipoverty aid. In fact, low-income residents played little role in this understanding of urban renewal. The urban crisis, mayors said, obligated them to use CDBG funds to stimulate economic growth. The role of city governing officials in this new atmosphere, as Landrieu candidly told reporters, was to "create an environment where business can best function."³⁸ Yet local officials did not insist that where aid was directed to private-sector growth, it should be precluded by considerations for low-income participation. Instead, they repeatedly claimed that to compel developers to do so would jeopardize investment and, with it, the opportunity to grow the economy and stabilize the tax base.

Of course, the idea that private investment would occur only in areas of unburdened access and control was a cardinal falsehood: there were certainly ways to stipulate inclusive models of development or compel contingencies for low-income communities.³⁹ Yet local officials, intent on securing a share in the new economy, sanctioned the disaggregation of activities where differing treatments—commercial districts reimaged to cultivate enclaves for luxury consumption separate from activity in low-income neighborhoods—underscored an assumption that the needs of the middle class were dissimilar, unrelated, and necessitated spatial segregation from the needs of poor people. Undoubtedly, this assumption implied that amid revitalization, poor residents were not capable of being active participants in the making of the new economy, nor visible citizens of the future city.

Thus, local officials raised the excuse that private-sector investment would be unwilling to operate in low-income areas where profit margins would be undercut. Accordingly, the flexibility granted to private-sector interests tended to undermine community-led economic development projects as well. Neighborhoods with high levels of poverty frequently lacked the organizational capacity, people, and capital necessary to enable complex projects to get off the ground. In these instances, local administrators suggested that community leadership cede control to developers. Yet the private sector often undermined or disposed of community participation, limited inclusive economic models, and encouraged gentrification. The inability to escape this paradox was further exacerbated when, in the rare cases when city administrators approved neighborhood economic development, they neither supported nor invested resources with the same vigor found in their boosting of downtown.

In New Orleans, this was true in the neighborhood of Central City, where the rates of poverty, overcrowding, and dilapidation made conditions some of the worst in the city. Nearly half the structures in the area were substandard, and unemployment was exponentially higher than in the rest of the city. In response to the expansive need in the area, the outspoken and charismatic director of the Urban League of Greater New Orleans, Clarence Barney, proposed a comprehensive community economic development project to systematically strengthen the neighborhood through job creation, counseling, building rehabilitation, and educational services. The project would propose developing three thousand new manufacturing and service jobs, a community center replete with health and counseling services, commercial support for small business owners, and new housing. Barney argued that where economic activity was inclusive of poor people, the city could counteract development “where terms of trade [were] encrusted with discrimination and the market flow[ed] not freely but unfairly.”⁴⁰

Despite the dearth of community economic development projects, the city provided minimal capital and planning resources for Barney’s initiative, instead taking what community leaders characterized as a “show me approach.”⁴¹ City analysts reasoned that the project could not generate the kind of capital necessary for the aggressive design without relinquishing strategic authority to private developers.⁴² Nor was the city capable, rationalized the director of the Community Improvement Agency, of providing the \$2.7 million needed for the project to take shape in the way that community leaders hoped would give residents control. As Central City residents and leadership balked at the proposed rearrangement under private direction, the project lost steam, was apportioned into more modest projects, and ultimately abandoned.⁴³

The failure of the Central City project, like the dismantling of antipoverty programs, was used as proof of the need to allow private developers to shape future urban development even as such reasoning ignored the asymmetry of funding where downtown interests were championed and community projects were scrutinized. Increasingly, both federal policy and local planning prescribed economic strategies that reinforced an urban vision of private-sector-led development. Although amendments to the Housing and Community Development Act made in 1977 seemed to pivot policy aims toward a more conscientious focus on low-income communities by requiring more extensive citizen participation and new targeting prerequisites, the majority of legislation demonstrated the growing bias toward privatization.⁴⁴ Mayors who had once championed antipoverty efforts now were at the forefront of lobbying for the authority to redirect resources to

private developers. In fact, the US Conference of Mayors strongly rejected the addition of ratios designed to ensure funds were directed into low-income areas.⁴⁵

Thus, the outcome of the majority of new urban policy expanded mechanisms by which to transfer control and federal aid into projects designed by the private sector. New provisions allowed local officials to use funds for development capable of “induc[ing] higher income persons to remain in, or return to, the community.”⁴⁶ Loopholes of this nature ensured that funding would continue to be diverted to areas and activities that would have little effect on low-income communities. This practice was crystallized most clearly in the legislation’s central innovation—Urban Development Action Grants (UDAGs). The \$400 million outlay for the UDAG program was designed to provide gap financing of new projects (that theoretically would not materialize without the addition of such funds) approved by city authorities or, in other words, to create direct federal aid opportunities for private investors.

As one-time awards, UDAGs were promoted as a mechanism to bolster urban economic revitalization through a balanced approach of commercial, downtown, and neighborhood-based economic development projects. In practice, the promotion of downtown districts as “vital” to urban tax bases and “essential” centers for employment sanctioned a clear imbalance.⁴⁷ Going so far as to suggest that hotel development had provided some of the best jobs for poor and working people worldwide, the new federal Housing and Urban Development (HUD) secretary, Patricia Harris, clearly supported such use despite other rhetorical claims to focusing on truly redistributive housing policies.⁴⁸ Although the Presidential Commission on Neighborhoods argued that the concentration of UDAGs in service sector economies would be unable to provide economic mobility to low- and moderate-income residents, the board nevertheless found that in the first round of grants not only had HUD officials given preference in funding to downtown projects, they had encouraged them.⁴⁹ In the first year of the UDAG program, thirty cities sought the grants to build luxury chain hotels in their downtowns; fifteen were given funding.⁵⁰ Urban Development Action Grants were, in fact, the loophole in Community Development Block Grants that local officials demanded.

It was a strategy that the Landrieu administration was quick to deploy in order to further aggregate economic development within the city’s downtown tourism and convention trade. With the technical assistance of the Community Improvement Agency, the city promoted a spectrum of downtown development projects as eligible for action grants. Reiterating the language of blight, hoteliers and developers stressed that renovations and new development in the Central Business District were paramount to protecting the city from further deterioration. Applications described the potential of a domino effect where blight would spread, crime would rise, and, inevitably, the disaster would begin to diminish the ability to attract tourism.⁵¹ As development interests were given more and more power over the design of urban economic growth, city officials feared that failure to provide funds to developers would undermine the city’s economic expansion.

Thus city officials, in New Orleans and elsewhere, allotted significant shares of their UDAG funds to downtown development. By 1979, New Orleans’s new mayor, Ernest “Dutch” Morial, announced an initiative to consolidate downtown efforts under a new private-public umbrella. The Megalink project, as it was called, would join a new massive convention center including a Sheraton hotel, new parking lots, and developer Joseph Canizaro’s Canal Street development, which had been

enabled by the land swap and was renewing the dilapidated retail corridor with new office space, luxury apartments, and a Saks Fifth Avenue. In doing so, the Megalink would complete a passage from the glittering new Superdome to the Mississippi River, thus providing tourists with a New Orleans unencumbered by poverty or decline. In 1979, the city sought more than \$25 million in action grants for developers, including nearly \$5 million for Canizaro's controversial Canal Place shopping development. The new secretary of HUD, former mayor Landrieu, awarded one of the largest UDAGs to date: some \$17 million for the convention and hotel project.⁵²

City officials and private developers alike claimed the grants were central to reversing the city's fortunes. At a city-sponsored conference on the UDAG system, now Secretary Landrieu praised the program as the most important innovation in recent urban policy. Urban Development Action Grants, he said, reaffirmed the reality that "the private sector built this country and it is going to continue to be the private sector that builds it and rebuilds it." Panelist after panelist reiterated this idea. Cities, businessman Howard Green stated, were most "efficiently revitalized by the private sector" when public aid was mobilized to "make opportunities within the distressed cities comparable with opportunities developers have in the suburbs."⁵³ The boom in hotels, office space, and convention goers confirmed the supremacy of private-sector-led economic development, conference participants claimed, and championed the "triangular partnerships" emerging between city halls, federal agencies, and private investors as the hallmark of the future.⁵⁴

Though talks of triangular partnerships heralded the role that public agencies played in subsidizing downtown, boom rhetoric that conflated economic growth with the efficiency and efficacy of private efforts downplayed just how substantial the role of federal aid had become. A national study of the program's first year found that nearly 40 percent of UDAGs were acquired for commercial development and that cities had deployed some \$191 million of other federal aid to assist UDAG projects, almost a quarter of which came from CDBG funding. With more and more frequency, city officials bundled UDAG funds with access to CDBGs, tax abatements, building subsidies, and tax-exempt bonding.⁵⁵ By the early 1980s, the Industrial Development Board had issued \$15 million in bonds alongside UDAGs, and the city had enhanced new construction with an incentivized zoning program, second in the nation only to New York's.⁵⁶ While maintaining the inability to channel such funds into low-income neighborhoods and complaining of diminishing federal aid, local administrators had used federal grants to willingly enhance the authority of private development interests.

Local administrators nationwide stressed that growing competition between cities placed a premium on expanding convention centers, tourist attractions, and festival marketplaces over more redistributive forms of economic growth. As a result of this competition and despite the site-specific nature of tourism, these processes developed through projects that were remarkably homogenous and culturally indistinct. In 1983, New Orleans awarded a UDAG to the Rouse Company for development of a festival marketplace along the city's waterfront in preparation for the 1984 World's Fair. The development group—renowned for similar projects in Boston (Faneuil Hall) and New York City (South Street Seaport)—received some \$110 million in action grants for twelve projects over the course of the 1980s. In the way that Rouse Company projects popped up in cities from New York to Boston to Baltimore, the conversion of wharfs into cosmopolitan riverfronts and the promotion of destination cities through tourism and convention industries did not make cities

appear more unique. It did, however, inherently widen the gap between private-sector development and the needs of low-income city residents.⁵⁷

The autonomy granted to private interests to pursue development for profit without contingencies for low-income people ensured that the benefits of new development were circumscribed: the majority of jobs created through new office space and convention development were white collar. Yet, by 1980, rather than staving off white flight and promoting a return to the city, the city's economy supported 100,000 export workers commuting into town from the increasingly white and more affluent suburbs surrounding the urban core. These benefits were also proven largely speculative in the 1982 oil bust, which drove oil companies out of their Poydras Street offices and back to Houston. White flight continued rapidly throughout the 1970s and early 1980s.⁵⁸ By 1990, there was a 25 percent vacancy rate in Class A office space in the city's downtown.

For low-income residents, the economic growth could hardly be described as a boon.⁵⁹ Nearly 30 percent of the city's jobs by 1980 were located in the largely seasonal and nonunion tourist industry, and this figure has only continued to rise.⁶⁰ Although poverty rates remained unchanging through this time, poverty was, by 1990, more concentrated than ever before. An estimated 10 percent of the city's population resided in public housing.⁶¹ The top quartile of income earners in the metropolis earned more than 44 percent of the city's gross income, while the bottom quartile earned less than 5 percent.⁶² A 1978 Urban League report, compiled from surveys with hundreds of low-income city residents, echoed the language of the Kerner Commission's report, issued a decade prior, in suggesting that the tourism boom masked the reality of two economies: one prospering from the deprivation of the other.⁶³

The reality was that public officials in New Orleans had done little to encourage economic inclusion as a principle for community development. Even leadership that insisted on diversifying the economy—such as Mayor Morial, whose development strategy emphasized an attempt to build an industrial base—made no effort to curb the public subsidization of downtown development. Instead Morial, like his predecessor, continued to enhance private power at the expense of democratic decision making. Isolated within poverty neighborhoods, community development had little capacity to foster discourse about resource equity, let alone action capable of addressing structural or institutional inequality. Certainly, the nature of CDBGs, rooted as they were in a physical development program, made supporting comprehensive projects more difficult; nevertheless, the presence of federal urban aid as well as an interracial executive office allowed leadership to seem progressive while promoting private-sector development in ways counter to the interests of poor people.⁶⁴

This mirage would end with the 1981 Omnibus Reconciliation Act, which cut nearly 40 percent of federal urban aid. But by promoting economic development that undermined the mobility and inclusion of low-income residents, city leaders had already abandoned their residents. The autonomy granted to private-sector interests to determine the economic agenda has ensured that development remains uneven and strategic decision making undemocratic.

By the mid-1980s, New Orleans leadership no longer felt it necessary to balance the pursuit of speculative economic development practices with a commitment to socially progressive ideals. With the election of Mayor Sidney Barthelemy, the city actively cut public sector employment,

undermined public housing where downtown interests saw the opportunity for expansion, and doubled down on the touristic economy by encouraging the gambling industry.⁶⁵ As CDBGs were increasingly apportioned to private companies and nonprofit organizations under the belief that their operations would yield more efficient results, the city also began experimenting with mechanisms to privatize the delivery of other public services and aid.⁶⁶

Making use of the perpetual urban fiscal crisis (which privatization has failed to solve), local leaders have continued to utilize transitions in urban aid that on their face appear to offer new opportunities through the open market—Section 8, Clinton-era welfare reform, HOPE VI, Moving to Opportunity—to mask choices that have excluded low-income residents and diminished opportunities for inclusion within the city’s political economy. Despite the multitude of evidence that such programs do little to promote equality, the popularity of such strategies continues. The processes that we see being actualized in post-Katrina New Orleans, where low-income residents are being forcefully removed in favor of outrageous modes of gentrification, are the legacy of this era during which city administrators came to imagine the role of privatization as taking precedence over the preservation of the social welfare state.

If New York has not had the political (or environmental) rationale for decimating public housing like the fell swoop of New Orleans, policies that raise the maximum income of housing tenants and link new low-income housing to mixed-income developments will assuredly make those most vulnerable in the city far more so.⁶⁷ The same is true for government strategies that have sought to reimagine deindustrialized spaces—Detroit, Baltimore, and yes New Orleans—as creative commons for young tech entrepreneurs, a strategy that may bring new capital but will only exacerbate already precarious conditions for working-class communities of color.⁶⁸

There is nothing exceptional about these shifts; rather, while New Orleans may continue in the post-Katrina era to be an incubator for new forms of revanchist privatization, these patterns define the last forty years of urban development in cities across the nation.

Notes

1 Detroit, Michigan, provides another extreme example, as the takeover of the city by a nonelected emergency manager has precipitated calls for privatization of city services and urban shrinkage.

2 Quoted in Peck 2006, 696.

3 N. Klein 2008.

4 N. Klein 2008; Campbell Robertson, “Louisiana Illegally Fired 7,500 Teachers, Judge Says,” *New York Times*, June 21, 2012.

5 The decline of federal urban aid was, of course, not inevitable or final but due to the bipartisan assault on former antipoverty programs.

6 “Mayor Gives Challenge to Business Community,” *Times-Picayune*, December 8, 1971, 23.

7 This rhetoric underscored another point that was central to dismantling antipoverty activities. According to the Nixon administration, the failure of the war on poverty to make middle-class citizens out of poor people only demonstrated further the need to encourage the departed (white) residents back to urban cores.

8 Though enacted at a moment when antipoverty programs were being dismantled, CDBGs did not seek to reinvent antipoverty activity. Instead they were offered as broad urban revitalization tools. The grant consolidated several programs previously run through the Department of Housing and Urban Development into one block grant that was controlled with the discretion of the mayor. Congress had minimal oversight initially, but in order to qualify, cities had to submit a plan for activities and how they would ensure community participation, as well as a housing plan for low-income development (though new housing was not an approved activity). While many have imagined CDBGs as the failure of Nixon's attempts to enact federalism, the grants facilitated a radical shift in the way governing officials approached issues of urban poverty. The new grant program successfully allowed the national government to divest itself of responsibility for urban inequality, while the final arrangement minimized links between physical development and social services and evaded provisions that would have confined use to poverty zones. For an overview of the legislation, see Fishman 1975.

9 Planners were actually often suspicious of community-led involvement. Thus, although planners believed it was important to spend time in local communities, they dismissed the opinions and motivations of community leaders in low-income communities as antidemocratic and dictatorial. For a discussion of the effect of this behavior on community-government relations, see French-Marcelin 2014.

10 Dwight Ott, "Community Act Program Is 'Nightmare,'" *Times-Picayune*, January 4, 1975, 5.

11 This is not to say that these neighborhood improvements did not matter, nor is it to say that they were not things that low-income people asked for. I am simply saying that the reorganization of aid around physical development made the exclusion of low-income residents from economic development much easier. Although it was true that resources were insufficient given the needs of low-income residents, the architecture of the grant made comprehensive projects politically undesirable to local officials. The ability to deploy community development activities citywide discouraged comprehensive approaches that would limit action to one or two neighborhoods or curb the opportunity for grants to be used as political patronage.

12 While economic conditions made tourism the central driver of the post-1960s New Orleans economy, civic boosters had been pushing tourism development in earnest since the early twentieth century (see Souther 2006; Stanonis 2006). For more on the 1970s tourism efforts, see Whelan, Young, and Lauria (1994); Mosher, Keim, and Franques (1995).

13 See Gotham and Greenberg 2014.

14 See Matteson Associates 1966.

15 "Report: Central Business District as a Community Improvement Area," 1974, box 108, folder Central Business District as a Community Improvement Area, Moon Landrieu Papers, Loyola University Libraries.

16 As a southern liberal, Landrieu promoted integration as essential to the potential for growth (which was indeed true, as tourism depended on inclusivity where tourists were concerned). While Landrieu frequently conflated integration and growth as part of the same project, his rhetoric regularly ignored that growth of this kind offered only a select few the opportunity and means to realize integration, political or economic. This omission was not unique but a result of the triumph of growth liberalism over leftist critiques that sought redistribution in wealth and access. See "Report: Manpower Needs Assessment," box 15, folder MP-MAPC-GEN, Office of Policy Planning and Analysis Collection, New Orleans Public Library.

17 "Ban on CBD Demolition Is Approved by Council," *Times-Picayune*, April 19, 1974, 1.

18 "Mayor Takes Press for a Ride," *Times-Picayune*, May 22, 1971, 8.

19 Canizaro, a young smooth-talking mogul from Biloxi, represented just one in a cadre of new real estate hopefuls that descended on the city to answer Landrieu's call for new growth. The municipal land, originally valued by the city's assessor at over \$5 million, was reassessed at a value of \$1.6 million prior to the Canizaro swap, a fact that more than one person found questionable. See "Planning Unit Gives Okay to Swap of Land," *Times-Picayune*, December 27, 1973, 1; "Canizaro Got Good Deal in Land Swap with City," *Times-Picayune*, August 10, 1979, 1; "Beer Asks Specific Data on Why Appraisal Dropped," *Times-Picayune*, January 11, 1974, 5.

20 Wallace, McHarg, Roberts, and Todd 1975. For a discussion of HOPE VI in New Orleans, see also Arena 2013.

21 The supermajority clause of the Louisiana legislature, requiring a two-thirds majority for any change in taxation legislation or millage increases, was the direct consequence of fear of black political power following the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1966. The Louisiana State Legislature believed that it could limit progressive, integrationist legislation by making it more difficult for black politicians to gain access to a majority. In reality, the clause hindered all tax legislation that could have equalized values between city and suburb. Furthermore, the Louisiana legislature did not just reject the municipal income tax, but embedded a ban on such levies within the state's constitution. In line with nearly a century of punitive state action against progressive economic policy, the legislature's ban prevented any future city government from enacting progressive taxation.

22 "Report: Central Business District as a Community Improvement Area."

23 While the transition from model cities to central business district planning struck some as irresponsible, the improvement agency's leadership had, from the outset, been tied to the speculative real estate community. In spite of protests from antipoverty and civil rights leadership, five of the seven founding members of the agency's board of directors had ties to speculative business practices. As urban renewal activities mobilized new construction and building throughout the city, the improvement agency had developed a planning capacity and management resources to furnish downtown development.

24 Memo: Francis Keevers to the Chamber of Commerce, May 13, 1975, box 134, folder Community Improvement Agency, Moon Landrieu Papers, Loyola University Libraries.

25 For a detailed history of the use of the term "blight" within planning circles and policy measures, see Robick 2011. Robick argues that originally the concept was used almost exclusively to describe environmentally unsound conditions and unmanaged growth. Yet, as federal renewal programs opened new opportunities to marshal resources toward specific political gain, blight took on a more ambiguous, open-ended meaning. Under renewal, the threat of blight became means to justify the razing of entire neighborhoods to make way for speculative development projects.

26 Notes: Preparation for Citizen Participation Meeting, 1974, box 1: CD-PRGR-74, Office of Policy Planning and Analysis Papers, New Orleans City Archives.

27 Notes: Preparation for Citizen Participation Meeting.

28 "Report: Community Improvement Agency Report on the Central Business District."

29 Memo: Warren Berault to City Hall, April 21, 1977, box 9, folder Core Area Development District, Moon Landrieu Papers, Loyola University Libraries.

30 Memo: Warren L. Berault to Anthony Gagliano, March 22, 1977, box 9, folder Core Area Development District: January–August 1977, Moon Landrieu Papers, Loyola University Libraries.

31 Memo: Joseph Canizaro to Moon Landrieu, April 21, 1977, box 9, folder Core Area Development District: January–August 1977, Moon Landrieu Papers, Loyola University Libraries.

32 This was met with extreme resistance. The Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) was at the forefront of challenging this misuse. Central to exposing the use of CDBGs to build neutral medians and pave streets in higher-income areas, the group challenged the utilization of block grant funding in the Central Business District. While the group's suit brought new attention to the issue, it did not reform the practice. See ACORN, press release, "ACORN Files HUD Protest against N.O. CD Misallocations," June 17, 1977, box 22: RF-7/06-ADP: Incoming Mail, Office of Policy Planning and Analysis Papers, City Archives of New Orleans, New Orleans Public Library.

33 In their study on the use of CDBGs in Southern cities, the Southern Regional Council found that communities had used the aid to build parking lots for downtown shopping centers and baseball diamonds in wealthy neighborhoods, pave streets around convention centers, and fund direct city council patronage. See Senate Committee on Banking,

Housing and Urban Affairs, *On Oversight on the Administration of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974*, 94th Cong., 2nd sess., August 22–24, 1976, 24.

34 Liebschutz 1983.

35 Nathan et al. 1977, 230.

36 Similarly, a 1974 HUD-issued report generated by the Real Estate Research Corporation provided a series of deployment strategies that local governing officials could use to make decisions about where to direct their resources. The inability to address urban poverty directly, the firm argued, was offset by allowing local officials to direct funding and redevelopment resources into areas of marginal, rather than complete, decline. Given the dire crisis facing cities and the federal urban policy climate—where, as the popular discourse of the day concluded, spending reductions were clearly only going to continue—the corporation contended that investing in neighborhoods with the potential to induce private investment capital was imperative. It was a strategy that was not only “*more necessary than ever* ... it [was] probably also *more easily possible* under the Community Development program” (Real Estate Research Corporation 1974, II-16).

37 Report: Policy Issue Paper, 1974, box 123, folder Policy Issue Paper Prepared for the Meeting of the Community Development Steering Committee of the National League of Cities, Moon Landrieu Papers, Loyola University Libraries.

38 Jason Berry, “The ‘Upgrading’ of New Orleans,” *The Nation*, September 23, 1978, 270.

39 An example of this comes from the successful efforts of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative to compel Boston to build in stipulations of low-income inclusion in private development projects in the Roxbury area of the city.

40 Report: Clarence Barney, “Community Economic Development,” box B21, folder Economic Development 1978, Ernest N. Morial Collection, New Orleans Public Library.

41 “150,000 Grant to New Orleans League,” *Times-Picayune*, April 11, 1975, 19.

42 Memo: Frank Keevers to Clarence Barney, November 25, 1974, box 8, ED-HSQ-GEN: General Information on Heritage Square, Office of Policy Planning and Analysis Collection, City Archives of New Orleans, New Orleans Public Library.

43 For a longer history of the Central City project, called Heritage Square, see French-Marcelin (2014).

44 See US Government 1977.

45 In front of the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs, city planning units lobbied for increased flexibility to make community development funds available to private-sector investment. Members of the Connecticut Community Development Association recommended that rather than enhancing measures targeting low-income areas, community development could be restructured to create “increased incentive for participation of the private sector.” By 1977, this trend was widespread. Local mayors resisted the congressional call for more oversight and suggestions that provisions be added to protect low-income residents from displacement by urban renewal activities (US Senate, Committee on Banking Housing and Urban Affairs 1976).

46 US Government 1977, 3; see also Liebschutz 1983.

47 Announcement from Office of Urban Development Director Joseph McNeely on new Housing and Urban Development legislation, June 1, 1978, in possession of the author.

48 Mark Reutter, “30 Cities Asking HUD Grants for Hotel Projects,” *Sun*, March 20, 1978, A1.

49 Presidential Commission on Neighborhoods, quoted in “UDAG Helps Distressed Cities,” *Times-Picayune*, April 21, 1979, 14.

50 A request by city officials in Portsmouth, Virginia, called for more than \$2.9 million to aid developers in the construction of luxury waterfront condominiums and retail space; officials in Utica, New York, asked for funds to build a pedestrian plaza linking a new Sheraton hotel to a parking center. Though some congresspeople and many activists balked at the notion that this type of development could do anything to aid the plight of low-income people in cities,

HUD officials continued to insist that it would. Where activists claimed that this program should be used to invest in an economy that could provide mobility, not make “poor people become maids for ritzy people,” the response of HUD was that it was better than not having a job at all. Reutter, “30 Cities Asking HUD Grants.”

51 This strategy of prevention guided much of how the UDAG and CDBG programs came to be used across the country. Increasingly, fear mongering by growth advocates positioned blight as something that was pathogen-like, that would spread given the opportunity. See Report: Community Improvement Agency, “UDAG Grand Hotel Goals and Objectives,” 1977, box J14: Urban Development Action Grants, Ernest N. Morial Files, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

52 “‘Megalink’ CBD Plan Announced,” *Times-Picayune*, April 7, 1979, 1; Report: City of New Orleans, “UDAG Briefing Sheet,” 1982, box J14: Urban Development Action Grants, Ernest N. Morial Files, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library; “Moon, Morial to Urge Saks to Locate in N.O.,” *Times-Picayune*, January 18, 1978, 4.

53 Conference Proceedings, Urban Development Action Grants, Public-Private Partnerships for New Orleans’ Development, September 12, 1980, box 43, folder 463, Alma Young Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

54 Robert Doherty, “Midtown Centers Rival Suburban Malls,” *Times-Picayune*, May 23, 1983, section 4, 11.

55 First Annual Report on UDAG, box 42, folder 459, Alma Young Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

56 Brooks and Young 1993, 257.

57 Metzger 2001, 44.

58 Brooks and Young 1993, 264.

59 Hirsch 1983, 109.

60 Whelan 1989, 227.

61 Cook and Lauria 1995, 539.

62 Quoted in Adam Clymer and Tracie Rozhon, “Progress Mingles with Past: New Orleans, a Paradox City,” *Baltimore Sun*, September 19, 1975, A1. See also Bobo 1975, 26.

63 “Project Assist: Action Strategies for Implementing Social Transition,” Assist, box 171, folder 7, Urban League of Greater New Orleans, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University.

64 Whelan, Young, and Lauria 1994, 22.

65 Report: Ernest N. Morial, “Report to the City Council on Federal Budget Reduction Proposals, March 26, 1981,” L5: Federal Budget Cuts, Ernest N. Morial Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library; Booklet: Ernest Morial, “New Orleans 2001,” 1980, box 41:450, Alma Young Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans; Morial and Whelan 2000, 215.

66 Morial and Whelan 2000, 215.

67 Cindy Rodriguez, “Some Public Housing Tenants Say Possible Rent Hike Is ‘Class Warfare,’” WNYC blog, June 25, 2012, <http://www.wnyc.org/story/218331-blog-public-housing-tenants-facing-rent-hikes/>.

68 Megan French-Marcelin, “Gentrification’s Ground Zero,” *Jacobin*, August 28, 2015, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/08/katrina-new-orleans-arne-duncan-charters/>.

*What's Left for New Orleans?**The People's Reconstruction and the Limits of Anarcho-Liberalism*

CEDRIC G. JOHNSON

The City That Care Forgot is a nickname for New Orleans that originated in advertisements for the St. Charles Hotel as early as 1910 and was popularized in a 1938 tourist guide produced by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration. It was intended to capture the city's "liberal attitude towards human frailties," and "live and let live" sociability, but the sobriquet has taken on a new, paradoxical meaning in the aftermath of the 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster.¹ New Orleans has since been flooded with volunteers, celebrities, so-called YURPs (young urban rebuilding professionals), school reformers, and new residents, all promising to deliver a better New Orleans. This postdisaster movement of people and capital has revitalized the city's tourism industry and created new cultural hybrids and a blossoming film industry, but simultaneously deepened standing social contradictions, ushered in rent intensification, and renewed the dispossession and exploitation of the city's working class. And herein lies a central paradox of the new New Orleans. The city is flush with care and concern, but now, ten-plus years and six master plans later, many of the social problems that the city's boosters and residents hoped to remedy in the immediate aftermath of the Katrina disaster have in fact worsened.

The city is smaller, slightly whiter, wealthier, but still majority black. There are fewer children, and about one out of four children in the metropolitan area lives in poverty.² And yet the post-Katrina portrait is still more complex. According to 2015 US Census Bureau estimates, there were 95,625 fewer blacks in New Orleans proper than before Katrina. Corporate media's annual reports on the state of the city over the decade since Katrina often told a tale of two cities, emphasizing the more roseate story of economic revitalization, the hopes and joys of returning residents and transplants,

and the renewal of traditions, but at other times portraying the stagnancy and hardship of the city's laboring classes.

The poverty rate in Orleans Parish decreased from 28 percent in 1999 to 23 percent in 2015, but still surpasses the national rate of 15 percent. During the same period, poverty in adjacent Jefferson Parish increased from 14 percent to 16 percent, and child poverty grew from 20 percent to 27 percent. And while some homeowners have fared well since the disaster—the number of homeowners without a mortgage increased from 35 percent in 2000 to 43 percent in 2015 and is higher than the national average throughout the greater New Orleans area—the story for renters has been more desperate. The median gross rent in Orleans Parish increased from \$710 in 2004 to \$947 in 2015, bringing the previously low-rent and still low-waged city proper and wider metropolitan region in line with the national median. The annual celebrations of progress and recovery have been marred by a persistent crime problem. There were 175 homicides in the city in 2016, the highest total since 2012.³ Included in that grim 2016 death toll were former Saints defensive end Will Smith, who was shot to death in a road rage incident, and Demontris Toliver, a twenty-five-year-old Baton Rouge-based tattoo artist who was killed on Bourbon Street during Bayou Classic weekend. We can find these dynamics of rising housing costs and increasing poverty, crime, and social precarity in every American city. New Orleans is not exceptional. Within this broader milieu, however, New Orleans may well be the most neoliberal city in the United States.

In the immediate wake of the disaster, when New Orleans commanded the attention of the nation and the world, many hoped a more just city would materialize. In an essay penned the week after Katrina made landfall, left-progressive intellectual Naomi Klein called for such a bold, democratic reconstruction. Sensing the various cabals sizing up the opportunities for recovery during those early weeks after the flood, Klein wrote, “New Orleans could be reconstructed by and for the very people most victimized by the flood. Schools and hospitals that were falling apart before could finally have adequate resources; the rebuilding could create thousands of local jobs and provide massive skills training in decent paying industries.”⁴ “Rather than handing over the reconstruction to the same corrupt elite that failed the city so spectacularly,” Klein continued, “the effort could be led by groups like the Douglass Community Coalition.... For a people's reconstruction process to become a reality (and to keep more contracts from going to Halliburton), the evacuees must be at the center of all decision-making.” The Douglass Community Coalition was organized before Katrina by parents, students, and teachers to fight poverty and transform Frederick Douglass Senior High School, but its organizers would ultimately lose their fight. The school was closed through a right-sizing plan initiated by the Recovery School District, one of many casualties in the tidal wave of postdisaster privatization that Klein and others anticipated.

In the decade since Katrina, a spate of new organizations such as Common Ground Collective (CGC), the People's Hurricane Relief Fund (PHRF), the People's Organizing Committee, and the New Orleans Survivor Council were created in the hopes of developing a progressive alternative to the rebuilding designs of the city's ruling class. Other existing organizations like C3/Hands Off Iberville waged battles to save the city's public housing stock from demolition and create a material basis for the right of return for displaced, working-poor New Orleanians. The kind of people's reconstruction that Klein and many others envisioned, one that would have placed the voices and interests of native, working-class residents at the center of decision making and guaranteed the right

to housing, education, and health care, did not materialize. Instead, the reconstruction of New Orleans has been an elite-driven affair where volunteers, homeowners, and activists have been mobilized around the rescue and expansion of the city's tourism-entertainment complex, and where the advancement of real estate development interests and privatization of public schools, health care, and public housing have taken center stage.⁵

Why was the left so unsuccessful in crafting a powerful alternative to the agenda of the city's business elite? A partial answer to this question can be found in the balance of class forces in the city after Katrina, where the very constituencies who might have written a different story of recovery—public workers, unionized teachers, and public housing residents—were banished from New Orleans. The city's construction and service economy workforce was reconstituted in the wake of the disaster through a reserve army of nonunionized and at times undocumented migrant laborers, a pro-capital context produced by the Bush administration's deregulatory actions in the weeks after the disaster.⁶ And although less has been written about the economic impact of volunteer labor, the thousands of students, church members, and activists who donated free labor to debris removal, home repair, and reconstruction added more downward pressure on construction industry wage floors, adversely affecting an already vulnerable, contingent labor force.⁷

As crucial as the imbalance of class forces was, another major factor in the failure of the Left in New Orleans is the prevalence of anarcho-liberalism. This political tendency is suffused with concern for the various problems intrinsic to capitalism, but it does not directly contest the demands that capital imposes on society and the environment, favoring instead the creation of bottom-up, voluntarist political alternatives. This neologism is gleaned from Bhaskar Sunkara, who provides us with an appropriate descriptor for a prominent strain of post-Seattle left politics and its political limitations.⁸ As Sunkara notes, anarcho-liberals share “an anti-intellectualism that manifest[s] in a rejection of ‘grand narratives’ and structural critiques of capitalism, abhorrence for the traditional forms of left-wing organization, a localist impulse, and an individualistic tendency to conflate lifestyle choices with political action.” Like much American thinking of the age, anarcho-liberalism is haunted by Cold War antipathy toward socialism and by considerable amnesia regarding the place of centralized planning in the evolution of the US economy and the creation of the middle class after World War II.

Anarcho-liberals embrace a critique of capitalism's excesses, but they reject state intervention and social democracy in a manner that converges with neoliberal ideology. This tendency is defined by an antiauthoritarian posture suspicious of formal leadership and the use of state power to achieve social justice ends, favoring instead spontaneity, horizontalism, and counterculture. Faith in public institutions and the possibility of transforming the body politic were casualties of the Katrina disaster with long-term implications for the city and the nation. Rather than placing demands on the state for social housing, worker protections, and other measures that might have improved the conditions of the most vulnerable New Orleans residents, anarcho-liberal emphasis on independent, private, and grassroots-led efforts fit well within the market-driven recovery advanced by Democrats and Republicans alike in the city.

The turn to anarcho-liberal politics is not unique to New Orleans, and residents in other cities and states share the same critical view of the liberal democratic process as being overrun by wealthy donors, party insiders, and lobbying organizations. The city's reputation as a den of political

corruption and graft, and the monumental failure of state institutions to guarantee basic protections to the most vulnerable New Orleanians during Katrina and the highly uneven recovery that followed, however, all fed cynicism toward government's capacity to deliver, lending credence to anarcho-liberal claims that only residents themselves could rebuild neighborhoods and lives. For many in New Orleans and across the US, the Katrina crisis provided ample evidence that government was inadequate, if not antagonistic, toward human needs.

This essay takes up the question of what form of governance might be most appropriate to achieving social justice in New Orleans and, against both neoliberal and anarcho-liberal market logics, opts for the renewal of a left politics focused on building popular power and advancing working-class interests through redistributive state interventions. Because New Orleans is but one node within a broader landscape of real and imaginary places where anarcho-liberalism draws inspiration and opportunities for action, this essay travels from the fictional world created by filmmaker Benh Zeitlin to Occupy Wall Street (OWS) encampments, the worker-run factories of Argentina, evacuating farming villages in Cuba, and back again to the roiling social struggles in the Crescent City.

The first section examines the origins of anarcho-liberalism and its resurgence by way of antiglobalization struggles at the start of the twenty-first century and evolution through OWS demonstrations. Here I engage manifestations of anarcho-liberal politics within post-Katrina New Orleans, analyzing ideological expressions in the writings and political prescriptions of Rebecca Solnit. The second section examines how grassroots mobilization worked with, not against, the broader elite-driven processes of rebuilding in the city. In practice, celebrations of voluntary disaster relief communities and calls for bottom-up reconstruction are forms of self-help that shore up neoliberalization by diminishing the potential for collective power over public decision making.

To sketch an alternative to anarcho-liberal politics, one that begins with the local, urban capitalist class relations that shape daily life, the concluding section of this essay takes up the slogan of the right to the city, first authored by French Marxist Henri Lefebvre, but revived in recent years by activists and intellectuals, most notably David Harvey and Peter Marcuse. The right to the city is understood here not as an individual right to access the city's resources but rather as the collective power to shape the processes of urbanization and the right to determine how the surplus created socially through urban productive relations should be distributed. Unlike the anarchist sensibility, this perspective is guided by a more direct critique of the dynamics of urban capital accumulation, a process that affects us all as wage laborers and city dwellers. Moreover, the right to the city frame as developed by Harvey, Marcuse, and others encourages a politics that is squarely addressed to questions of building effective solidarity and social power, questions that must be answered by those who hope to craft a more just alternative to neoliberal urbanism in New Orleans and beyond.

The Origins and Limits of Anarcho-liberalism

Benh Zeitlin's 2012 fantasy film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* was a runaway art-house hit, and in many ways it conveyed the prevailing anarcho-liberal sensibility that had taken root in post-Katrina New Orleans. *Beasts of the Southern Wild* was widely acclaimed during the summer of 2012. Its fans included President Barack Obama and Oprah Winfrey, and it garnered a slew of awards on the film festival

circuit. Such praise was largely due to the precocious performance of six-year-old Quvenzhané Wallis in her lead role as Hushpuppy, which garnered an Oscar nomination. The film is set in a fictional rural community, the Bathtub, which sits beyond the levee walls of a nearby city, where marshlands give way to the sea.⁹ Perhaps inadvertently, the Bathtub recalls words of the antitax crusader Grover Norquist, who said he hoped to shrink the size of government to the point where it might be “drowned in a bathtub.”¹⁰ And like Norquist, the film celebrates the virtues of rugged individualism while vilifying government as invasive and ineffectual.

Like the other children in the Bathtub, Hushpuppy is taught to be fiercely independent. She and her father, Wink (played by local New Orleans bakery owner Dwight Henry) live in separate houses made of reclaimed materials, makeshift structures that evoke the slum aesthetic one might encounter in the informal settlements of Lagos or the hillside favelas of Rio de Janeiro. Hushpuppy’s independence becomes all the more important as multiple disasters unfold—a major hurricane sweeps across the Bathtub; her father contracts a mysterious illness; and massive boar-like creatures called aurochs are unleashed by melting polar ice caps. This film is visually intriguing, and the folkloric dimensions are at times alluring, albeit underdeveloped. The strong performances by unknown, mostly black local actors lend an air of authenticity and believability to *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. These cinematic virtues, however, conceal the film’s more cynical, reactionary politics.

Like those elements of the OWS demonstrations that demanded greater democracy and economic justice for the 99 percent but rejected the necessity of sustained organizing around a principled agenda, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* combines leftist social criticism with an antistatist politics that is essentially conservative. The film embodies an anarcho-liberal politics that is progressive in celebrating autonomy and popular protests, but hardly anticapitalist in any traditional sense. Revolutionary transformation of society is not a central aspiration, and, in practice, the localized forms of autonomy and protest that are encouraged are nonthreatening and fit comfortably within the established liberal democratic order.

The film celebrates wild freedom, but democratic government at a greater scale other than the primitive village form is demonized. As the film unfolds, and as Wink and Hushpuppy fight to maintain their lives and sense of home, emergency workers come to their aid, but such assistance is vigorously refused. And even after Wink is told that his life-threatening condition requires emergency surgery, Hushpuppy helps him and other residents to escape the storm shelter and return to the Bathtub. Those elements of the state designed to ensure social welfare, such as the national guard, flood control systems, hospitals, and emergency shelters, which all serve as critical lifelines in real disasters, are all depicted in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* as impersonal and corrupt, the enemies of the wild freedom that the Bathtub’s residents enjoy. Even the physical landscape of the nearby city is depicted as ominous—the levees protect the city but flood the Bathtub.

The film offers a soft critique of the perils of modernization and invites introspection on the kind of world we as citizens of an advanced capitalist society have created and its pernicious effects for people who inhabit places like the Bathtub. The development of massive industrial cities and extensive infrastructure around the use of fossil fuels has caused great ecological ruin, but after viewing the film, one walks away with the sense that the solution to our current crises is to return to preindustrial, quaint ways of living—we can simply turn back the clock, reject modern technologies like the Bathtub’s denizens, and live off the land (or sea) in small, autonomous communities. The

forms of self-activity and independence that are cheered by fans of *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, however, are inadequate to address the looming environmental and social crises of our times. The film's antistatist posture and fetishization of communalism and horizontality reflect prevailing modes of left political critique and action in the post-Katrina landscape.

The anarcho-liberal tendency that has achieved popularity in the United States today is, in practice, a departure from international traditions of anarcho-syndicalism, Italian workerism, and the French notion of *autogestión* (which is roughly translated as workers' control over production) that were embedded in working-class struggles. By contrast, anarcho-liberalism's intellectual roots in the US, particularly its rejection of socialist statecraft and celebration of self-actualization, can be traced back to the New Left counterculture of the 1960s, though its more immediate sources reside in the anticapitalist politics that first crystallized against corporate globalization during Bill Clinton's presidency and resurged during OWS. The end of the Cold War and collapse of the USSR had a powerful effect on left politics during the 1990s, producing strands of anticapitalism leery of the socialism that was attempted throughout much of the twentieth century—the seizure of state power and initiation of nationalization and planning to abolish private property and redistribute social wealth.

We can see evidence of this antistatistism in the ways that many OWS activists appropriated aesthetic and rhetorical elements of the left popular struggles that developed in response to Argentina's 2001–2 economic crisis. As an industrialized nation with a large middle class when the crisis took hold and plunged half of its population into poverty, Argentina provides a more a direct parallel with the US economic crisis than other Latin American nations. The pursuit of factory occupations and autogestión in that country's urban centers, however, was supported by a tumult of social forces that included the *piquetero* movement of the unemployed, some unions, existing cooperatives, Peronists, anarchists, communists, and various other left political parties as well as a mix of genuinely sympathetic and opportunistic politicians.¹¹ After the Argentine crisis, the popular slogan “¡Ocupar, Resistir, Producir!” referred to the active process of occupying shuttered factories and firms, resisting eviction, and restarting economic activity through cooperative ownership—a long and complicated process that, at its height, created some two hundred such recovered firms in places like Buenos Aires, Córdoba, and Neuquén.

Within the US context, “occupation” came to mean encampments in public parks and plazas rather than the takeover of productive property. The popular assemblies in Argentina were most often rooted in actual neighborhoods and involved ongoing deliberation and organizing among various social layers. In contrast, the human microphones in Manhattan's Zuccotti Park, Oakland's Ogawa Plaza, and other public spaces across the country were momentary spectacles of democracy. Such acts may have been powerful experiences for their participants, providing a moment of solidarity and in-gathering. In retrospect, however, Occupy failed to engage middle-income and working-class citizens in a sustained manner beyond activist networks and the coastal urban centers. Moreover, the demonstrations did not advance a specific policy agenda that might have addressed the insecurity and suffering so widely felt amid the housing foreclosure crisis and economic recession.

The Occupy demonstrations helped to momentarily open up more space for public criticism of capitalism, but the expressed aversion to politics—such as, “No demand is greater than any other demand,” “We are our demands,” and other such slogans—could not be expected to generate much more.¹² The language of the 1 percent versus the 99 percent was a vivid characterization of wealth inequality, but it fell short of providing an analysis of class relations that might have guided protracted political work and produced real solidarity. Most importantly, unlike Argentina, where popular responses to the economic crisis developed complex orientations toward the role of the state, which is multifaceted and can be repressive, instrumental, and benevolent, the Occupy demonstrations reflected a less discerning sensibility. Occupiers hoped to achieve societal transformation through counterculture and parallel institutions, rather than through the more arduous process of social struggle aimed at creating real popular power and pushing state practices in a more progressive democratic direction. Rebecca Solnit’s writings on Katrina and disaster more generally may constitute the most representative illustration of this anarcho-liberal tendency and its limitations.

In her 2009 book *A Paradise Born in Hell*, Solnit celebrates the prosocial behaviors and altruism that flourish during moments of natural disaster and social crisis. Solnit’s account of postdisaster sociality provides a necessary antidote to corporate media framing of the Katrina disaster that too often resorted to narratives of black criminality and mass chaos—a perspective that appealed to right-wing antiurban and racist fears. In contrast to the wild rumors of murder and mayhem that circulated in the weeks and months after the city’s levee system failed, local residents responded in large measure with an outpouring of benevolence, sharing foraged food, medicine, and other supplies, improvising rescue squads, and shuttling elderly, young, and infirm residents to safety in makeshift flotillas of refrigerators, punching bags, doors, salvaged boats, and often on the backs of the able-bodied.¹³ Solnit celebrates these spontaneous mutual aid communities and more formal organizations like Catholic Charities and Habitat for Humanity that responded to pressing need in the wake of Katrina.

Foremost among these post-Katrina formations, for Solnit, was the Common Ground Collective (CGC). This organization was founded in early September 2005 at the kitchen table of Algiers resident and former Black Panther Party member Malik Rahim, along with his partner, Sharon Johnson, a former Black Panther; a member of the Angola 3 political prisoners, Robert King Wilkerson; and two white Texas activists, anarchist Scott Crow and Brandon Darby (who was later revealed to be an FBI informant). In his endorsement of Crow’s 2011 book *Black Flags and Windmills*, anarchist and key intellectual figure of the OWS demonstrations David Graeber later described CGC as “one of the greatest triumphs of democratic self-organization in American history.”¹⁴ The group was drawn together by the immediate need to combat racist vigilantes and help disaster victims. Solnit sees the various projects created by CGC, their initial first aid station and later health clinic, food distribution center, tool lending station, and so on, as descended from the Black Panthers’ programs for “survival pending revolution,” which included free breakfast for schoolchildren, free groceries to poor residents, medical screening, and so on.

Solnit is right to highlight these aspects of disaster sociality. The connection she draws between these disaster communities and the creation of a “beloved community,” a more just social order envisioned by Martin Luther King Jr., however, is ill conceived and seems to forget that King and

the thousands of citizens and activists who took part in postwar civil rights mobilizations saw federal intervention as central to their struggle to defeat Jim Crow segregation. Like others, Solnit rejects the older notions of left revolutionary change predicated on the seizure of state power and instead embraces the view that society might be transformed incrementally through the creation of parallel communities and institutions.¹⁵ Solnit offers what is by now a familiar account of what went wrong during the Katrina disaster: “The original catastrophe of Katrina ... was the result of the abandonment of social ties and investments. Yet despite the dire consequences of this social withdrawal, the answer to Katrina on the part of New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin and many others has been more abandonment and privatization.”¹⁶ Solnit writes that Nagin and the city’s governing elites used the disaster to fire public school teachers, transform the city’s school district through charterization, making schools “less accountable to parents and taxpayers,” and demolish public housing stock.¹⁷ From this account of government failure, however, Solnit follows other actors in the post-Katrina milieu who do not call for a renewed struggle to create more effective governing institutions and a more just social order, but instead turn toward various forms of self-help as solutions to contemporary social problems.

Solnit’s analysis of these disaster communities conflates self-actualization of volunteers with the creation of community, and it ignores how public policy—health care, schools, public safety, and so on—is also an expression of community values, care, and basic respect for human dignity. In contrast to King’s vision of the beloved community, which sought state recognition and universal protection extended to black citizens throughout the nation, Solnit’s notion of the beloved community is limited in scale and temporality. She valorizes spontaneous and short-lived communities, while expressing deep cynicism about state power and bureaucratic organization, the antithesis of popular self-governance in her thinking.

Solnit does not seem to appreciate how the volunteer legions she celebrates were at times complicit in advancing the pro-capital recovery and reconstruction process. Her account does not discern in any critical way between the political motives and consequences of volunteerism in the region and the nature and objectives of progressive left organizing:

The volunteers are evidence that it doesn’t take firsthand experience of a disaster to unleash altruism, mutual aid, and the ability to improvise a response. Many of them were part of the subcultures, whether conservative churches or counterculture communities, that exist as something of a latent disaster community.... Such community exists among people who gather as civil society and who believe that we are connected, that change is possible, and who hope for a better earth and act on their beliefs.¹⁸

Solnit does not consider how undemocratic and exclusive these ostensibly empowering gatherings are in fact. She mentions some of the racial tensions that erupted between volunteers and local residents, as well as the ideological conflicts between interlopers who were committed to abstract anarchist values and those more settled activists and natives who needed to think through practical solutions and longer-term strategies. Still, her analysis misses the underlying class contradictions of

volunteerism as a means of disaster management. Although there are always exceptions, volunteers are typically those with enough leisure, finances, and mobility to travel to disaster zones.¹⁹

Solnit characterizes the altruism that surges after disasters in terms of carnival, a familiar trope of post-Seattle anticapitalism, “a hectic, short-lived, raucous version of utopia” when social conventions and routines of everyday life are disrupted.²⁰ The carnivalesque—for which New Orleans is a celebrated and potent signifier—is not always good, just, or egalitarian. New Orleans’s carnival traditions, far from ideal forms of democracy and openness, are rooted in long histories of class power, social hierarchy, racism, and at times violence. Moreover, the antiblack pogroms and routine lynchings of the Jim Crow era were characterized by a carnivalesque atmosphere where throngs of whites often donned Sunday attire, imbibed in social drink and good cheer, posed for family photographs, sometimes in front of a smoldering corpse, and created other macabre souvenirs of the fete. Popular control and unfettered freedom are not always consonant with radical democracy. Making inroads against lynching and black subjugation, indeed, creating King’s beloved community, required more than moral suasion; it required state interventions like the mobilization of the National Guard to escort black students as they integrated Southern schools and federal marshals to open the ballot box to black voters. A more nuanced view of history and power relations would be helpful here, but these are deep flaws of the anarcho-liberal tendency.

To her credit, Solnit offers a glimpse of what effective disaster preparation and recovery looks like—a system that brings to bear the resources of the state while mobilizing elements of civil society. Her reading of the Cuban model, however, is rather selective. possibilities to ensure that people survive the hurricanes that regularly scour the island.”²¹ Under the island’s civil defense system’s decentralized structure, neighborhood and village-level leaders are responsible for going door to door to make sure that all residents are accounted for and able to reach safe haven in advance of a coming storm.

Solnit celebrates the role of local people in coordinating evacuation but seems to forget that this effort is completely coordinated by the state and party apparatus. She also downplays the fact that the Cuban system features state-funded rebuilding, whereby residents with damaged or destroyed homes are provided with building materials and architectural plans for reconstruction. Such blueprints include a windowless safe room, located in the interior of the floor plan and constructed of a concrete shell able to withstand hurricane-force winds. Unlike the spontaneous disaster communities she touts, which are limited in scale and impact, and often reproduce social inequality by virtue of their volunteer dimension, the Cuban model uses state power to redistribute social resources nationally and guarantee some modicum of universal protection to its citizenry.

A People’s Reconstruction Revisited

In her 2007 book *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein describes the phenomenon of disaster capitalism, concluding that “it has much farther-reaching tentacles than the military industrial complex that Dwight Eisenhower warned against,” and that the “ultimate goal for the corporations at the center of the complex is to bring the model of for-profit government, which advances so rapidly in

extraordinary circumstances, into the ordinary and day-to-day functioning of the state—in effect, to privatize government.” Klein’s analysis of the spread of neoliberalization is powerful, countering dominant narratives of consensual progress by recalling the actual historical violence of capital and the role of coup d’état and proxy wars in the advance of neoliberalism. As others have noted, though, her work overemphasizes shock and coercion at the expense of softer, more democratic political strategies employed by neoliberal reformers.²²

Klein is one of the most influential left intellectuals of her generation, and her accessible writings have done much to popularize left critique of capitalism. But her overemphasis on White House patronage streams and the machinations of disaster profiteering firms like Bechtel, Halliburton, Blackwater, and the Shaw Group hides how, unlike in the war zones of Afghanistan and Iraq, in US domestic politics the imposition of the neoliberal model has been achieved through more consensual means. Like Solnit, Klein misses how altruism, goodwill, and even social protests are mobilized in the process of neoliberalization.

In New Orleans, short-run cleanup entailed disaster capitalism of the sort that Klein describes, but the longer-run reconstruction process has been characterized by more benign and even benevolent actors—grassroots organizations, civic associations, and charitable groups like Phoenix of New Orleans, the Good News Camp, Catholic Charities, Habitat for Humanity, and many others. In her ethnographic examination of the privatized recovery in post-Katrina New Orleans, Vincanne Adams concludes that “the acts of witnessing and the affective surplus” produced during moments of catastrophe “have become themselves part of an economy in which affect circulates as a source of market opportunity for profit... The affect economy we live within today makes use of affective responses to suffering in ways that fuel structural relations of inequality, providing armies of free labor to do the work of recovery while simultaneously producing opportunities for new corporate capitalization on disasters.”²³ Faith-based institutions largely drove the recovery. Catholics alone contributed at least \$7 million in postdisaster assistance to over 700,000 survivors. And of the top ten private charities investing in post-Katrina relief, six were faith-based.²⁴ As part of a planned oral history project, historian Christopher Manning reported that within the first five years after Katrina, such organizations mobilized over a million volunteers, drawn from church congregations, civic organizations, high schools, and universities.

These actors have helped to facilitate a process that I’ve described elsewhere as grassroots privatization, where neoliberalization is legitimated and advanced through empowerment and civic mobilization.²⁵ These processes constitute, in fact, a people’s reconstruction of a sort, but clearly one that lacks the left-oppositional character that Klein and many others called for in the aftermath of the Katrina disaster. Instead of a recovery and reconstruction process intimately shaped by the needs and interests of the great majority of New Orleanians and Gulf Coastal residents, the remaking of the region has featured the public and affective labors of volunteers, nonprofits, and activist organizations in a process driven by propertied interests, multinational hoteliers, private contractors, and real estate developers. What is left is the reality that anarcho-liberal critiques of capitalism’s excesses (e.g., sweatshop conditions, soil and water pollution, mass layoffs, poverty, etc.) and the attending calls for more democracy all provide legitimation to dynamics of accumulation, insofar as these lines of criticism and action avoid directly challenging investor class power and the state-judicial structures that secure property relations.

Unlike the dispensation of contracts to Bush campaign contributors during the first months after Katrina, grassroots privatization did not garner the same popular outrage, but it followed a similar logic of governmental outsourcing and the process of accumulation by dispossession, where formerly public services and goods—sanitation, debris removal, education, housing, public safety, and health care—were enclosed for profit making.²⁶ Such activity furthers the reach of neoliberalization by cultivating consensus, often in unlikely corners of society. Occupiers, alienated citizens, liberationist clergy, New Urbanist planners, liberal academics, students, antipoverty activists, black nationalists, progressive architects and designers, and social conservatives have all embraced the allure of these strategies, but these measures lack the basic fairness, oversight, and wider economic impact that a public works approach to disaster relief and reconstruction might afford.

Grassroots privatization depoliticizes the process of reconstruction in a few notable ways. Volunteerism provides participants with an opportunity to express compassion without the risks associated with social protests or the depth of commitment required in protracted organizing campaigns. Volunteerism may lead to activism in some cases, but this is less likely within a context where problems that might be addressed through state power are routinely defined as personal or moral issues that can and should be rectified through individual initiative or technical and religious solutions. In her 1998 book *Avoiding Politics*, Nina Eliasoph examined the disappearance of the public sphere, understood here not as mass media but as what happens between people, the ways citizens talk about issues and discover common concern. Her ethnographic work focused on a suburban community in the Pacific Northwest and on spending time with her subjects in different social contexts—activist meetings, social activities, and volunteer settings—paying close attention to the character of everyday talk. What she found was strenuous disengagement. Her findings are disturbing, and her discussion of what happens in voluntarist settings speaks to the post-Katrina context. Although the act of volunteering most often brought citizens face-to-face with various social problems, the context of volunteerism repressed public-spirited conversation. Eliasoph found that volunteers “tried to shrink their concerns into tasks that they could define as unpolitical, unconnected to the wider world.... Volunteers shared faith in this ideal of civic participation, but in practice, paradoxically, maintaining this hope and faith meant curtailing political discussion: members sounded less publically minded and less politically creative in groups than they sounded individually.”²⁷ I would add that the actions of volunteers are not then apolitical, but in fact politically conservative inasmuch as they preserve prevailing social relations.

Rather than confronting the processes of exploitation and uneven development at the center of the reconstruction process, volunteer-led rebuilding efforts coexist rather peacefully alongside local norms and power dynamics, in a manner that might be likened to theater actors who move from one scene to another, executing their lines faithfully while ignoring the heavy lifting and prop changes undertaken by stagehands. One clear illustration of this contradiction between volunteer moralism and progressive political action can be found in the first year after the disaster, when thousands of volunteers began pouring into places like St. Bernard Parish to do the work of debris removal, mucking and gutting homes, and providing emotional support to devastated residents. Many volunteers went about this work without engaging or contesting the blood-relative ordinance passed in St. Bernard that forbade residents from renting to anyone who was not kin, a measure that openly discriminated against blacks and Latino migrant workers in the largely white parish.²⁸ This measure was ultimately ruled unconstitutional, but it succeeded nonetheless in discouraging resettlement in

the parish and limiting the housing options available to both returning minority residents and newcomers. Of course, some volunteers are awakened to such injustices through their visits, but many are able to evade these local political realities, focusing instead on innocuous microlevel forms of help freed from the thorny choices and risks that must be made whenever we take sides in a political fight.

Although volunteers were typically praised in periodic news coverage commemorating the disaster and marking the city's progress, the presence of a seemingly bottomless reservoir of unwaged labor undoubtedly devalued migrant wage labor in qualitative and relative terms. Why would homeowners want to employ wage laborers if mercurial students and devout church members could complete the same work for free? Donated labor was both free and devoid of the relations that might trouble the conscience of homeowners and triumphal narratives of recovery. In turn, volunteer laborers relished the homeowners' expressions of gratitude and tales of pluck and resiliency. For both homeowner and volunteer, this relationship holds great, mutually affective rewards, more desirous than the often publicized conditions of hyperexploitation and vulnerability associated with Latino male construction labor.

The use of secular and faith-based nonprofits to facilitate rebuilding also carries little guarantee of constitutional equal protection, and, as noted above, these arrangements most often facilitate the reproduction of social inequalities. As Adams makes clear, "The idea that citizens should have a right to recovery assistance just because they are citizens (and have paid insurance or taxes for this sort of recovery help) becomes easily replaced by the notion that disaster recovery is not itself a civil right but a moral choice, or even a measure of one's commitment to one's faith."²⁹ Additionally, postdisaster reconstruction undertaken by private, charitable groups has often benefited those sectors of the population who are more articulate, educated, and socially integrated. This is true for volunteers but also, in the case of New Orleans, for those recipients of nonprofit aid who are better positioned and able to negotiate the labyrinth of application procedures and subcultures of relevant nonprofit organizations.

The use of volunteer labor also bore negative consequences for working-class renters, since most NGO- and church-oriented recovery targeted single-family homes, reinforcing the bias toward homeowners reflected in the state of Louisiana's Road Home program and other initiatives. More troublesome still, the political elite's commitment to public housing demolition, a process that was conceived during the late 1980s in the city and well underway by the time of the Katrina crisis, made it more difficult for some residents to return, greatly diminished the availability of affordable housing stock, and contributed to the skyrocketing rents that came to define the city by the time of the tenth anniversary.³⁰ The common antiracist framing of the disaster and the dynamics of reconstruction that defined both liberal media coverage and much academic work in the ensuing years has largely failed to account for this discrete, local class conflict between public housing residents and private real estate interests, precisely because this struggle is not reducible to institutional racism or essentialist assumptions about black-white conflict.

The reconsolidation of the city's elite and the construction of new means of legitimacy out of a historical moment when the class contradictions of the city were so dramatically and painfully exposed is one of the more fascinating dimensions of Katrina's reconstruction. Although journalists and academics made much of the open expressions of class contempt and racism offered by the

likes of restaurant owner and real estate broker Finis Shellnut and Louisiana congressman Richard Baker in the immediate wake of the Katrina disaster, such comments have overshadowed the more subtle interplay of elite prerogatives, racial brokering, and participative strategies that have defined the character, priorities, and trajectory of recovery and reconstruction in New Orleans.³¹

This process of reconsolidation has been fraught with internal political division, personal rivalries, economic competition, and public scandal, but elite consensus has congealed around a renewed agenda of neoliberalization and a revitalized tourist-entertainment industry. What has emerged is a multiracial recovery-growth regime, a historical bloc that advances the real estate interests of those like Shellnut, Joseph Canizaro, Pres Kabacoff, the restaurant and hospitality industries, and various other institutions and players that constitute the city's tourism zones, along with the varied interests of the more affluent and more organized neighborhoods, with postdisaster newcomers often playing a critical role.

Black public figures like jazz trumpeters Wynton Marsalis, Irvin Mayfield, and Kermit Ruffins, famed restaurateur Leah Chase, public officials like Ray Nagin, former HANO board chair Donald Babers, and one-time recovery czar Edward J. Blakely, among others, have been crucial at various junctures in projecting the image of multiracial, inclusive recovery. Most of these figures publicly demanded a racially just rebuilding process, asserted the centrality of the black presence to the city's culinary and musical traditions, and defended the right of return for all residents in the abstract, adding a sense of internal dynamism and a veneer of democratic inclusion to the neoliberal project. This combination of liberal notions of racial justice and neoliberal politics has been missed in some analyses of the post-Katrina milieu that do not appreciate the historical origins and role of black political leadership in the city since the end of Jim Crow.

Popular and academic treatments of New Orleans since Katrina have typically relied on potted narratives of racial segregation that miss the city's unique and complex social history and neglected the ways that black political incorporation during the 1960s and '70s not only ushered in four decades of local black rule but transformed the local tourism industry in ways that diversified the city's touristic identity and expanded black commercial elites' share of local economic growth. The process of postsegregation black incorporation was shaped by the Great Society interventions of the community action agencies, antipoverty programs that actively recruited and cultivated black politicians, and the nationwide demand for black power emanating from civil rights struggles, which encouraged the pursuit of black ethnic politics.³² Despite internal class contradictions, historical tensions between Catholic Creoles and Protestant blacks, competing elite factions, neighborhood turf battles, ideological differences, and political intrigue, local blacks consolidated power during the early 1970s under the liberal, pro-integration regime of Moon Landrieu, and ultimately gained control of City Hall with the election of Ernest "Dutch" Morial in 1977.

During the same period of black incorporation, the renaming and development of the Municipal Auditorium site into a park honoring the late jazz trumpeter Louis Armstrong marked the beginnings of the liberal integration of the city's public tourist identity. The development of the park was met with opposition, especially by whites who detested bestowing such an honor on one of the city's most famous expatriates.³³ In the decades since the debates over Armstrong Park, the Tremé neighborhood, black parading and brass band traditions, Mardi Gras Indian subculture, and voodoo have all become some of the most identifiable aspects of the city marketed and commodified for

tourist consumption. Under the leadership of Morial and subsequent black governing regimes, the city also saw the expansion of tourist niches tailored to black consumers, events such as the 1980s-era Budweiser Superfest tour and other major concerts, the annual Bayou Classic collegiate football game, the Essence Music Festival, and national conventions of black professional and social organizations. The commonly heard post-Katrina assertion that New Orleans is the most African city in America would have made little sense to visitors during the immediate post-World War II years and would have been rejected by those in power, because that postsegregation identity is the result of a decades-long transformation of who governs the city and who participates in its place branding.

As in other cities, black political elites in New Orleans have fallen silent during debates over the privatization of public housing and public schools and often have openly supported revanchist policy.³⁴ These voices alone, however, did not confer legitimacy on the neoliberal recovery-growth regime, especially given the widespread discontent and suspicion that permeated the post-Katrina environment. Rather, the support of NGOs and even some progressive activist organizations has been crucial to securing broad public support for privatized reconstruction.

As sociologist and longtime public housing advocate John Arena has noted, even those organizations expressly committed to a grassroots-led reconstruction have often succumbed to the overarching dynamics of corporate-centered recovery and reconstruction. The PHRF's executive director, Kali Akuno, submitted a grant proposal to the Venezuelan government in hopes of securing funds for the creation of a community bank and land trust in the Lower Ninth Ward. Arena notes that this attempt at advancing a "people's capitalism" reflects the accommodation of left progressive forces to the neoliberal recovery model. "The request was not about how the Bolivarian Republic could assist local groups to pressure and confront the state in the midst of its neoliberal restricting agenda," Arena writes, "but rather how to build a nonprofit alternative."³⁵

For Arena, and others like myself, the true test of progressive left politics within the context of post-Katrina New Orleans centered on protecting and expanding those aspects of public policy that would have established the material bases for the right to return for all residents. The fights to protect existing public sector jobs and create transitional employment for returning residents through public works, to reopen Charity Hospital and continue its long tradition of accessible health care and service to New Orleanians, to save Iberville and the remaining Big Four public housing complexes from demolition, and to preserve and improve the city's system of K-12 public neighborhood schools each constituted crucial battlefronts in the post-Katrina context.

Within this context where the beneficent use of state power has been greatly diminished, private and collectivist alternatives like worker cooperatives and community land trusts seem especially appealing for many. Worker control over selected firms or individual factories or local community ownership of select buildings is certainly an advance over conditions of exploitation. These can have the immediate effect of improving the living conditions for those workers and tenants fortunate enough to have access to these collectivist projects, and they can also have a demonstration impact in cities, pointing the way to different postcapitalist modes of living, where the power of capital is supplanted by that of associated producers and planning guided by use values rather than profit making. If these alternative projects are not connected to broader popular struggles aimed at contesting capitalist power in other spheres of activity, they are bound to function as modalities of

neoliberalism, yet another niche within an elaborate and dynamic process of accumulation. Within the US context, carving out such spaces of economic autonomy has most often been launched by those who have lost faith in traditional union organizing and the possibility of achieving social justice by directly contesting the power of capital through statecraft and policy.

Sadly, many of the most outspoken progressive left activists in national media and on the ground in the city demurred on these critical fronts. It is still amazing and deeply unsettling that no major national demonstration was staged in solidarity with Katrina evacuees, nor any national mobilization of resources and bodies to defend the last remaining public housing complexes from demolition. On one level, the dearth of popular attention and mobilization can be attributed to the hegemony of antiwelfare sentiments and the difficulty that American publics have in perceiving more impersonal, systemic motors of inequality, especially when compared to racist offense.

These battlefronts entailed issues that would have secured the right of return for many working-class residents, but effectively confronting these very issues of public policy required a more nuanced, dialectical view of the American political process than the antistatist approach taken by anarcho-liberals. Within recent times, the state within the US has come to function largely, but not exclusively, as an executive committee of neoliberal reform, but when a longer, more international-historical view is taken, we see moments when working-class social movements have forced the state to reflect the popular democratic will, and when concrete social good was achieved through social democratic and socialist regimes. Though not without limitations, the renewed discourse of the right to the city, with its emphasis on popular democratic control over the urbanization process, may provide an alternative to the anarcho-liberal impasse because of its capacity to bridge the local character of political life and a left politics focused on building popular power and achieving redistributive policy.

The Right to the City and Anticapitalist Struggles

French Marxist Henri Lefebvre first coined the “right to the city” slogan amid the May 1968 events in Paris, where thousands of students and workers initiated a wave of university and factory occupations, public demonstrations, and general strikes that momentarily contested the power of the French ruling class. In his 1968 pamphlet *Le Droit à la Ville*, Lefebvre describes the right to the city as “a cry and a demand” that “cannot be conceived as a simple visiting right or as a return to traditional cities. It can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed *right to urban life*.”³⁶ This slogan has experienced a rebirth within the past decade. Antievasion organizations such as the Right to the City Alliance have looked to Lefebvre’s writings for inspiration, and a number of critical urban theorists have made good use of Lefebvre’s work in their analysis of the contemporary urban malaise. The slogan, however, has also been appropriated by centrist and bourgeois political forces who have excised its anticapitalist content, adopting the slogan as a banner for poverty-reduction and slum-upgrading projects that have been in circulation for some time.

The United Nations and the World Bank have both adopted Right to the City platform planks, but as David Harvey warned at the 2010 World Urban Forum in Rio de Janeiro, “the concept of the

right to the city cannot work within the capitalist system,” a point that did not go over well with the reform-minded audience.³⁷ Such reformist appropriations of the right to the city run the risk of assimilating demands for social justice to market logics, and run counter to the left-critical position offered by Lefebvre, Harvey, Marcuse, and others asserting the slogan.

At the heart of their arguments is a more radical demand that citizens should have a collective right to shape urbanization, a popular democratic power that contradicts the current state of affairs where capital determines working conditions, wages, health care access, education, infrastructure, land use, housing and real estate value, leisure, and the character of everyday life. I agree with Harvey and others who wish to maintain the anticapitalist intentions of Lefebvre’s initial formulation and see the right to the city as a useful way of orienting a working-class-led, left politics in a highly urbanized US society. American cities have been especially vulnerable to the volatility of neoliberal world making since they were both critical nodes of capitalist growth and federal investment during the Fordist-Keynesian era and, as a consequence, have been severely impacted by welfare state rollback and austerity.³⁸ Hence, urban space constitutes both the central battleground for struggles against neoliberalization and the site where left popular forces are most concentrated and organized and stand the greatest prospect of political success. If the slogan “right to the city” is to mean anything, then it must mean the difficult practice of contesting the very powers that now dominate the urbanization process, and, in contrast to the anarcho-liberal tendency, it must also mean taking up the equally daunting task of building more just forms of governance.

Harvey’s extrapolation of the right to the city is firmly rooted in Karl Marx’s labor theory of value and, as such, emphasizes the contradictions stemming from extensive social cooperation within highly urbanized, capitalist productive relations. Lefebvre characterizes the city as an oeuvre—a work in progress.³⁹ The contradiction here rests in the fact of broad-based social labor responsible for the city’s continual remaking. The process is at once collective, because as workers, visitors, consumers, and citizens, we all contribute in manifold ways to the constant remaking of the urban form, its technological and social complexity, and economic and cultural wealth. And yet, at the same time, a small minority of politicians, investors, and developers shapes that future in ways that reproduce their power and the conditions of social precarity and exploitation essential to furthering the process of accumulation. Although the right to the city is presented in the liberal language of rights, Lefebvre, Harvey, and others are really calling for working-class power, the right of the great majority to determine urban processes through popular control.

Unlike Solnit’s beloved community, which is predicated on self-actualization through small groups, the right to the city as articulated here celebrates the vast potential for creativity and freedom that is afforded only through the social complexity of metropolitan life. As the architecture critic and urbanist Lewis Mumford once wrote, “Within the city the essence of each type of soil and labor and economic goal is concentrated: thus arise greater possibilities for interchange and for new combinations not given in the isolation of their original inhabitants.”⁴⁰ In a similar vein, Harvey notes that the right to the city is not merely the individual liberty to access urban resources. Rather, it is a “right to change ourselves by changing the city,” and it is by definition “a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization.”⁴¹ This “freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is,” according to Harvey, “one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human

rights.”⁴² This concept shifts focus from recognition and inclusion within the established capitalist growth coalitions that govern most contemporary cities toward the possibility of an egalitarian urbanity where the interests and passions of living labor determine the course of public life, the shape of the built environment, and how the wealth produced through extensive cooperation is distributed and consumed. Unlike the anarcho-liberal tendency, the socialist right to the city outlined here insists on a return to politics and struggles over the distribution of social wealth and the development of policy that will ensure a freer, happier mode of existence for the greatest number.

Popular left forces in New Orleans were weakened during the immediate years after Katrina with the mass layoffs of public employees and public school teachers and the mass evictions of public housing tenants. In the intervening years, however, new bases of opposition have taken shape; older forces have regrouped, and there are promising signs of struggle throughout the city. In the wake of public housing demolitions, activists and residents have waged fights against rent intensification and for affordable housing. Others have sought to defend the rights of workers through traditional labor organizing. UNITE HERE Local 2262 and the Teamsters local successfully unionized nine hundred workers at Harrah’s Hotel and Casino in 2014, and UNITE HERE more recently succeeded in organizing the Hilton Riverside.⁴³ Advocacy organizations like Women with a Vision and the Sex Workers Outreach Project have worked to create better conditions for sex workers, who constitute a central but socially dishonored labor force in tourist economies globally. In 2011, Women with a Vision succeeded in ending the draconian practice of placing convicted sex workers on the sex offenders’ registry, a policy that further stigmatized the working class, minority, queer, and trans escorts and performers and undermined their right to gainful employment and civic life.⁴⁴ These struggles and others being waged against noise ordinances, stress policing, and rent intensification constitute the bases for a more just New Orleans, one that reflects the needs and interests of the working-class residents who make the tourist city run day in and day out.

Marking the first anniversary of the Katrina disaster, New Orleans native and political scientist Adolph Reed Jr. warned, “Unless current patterns change, the struggle for New Orleans’s future may be a more extreme, condensed version of the future of many, many more people as the bipartisan neoliberal consensus reduces government to a tool of corporations and the investor class alone.”⁴⁵ How much have we learned from the Katrina disaster and the intervening financial crisis of 2008? Some lessons have been taken to heart but not nearly enough. Public officials displayed considerably more savvy and urgency in managing late 2012s Hurricane Sandy crisis, but the 2017 south Louisiana floods that devastated communities from the Florida parishes across the greater Baton Rouge area and on westward to Acadiana proved once again that state and national approaches to flood protection, rescue, and rebuilding are woefully inadequate. Likewise, while the tragedy of Katrina sparked serious public debate and urgent planning to restore coastal wetlands lost to industrial pipelines and shipping channels, the political influence of the energy sector, the automotive industry, and other interests have undermined progressive reform and regulation. The experience of New Orleans should have also forever washed away that leftist canard that worsening social conditions alone will deliver the death blow to capitalism, and not the more difficult task of building popular support for alternatives. As Klein has brilliantly detailed, moments of crisis and social disruption can provide opportunities for capital to extend its power and produce even more dire conditions for many citizens. Solnit contends that what “begins as opposition coalesces again and again into social invention, a revolution of everyday life rather than a revolt against the system.

Sometimes it leads to the kind of utopian community that withdraws from the larger society; sometimes, particularly in recent decades, it has generated small alternatives—cooperatives, organic farms, health care projects, festivals—that become integral parts of this society.”⁴⁶ “One of the fundamental questions of revolution,” she continues, “is whether a change at the level of institutions and systemic power is enough or whether the goal is to change hearts, minds and acts of everyday life.”⁴⁷ This is not a helpful question. It poses a false opposition between institutionalized power and quotidian life that obscures the complex interdependency, social relations, and bonds of trust that constitute contemporary societies. Governing institutions and systemic power have tremendous bearing on the character of daily life, that is, the quality of the built environment, basic water utilities and other infrastructure, ecological integrity, traffic, biomedical technology and health care access, and individual mobility in the literal and economic sense. What kind of society will the small alternatives touted by Solnit and many others actually generate? A society that looks very similar to what we already inhabit where some classes enjoy relative freedom, material comfort, healthy environs, longer lives, and personal security while others are left to fend for themselves. A close examination of the experience of New Orleans should challenge those who abide the anarcho-liberal sensibility. The city’s rebirth demonstrates that the kind of people’s reconstruction we have seen is not enough. Like so many other well-intentioned projects, without substantive power, a bottom-up reconstruction can be appropriated and deployed to pro-capitalist ends, reproducing inequality in its wake. And perhaps most importantly, the experience of New Orleans might still force us to develop a revitalized leftist perspective on statist planning, one that does not succumb to the missteps of the past but is capable of abolishing poverty and producing a more just society, where care and altruism are not only expressed voluntarily within daily life but reflected as well in democratic public institutions.

Notes

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9 The film was actually shot in the town of Montegut in southern Terrebonne Parish.

10 Grover Norquist interview, Mara Liasson, "Conservative Advocate," *Morning Edition*, NPR, May 25, 2001, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1123439>.

11 Monteagudo 2008; Vieta 2010; Sitrin 2006.

12 See Khatib, Killjoy, and McGuire 2012.

13 In one of the first histories of the disaster, Douglass Brinkley (2007, 372–81) makes reference to the Cajun Navy, those volunteers from the suburbs of New Orleans and the countryside of Acadiana who descended upon the city with pirogues and recreational motorboats in tow to rescue residents and offer emergency care and relief. Brinkley's account captures one dimension of grassroots disaster relief but neglects others, especially the work of black working-class residents. Their unsung heroism was captured brilliantly by Upper Ninth Ward resident Kim Rivers Roberts's handheld video footage of the flooding and used in the 2008 film *Trouble the Water* by Tia Lessin and Carl Deal. See also Ancelet, Gaudet, and Lindahl 2013.

14 Crow 2011.

15 Holloway 2002.

16 Solnit 2009b, 302.

17 Solnit 2009b, 302.

18 Solnit 2009b.

19 V. Adams 2013.

20 Solnit 2009b, 166–67

21 Solnit 2009b, 265. Oxfam International, an antipoverty NGO, provided a thorough report on the Cuban civil defense system which detailed specific lessons that US policy makers and citizens might glean from the Cuban model, a report that was published and circulated incidentally the year before Katrina struck. Oxfam America, *Weathering the Storm: Lessons in Risk Reduction from Cuba*, 2004, https://www.oxfamamerica.org/static/oa3/files/OA-Cuba_Weathering_the_Storm-2004.pdf

22 See Arena 2012, 148; Doug Henwood, "Awe, Shocks," *Left Business Observer*, March 2008, 117; Alexander Cockburn, "On Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine*," *Counterpunch*, September 23, 2007; C. Johnson 2011, xxxii–xxxiii.

23 V. Adams 2013, 10.

24 The Salvation Army raised \$336 million; Catholic Charities USA contributed \$142.2 million; United Methodist Committee on Relief raised \$69.6 million; while International Aid (a Christian relief/mission organization) raised \$50.5 million. Feed the Children (an Oklahoma City-based Christian relief nonprofit) contributed \$47.1 million, and Habitat for Humanity (Baptist Crossroads) raised \$82 million (see V. Adams 2013, 134).

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32 Germany 2007.

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34 See Arena 2011b; Reed 2016.

35 Arena 2011a, 172.

36 Lefebvre (1968) 1996, 158, emphasis in original.

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42 Harvey 2008.

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