THE VILLAGE OF HOPE: Community Reformation in Post-Katrina New Orleans

Milan Miller
Bard College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2018

Part of the Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License.

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2018/428

This Open Access work is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been provided to you by Bard College's Stevenson Library with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this work in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@bard.edu.
THE VILLAGE OF HOPE:
Community Reformation in Post-Katrina New Orleans

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Social Studies and the Arts
of Bard College

by
Milan Alicia Miller

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2018
“The silence of the city of New Orleans after the hard blow of hurricane Katrina didn’t last long. The musical culture had to be revived even if the venues were destroyed, the instruments washed away, and the people’s spirits broken. The art of music, which composes much of the culture of New Orleans, never drowned when the levees broke. It is because of this melodic spirit that the community was prompted to revitalize their beloved city through music. It is evident that throughout the rebuilding efforts in New Orleans, music and culture have been on the back burner as far as the media is concerned; however, the impact that music has had upon the city since its beginning is vital to the rebuilding of the New Orleans community and was recognized by several charities, which footed the relief efforts geared towards regaining and maintaining such rich musical heritage. The true meaning of rebirth in New Orleans does not only lie within the newly constructed buildings, health relief efforts, or the economic growth, but lies at the cultural heart of the city where musicians continue to play their hopeful melodies.” – (Crovesi 2011)
DEDICATION

To the many women, men, and children who called New Orleans, Louisiana their home before August 29, 2005.

And for those who preserved our culture during the storm-induced diaspora. This thesis is for you.

In memory of Peter Hutton.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are countless people who contributed to the development of this film and anthropology project over the past two years, and for all of your help and support I am eternally grateful.

First of all, I would like to thank:

Shamarr Allen  
Andrew Baham  
Michele Brierre  
Keng Harvey  
Alfred Growe III  
Dwight Miller Sr.  
Ellen Smith  
Mahogany Brass Band and Dr. Brice Miller Sr.  
Pinstripe Brass Band and Herbert McCarver  
Dr. Michael Torregano  
The Ellis Marsalis Center for Music  
Residents of Musicians’ Village

Thank you for taking the time to share your stories. Thank you for letting me into your work spaces, homes, and hearts. It was a privilege to be entrusted with the story of your commitment and passion for preserving the musical landscape of post-Katrina New Orleans.

I would like to thank my anthropology advisor, Laura Kunreuther for her leadership and guidance throughout my undergraduate academic career. Her guidance, dedication, and support were magnified in her unwavering willingness to step in and support me whenever needed. Thank you for encouraging me to pursue a topic of interdisciplinary research that celebrates the overlooked, misunderstood, and in many instances unwritten about people and places in New Orleans that serve as a foundation for understanding the relationship between music, place-making, and disaster recovery. Thank you for pushing me to ask difficult questions and seek deeper meanings that go beyond my lived experience. The same is to be said for my film advisor, Effie Asili, for his never-ending guidance as an academic mentor, filmmaker, and scholar. Thank you for challenging me creatively and constantly checking on my progress. You both encouraged me to use my experience, and insider perspective to tell the story of Musicians’ Village and New Orleans.

I am fortunate to have other distinguished professors, mentors, and support networks to acknowledge. I am very appreciative of the knowledge, input, and attention they have offered to this thesis. Thank you, Yuka Suzuki. Your wisdom and knowledge have been a tremendous asset to me throughout my studies in the anthropology department. Without your invaluable tips during the IRB process, I would not have been prepared to accomplish this thesis. Michele Dominy, thank you for shaping my awareness of the methodological approaches to creating an ethnography and helping me decipher the difference between travel, tourism, and anthropology.
Thank you to the BEOP family and the POSSE Foundation giving me the opportunity to study at Bard College. I would not be where I am without you.

I would like to also thank:

Peggy Ahwesh
Marco Lorenz
John Asuncion
Ben Coonley
Stephanie Kufner
Brandon Jack Lee
Ruthie Turk
Ashley Sheppard-Quince

Thank you for your countless amounts of unwavering support. Thank you for being there during the many times I doubted myself as a scholar.

To the dozens of seniors who encouraged me as I encouraged them. I want to especially thank Isha Aggarwal, Arti Tripathi, Riti Bahl, and Sarah Cohen for being there when I felt like I hit many breaking points. Thank you for being there for me when anxiety overtook my brain and I felt myself falling into a rabbit hole. Thank you for showing me compassion and believing me when I said I was suffering. Thank you for telling me I was going to get through it, that we all were going to get through it, and meaning it wholeheartedly. I am forever thankful for all your words of encouragement. Bard College Class of 2018, we made it!!!

And lastly, I have to acknowledge my family who made this scholarly pursuit possible, my father, Dr. Brice Miller Sr. - thank you for showing me how to use my positionality as a Black intellectual, my mothers, Shaneeka Miller and Melanie James, and my siblings Brice Miller Jr., Zoe Miller, and Brionne Miller; my grandparents, Dwight Miller Sr., Brenda Miller, Rose Reddick, the late Freddie “King” Reddick, and Eddie Maria Cruz. Thank you to all my aunts, uncles, and cousins. I am forever indebted to you. And of course, I have to thank myself.

Finally, for all the New Orleans musicians. This thesis represents you. Thank you for allowing me to take my first steps as a cultural agent by sharing your stories.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Introduction** | 8

**Chapter One**
*I’m Coming Home: The New Orleans Music-Based Community Renaissance* | 21

**Chapter Two**
*Katrina Stories as a Voices of Reason: Diaspora, Tradition, and Preservation* | 41

**Chapter Three**
*Race, Place, and Tourism: Musicians’ Village’s Place in New Orleans Gentrification* | 60

**Concluding Thoughts** | 72

**Artist Statement** | 78

**Bibliography** | 80
**Introduction**

**I Got the Hurricane Blues**

Early in the morning on August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina, a category five storm, made landfall over New Orleans, Louisiana. After making landfall, the Hurricane’s blustering winds, ceaseless rainfall, and violent storm surge obliterated the southern shores of Louisiana, and flooded about eighty percent of metro New Orleans. The damage done to the city of New Orleans was unfathomable, unexpected, and immeasurable. Shortly after the storm, it was reported that around “1,118 people were confirmed dead in Louisiana as a result of Hurricane Katrina. More are still missing or presumed dead. Thousands of homes were destroyed. Nearly 124 jobs were lost, and half of the region’s population has not yet returned” (Andersen et al 2007, v). Those who were most affected by the storm were poor, primarily Black, residents of the city who were not able to afford to evacuate or relocate prior to the storm.

While pre-Katrina New Orleans already had a low unemployment rate amongst the Black population, those who were near the bottom of the socio-economic barrier were struggling Black musicians, artists, and Mardi Gras Indians- those who carry on and preserve what is known as ‘the traditional cultures’ of New Orleans. This subset of the population primarily made an income on a gig by gig basis. By having their homes destroyed by the storm, these people were unable to afford relocating back to New Orleans, or if they were able to afford relocating, they did not necessarily have a place to return to. In 2006, a year after the storm, renowned musicians Harry Connick Jr. and Branford Marsalis partnered with the New Orleans chapter of Habitat for Humanity to create a neighborhood in the Upper Ninth Ward of New Orleans, called Musicians’
Village for, primarily Black, musicians, artists, and Mardi Gras Indians who had lost their homes to the storm and were not able to relocate back to New Orleans.

**After the Storm - My Narrative**

In those brief rare moments when I am not thinking about the implications of Hurricane Katrina on Black livelihoods, I think about the importance of story. In the unsettling aftermath of the storm, my focus is on the relationship between place-making, music, and post-disaster recovery. I find it best to discuss these subjects through narrative. Throughout the thesis, I incorporate my personal narrative and experience with Hurricane Katrina as an anecdotal lens to tie in the larger theoretical and methodological framework at hand.

Being a native of New Orleans, I still remember the day we lost New Orleans. It was August 27, 2005, two days before Hurricane Katrina made landfall. I, along with my older sister and infant brother, were awakened by my father. He had told us to get up and pack three days’ worth of clothing. At the time, I was eight years old and did not understand the immediate implications in the tone of my father’s voice. I remember him and my stepmother walking frantically throughout our shotgun style home. They spent the morning calling family members to see where everyone was headed. We did not typically evacuate, because the city of New Orleans encounters numerous hurricanes each year. New Orleans lies between three bodies of water, the Mississippi River, Lake Pontchartrain, and the Gulf of Mexico. During the early settlement of the city, “the French referred to it as ‘Le Flottant’- The Floating Land” (Verderber 2009, 92). Locals now refer to the city as a ‘soup bowl’ due to the fact that the city lies beneath the sea level and floods intensely during rain storms. In order prevent water from spilling into the city from the surrounding bodies of water, New Orleans has a series of levees and floodwalls that wrap around the city. Our home had been located in the Carrollton area of New Orleans, a
neighborhood lined by levees and floodwalls that typically doesn’t flood, so my father did not prepare for water damage. We left the house in a hurry and said a prayer before driving away from our street. As we drove from our home, I remembered thinking about my mom. She had lived in the Lower Ninth Ward, a block away from a levee. I was worried, but hoped that she would be fine, because she had said that she would be seeking shelter at a friend’s house in the Upper Ninth Ward.

Prior to Katrina, the Ninth Wards of New Orleans were known to house Black people and ironically both neighborhoods received the worst amounts of damage following Katrina. When asking anyone why the Ninth Wards received the most amounts of damage, you typically get one of two answers: “they (as in the city government) bombed the levees to save the French Quarter” or “they simply don’t care about Black people” as Kanye West famously said during a live broadcasting when wondering why former president, George Bush, wasn’t sending aid to New Orleans. Regardless of which answer one hears, it is widely believed that the damage and levee failure caused by Hurricane Katrina were neither an accident nor an act of nature. Instead, it is believed that the destruction of the storm was caused by government neglect to the New Orleans Hurricane Protection system. Following the storm there was a report published that highlighted flaws in the levee system such as revealing that parts of the levees “were too low, while others were poorly designed, maintained or constructed” (Wolfgang 2015). The report also stated that preventative damage came from organizations such as FEMA and the Louisiana state government, because the powers at hand were unable to address the needs of residents, primarily Black, who were unable to evacuate.

Leading up to the storm, thousands of people took shelter in the Superdome as it became a “shelter of last resort as New Orleans became engulfed in floodwaters and access to lifelines
broke down,” for those unable to evacuate (Masquelier 2006, 736). As Katrina made landfall, her unstoppable storm surge crept into the superdome. Over the next few days as rain continued to pour, the Superdome and the city itself would turn into a marsh of despair. On the streets of New Orleans, floating by were human corpses. Looting was taking place, but song was still alive. I know this because my mother was there, and I had seen it on the news.

After driving for what seemed like hours, my family and I ended up at a motel in Memphis, Tennessee. Unlike many music-centered families, we had been fortunate to evacuate the city before Hurricane Katrina made landfall. This was in part because my father was a world-traveled musician and owned one of New Orleans’ premiere music companies where funds were stored for emergency funds. These funds were important, because without them, evacuating would not have been easy. We stayed in Memphis for around three days, because we assumed that we would be able to return to the city swiftly. Once acknowledging that the city was no longer as we knew it, we traveled a few hours south to a shelter at the Mississippi University for Women in Columbus, Mississippi. It was there that I learned what had transpired in New Orleans.

Being that I was only eight years old at the time, my parents kept me away from the television. One because we had not heard from my mother and feared that we would see her body floating on the screen, and two because my young eyes were too sensitive to understand the realities of what was happening. I did sneak a few glances at the news though. What I saw remains vivid in my memory. There were bodies floating down streets, blocks of neighborhoods ruined, violence, looting, stories of rape, or trauma. I witnessed the city drown, and I knew we couldn’t go back. But my father was able to return. Prior to Katrina, he had served as the jazz ambassador for the city of New Orleans, and ironically enough, musicians were some of the first
people being allowed back into the city following the storm. Musicians were asked to travel to the city to perform for many benefit concerts because music equals life in New Orleans, and having music performed in the city meant that the city was coming back, or so it seemed. I always wondered why my father was able to travel to the city and we couldn’t. What was the relationship between music and place, my young mind wondered. And why did music serve as a symbol of recovery?

My joint senior project answers this question through both the creation of a short documentary, called *The Village of Hope*, which can be found on Bard’s Digital Commons underneath the Film Senior Projects, as well as YouTube, and a written ethnography about the phenomena of the post-disaster recovery of a New Orleans localized music neighborhood called Musicians’ Village. I examine how the formation of Musicians’ Village in post-Katrina New Orleans contributes to our understanding of the intersection between the post-disaster recovery of an urban city and the role of its cultural practices. By focusing on the dialogues produced and sustained by Black musicians in the city of New Orleans who were displaced after Hurricane Katrina and have since relocated to Musicians’ Village, this project explores “real people, in real time, and in a real place where culture is reforming in spite of the everyday struggles of a city still recovering from disaster” (Miller 2017).

**Situating Musicians’ Village**

Wondering about what historical neighborhood I could potentially research for my senior thesis on music-based cultural preservation in post-Katrina in New Orleans, I went to my father-Dr. Brice Miller, who is a New Orleans based public intellectual and musician, who lives his life using the tools of anthropology, ethnomusicology, philosophy, and history. He immediately recommended Musicians’ Village that was built two years after Hurricane Katrina. I wanted to
do research at the Musicians’ Village because I had heard that it was a neighborhood comprised of primarily African-American musicians that were attempting to pass down the traditional musical cultures of New Orleans to younger Black kids of the Ninth Ward, while reviving the history, tradition, and locality of the Upper Ninth Ward.

Musicians’ Villages, located in the Upper Ninth Ward of New Orleans and known notoriously as the “new Treme” by both tourists and locals, has seen a drastic transformation in the recent decade. Since the summer of 2007, the neighborhood has not only expanded its cultural influence, but also its resident base. This cultural and demographic expansion, however, does not come without an inherent skepticism. In the following chapters, I ask: what is this neighborhood? What does it mean to the city?

In this research, I will explain why what has occurred in Musicians’ Village over the past decade is an indicator of what may become for the future of Black musicians and their culture in New Orleans. I discuss how the many cultural phenomena that have taken place in Musicians’
Village exists as webs of meanings. In his book, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz looks at the definition of culture and what it means to the field of anthropology. His most prominent assertion is that culture is suspended in webs of meaning (Geertz 1973, 5). Culture gives meaning to individual acts, against which they can be interpreted. Therefore, my analysis of Musicians’ Village’s culture, following Geertz, is an interpretive one in search of meaning. Anybody can read about Musicians’ Village—though, the meanings and interpretations associated with the neighborhood may vary. If you Google search “What is Musicians’ Village”, what appears on your webpage? For starters, on the upper right hand side of the webpage, you will find an image of brightly colored houses, accompanied by a brief blurb of its history provided by Wikipedia. “Musicians’ Village is a neighborhood located in the Upper Ninth Ward in New Orleans, Louisiana…” (Wikipedia 2018). This is not untrue. But perhaps what is more telling about the interpretations of the neighborhood are the immediate results you’ll find under the search bar. Five posts from the search bar, you’ll find a link to Nola.com with the pegged title, “Musicians’ Village Helps Struggling Artists Buy Homes”. Two posts further you’ll see a link to AirBnB advertising one to “Stay in the Musicians’ Village!” Venture to the second page of results you will see “Musicians’ Village makes the 9th Ward Looked Lived in Again and Safe”. So what is the relevance of the random search results and how does it relate to Clifford Geertz? The search results elucidate several attitudes of what the neighborhood means and brings to the city such as music, recovery, and cultural preservation. The interpretive process of searching on Google is an attempt to contextualize the cultural meaning of the Village.

To find the “webs of meanings” within Musicians’ Village, I use the symbol of its place in preserving the African-American musical and artistic traditions of New Orleans to uncover “thick description” and thus permeate the collective ideologies of the neighborhood. Thick
description is a tool in anthropology that explores the hidden meanings of cultural phenomena by striving to determine their social-cultural importance. By using thick description, I will interpret the meanings behind the place-making of the Village and will, like Clifford Geertz, uncover the difference between the “twitch,” “wink,” and “blink,” or hidden aspects of the Village in post-Katrina New Orleans (Geertz 1973, 6-7). A “twitch,” “wink,” and “blink” may all look like the same eye motion without any context, but there is a reason that each motion is different. Yet in order to find that difference, one has to dig deep to find the individual meanings of each. In the context of my research, the meanings are not intentionally hidden, but through thick description these cultural phenomena become meaningful for the reader as you become able to identify the significance of Musicians’ Village.

The Social-Economical Impact of Hurricane Katrina

Immediately following Hurricane Katrina, former mayor, Ray Nagin, established the “Bring New Orleans Back (BNOB) Commission to develop recommendations for restoring the city” which advertised “jazz needs you, Creole cooking needs you, and New Orleans needs you now more than ever. So check out some places to stay and pay New Orleans a visit” (Jackson 2011, 5). The business objective of BNOB used carefully selected images of tourist advertisements to create a caricature that New Orleans had recovered from the disaster of the storm. The BNOB advertisements were popular amongst tourists, but had little significance amongst citizens, primarily Black, of the city. BNOB advertised an imagined New Orleans, “one emphasizing tourism, food, and fun, while masking disparities in accessing resources such as affordable and accessible housing, employment, quality education, and health care resources needed by thousands of the city’s Black residents across class in neighborhoods located throughout the city,” those who needed adequate resources both before and after the storm.
The optimistic narrative that BNOB hoped for did not extend to the local, Black, residents of New Orleans. While media outlets and the tourism industry, highlighted the ‘recovery’ of the city, they casted a shadow and ignored areas of the city such as the Upper and Lower Ninth Ward, historically Black communities that to this day remain in a state of decay.

In the predominantly Black neighborhoods of the Upper and Lower Ninth Ward, the infrastructure such as residential and nonresidential spaces, roads, schools, etc. remain in a state of decay. Hurricane Katrina created the opportunity for the privatization of public housing. Prior to the storm, public housing served as the homes of many within the Black communities of New Orleans. As a result of privatization, poor and working class Black families were pushed out of their communities, and presently “four of the city’s poorest neighborhoods, including the Ninth Ward, are still largely abandoned, with half of their pre-storm populations” (Michaels 2015). In addition to residential decay, poverty within Black communities increased from “44 percent to 50.5 percent” after the storm (Alexander-Bloch 2015). While Blacks were also dealing with the loss of housing, they also had to cope with the loss of jobs. During the ten year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, media outlets poured into the city to capture the rebirth of New Orleans. They captured images of the French Quarter, bustling with tourists, packed restaurants, and jazz and brass bands performing around the city. For many not in the city, one would assume that the images portrayed a swift transition from the damage of Katrina to a blossoming New Orleans. The media gave the public the perception of a city that completed its recovery, renewal, and rebuilding. For even Mitch Landrieu, the former mayor of New Orleans stated that, “We are America's comeback city- New Orleans is a beacon of light, the capital of what some have called the New South” (Gladwell 2015). This ‘New South’ that Landrieu speaks of misleads many into thinking that New Orleans is as vibrant as it was prior to Katrina. Following Katrina, the media
created a false narrative of rebirth in New Orleans. How is the city of New Orleans “as vibrant as it was prior to Katrina” when the majority of Black residents, who serve as a base for the city’s culture are without proper housing or income?

The power of New Orleans’ Black culture is tied to place. In fact, “the distinctive cultural practices of New Orleans such as jazz funerals and second-lines are emblematic of New Orleans because they do not appear anywhere else in the United States” (Regis 2003, 44). It is important to understand the historical factors that shaped the Black experience in New Orleans. As I elaborate in chapter two, much of New Orleans’ Afro-Creole culture stems from Congo Square, which was a slave market and then a place of ceremony for free slaves and people of color. When free people of color, during the time of slavery, would meet at Congo Square they were free to do whatever with little to no supervision ranging from performing music, religious rituals, opening shops, and buying nearby land. Thus “the roots of Black cultural tradition formed deep in Black communities and remained central to the daily lives of Blacks in their neighborhoods” (Regis 2003, 46). Yi-Fu Tuan describes the power of place to impose and perpetuate culture in his book *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, stating that, “the built environment creates clarifies social roles and relations” (Tuan 1977, 102). His argument claims that the environments in which people live symbolize the way culture is created and how each person fits into its place. Relating to Tuan, this thesis, as an interdisciplinary research project, investigates the social-cultural impact of Musicians’ Village, a neighborhood comprised of primarily African-American musicians, in post-Katrina New Orleans, Louisiana.
Everyday Place-Making and Music

Musicians’ Village serves as one of the youngest and innovative places of cultural preservation in relation to other musical neighborhoods such as Treme. Place and music have been synonymous in New Orleans for more than a century. They are emblematic and reflect the city’s complex, and often troubled history. Most people who are familiar with New Orleans link music and place through ritualized cultural spaces, such as Congo Square, the former slave trading market mentioned above, or Treme, the birthplace of jazz, yet do not necessarily question what caused music to be linked to these specific places. In this study, I examine the links between music and place by focusing on cultural heritage, place, gentrification, tourism, disaster, and the perspectives of the musicians that make the musical and place-making efforts of Musicians’ Village a distinctive and iconic form of cultural preservation.

The musical practices of New Orleans musicians serve as a thread that connects all of New Orleans’ distinctive cultural practices, including jazz funerals, Mardi Gras Indian parading, and community parades called second-lines. Yet because their culture is deeply-rooted in the social-cultural history of the African-American community, few scholars have an insider understanding of the relationship between place and music, including locals like myself. It is true that most people associate the musical practices of New Orleans with jazz funerals, second-lines, festivals, and Mardi Gras. Anthropologist Claude F. Jacobs notes that most tourists of the city have never witnessed true New Orleans culture and have little knowledge of the significance of Black tradition. He references Helen Regis, an anthropologist who has done extensive research on New Orleans’ jazz and heritage, the Ninth Ward, etc., who writes about how the appropriation of Black culture and tradition have become a dominant theme for tourism organizations that claim to show “authentic” New Orleans Culture. For visitors, “in the hands of local elites and the
tourist industry, second-lines, festivals, and Mardi Gras have become "minstrel-like" appropriation and commodification of black culture appearing in both tourist literature and commercial advertising alike” (Jacobs 2001, 310). This literature is mostly concerned with tourism in the city, and the progress (or lack thereof) of marginalized groups that were made explicit following the storm. What is missing from the literature is why the physical and cultural rebuilding of the city happened the way it did. Specific neighborhood rebuilding efforts, like those done in the Upper Ninth Ward with Musicians’ Village, are critical to understanding a city’s values in rebuilding. I intend to bridge the gap between these two narratives by arguing that the creation of cultural institutions and residential spaces represent the larger narrative of recovery, rebuilding, and renewal in New Orleans.

**Chapter Organization**

In Chapter One, *I’m Coming Home: The New Orleans Music-Based Community Renaissance*, I give a historical overview of music-based neighborhoods in New Orleans. I discuss the social injustices and housing discrimination that were present prior and after Hurricane Katrina, and analyze how these issues are perpetuated through neighborhood based recovery efforts. In Chapter Two, *Katrina Stories as a Voices of Reason: Diaspora, Tradition, and Preservation*, I talk about the role of oral history in post-Katrina New Orleans. This chapter will concentrate on describing the interactions that take place between residents of the Village and a city still attempting to rebuild and rebrand itself. I discuss the storm-induced diaspora and trace it back to the African diaspora, leading to how we define the musical culture of New Orleans. In Chapter Three, *Race, Place, and Tourism: Musicians’ Village’s Place in New Orleans Gentrification*, I discuss cultural tourism, gentrification, and how the formation of Musicians’ Village is linked to struggles for justice, and how the Village embodies a cultural
resistance to dominant gentrified culture. The thesis will conclude with a discussion of the role of cultural performance, resilience, and preserving New Orleans’ musical practices in its post-Katrina state. The conclusion, focusing on the context of post-Katrina New Orleans, aims to enhance our awareness of how the formation of Musicians’ Village reshapes traditions and preserves New Orleans’ Black culture that remains relevant in modernity.
Chapter One

I’m Coming Home: The New Orleans Music-Based Community Renaissance

“I was guilty of the same thing our city has been guilty of for 100 years: Resting on our traditions and thinking everything is going to keep on going status quo,” Connick said. “No one thought there would be a storm that would put the city under water. No one thought that the musical traditions would ever be in jeopardy.” - (Harry Connick Jr. 2015)

Situating Musicians’ Village

Tradition and culture in New Orleans have always played a role in articulating the city’s music. Therefore, the story of New Orleans post-Katrina cannot be told without the music or musicians at the center of its narrative. Though there has been research done on the evolution of New Orleans’ music pre and post-Katrina, there is a lack of information regarding the social-cultural ecologies of their place-making in the post-Katrina context. Studying Musicians’ Village provides a lens that allows us to analyze that phenomena. Journalist John Swenson writes, “When assessing the damage caused by Hurricane Katrina, the music community appeared to be among the hardest hit institutions.” (Swenson 2008). Swenson suggests, “the biggest factor threatening the future of New Orleans music is the widespread destruction of neighborhoods that nurtured them,” and with music-based neighborhoods like “Treme being overrun by gentrification, the future of music, and African American culture in general, have been marginalized or are largely gone from the city” (Swenson 2008). Examining a music based community in New Orleans post-Katrina offers a unique, insider, lens to interpret, understand, and describe the cultural continuity efforts of Musicians’ Village and understand the city’s post-disaster recovery.

When Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath of floods, wind, and rain devastated New Orleans, Louisiana twelve years ago, many Black people could not afford to return or relocate
back to the city. Their homes, city, and culture were gone, and they could not afford to relocate or rebuild. This was particularly true amongst the city’s musicians, who were typically on a low income and paid on a gig-by-gig basis. When musicians get paid, usually the band leader gets the check and that one check is divided to as many as six band members. Yet these low paid performers are the most defining faces of New Orleans’ culture. New Orleans musical traditions were at risk after Hurricane Katrina until three people came together to keep the culture alive: musician and actor Harry Connick Jr., saxophonist Branford Marsalis, and executive director of the New Orleans Area Habitat for Humanity, Jim Pate. Harry and Branford, both natives of New Orleans who now live in Boston and Florida, flew into the city shortly after the storm with one of the first news crews. During their stay, they helped rescue people from roofs. I was told by a resident of Musicians’ Village, Ellen Smith\(^1\), that during Harry and Branford’s stay, they received many calls from musicians asking how they were going to get back into the city. It was from this that the idea of Musicians’ Village emerged.

Harry Connick had been friends with Jim Pete, who had been working with Habitat for Humanity during previous years, so the plan to create the neighborhood came about naturally. Being that Harry was familiar with the Upper Ninth Ward, as he lived there during his childhood, he knew of an abandoned school lot that was previously home to Kohn Junior High School. The development of Musicians’ Village consisted of 70 single family homes, 10 elderly styled homes, a family park, and the Ellis Marsalis Center for Music. More than one thousand volunteers worked with Habitat for Humanity to build the homes, including residents of the Village themselves.

\(^1\) Throughout the thesis there will be some people with whom I reference their legal name and others with whom I use pseudonyms
Around 70 percent of the homes in Musicians’ Village are home to New Orleans musicians. One of them is Shamarr Allen, a singer and trumpet player. Before Hurricane Katrina, Allen lived in the Ninth Ward. Fortunately, he was able to evacuate to Atlanta, Georgia before the storm hit. By the time he arrived to Atlanta, the storm had touched down. After the storm, in an attempt to return to the city, state troopers would not let him back in. “I stayed in Atlanta for a few years,” Allen recalls when speaking to me about his journey back to New Orleans. He was on his path to become a big musician in Atlanta, before hearing about Musicians’ Village. “During the storm we lost everything- our home, my instruments, and my music.” After a few years, Allen was able to make a living by performing music in Atlanta, but he missed New Orleans. “I missed everything about the city,” he says. “I missed the food, the music, the people, and the culture. In Atlanta, I couldn’t find that.” Allen heard about the Musicians’ Village neighborhood and figured it would be the best way to move himself and his family back to New Orleans. He has not thought of living anywhere else since.

New Orleans is a city of neighborhoods, and it is within these neighborhoods where the city’s vast cultural seeds are cultivated into long standing traditions and an identity tied to place is established. It is also within New Orleans’ neighborhoods where the city’s cultural traditions originated, primarily through food, music, religion, and dance. These cultural identities and traditions continually shape the old and new histories of the city. Throughout New Orleans’ history, its cultural continuity and constantly evolving traditions have served as one of the city’s most significant assets for both tourist and locals. Having grown up in New Orleans, I know who I am because of the smell of red beans being cooked every Monday, and the sound of a second-lines coming down the street- a phenomena unique to Black neighborhoods of New Orleans. These smells and sounds make me feel at home and comforted, while also being able to
recognize myself. The neighborhoods of New Orleans are where cultural traditions have been invented and preserved: music, cuisine, architecture, performance and visual arts, second-line parades and benevolent social aid and pleasure clubs\(^2\). Within New Orleans, the neighborhood spaces are expressive of the city’s aspirations. They are a coded record of how citizens of New Orleans construct identity and a sense of self, individually and collectively.

The neighborhoods of New Orleans are seen by many as a fundamental right to have freedom of cultural expression about themselves in the city. They provide important connections for individual and community identity. Every neighborhood has its own distinct cultural function. The French Quarter is known for its European architecture and Bourbon Street nightlife. The Garden District is known for the St. Charles Streetcar Line and its plantation era mansions. Treme is known as the oldest African American suburb and the birthplace of jazz. Because each neighborhood is allowed to have its own distinct cultural function, the neighborhoods are allowed to flourish without state intervention and Musicians’ Village was idealized with the same intentions.

**The Upper Ninth Ward, Twelve Years After Katrina**

On my first day, fieldwork for me was a process and a set of fieldwork ‘tools’: an old marbled journal for note-taking, a pre-exploded black gel pen that I found at the bottom of my purse, a Zoom H5 audio recorder, my handy DSLR camera, and a copy of *The Ellis Marsalis Center for Music Annual Report 2016*. I jammed these materials into the second compartment of backpack and climbed into my dad’s truck. I was already late. I drove these materials and myself

---

\(^2\) Social aid and pleasure clubs are “benevolent African-American neighborhoods that have existed in New Orleans since the late eighteenth century” (Ray 2003: 39). As anthropologist Celeste Ray describes, “Social clubs historically combined benevolent functions such as providing insurance to its members with pleasure in collective entertainment such as balls and second-lines” (Ray 2003, 39).
to Musicians’ Village. I wanted to explore the conversations produced and sustained by African-American musicians’ in the city of New Orleans that were displaced as a result of Hurricane Katrina and had presently relocated to Musicians’ Village. I also wanted to identify and explain the role of Black artists and musicians in strengthening and repairing the social fabric of traditional New Orleans music-based communities and neighborhoods.

Each year as another anniversary of Hurricane Katrina approaches, journalists, scholars, celebrities, tourists, and ex-residents descend upon New Orleans to find out how the city is faring. The Ninth Ward has become the poster child for the slow recovery of New Orleans, and a “metaphor for poverty, race, and neglect” as “only about 37 percent of households have returned” to the Ninth Ward compared to other neighborhoods throughout the city that have seen almost 90 percent of household return since the storm (Breunlin and Regis 2006, 748; Allen 2015). Some residents of the Upper Ninth Ward, that I have spoken to, who have seen many Katrina anniversaries come and go, wonder: will attention make a difference, or will their neighborhood struggles merely make headlines?

In “Putting the Ninth Ward on the Map: Race, Place, and Transformation in Desire, New Orleans,” anthropologists Breunlin and Regis write about the aftermath of the Ninth Ward in the immediate years following Hurricane Katrina and the way that the media used headlines to construct a recovery image of the neighborhood. They write:

“In 2005, the Economist ran a cover story called “The Shaming of America” with an image of a black woman in a New Orleans T-shirt crying. Similarly, Newsweek’s headlines read “Poverty, Race, and Katrina: Lessons of a National Shame,” and the cover featured a close-up of Faith Figueroa, a one-year-old lack child from the Ninth Ward. As these stories developed the Ninth War became a metaphor for race, poverty, and neglect” (2006, 748).

In the moments of despair following the storm, the rhetoric used in scholarly articles and the media showed recovery in two ways: negatively and positively. There was a narrative that New Orleans was resilient and heading towards recovery, but that optimism faded as one entered the
Ninth Ward. There, homes appeared as if they had just been hit by the storm days before, despite the amount of years that had passed. But as one looks at predominantly white or non-ethnic neighborhoods such as the Garden District, French Quarter, and Lakeside, renovated houses and new community developments stand as a symbol of recovery. Yet twelve years after the storm, Musicians’ Village residents I’ve spoken with see the Ninth Ward as a tapestry of hope. “It is only a memory of what it once was,” said Ellen Smith, a resident of Musicians’ Village. The residents who live in the Ninth Ward and specifically Musicians’ Village have an enduring sense of community and civic pride, despite moments of despair. There are surrounding Ninth Ward neighborhood blocks filled with rows of empty homes and overgrown grass, but the residents who are back are glad to be back. There is a lot more rebuilding to be done, along with recovery efforts, but local nonprofits such as Habitat for Humanity, are not giving up on New Orleans’ recovery and rebuilding efforts anytime soon, even if the public attention shifts away after the Hurricane’s anniversary, or so we think.

In *Wisdom Sits in Places*, anthropologist, Keith Basso develops the idea of ‘place-making’ in which he defines as the way ordinary people begin to think about particular places and wonder about the past, present, and future of what happened in a specific place. With place-making people think of particular places and form an understanding of what happened there, who was involved, why it matters etc. He writes, “What happened here? Who was involved? What was it like? Why should it matter?” (Basso 1996, 5). Although Basso’s place-making draws from the etic, or insider perspective, world-making view of the Western Apache people, the term can also be applied to the emic, or outside perspective, of the place-making policies of the media and how that translated to local citizens attempting to recover from the storm. Breunlin and Regis write how, “the media coverage following Hurricane Katrina defined the Ninth Ward for the
world. People who had never even set foot in the area suddenly became experts on our city’s future possibilities and past failures” (Breunlin and Regis 2006, 748). For recovering citizens of New Orleans who were both in and out of the city, the disaster of the storm was objectified by the media as the media sources had little local knowledge about the people and places that call New Orleans home.

If we continue the idea of place-making beyond the media’s coverage and misleading information, we learn that the Ninth Ward has “its own history and relationship to the rest of the city and region” (Breunlin and Regis 2006, 748). It is imperative that we take into account the history of people making the place of the Ninth Ward. With this in mind, we can see how people understand their community and respond to their place in the city. Before Katrina, the Upper Ninth Ward was a neighborhood of predominantly African-American people, as safe and affordable housing in New Orleans is related to the topography of land. The topography of New Orleans refers to both environmental and racial factors. During the settling of the city, the city was constructed along the banks of the Mississippi River and then moved inwards. Areas that were further away from the River and towards the innards of the city were referred to as “back-a-town” areas, which are basically decrepit and poor parts of the city that are susceptible to flooding. During the late 19th century, after slavery ended, free people of color moved into these decrepit, yet affordable areas that were prone of flooding. As the city became more segregated in the early 20th century middle-class and working-class white families were able to buy homes in the inner city due to loans issued from the “Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and Veterans Affairs (VA) loans initiatives. However, these federally subsidized programs “redlined” racially mixed and dense inner-city areas and refused to issue loans there” (Breunlin and Regis 2006, 749). Black and other racially mixed families who could not afford mortgages or qualify for
loans ended up being “pushed” to the Ninth Ward due to redlining efforts. The Ninth Ward remained racially mixed through the first half of the 20th century until the desegregation of schools. Located only a block away from Musicians’ Village is William Frantz Elementary School, which is the school that Ruby Bridges integrated. Once a Black child began attending the school, the white families of the Ninth Ward fled to the suburbs.

One of the defining characteristics of the Ninth Ward is its relationship to water. When referencing author, Craig E. Colten, Breunlin and Regis state that the Ninth Ward is, “a low-income section of the city and has endured chronic neglect in terms of city services. The ward’s lower sections have been victimized repeatedly by flooding” (Breunlin and Regis 2006, 749). The main reason for this is that the Ninth Ward is located topographically below sea level. During the 1920s, the Ninth Ward was further victimized by water when the Industrial Canal was built and therefore split the Ninth Ward into two: the Upper and the Lower Ninth Wards. The Canal was built to accommodate large ships transporting material between the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain. A few decades later in the 1960s, the Canal became known as a ‘hurricane superhighway’ that funneled storm surges cutting through the swamplands of Plaquemines and St. Bernard Parishes into the New Orleans area. The critique was demonstrated to be true when the Industrial Canal levees were breached during Hurricane Betsy in 1965 and again during Katrina in 2005” (Breunlin and Regis 2006, 749). The Ninth Ward suffered over ten feet of flooding after the storm and many homes that I have driven by are still marked with water lines from where the flood water stopped on the houses. There is also a narrative that one reason that the Ninth Ward flooded so heavily is because the levees were “broken” to save the French Quarter which sits on the Mississippi River opposite of the Ninth Ward.
Before Katrina, residents of the Ninth Ward knew everybody on the block, who had crawfish boils in the backyard, who said hello from the front porch, who paraded together with brass bands and Mardi Gras Indians in weekly second-lines, and who swore they would never leave the neighborhood where they were born and raised. Now, twelve years later, lot after lot sits neglected with boarded window homes, overgrown grass, and overall decay. “People are not coming back here, because they don’t have the money to do what they need to live here,” Keng Harvey said.

Keng Harvey is regarded as one of New Orleans’ cultural treasures, and his story is one that deserves to be heard far and wide. I was introduced to Harvey through my father, Dr. Brice Miller Sr. My father first met Harvey in the mid-90s when he was “a dread-headed rapper, DJ, electronics guru rocking out with Iris May Tango”, and my father was “a tall, skinny, preppy college rapper known as School Boy” (Miller 2017). Throughout the past decades, they have shared many stages together through performance. Harvey is one of the dozen or so residents of Musicians Village and the Upper Ninth Ward that I interviewed. He grew up in the Ninth Ward and was living there when Hurricane Katrina hit. Like the rest of his neighborhood, his home and his music was wiped away by more than ten feet of water.

Most of the residents of the Upper Ninth Ward and Musicians’ Village live near each other, just like the always have- New Orleans is a very small city when you really conceptualize it. Barbara Eckstein’s *Story and Sustainability: Planning, Practice, and Possibility for American Cities*, discusses the role that neighbors and neighborhood serve in creating, retaining, and reviving community culture. She writes, “to think of someone as a neighbor acknowledges an inherent obligation to recognize that person, and “to think of a piece of the city as one’s neighborhood is to acknowledge an investment in it that goes beyond rents or mortgages”
(Eckstein 2003, 87). For example, Ellen Smith lives on the same street as Keng Harvey. “For us, it’s like living with family,” Smith said fondly recalling how they used have cookouts, perform music together, and how they helped each other find housing after the storm, “but there’s no reason that someone in the Ninth Ward would want to come back unless there’s something like this”, referring to Musicians’ Village.

Smith did not have any excess money to move back to New Orleans. This was a common challenge faced by residents in the Ninth Ward. There are people whom I spoke with in New Orleans who were originally from the Ninth Ward and chose not to move back, and I think that is due to the structural issues within the Ninth Ward. For example, “nearly 12 years after Hurricane Katrina, it is still hit-and-miss on any given block in the Lower 9th Ward: an occupied home with a neatly trimmed lawn here, an empty lot sporting chest-high grass and discarded tires there” (Williams 2017). This is a common challenge faced by residents of the Ninth Ward. Before Katrina, the Ninth Ward “had the highest rate of black homeownership in the city before Katrina” (Adelson 2015). According to Ellen Smith, many homes within the Ninth Ward had been passed down through generations, and this created problems for households attempting to receive government aid after the storm, because no one had the necessary paperwork to prove household ownership, as the homes typically transitioned from one generation to the next.

It isn’t known how many people who lived in the Ninth Ward prior to Katrina will want to or be able to return. According to the House The 9 Program, a program that is “key to moving the Lower 9th Ward out of the poverty, disinvestment, and blight that followed the flood is to restore the core strengths that are central to the neighborhood's identity—strong family networks grounded in the ownership of homes” and started by the Lower Ninth Ward Homeownership Association, there are about 463 Ninth Ward households who initially signed up for government
aid through Road Home, a “program has helped many residents of Louisiana affected by Hurricane Katrina or Hurricane Rita get back into their homes” and have still not received aid (House The 9 and Road Home 2018). The unknowingness of aid can contributed to the amount of federal and state funding that was taken away from the poor of New Orleans. Two weeks following Katrina, former president, George Bush, gave a national speech in New Orleans discussing the aid that the federal government would give to the city of New Orleans to help its recovery efforts. Yet along those same lines, much of his recovery rhetoric hid the “deep funding cuts in an array of programs that aid the poor of New Orleans, including housing assistance, food stamps, Medicaid, community development grants and energy assistance” (Fletcher 2006). It was this negligence of the city, state, and federal government towards the people of New Orleans, after the flood water that inundated metro New Orleans receded, that pushed New Orleans born, high-profiled musicians, Harry Connick, Jr. and Branford Marsalis to “realize that the indispensable musical heritage of the city was threatened by the loss of housing and the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of people” (Habitat Nola 2015).

Harry and Branford collaborated with the director of the New Orleans branch of Habitat for Humanity, Jim Pate, and identified an abandoned lot, that used to be Kohn Elementary School, as a modest location to build a neighborhood for struggling musicians. The three of them deemed the neighborhood, now Musicians’ Village, as “a neighborhood that would provide options for affordable housing, which would give musicians incentive to return and remain in New Orleans, carrying on its unique musical legacy” (Habitat Nola 2015). In New Orleans, neighborhoods and the creation of culture and memories in that neighborhood is not only a way in which local residents define their culture, but it is also a way for people to heal, rebuild, remember the past, building a future together.
After committing to the pledge of building Musicians’ Village to preserve the musical culture of New Orleans, volunteers collaborated to build 77 homes in a four block radius with a music center, the Ellis Marsalis Center for Music, located at the epicenter of the neighborhood.

**Figure 2.** Musicians’ Village during construction in 2006. (Bell Architecture 2017)

After the homes began being built, Harry Connick Jr., Branford Marsalis, and Jim Pate began reaching out to musicians to make sure that they would be able to qualify for Habitat for Humanity’s homeownership program. This program required musicians to prove that they were a performing musician by showing pay stubs or advertisements. One of my informants, Ellen Smith, a vocalist and administrative assistant at the Ellis Marsalis Center for Music (EMCM, the Center) and current resident of the Musicians’ Village, was one of the first musicians to be move

**Figure 3.** Musicians’ Village as of now in 2017. (Getty Images)
into Musicians’ Village. During one of our conversations she recounted her experience with finding out about the neighborhood:

“Musician’s Village was started by Harry Connick Jr. and Branford Marsalis. They actually snuck into the city with a film crew, because those were the only people allowed in the city back then. Residents couldn’t come into the city to check on houses or anything like that because we were designated by zip code as to who could come back, and they were trying to keep as much order in the city as possible. So, Harry and Branford snuck in. They were rescuing people off roofs and were devastated by what they saw, because they were both raised here. And so they decided to come together and come up with a concept to get musicians to move back home. Harry had been working with Habitat for Humanity for a long time because I saw him build a house on the block where I was raised like 10 years before Katrina. This whole area that encompasses Musician’s Village used to be a middle school and it was vacant, so they bought the whole couple of lots. I think it was four lots, and they built 72 houses and Musician’s Village with the Ellis Marsalis Center for Music (EMCM) right in the middle. When it was being built, I was one of the first people who signed up for it. I was afraid that it wouldn’t- the dream wouldn’t be recognized, because the neighborhood had a bad reputation before Katrina. It was crime ridden, ya know, drug infested and all that kind of stuff- I was worried. But it has turned out- I have been a resident for now 10 years- it has turned out to be better than I ever dreamed and I’m just very happy to live here. I’m happy that Harry and Branford took the time to give back out of their busy lives and I’m happy that they put the EMCM here” (Smith 2017).

Ellen’s narrative details what it was like to be a musician finding out about this neighborhood. She was initially skeptical about moving to the Upper Ninth Ward. The Upper Ninth Ward is notoriously known for its high poverty and targeted racial crime rate. In the New Orleans before Katrina, residents of that neighborhood were like what MLK describes of Birmingham, Alabama nearly 60 years ago, “living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and were plagued with inner fears and outer resentments” (King 1963, 2). New Orleans, like Birmingham, is one of the “most thoroughly segregated cities in the United States” that continues to suffer from racial crime in unprecedented amounts (King 1963, 1). In 2004, the year before the Katrina, there were more than 167 murders per year. New Orleans’ murder rates “dwarfed those of other murder capitals of the U.S at the time: Baltimore, Atlanta, New York City”, etc., and the Upper Ninth Ward had one of the highest crime rates in the city (McCarthy 2008). After Katrina, the crime rate did not improve. Instead, in 2010, New Orleans had a murder rate that was 10 times the national average (Lane 2017).
In the article *The Subject Supposed to Loot and Rape: Reality and Fantasy in New Orleans*, Slavoj Zizek writes, “… New Orleans is one of those cities within the United States most heavily marked by the internal wall that separates the affluent from the ghettoized Blacks” (Zizek 2005). It is as if crime exists in New Orleans as long as it remains in and “disproportionately impacts black and low-income communities,” and doesn’t cease unless an outside force comes in and physically deters it (Breunlin and Regis 2006, 2). There were improvements of crime in the Upper Ninth Ward that were expected to come through the creation of Musicians’ Village. Initially, there was little change, but as of 2017 the Upper Ninth Ward’s crime rate has subsided. Ellen thinks this is due to the construction of Musicians’ Village and the Ellis Marsalis Center for Music. These institutions are thought to have changed the demographic of the neighborhood and help deter crime.

In their annual report, the Ellis Marsalis Center for Music describes itself as:

“[A center] located in the Ninth ward, the Ellis Marsalis Center for Music (the “Center”) broadens opportunities for underserved children, youth and musicians. It provides a safe, positive environment where underserved children and youth develop musically, academically and socially. The Center also delivers strategic assistance and tools to Village musicians that can enhance their professional growth and offers opportunities for musicians throughout the city of New Orleans to perform and record. The Center values its connection to the surrounding neighborhood and endeavors to be an ongoing source of cultural inspiration and preservation” (The Ellis Marsalis Center for Music Annual Report 2016, 1).

Both Musicians’ Village and the Center boast themselves on being structures that are carrying on and preserving the Black musical culture of New Orleans. Culturally, Musicians’ Village and the Center can be situated as a form of resistance and resilience through tradition and everyday practices. Both institutions act as agents of knowledge that serve to preserve and pass down the traditional musical cultures of New Orleans through music, dialogue and place-making. Donna Haraway defines situatedness as a comparative and objective approach to fieldwork that requires one to acknowledge their own place within the knowledge-making project. It requires “that the
object of knowledge be pictured as an actor or an agent, not as a screen or a ground” (Haraway 1988, 592). Because the culture of Blacks in New Orleans is rooted in social-cultural oral histories and experiences that primarily Blacks go through, there is a limited agency of Blacks, especially Black musicians, being able to be cultural knowledge producers because cultural knowledge is typically produced by outsiders of the city. Yet, the Center sees itself as being able to be the cultural knowledge producer that produces a local cultural ecology of the city. The Center sees itself as an “agent in the production of knowledge” about itself and the Musicians’ Village community, while reflecting on the cultural relevance of other music-based neighborhoods such as Treme (Haraway 1988, 592).

**Musicians’ Village Relation to Treme**

Neighborhoods such as Treme and Musicians’ Village reflect the city’s relationship between music and place in terms of Black spaces. Presently, there are limited studies that focus primarily on the relationship between Treme, Musicians’ Village, and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. By being a native New Orleanian, I hope to be able to key in on first-person experiences related to the phenomenology of place, recovery, and resilience as a way of understanding cultural preservation and post-disaster recovery. Musicians’ Village, after all, attempted to become the Treme that was destroyed.

Traditional Black artistic communities and neighborhoods, such as Treme, have been synonymous with New Orleans’ musical culture for a multitude of decades. Located in the Seventh Ward of New Orleans, Treme is one of the oldest Black neighborhoods in the United States that has been home to free people of color since the 18th century. As one of the most culturally significant neighborhoods in New Orleans, Black residents were able to purchases homes as early as 1812. Treme is known for being the birthplace of jazz, home of Louis
Armstrong, and home of the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club, one of the oldest and largest Black Mardi Gras Krewes. The neighborhood includes Armstrong Park, the former Congo Square, and a marketplace where African slaves were sold and traded. Congo Square was also a gathering place of slaves and free people of color during French colonial times, where people would use the space for recreation, dance, music, and religion. By the 19th century, free people of color were able to retain property and wealth within the neighborhood. From this, it can be observed that Treme served as New Orleans’ birthplace place of music and culture for the Black community as no other New Orleans neighborhood possesses this history.

Over the past decades, Treme has seen many changes. The most infamous was when the federally funded interstate, I-10, took away the landscape of the neighborhood. In the late 1960’s, ethnomusicologist, Mick Burns recounted how:

“Fourteen blocks were demolished to make the space that became Armstrong Park, and the I-10 expressway was extended over Claiborne Avenue, thus obliterating a tree-shaded meeting place and parade route and forcing a lot of people to move somewhere else. Whether the location of these projects was racially motivated (as many people believe) or merely the kind of ill-considered decision that seems to characterize most urban planning” (Burns 2006, 67-68)

The racially motivated aspect of the destruction of Treme is up for debate by many in the music community. Many residents of Musicians’ Village have spoken about how Treme was chosen as the location to build the interstate primarily because it was an all-Black neighborhood that had seen its glory days of music and its gloomy days of crime. According to an article titled “Demolishing This New Orleans Highway?: Easier Said Than Done”, Martin Perdersen states:

“In the 1960s, during the height of the Civil Rights Movement, a highway was rammed through the neighborhood, against the will of its residents. (This happened of course in countless other African American communities in countless other cities; the interstate highway system rarely, if ever, bisected affluent communities.) The highway was a blunt and vicious sledge hammer. It killed off a lot of retail; gobbled up untold acres of land, resulting in numerous empty lots; and likely contributed to high rates of asthma in the neighborhood” (Perdersen 2014).
The creation of the interstate was a process in which the neighborhood was drastically transformed. Treme’s main strip, Claiborne Avenue, was once lined with oak trees, streetcar lines, jazz bars, and Black owned businesses and the center of Black commerce and community, but these, along with the culture of the neighborhood, were all destroyed once the interstate was built, which displaced hundreds of African-American families. There “were a number of historic landmarks within the confines of Treme that had been erased during the construction of the highway. There were families that go all the way back to slavery and when those families were dispersed, their whole history and cultural aesthetics were wiped out” (Burns 2006, 68). In post-Katrina New Orleans, the culture of Treme has continued to erode due to gentrification. Whereas with pre-Katrina, Treme was home to many jazz families, as of 2018, there are only five Black musicians who live in the community and only two of them are homeowners. Musicians’ Village on the other hand has over forty Black homeowners, most of which are musicians, educators, artists, or Mardi Gras Indians.
From Treme to Musicians’ Village

About five miles from metro New Orleans, near the recently developed St. Claude streetcar line, lying directly on the banks of the Mississippi River, is the beautiful little neighborhood of Musicians’ Village. The St. Claude streetcar line is relatively new to the city of New Orleans. It had been in the works of the city council for over a decade, but wasn’t enacted until the St. Claude neighborhood began to increase in popularity from an influx of white gentrifiers. Claiborne Avenue, which extends beyond St. Claude, from metro New Orleans to Musicians’ Village and beyond, passes through Treme near Congo Square and links a dozen or more sites of New Orleans’ history, but, of all the sites along Claiborne Avenue, Musicians’ Village is the one that is actively living out New Orleans’ history.

It is certain that some sort of tourist recreation is necessary when taking a trip to New Orleans. For this reason, I sometimes go upon a pedestrian tour even though I am a New Orleans native. As I walk, the whole area of the Upper Ninth Ward stretches in front of about me, a vast space upon which I can note things that catch my eye. When I reach beyond them, a little sign that says “Musicians’ Village” appears. It was the idea of Harry Connick Jr., and Branford Marsalis from the beginning to build here a community with all the delights of a small neighborhood, yet with all the advantages of proximity to a world renowned city. Here, at one of the entrances of Musicians’ Village (it is a public neighborhood, therefore there is not an official entrance), which extends from Alvar Street to Bartholomew Street, a distance of about five blocks, we are greeted by brightly colored homes on full display. On either side of the homes yards are constructed, and in them are bar-b-q equipment and outdoor furniture, where the residents congregate and wait for in-coming gig opportunities, or simply rest and enjoy the day.
Musicians’ Village is admirably suited to the wants of local musicians who wish to make a home in a neighborhoods that seeks to preserve the history and musical traditions of New Orleans. It would be a nice to say the Village no unattractive features, but this is not true. Just within a one block radius on the outskirts of the Village sit abandoned homes, unsightly buildings, and crime-induced stores- all which mark the natural beauty of the Village. But none of this, in fact, has in any way lessened the value of property in any portion of the Village. In some sections of the Village, the homes are painted in a myriad amount of colors that allow the homes to tell a story about each of its residents. For example, Keng Harvey’s home is painted a vibrant yellow, because he says yellow is the color of hope and energy. There are some portions of the Village still unimproved, and a few steps away from the main entrance brings one into a community park and miniature wilderness of about two acres. Great trees of pine form a secret enclave/hideout that makes criminal activity possible. I was told by Shamarr Allen that local drug dealers use the park to make drug transactions and occasionally he hears the shrill of drug transactions during quiet nights. Shamarr says this action, gives him a reminder that he is still in the city of New Orleans, and although the Musicians’ Village is destined to change the narrative of the Ninth Ward’s past, it shows that some things stay the same.

In his book, *Coming Home to New Orleans: Neighborhood Rebuilding After Katrina*, author Karl F. Seidman, discusses the role that urban development plays in neighborhood recovery efforts that aid to the recovery of the entire city. He writes:

A city’s post disaster recovery can be viewed as occurring on three levels: (1) individual household and enterprise actions to return and rebuild; (2) restoring neighborhoods as residential and social centers; and (3) city-wide reconstruction of infrastructure systems, restoration of public services, and recovery of the economic base. Public policies focus on the first and third levels: relief and rebuilding aid to individuals and businesses; and large investments to restore public infrastructure and facilities. However, the

---

3 This mark in value has been made possible by a rigid marketing strategy enacted by private realtors that will be elaborated on in chapter three.
intermediate neighborhood scale is quite important to the rebuilding process. In fact, the most immediate environment influences individual rebuilding decisions. Moreover, a neighborhood’s size and cohesion make it a feasible basis for coordinating rebuilding investments related to core public services such as schools, libraries, parks, health and social services, and the like. Finally, community-based organizations that focus on neighborhood issues and improvements are a potential source of capacity and resources to accelerate recovery (Seidman 2013, 13).

Musicians’ Village serves as a way to understand how community based neighborhoods assist the city in its post-disaster recovery. Seidman discusses how community based neighborhoods have the ability to aid the place-making process of recovering communities from the ground up. The construction of Musicians’ Village has contributed greatly to the culture-based recovery efforts of New Orleans, yet before we get there, we must first understand how Musicians’ Village impacted the recovery and rebuilding efforts of local musicians. From this we can connect the Village’s resident’s migrations to the neighborhood to the greater storm-induced diaspora.
Chapter Two
Katrina Stories as a Voices of Reason: Diaspora, Tradition, and Preservation

Our stories matter, our culture matters, our sociocultural experiences matter, and we have an obligation to carry forth those stories within our community, from one generation to another...” - (Miller 2017)

Introduction

This chapter brings together Hurricane Katrina’s oral histories that have been studied by others. Throughout the past decade, scholarly and media attention has begun to focus on New Orleans’ Katrina survivors in real time, developing a deeper cultural understanding of living in a post-disaster city, through the words of New Orleans residents themselves. Mick Burns’ book Keeping the Beat on the Street (2006) focuses on oral history interviews with New Orleans musicians from the historic Fairview Baptist Church Brass Band, Hurricane Brass Band, Mahogany Brass Band, and Rebirth Brass Band, amongst many others. Completed prior to Hurricane Katrina, Burns’ book provides a valuable insight into the brass band renaissance of the 1970’s and early twentieth century. However, what truly makes his book about musicians of New Orleans unique is his focus on oral histories. The musicians’ words provide a perspective and valuable contribution to understanding the musical traditions and history they themselves have created and preserved. Focusing on the musician’s voices, this chapter will relate my ethnographic and insider access that enabled me to capture the microcosm of the post-Katrina musician’s community to Burns’ research. In particular, this chapter focuses on the oral histories of those affiliated with Musicians’ Village in post-Katrina New Orleans, while highlighting the storm-induced diaspora that those of the musical community faced.

The years following Hurricane Katrina saw an explosive reformation of the cross-diasporic dialogues, a combination of the African diaspora and “storm-induced diaspora,” that
have been produced and sustained by African-American musicians and educators in the city of New Orleans (Dyson 2007, 75). Earlier storms, especially Hurricane Ivan of 2004, had caused the push of Black New Orleanians from their homes in search of shelter from a potential storm threat. Hurricane Ivan ended up not causing much damage to the city of New Orleans, which in a way became incentive for people not to evacuate for Katrina. As stated in the previous chapter, Black residents of the city have been concentrated in the Ninth Ward for several decades. The Ninth Ward is:

“a community with many economic challenges- chronic and systemic poverty in a core group. However, there are many families that are middle class and own multiple properties, have professional backgrounds, and have educated their children. And because of the roots, the fact that mama and grandmamma and daughters all live in the same neighborhood, there’s a real connectivity of home and family” (Dyson 2006, 78).

In New Orleans with each storm threat comes a migration of Black residents to and from their homes, due to the topography of Black neighborhoods. The “richer, white folk have always lived on higher safer ground, while the lower, more dangerous ground has always been for Black, poorer people” (Dyson 2006, 79). The Black residents of the Ninth Ward have dealt with migration by keeping in contact through oral history and story, many of which I spoke about with residents of Musicians’ Village. The community of musicians, artists, Mardi Gras Indians, and educators at Musicians’ Village and the Ellis Marsalis Center for Music have combined the history of Black living patterns and Black thought to preserve a musical tradition that also preserves the cultural lineage, performance practices, and musical legacy of the Ninth Ward.

Through a field and archival study from April 2017 to January 2018, I conducted an extensive study of New Orleans’ Musicians’ Village to address some lingering questions about neighborhood patterns, musical enculturation, preservation, adaption, tradition, and change. How did music come to represent Black neighborhoods of New Orleans? How was African music
sustained and transformed by Black New Orleans slaves through centuries of slavery and later through decades to systematic disenfranchisement during Jim Crow? What does it mean that these musical practices continue to be face of Black culture in New Orleans? How has the performative exchanges of New Orleans Musicians’ shaped the cultural landscape of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina? Finally, how have migrations out of, as well as back into, the city following the trauma of Hurricane Katrina affected the musical cultures, as well as the communities surrounding them? These are just a few questions I spoke to residents of Musicians’ Village about.

In addition, I spent a few days examining how and why a vast range of residents of Musicians’ Village considered themselves to be a part of a diaspora due to their displacement as a result of Hurricane Katrina. Not only had I heard people refer to themselves as diaspora, I also heard many refer to themselves as refugees. Neither the term diaspora nor refugee are typically applied to those dealing with the aftermath of natural disasters, but rather to human agency, so I really wanted to tap into layered meanings of the terms. In addition, I wanted to explore the diasporic dialogues produced and sustained by African-American musicians in the city of New Orleans that were displaced as a result of Hurricane Katrina and had presently relocated to back to a music based community in New Orleans.

**Diaspora**

The history of localized music based communities is not unique to New Orleans, but their origin is of New Orleans. Since its foundation on Mississippi swampland by the French in 1718 as a trading post, music and place have longed been linked in New Orleans. The cultural practices of neighborhoods epitomizes the history of New Orleans as a city that is defined by the relationship between place and culture. By this, I mean, New Orleans’ distinctive multicultural
facets have allowed its diverse cultures to manifest into a way of life that reflects the exuberance of life that New Orleans is known for. Historically, New Orleans has been America’s melting pot of various cultures and ethnicities. In its early days, New Orleans was home to the largest population of free people of color, under the French Code Noir, that exempted slaves from working on Sundays. It was the intersection of this freedom and the mingling of African, European, Haitian, and Creole populations on Sundays at Congo Square, later Treme, where their cultural practices morphed into new musical and cultural practices. These new music practices that combined the traditional African, Haitian, and Creole rhythms with European instruments and marching contributed to the development of the brass band tradition (Burns 2006).

In New Orleans, brass bands, as well as jazz, are iconic of the city’s music, culture, identity, and sense of place. From the music performed by enslaved Africans and free people of color in the Congo Square marketplace of the colonial era to the second line parades lead by jazz and brass bands of the modern era, Black musicians in New Orleans have consistently responded to changes in their economic, and social situations. For example during the Jim Crow Era, the restrictive laws forced Creole and Black musicians to compete for the same jobs in Storyville, the city’s former red light district. As a result, the Black and Creole musicians came together and localized to performing in Treme, or in the surrounding Seventh Ward area. Fast forward many decades later, and Black musicians are still facing obstacles in the post-Katrina aftermath, but are resiliently fighting back against them. Music has served as a way for the Black community of New Orleans to create a common identity and recreate the oral histories that make up the New Orleans African and storm-induced diaspora. Yet the constitution of the New Orleans African and storm-induced diaspora have remained in a perpetual state of flux, initially with migrations to and from Haiti.
and Africa, and presently with the migrations of those affected by Hurricane Katrina to and from other areas of the United States. These migrations have affected the city’s Black musical expressive traditions.

**Defining New Orleans’ Diaspora**

Throughout New Orleans’ history, several developments have shaped local meanings of diaspora and tradition. Anyone who seeks to write about a diaspora within a society is most certainly going to get entangled in the separation between the terms minority and diaspora. The term diaspora seems to be straightforward, but it is not. Throughout history, the term diaspora has had a specific meaning, “the exile of the Jews from their historic homeland and their dispersion throughout many lands” and in contemporary time the term is used, “for several communities of people- expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities” (Safran 1991, 83). As many scholars have noted, diaspora is an under-theorized term, and because of the tension between identity politics and ethnicity, it is a term that has become evoked with political meaning. Many populations of different ethnicities, nationalities, races and religions throughout the world have pushed to claim a diasporic identity for themselves, and the residents of New Orleans follow in this path.

Because of the working definition of diaspora, in simple terms, meaning a population of people living out of their homeland and unable to integrate into a host society, is so broad, many of the scholars I have read applied the term to, “Cubans and Mexicans in the United States, Pakistanis in Britain, Turks in Germany, Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, Greek and Polish minorities, Palestinian Arabs, blacks in North America and the Caribbean etc…” (Safran 1991, 93). With such a vast range of populations living outside of their homeland, almost any
population can be considered a diaspora. I suggest that Robin Cohen’s definition of diaspora be applied to determine how to define both the New Orleans diaspora. The characteristics of a diaspora based on his definition are: “1) dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions; 2) the expansion from a homeland in search of work; 3) a collective memory and myth about the homeland, including its location, history, suffering and achievements; 4) idealization of an ancestral home and collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity; 5) the frequent development of a return movement; 6) a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time; 7) a trouble relationship with host societies; 8) a sense of empathy and co-responsibility with co-ethnic members in the host land; 9) enrichment of life in host countries” (Cohen 2008, 17). The New Orleans diasporic group contain elements from most, if not all, of the nine characteristics of diaspora based on Cohen’s definition.

The New Orleans diaspora is linked to the Atlantic slave trade. This linking connects the African diaspora to characteristic number one from Cohen’s definition. The Atlantic slave trade refers to the traumatic, forced dispersal of African people from their homeland of Africa to other locations throughout the world, most prominently to the western hemisphere. Beginning in the 1500’s, “more than 700,000 Africans boarded ships bound for the New World in the first half century of slave trading along the transatlantic routes that brought the Americas into the orbit of European and African worlds” (Smallwood 2007, 16). Michael Gomez’s definition of the African diaspora addresses how, “it is a phenomenon unlike any other, with millions forcibly removed from family and friends and deposited in lands foreign and hostile” (Gomez 2005, 72). He also notes that not all who came to the western hemisphere from Africa were forcefully taken. Yet, with the majority of Africans being forcefully taken, there was a collective memory
of homeland. Here, it has to be noted that while there was a collective memory, it was not a cohesive collective memory of homeland, because many people who were taken from Africa belonged to different villages, tribes, religions, cultures, spoke different languages etc. Many tried to return back to Africa, but those who could not, preserved their culture in New Orleans’ Congo Square.

The Africans in diaspora also have had a history of troubled relationships with the host society. For many generations after the ending of the transatlantic slave trade, “Africans and their descendants [wanted] the opportunity to return to Africa … to escape the oppressive, racist atmosphere” of the host society (Gomez 2005: 143). This wanting to return to Africa appeared, disappeared, and reappeared throughout history, with the most recent historical example being the Pan-Africa return to Africa movement. The Pan-African and Black liberation movements that spread across the world in the 1950s and 1960s gave Black residents of New Orleans a desire to embrace their cultural heritage. During this time, local institutions such as Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs, brass bands, and Mardi Gras Indians were embraced as sources of community culture (Kunian 2018). The weekly second lines in Congo Square were also rebirthed during this time in an effort to reenact African historical memory.

The New Orleans diaspora can be further complicated by the traumatic upheavals of Hurricane Katrina, which displaced nearly half the city’s Black population and produced a diaspora of its own. A handful of the Musicians’ I interviewed were often ambivalent about diaspora and its social meaning, yet most of them identified West Africa and the Caribbean as a major influence of New Orleans music. During an interview with Dwight Miller Sr., I was told that many musicians refer to West Africa and the Caribbean as a source of New Orleans music, because many migrants from both locations either lived or visited the Congo Square area. It is
also this area where Louis Armstrong, the father of jazz, learned and performed the trumpet. Being that Louis Armstrong is the definition of New Orleans’ jazz and he gather his influence from Congo Square, many musicians reference the locations as well. Through my interview with Dwight Miller Sr., I was able to understand how important history and specifically oral history is to musicians. The next section will delve deeper into narrative and oral history.

**Katrina Stories**

It is August 29th, and Hurricane Katrina has reached New Orleans. But when I tell you about a storm hitting South Louisiana, I am not talking about August 29, 2005, I am talking about right now. 2017. Right now, floods are engulfing the Ninth Ward both physically and metaphorically. Physically it has been raining for a few days straight and the city has completely flooded out. The mayor is blaming the flooding on drainage issues. Metaphorically, the flooding is of memories in this neighborhood, haunting residents to the brink of collapsing, like the levees. As the twelfth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina recedes from our recent memory, I descended upon the Musician’s Village in New Orleans to speak with Musicians’ to find out how they are faring. Twelve years after the storm, Musicians’ Village is a tapestry of hope, and the residents who make up the Village have an enduring sense of community and neighborhood pride. During my trips to Musicians’ Village, I regularly ask residents “can you tell me about yourself?” and one of the primary ways that many situated themselves during our conversations was by reflecting on their “Katrina Story”, almost as if their identities were shaped by the cultural trauma of Hurricane Katrina.

For example, here is an excerpt of a transcript from one of my interviews with Melanie Parker a vocal musician, who did not evacuate for the storm. She told me a heartbreaking story of her waking up the day after Hurricane Katrina.
On the morning of August 30, 2005, when Melanie Parker lowered her legs from the bed of her friend’s Upper Ninth Ward home, noticed a fast rising pool of water taking over the bedroom floor. She then checked the window to see where the water was coming from. As she later explained to me, “I left the room and walked down the long, narrow hallway. My gaze kept directly to the water stained door at the opposite end of the hall.” She hollered down the hall for her friend: “you alright? “No.” Her friend’s voice echoed and vibrated as if they were in an underground tunnel as the home slowly became inundated with water.

Melanie Parker then waded her wide-set frame through the now waist deep water of the home to the front door. She was panicking, afraid of not being able to save herself, nonetheless her friend. By the time her neighbor arrived, the water was almost up to Melanie’s breast. They attempted to use a boat to find safety, but the boat would not start and Melanie’s friend was struggling to exit the house, waist deep in rising water. Without a car or enough funds to flee the city along with the thousands of other New Orleans residents who had followed Mayor Ray Nagin’s mandatory evacuation order, Melanie, along with a few others I spoke with, decided to stay in the city and ride out the storm. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, Melanie had waited for emergency transportation buses to pick her up, and bring her to the Superdome where people were being sheltered. The buses, along with other modes of promised help, never came.

Like the many other “100,000 people” who decided not to, or were unable to, evacuate, Melanie had first shrugged off the severity of the forthcoming storm (Sullivan 2005). A hurricane storm was nothing new to her, and she was irritated by the pointless evacuation she had gone through a year prior with Hurricane Ivan because it missed the city. “Usually storms in New Orleans means time off from work and her kids home from school. It’s only when the water kept rising that I knew it would be serious,” Melanie a vocal musician who was beginning her
career before Katrina hit, told me, “it wasn’t the storm that was bad. We actually didn’t get much rain. The issue was the levees. I heard them break.”

As the Mississippi River spewed its contents into the Upper and Lower Ninth Wards—low-lying and poor, primarily African American neighborhoods—water began to engulf entire buildings, destroying most structures and trapping people into what remained. “We got help before the water got too high, but the boat we had been trying to get rescued on was having issues, so we had to wait.” Less than twenty-four hours after the hurricane made landfall, a neighbor spotted Melanie after hearing her yells for help. “Everything I had was able to fit into a few small bags. My clothes? My shoes? My children’s pictures? Even our government documents, gone.” Also gone were the weekend gigs, second-lines throughout the neighborhoods, and the city of New Orleans.

They finally rowed to a nearby shelter in the local neighborhood. As Melanie entered the shelter, a familiar old Negro spiritual “Wade in the Water”—a song commonly sung during funerals and second-lines—hauntingly echoed throughout the space. From “the spiritual drum-and-dance ceremonies performed by enslaved Africans in the colonial-era Congo Square to contemporary second line parades, Black musicians’ in New Orleans have consistently responded to the often-traumatic changes in their social conditions with music” (Miller 2017). Music has served as a means for the city’s Black community to forge a common identity, express culture and resist oppression, crime, while reenacting the shared and individual histories that make up their cultural based identities.

Melanie explained to me how “Wade in the Water” was often sung to express the plight of poor Blacks stranded in the city after Hurricane Katrina as many people literally “waded in the water to escape their flooding homes and neighborhoods” (Pena 2006, 1). “We were part of a
living culture of pride and resistance that made us Black people proud,” Melanie later recalled. It would be days, weeks before residents of that flooded neighborhood exited the shelter, and two years until other musical residents of the city were relocated to Musicians’ Village.

This brief reflection about the Ninth Ward neighborhood during the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina highlights a few key points about New Orleans’s recovery post-disaster. On a general level, it illustrates the resilience and mutual aid of neighborhood residents in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. In Stephen Lukes’ essay, Questions About Power: Lessons from the Louisiana Hurricane, he uses Emile Durkheim’s definition of “moments of effervescence” as “periods of creation and renewal”, when people “are brought into more intimate relations with one another, when meetings and assemblies are more frequent, relationships more solid and the exchange of ideas more active” (Lukes 2006). The image of neighborhood residents tending to the immediate needs of those who were helpless and hopeless during the storm - a wide-set middle-aged woman and her friend being rowed to a local shelter where they were immediately greeted with care and hospitality evokes a symbolic insight into the community spirit of New Orleans Black neighborhood residents. More specifically, the reflection highlights the omnipresent community aspect of Black neighborhoods before Katrina. Then, as with now, Black residents, in neighborhoods such as Melanie’s, have always been willing to treat the needs of neighbors as if they were the needs of family. Neighbors will call out to one another for needs, wants, conversation, communion, and work.

**PTSD**

Melanie grew up in the Ninth Ward and was living there when Katrina hit. Like the rest of the neighborhood, her home along with her neighbors were wiped away by more than ten feet of water. Most of the residents of her neighborhood lived just feet away from each other, like
they had done throughout generations, so they were as close as any family would be. “For us this is our homes,” Melanie said fondly recalling how she and her neighbors planned to recover together. For Melanie, a vocal musician, who had lived in New Orleans her entire life and had been actively participating in New Orleans’ culture, experiencing Hurricane Katrina by seeing roofs emerge from flooded her neighborhood while navigating through submerged cars and dead bodies felt like the end of the world, and then witnessing the city experiencing major flooding on an anniversary of Hurricane Katrina said it has caused her post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but she feels like telling her story helps her move forward.

Posttraumatic stress is often discussed as a problem for residents of post-Katrina New Orleans (DeSalvo et al. 2007). Experiencing a major event such as Hurricane Katrina can have extreme psychological effects on anyone. Hurricane Katrina caused a myriad amount of psychological trauma across the city of New Orleans. A fact that no one denies. There should be no surprise that the rates of PTSD in post-Katrina New Orleans are so high, but that hasn’t stopped the Louisiana government from “enacting major budget cuts to mental health treatment” (Adelsen 2012). The idea that human beings “process” information and have the ability to “download” specific traumatic memories shows how the brain catalog trauma as a type of anxiety and psychiatrists categorize this anxiety as PTSD (Collura and Lende 2012, 134). In anthropological terms, “PTSD has a cascade of effects that create behavioral and social dynamics, which can increase, or decrease, the impact of trauma, hypervigilance, and arousal over time” (Collura and Lende 2012, 133). Regardless of how one categorizes PTSD- it ultimately affects the affected person’s brain chemistry. Formally calm people may become skittish. They may experience nightmares, have flashbacks, and have reactions to certain ordinary situations such as taking a bath. For example, Melanie is still unable to take a bath up
until this day, because being surrounded by a pool of water reminds her of being swallowed by Katrina’s waters.

With Hurricane Katrina came more damage than anyone could have ever imagined. There was physical damage from the storm, completely wiped away neighborhoods, but there were other forms of damage as well. Those who evacuated were lucky and were only able to see the aftermath of the storm on the news, but those who stayed behind were stuck on roofs or were forced on buses headed to Dallas or Houston, Texas for shelter in one of the major football stadiums. No one knew when they would be allowed to go home, or if they would be able to go home at all. Those who were not forced on buses, were sent or voluntarily went to the makeshift refugee camp in the Superdome, where people reported, “tales of rapes, child molestations, shootings, suicides, and flooding within the stadium” (Presse 2005). The Superdome was reported as a “concentration camp” and its role in post-Katrina New Orleans serves as a place of trauma (Presse 2005). It’s important note that not everyone who experienced Hurricane Katrina by evacuating, being forced on buses, or at the refugee camp in the Superdome has suffered from trauma. Of those who experienced Hurricane Katrina, “33% suffered from trauma symptoms compared to only 5% who suffered from symptoms after 9/11” (Babbel 2011). Although not everyone has trauma, 33% is still an unusually high number being that New Orleans has always had a small population.

One thing I noticed during a few of my conversations was that residents of Musicians’ Village’ reconstruction of their Katrina stories did not begin with a reflection of their life before the trauma of the storm or the circumstances of their lives leading up to the storm. This “requires a closer look into the cultural constructs that are responsible for what stress and trauma mean to each” person (Collura and Lende 2012, 138). With trauma it is often important to know about the
earlier history of the person to create a continuity with the past, because it provides context within which the meanings of the persons trauma can be understood, but I wasn’t given that option most of the time, which can be due to the way I asked my questions. Yet I did notices that it was almost as if a few of my informants’ identities relied upon their post-Katrina experience to help them define themselves in the present.

During an interview with Nichelle James, it was brought to my attention that some victims of Katrina weren’t able to receive mental health treatment for Katrina trauma until leaving the state of Louisiana. Nichelle, like Melanie, also stayed in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, but had a completely different experience.

On Saturday, August 27, 2005, two days before Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, Nichelle James was at a hurricane party, which is a type of party in a similar style to a birthday party where residents of New Orleans celebrate the warning of a Hurricane while expecting it won’t hit the city. She and her friends didn’t think much of the storm, because they had all lived in New Orleans their entire lives and were used to storm threats. At most they had experienced a few feet of flooding, but nothing like what they were about to encounter. Sunday was deceptively peaceful, as Hurricane Katrina whirled towards New Orleans. Because of the calm weather, Nichelle didn’t think to evacuate even though Mayor Nagin “ordered the first-ever mandatory evacuation of New Orleans” (Russel 2005). Governor Kathleen Blanco also added that the storm was “very serious as it’s the storm most have feared” and the city needed “to get as many people out as possible”, still this didn’t phase Nichelle (Russel 2005). Sunday night, Nichelle decided to room at a friend’s house in the Upper Ninth ward of New Orleans, because her friend had a two story home. On Monday morning, the day of Hurricane Katrina, Nichelle recounted how the weather was still calm. There had been rain pouring, but no heavy flooding.
Around noon, Nichelle and her friend heard a loud BOOM and then saw a refrigerator rushing down the streets towards them being pushed by a fast flowing current of water. After that, it only took minutes for water to begin surrounding their house foot by foot. They did not have any option, but to climb to the roof and wait for rescue. They ended up being stranded on the roof for days and were eventually rescued in a boat by local neighborhood members. Nichelle was then sent to the Superdome.

During my interview with Nichelle, I was told the story of trauma. She told her story completely, in depth, and in detail. She says that by constructing her Katrina trauma story as a narrative, she is about to transform her traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into her life. Whether residents evacuated or were caught in the city during the flooding, many residents experienced trauma. This trauma continues to play an ongoing role in their everyday lives. That is, the traumatic events of Katrina and the flooding are still present, “both as memories that haunt the present and as causative events that created situations of ongoing disorder and disruption that continue to define the present” (Adams et al. 2009, 617). After Nichelle was sent to the Superdome, she encountered much of what made it be described as a concentration camp. Throughout her short stay there, she became a victim of rape, abuse, and malnourishment. “Inside the Superdome, the amount of people was overwhelming,” Nichelle told me, “women were getting raped in bathrooms. The toilets were overflowing. We didn’t have power and there was flooding. It was bad. Real bad.”

Around thirty-thousand people were sharing the space of the Superdome (Scott 2015). “It got so bad that the army stopped allowing people to enter the Superdome. Things were bad and nobody knew what was happening,” said Nichelle. After reporting her abuse, she was then unvolunteeringly sent to a refugee camp in Houston, Texas, and later shipped away on a bus to
Arkansas. While in Arkansas, Nichelle began to heal through song and began singing “I’ll fly away,” a song that has been sung in New Orleans since slaves were sold at Congo Square. The lyrics of the song are about flying away to Heaven after one dies, but for Nichelle the lyrics meant she was still her, still alive. Singing for her was a push back against Katrina. For Nichelle and fellow musicians, as well as New Orleans residents, music was needed to cope. It let them know that there was normalcy after devastation. “As long as we had our music, we knew the heartbeat of the city would keep on beating,” said Dr. Brice Miller. Although her Katrina story is painful, Nichelle uses it as a form of empowerment, as a way to confront the horrors of the past.

**Stuck in the Mud**

I am a witness to this phenomena, because I was only eight years old when the hurricane took place. A little background: my parents are separated. As I child, I would typically spend Monday through Friday at my mother’s house, because the elementary school my older sister and I attended was located in her neighborhood. On weekends, I would go to my father’s house. The weekend before Hurricane Katrina was one of the weekends I was spending by my father. We had been following the news, but didn’t really pay it much mind, because hurricanes always strike New Orleans, but my father didn’t decide to leave until two days before when the local news meteorologists panicked and told everyone to get out of the city if they can. “Wake up, wake up”, is what my father told my older sister and I. “Pack three days’ worth of clothes and make sure your little brother has all of his things”. As I child, I didn’t understand the severity or urgency of the issue, and simply followed my father’s commands. After all things were packed, my father, stepmom, older sister, younger brother, and I drove to my grandparents homes in New Orleans’ East and collectively decided to drive north. We drove until we ran out of gas, and
ended up taking shelter at a motel near Memphis, Tennessee. By the time we had gotten there, Hurricane Katrina had begun making landfall over New Orleans.

We did not know how long we would have to stay at the hotel. Funds and clothing were running low. We had only prepared to be away for three days. My father heard on the radio that there was a shelter in Columbus, Mississippi at the Mississippi University for Women, so we drove there and remained in that shelter for about two months. During this entire two month stay I did not hear from my mother or any family for that matter. All I had known was that my mother had stayed in New Orleans during the Hurricane and my father wouldn’t let me watch the news out of fear that I or my older sister may see her as one of the floating corpses that were shown on the news. I constantly created scenarios in my mind of my mother’s death. I didn’t say anything to anyone, but I did mentally revisit the scenarios constantly. I revisited them so much, in fact, that I was practically unsurprised, when I was told “it would be a while before we hear from her”; whether that meant death or communication failure I didn’t care, but I did begin to experience moments of paranoia afterwards- symptoms of post-Katrina trauma.

Like anthropology, trauma is all about details. Trauma renders itself in certain sounds, scents, situations. In the qualities of air pressure, the scent before rain starts, in moments. When the human brain recognizes a trauma, whether that be physical, mental, situational, or emotional, it makes decisions on what to remember, and it often is indecisive about what to remember: the images of people drowning, the taste of homemade ranch dressing, and the sound of your father crying. Sometimes the brain gets obsessive about trauma. One of my informants, Ellen Smith, explicitly told me not to ask her about Katrina, because she did not want a Katrina story or her trauma to define her. Instead Ellen chooses to talk about how music aided her in returning home.
Sing to Me

Through the executive director of the Ellis Marsalis Center for Music, Michele Brierre, I was introduced to Ellen Smith, who is regarded as one of the first musicians to relocate to Musicians’ Village. Ellen moved to Musicians’ Village in the summer of 2007, making her a recognizable established person to speak with about the history of the Village. She is attributed to cultivating the atmosphere of the neighborhood. I met with Ellen during the summer and winter of 2017, while she was working towards establishing the relationships between residents of Musicians’ Village and the administration of the Ellis Marsalis Center for Music.

Coming from Mississippi in 2007, Ellen had been “one of the first people to speak to Branford Marsalis about the Village.” Ellen told me the story of Branford Marsalis and Harry Connick Jr. sneaking into the city shortly after Hurricane Katrina. “Residents weren’t able to come in the city, so they snuck in and rescued people off of roofs, a lot of the people they rescued were musicians they knew,” Ellen said. The fact that musicians were among those to be stuck in the city as well as the first to return to the city is no coincidence. Music contains the value and power of New Orleans’ culture. Ellen told me that through a phone call with Branford she was given the details about the forthcoming Village. Ellen was then placed in the Habitat for Humanity’s homeownership program where she met her future neighbors and reunited with former band mates. Throughout the program, the neighbors would work on each other’s homes during the day, and would meet in backyards at night for impromptu concerts. “We were all struggling, but it got us a little closer.” In the beginning, the Village was disfigured. Where traditional shotgun houses once stood, were vacant lots. The homes that remained were covered with Katrina cross- big spray painted X’s that reported the number of casualties and hazards per home.
Most people who are familiar with the Ninth Ward in post-Katrina New Orleans are accustomed to seeing signs of Katrina still about of residential landscapes, and Musicians’ Village is no different from this. However, when placed against the knowledge that this storm was over a decade ago, understanding why music-making and place-making has continued in the Musicians’ Village in spite of the complexities that surround the cultural and economic recovery of the city sheds light on the relationship between the post-disaster recovery of New Orleans and its cultural continuity. The circumstances in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina brought to light the unfortunate situations that Black musicians have faced individually and as a community. After the storm, they had to not only rebuild their own lives but also rebuild the musical cultures of the city.

Although Musicians’ Village is a neighborhood that aids musicians in their recovery efforts, both the musicians and the neighborhood have dealt with gentrification, cultural appropriation, and the appropriation of public space, being the neighborhood itself. This factors have impacted the cultural practices of Black musicians in post-Katrina. Black musicians have been able to create and preserve many musical traditions, because of their everyday geography and their attachment to place. Therefore, it is important to understand how the formation of Musicians’ Village serves as a way to preserve the cultural practices of New Orleans that are losing their cultural relevance due to an influx of gentrification, disaster tourism, and disaster tourism.
Chapter Three

Race, Place, and Tourism: Musicians’ Village’s Place in New Orleans Gentrification

And this is why capturing the cultural stories of us, by us, is vitally important. Our heroes don’t need to appear on no stamps, and our community champions don’t need to be leading a protest to be heroes. - (Miller 2017)

Introduction

It is unfathomable to know that Blacks in New Orleans have cultivated such a resilient culture of music in response to political, social, economic, and environmental oppression, only to have that culture stripped by the very same oppressor. But that is the experience of being Black in America. And a prime example of this is what has been happening to the Black musical community in New Orleans post-Katrina. Over the past twelve years since Hurricane Katrina, Black residents of New Orleans have first-hand witnessed the so called “advancement” of the city as a new wave of residents have come in and began to deplete the traditional cultures of New Orleans. Because of the devastation that was Hurricane Katrina, people came into New Orleans with the intentions of “advancing” the city. What is “advancement” for certain populations of the city is destruction for others. Of course, I am not at all undermining the efforts to improve the city. I am only saying that the urbanization has, in part, led to the gentrification of New Orleans.

Gentrification has taken a toll on many Black neighborhoods. The tearing down of the housing projects, the closing of various public schools and creating, in their place, charter schools, creating of noise ordinances in Black neighborhoods, and the taking over of small local businesses by private corporate giants all have contributed to the disappearance of traditional Black New Orleans neighborhoods. I do not understand this new culture of New Orleans- where we now have to pay to see performances of brass bands and can’t afford to live in neighborhoods that were occupied by generations of families. My family moved to the Uptown area of New
Orleans in 1996. At the time it was a predominantly Black middle-class neighborhood. There were local public schools, locally owned markets and stores, and a vibrate second-line community. Yet as of 2017, we have witnessed how gentrification has drastically changed both the cultural geography, and the physical and metaphysical culture of New Orleans’ neighborhoods such as mine.

**Can I Live Here?**

In 2016 the Housing Authority of New Orleans “released a plan to combat segregation and gentrification in New Orleans, which have both become exacerbated in the 11 years since Hurricane Katrina” (LaBorde 2016). NPR reports “a different mix of people now calls the city home than before the storm. Proportionately, the number of whites has risen while the number of black residents has gone down. There are 100,000 fewer black residents in New Orleans than before Katrina. African-Americans now account for less than 60 percent of the population. That's down from two-thirds. And that has changed the culture of the city” (Allen 2015). The cultures of New Orleans are created by a sense of place, and that sense of place is created by everyday activities that are normal here, though they would be out of place anywhere else such as second-lines, block parties, jazz funerals, crawfish boils. From the perspective of cultural geography- the architecture, neighborhood histories, and traditions of the city are all connected, which creates a sense of belonging and place to a culture. The cultural consistency of New Orleans' neighborhoods has been instrumental in shaping the city's old and new cultures, and the international love affair the world has with the "Big Easy". Right now in New Orleans with an influx of gentrification, there is the question of what has happened to New Orleans’ culture? It's being lost.

---

4 Big Easy is a nickname for New Orleans.
The lack of acknowledgement for Black people and their contributions to the culture of New Orleans is concerning, but fortunately Musicians’ Village and the Ellis Marsalis Center for Music are aiming to continue to preserve the Black musical culture of New Orleans. It has been left up to Blacks to find creative ways to preserve their cultural heritage while being resilient to gentrification in post-Katrina New Orleans and this is why understanding Musicians’ Village role in post-Katrina New Orleans is essential.

Race and Place in New Orleans

To do proper research about Musicians’ Village, it is both necessary and important to acknowledge the effects of race, gentrification, and tourism in New Orleans. Black culture is not only the backbone of Musicians’ Village, but it is also representative of the population of the community members. Throughout New Orleans’ history, its preserved Black culture has been one of the city’s most significant and primary assets. In *Who Dat?: Race and Its Conspicuous Consumption in Post-Katrina New Orleans*, Marc Perry emphasizes the use of cultural exploitation and culture economy for regional development of New Orleans. Perry writes:

“Black New Orleanians are often figured within two seemingly social fields of opportunity and the broader vitality of Black working class New Orleans. The first of these is predicted on commercially assailable and therefore “good” Black subjects as the instrumental facets of New Orleans’ tourist-driven cultural industry; the other tied to those deemed unassimilable and hence deviantly “bad” and responsible” (Perry 2015, 93).

In the text Perry describes how the cultural exploitation of New Orleans correlates to the growth of economic prosperity for outsiders. Soon after moving back to New Orleans in August of 2013, my family and I quickly noticed how drastically increased the prices of local products were. A few years before, we would have be able to go down to the French Market and purchase several items made by locals for merely a buck, but as the city developed and more and more tourists become residents, it seemed as if the culture began to become sold. Brass bands are no longer able to perform freely on the street, and local food vendors need commercial licenses.
It is a known fact that “Black” culture is not the only culture of New Orleans. The culture of the city can be said to come from the Haitians, French, Spanish, Creoles, Cajuns, slaves, free people of color, and plantation owners, but not all of this culture is celebrated or shown. For example, the Haitian cultural influence of New Orleans is deeply rooted in the history of New Orleans as well as in the present tourism industry of the city. The impact of the Haitian Revolution, and Haiti being “born of the world’s only successful slave revolution” was deeply intermingled with the United States (Leddy 2004). Ironically, a myriad of the slaves in Haiti that revolted migrated to the United States to New Orleans, Louisiana. The Haitians that migrated to New Orleans brought along with them the religion of Voodoo.

Being that New Orleans was home to one of the largest slaves ports in the United States, “[it is] certain that New Orleans was the birthplace of Voodoo in North America” as large concentrations of slaves from West Africa and the Caribbean islands were brought there (Maranise 2012, 4). In New Orleans, slaves had requirements to forbid practicing their native religions, but slaves also had leniency because of the Code Noir. Underneath Louisiana’s Code Noir, slaves were able to have Sunday’s free of slavery. As a result, slaves began to congregate as “part of the weekly public ceremony in Congo Square” (Maranise 2012, 6). Many slaves took advantage of the time off to practice their indigenous traditions with other slaves, thus forming new traditions that reflected shared values. The development of shared values is relevant, because it serves as a structure within which New Orleans Voodoo and culture that stemmed from slaves and migrated Haitians began to thrive- a culture which is now for profit, as tourists flock to the city to “practice Voodoo”. This is only one example of how Black cultures of New Orleans are exploited.
Political Silence

New Orleans’ city government has paid and continues to pay little attention to the everyday struggles of Black communities, despite the fact that the Black communities are one of the foundations of New Orleans’ culture that tourist flock to the city to witness. Instead, city government leaders opt to reconstruct the rich culture and troubled Black history of New Orleans as a commodity that can be packaged and sold for profit to New Orleans recent influx of White residents. In “Many Thousand Gone, Again”, author, David Troutt writes about the lack of recovery efforts by the city government of New Orleans for Black residents. His main argument is that there was a conspiracy by the city government to prevent Blacks from relocating to the city, because the government apparently wanted other demographics of people to indulge in the city’s culture. He writes:

“after Katrina’s massive ground clearance, the devolution away from the hope of something truly interesting and radically beautiful among New Orleans may give way to the latest commodified form: Disney on the Mississippi. In the unspoken terms of this consumption fest, a poor Black population that can be jettisoned, must be jettisoned for the sake of new subdivisions, better schools,. and lower taxes. Hence, anything that slows their return to New Orleans is an obvious benefit” (Troutt 2007, 7).

In New Orleans, the city’s government is exploiting the history and culture of Black musicians to make a profit from White Americans by “producing their own representations of Blackness” (Regis 2003, 41). The music of Black musicians is marketed as a reason to come to New Orleans, yet when these musicians perform, the income from the tourism industry (hotel fees, restaurants, etc.) all goes to the city government and the musicians themselves only make very little profit. For example, when speaking to my father Dr. Brice Miller, I was told that on average a band leader will get a check of $500, but that has to be distributed throughout each member of
the band. The average band has six members. So, although $500 may seem like a nice stipend to get paid for performing, the money does not go very far. It’s pure exploitation.

**Dualities of Tourism**

New Orleans native Lynnell L. Thomas’s book *Desire and Disaster in New Orleans: Tourism, Race and Historical Memory* grapples with the socio-economic inequalities between Black and White residents of New Orleans (Thomas 2014). The book details the development of New Orleans’ tourism industry and the false image of New Orleans that it creates. There is a tourist narrative in New Orleans that reinforces the stigma that Blacks are culturally inferior, despite the fact that the narrative often ignores the historical and contemporary hardships that have shaped Black culture. The tourist narrative involves a “dyad of blackness—one shaped through a raced desire for certain performing bodies, and the other constructed through a racialized fear of a menacing cornucopia of criminalized pathology” (Perry 2015, 95). When tourist visit the city of New Orleans, they typically remain in the French Quarter and are warned not to venture out into the “real” New Orleans. The “real” New Orleans is where one sees abandoned homes, drug deals, robberies, and shootings— all which are part of the Black culture of New Orleans. In a way, this tourist narrative is ironic because the tourists visit New Orleans to experience the traditional Black culture, yet want nothing to do with the Black people themselves. The city government of New Orleans reinforces this narrative by putting a plethora of its money and resources into tourist areas such as the French Quarter while neglecting traditional Black neighborhoods. As a result, many Black neighborhoods are underfunded and undeveloped.

Ethnomusicologist Matt Sakakeeny’s book *Roll With It: Brass Bands in the Streets of New Orleans* examines Black brass band musicians within the socioeconomic struggles of being
a musician in a post-disaster city. As Sakakeeny argues, traditional New Orleans music is always in demand, and becoming a musician presents itself as a viable career opportunity, yet the tourism industry does not provide the musicians a way out of poverty or marginalization (Sakakeeny 2013). The musicians are paid by tips or per gig, which makes them susceptible to not being able to afford basic essentials such as a home. Because of this, Musicians’ Village provides housing to predominantly Black musicians who are unable to afford a home whether that be due to displacement or increased rental prices. The musicians are also vulnerable to gentrification because Whites have moved into the neighborhoods where such musicians lived and have created ordinances that prevent live cultural performances such as brass bands and second-lines.

_Second-Lines - Where Music and Place-making Intersect_

The rhythms at the base of New Orleans’ traditional Black brass band music are grounded in a parading tradition called the second line, which developed out of the local jazz funeral tradition. Jazz funerals became common in the city’s Black neighborhoods by the late 1800s, typically under the sponsorship of one of the mutual aid societies known as Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs. The main function of these societies was to provide for the well-being of its Black members in a time when basic social services were largely unavailable to Black residents. Funeral services were among the most vital programs provided by these societies, and along with a church service they typically featured brass band-led processions to and from the grave site. On the way to the grave site, the brass band would generally play a slow dirge to mourn the departed. After the body was buried, however, the brass band would begin the procession away from the grave site by striking up a lively, syncopated march tune. People from the neighborhood and the deceased family would form in a “second line” behind the band and the mourners,
adding their own rhythms on improvised percussion instruments. Eventually, the second line parade became a Sunday tradition of its own, with Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs sponsoring Sunday parades to this day.

As a distinctive cultural practice authentic to New Orleans, brass bands and second-lines are forms of traditions that have been passed down through generations of Blacks. I recently read a news article titled “Traditional Second-Lines Charged at Least $1000 more than Mardi Gras Krewes to Parade” on Nola.com. The article is about traditional second-line performers being charged upwards of $1000 to parade (Nola.com 2017). There has been an ironic switch from brass bands being able to perform for free to now having to pay to perform. Why is there a cost to culture? As a New Orleans native, I know that this is an abundant amount to charge second-line performers, as they perform for the culture and not for money. At the same time, the dichotomy between performing for money and performing for culture does not hold up today given the tourist market. Although the article does not overtly assert that gentrification is the cause of an increase in fees, I have noticed that traditional Black traditions and culture have been being targeted as a new wave of Whites have entered the city.

In an interview with my father, Dr. Brice Miller Sr., we spoke about the influx of young White populations moving to New Orleans and the effect that has had on the well beings of Blacks, specifically artists and musicians, in the city of New Orleans, LA. He spoke about how the contemporary musical scene in New Orleans was profoundly shaped by two developments that occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s, by quoting Matt Sakakeeny’s book- a source that many of my informants have referred to:

“As Matt Sakakeeny writes in Roll With It: Brass Bands in the Streets of New Orleans (2013), the city’s leaders responded to the decline of the manufacturing and shipping industries in the 1960s by transforming New Orleans into a tourist mecca. The leaders began to see the culture and history of New Orleans as a commodity that could be packaged and sold for profit. Tourism then emerged as the city’s primary
economic market because the city leaders noticed that the local culture and history could be appropriated and sold as commodities if the city presented its traditions as frozen in time.” (Miller 2017)

By having the culture of New Orleans “frozen in time”, people have and continue to flock to the city to awe at the second-lines, take photos of the panhandlers, and take advantage of New Orleans’ struggling traditional cultural barriers that keep the culture “frozen”. Mayor Mitch Landrieu states that, "the cultural economy [of New Orleans] is more important than ever, culture is inseparable from our way of life in New Orleans. We enjoy a diversity of cultural riches that most cities can only dream about"(Hutcheson 2017 et al.). The cultural economy has become a vital and recognized component of the city's tourism industry and driver of New Orleans' recovery. New Orleans' culture "is a tremendous tool for economic development and an invaluable asset that increases our quality of life on many levels", yet at the same time although the cultural economy is helping New Orleans recover, it is now exploiting certain residents more than ever (Hutcheson 2017 et al.). One thing that the publishers of the Cultural Economy, a guide that documents the benefit that the tourism industry has on the city in terms of financial gain, do is interview locals about the perceptions about how the culture of New Orleans is helping the city, and there was a theme that kept popping up about how gentrification is depleting the true culture of New Orleans:

“A common theme was authenticity of the cultural worker by being local paired with dismay at the change of the cultural landscape caused by the influx of “transplants” or gentrification. These factors lowered the authenticity and the cultural confidence as it related to New Orleans as a city. New Orleans is currently in a state of flux. The recovery from Hurricane Katrina has both restored cultural assets and returned some of the former cultural practitioners, but it has also brought in much more outside influence than was present before the storm. Cultural workers, both local and new, are still discovering New Orleans culture and choosing to approach their cultural practice from a preservation path, an innovative path, and most often times, both. There is fierce debate regarding the degradation of traditional culture versus the creation of new cultural forms next to it” (Hutcheson 2017 et al.).

---

5 Amount of USD the city gains from tourist expenditures.
The idea of a “fixed culture” in post-Katrina New Orleans has attracted a healthy "influx of entrepreneurs" (Suleiman 2012). They are young (mostly non-ethnic white), talented, educated people with disposable incomes. The public housing projects that once served as territorial landmarks have all been torn down, replaced by mixed-use/mixed-income housing aimed at attracting this new populace to the urban core. Gentrification has tremendously impacted the affordability and cultural "feel" of communities like Black neighborhoods like Treme, displacing long time renters with property owners. Unfortunately, this has done very little for the Black residents of the city who have been in New Orleans for generations, except displace them due to gentrification. This displacement of Blacks due to gentrification has caused some families to cross territorial boundaries, resulting in the continually escalating murder rate.

For Black locals of New Orleans, growing recognition of the city’s traditional Black music culture has not always been accompanied by the acknowledgement that “frozen” traditions thrive. The incorporation of bounce, soul music, and hip-hop into brass-band marching music has not been without controversy. In response to these musical mixes, Black musicians that I’ve interviewed in Musicians’ Village have sought to represent local Black musical tradition in a more formalized and “respectable” fashion, as well as in new ways. One of the primary ways that musicians like New Orleans born multi-instrumentalist and former resident of Treme, Dr. Michael Torregano, situates himself in the change of New Orleans’s music across generations is by reflecting on his work as a high school band director and a current administrator of the Ellis Marsalis Center for Music. In my conversations with Dr. Torregano, he told me that one of the most important things he learned as a child was how to play traditional brass band music properly:

“We [in reference to people of his generation] learned to play the music properly. We played blues, we played traditional songs, we played, like, “When you’re Smiling,” we played “What a Wonderful
World,” “When the Saints Go Marching In,” all those kinds. Songs that had changes on [them] that taught you how to play over changes. We didn’t learn from books. We all learned how to play and improvise from one another.”

While he does not state it outright, he might be implying that an education in playing the music “properly” is what separates his generation from players in the new generation of musicians. Another value that he learned was the importance of proper attire and stage etiquette:

“No only did we learn about brass band music and how to play that; we learned how to be as musicians – to have character, to act like you want to be there when you’re on the stage, not like somebody’s owing you something. We were taught to always come to a performance clean and put together- in traditional black and white three piece suits, because that’s respect. Don’t come to the bandstand in jeans and t-shirts, that kind of thing like the youngins, you know – you disrespecting the music, you’re disrespecting the culture showing up like that.” (Torregano 2017)

For Black musicians like Dr. Torregano, Musicians’ Village’s is a place where musicians live to pass on the traditional culture of New Orleans to these “at risk” youth. Grammy nominated trumpet player, Shamarr Allen, started a foundation that educated “at-risk” from the Ninth Ward about music. He sees his foundation as a way to keep kids off of the street. For him keeping an instrument in a child’s hand is the same as keeping a gun out of a child’s hand. By being in close proximity to the Village, these “at-risk” youth are exposed to not only musicians who live in Musicians’ Village, but also Mardi Gras Indians, photographers, artists, journalists, essentially anyone who can say their career relates to the arts. For both Shamarr Allen, and Dr. Torregano, the idea of Musicians’ Village sounds good, but in reality it isn’t as good as it sounds It is supposed to be a performing arts community, but recently those who are not local to the city have begun moving into the Village and they say it takes away from the culture of the Village, and more generally, the whole city of New Orleans. For example, Dr. Torregano states that:

“There are a lot of people who walk into the Center and look around. The people interrupt the classes. The people come to the Center to try to take the idea of the Village so that they can duplicate it wherever they’re from. I seen a lot of musicians that have come here and try to act like they know what to do. I saw musicians on the bandstand try to tell me what I was doing is wrong. How you gonna tell me what I’m doing is wrong, if I grew up doing this all my life? Because they studied something in school or looked at some video, they think that they’re an expert. A lot of what we do in New Orleans is going from word to word, mouth to mouth, keeping things in New Orleans. Sometimes we can teach somebody something without even using words. But we have these folks moving in from out of town and they can’t understand
this stuff. Because they learned stuff a certain way from a book they expect that’s how things are supposed to go, that’s a big problem we’re having in the city right now, especially with the music scene, because those guys who are moving in, they are taking over, and for folks that are from here, it’s getting harder and harder to find work, and the way we do things is being changed by people coming from out of town and taking over.”

Education is still a struggle and reform has been hard to take hold as New Orleans continues to recover from the storm. Public schools are no longer so public. Neighborhood schools, which pre-Katrina identified by the names of "generous" slave owners like John McDonough have now become privatized charter schools run by different charter organizations such as Kipp. A bright side for schools has been the strong rebirth of the marching band tradition since Katrina. Many schools have invested to develop music programs. It is a well-known social understanding in New Orleans that keeping an instrument in a kid's hand might keep that same kid off the streets, and away from the temptations of drugs or picking up a gun, which is one of the promises of the Ellis Marsalis Center for Music. Both the Center and the Village have used their place to drive renewal to the Ninth Ward area, starting with the youth. Culturally both have perpetuated narratives of community reformation that address the social, cultural, political, educational, environmental, and economical issues that have halted the recovery efforts for Black residents, specifically Black musicians of New Orleans. They serve as a home for Black musicians who lived and performed in the city before and after Katrina, who were each affected by the storm in various ways in the days, weeks, months, years, and decade following the storm, and have served to preserve the musical legacy of such musicians in the locality of the neighborhood.
Concluding Thoughts

This study documented the ways in which Black residents of New Orleans, in particular Black musicians, have been impacted by Hurricane Katrina, and how the storm and post-disaster recovery efforts of the city have affected their place-making, community formation, music practices, cultural preservation, and cultural continuity as the city markets itself as “being back.” The conditions of the Black community in the Ninth Ward shed light on situations that musicians have faced individually and as a community as they all attempt to rebuild their lives while upholding the music and culture-making practices. Thus this study, as an interdisciplinary anthropology and film senior project, investigated the “recovery” of New Orleans by looking at the social-cultural and economic impact of community reformation post-disaster and the role of Musicians’ Village. I believe that the story of New Orleans cannot be told without the traditional Black cultural preservers at the center of its narrative, therefore I examined how the formation of Musicians’ Village in post-Katrina New Orleans contributes to our understanding of the post-disaster recovery of New Orleans and the role of its cultural preservation. Throughout the thesis, I found it both necessary and important to acknowledge the conventions of race, gentrification, tourism, and the social-historical issues of New Orleans as it contributes to our understanding of the intersection between the post-disaster recovery of New Orleans and the role of its cultural practices. As James Baldwin states in “Many Thousands Gone”, “It is only in his music, which Americans are able to admire because a protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story” (Baldwin 1984, 24). I have explored the role that Black musicians play in shaping the cultural story of New Orleans and how that culture is able to be preserved through recovery although there has been a recent influx of gentrification.
New Orleans, Louisiana, as a tourist destination and gentrification mecca, is typically conceptualized as a site of pleasure and leisure. Tourists flock to the city to embark on a journey of eating at various restaurants, walking around the French Quarter, or celebrating at one of the city’s various festivals such as Mardi Gras or Jazz Fest. However, in recent years, since Hurricane Katrina, tourism associated with Katrina’s disaster and recovery, have become a highly-profitable tourism phenomena. This form of tourism, as disaster tourism, involves visiting a site at which disaster or post-disaster recovery is the main attraction. Musicians’ Village has become a victim of disaster tourism as tour buses filled with non-Black people constantly roam the streets of the Village to gawk at the neighborhood. During an interview at Keng Harvey’s home in the Village, we witnessed three tour buses pass by in the span of 30 minutes. Keng told me how sometimes people get out of the buses and take pictures of the residents of the neighborhood, but make no effort to engage with the community members. He, along with Ellen Smith, feels uncomfortable practicing his music on his porch or outdoors, because tourist stare at him as if he were a monkey in a zoo. Michele Brierre, also said that she doesn’t even feel comfortable tying her shoe outside, because she is afraid of what a tourist may do with a picture of her bending down. These conversations pointed out how uncomfortable tourism is for everyday citizens, who happen to be Black and musicians, of New Orleans. They feel like tourist and new residents of the city, exploit them without recognizing them.

Throughout the film thesis aspect of this project, which is told in the words of the musicians and those committed to the story of the recovery of New Orleans’ culture themselves, I concentrated on describing the interactions that have taken place within the Village and the multitude of issues facing a city still attempting to rebuild and rebrand itself by profiling those whose connections with Musicians’ Village and the city of New Orleans illustrate a connection
in preserving and passing on the unique cultural traditions of New Orleans. The theme of the film surrounds the phenomena of disaster tourism on a more in depth level. As the city of New Orleans continues to rebuild twelve years following Hurricane Katrina, it is clear the storm sparked an initiative to preserve the Black musical cultures that had been a key component of the city’s culture in the centuries and decades leading up to the storm. At the same time it is also evident that to acknowledge that the recovery efforts by the city government that were targeted towards Black musicians have been inequitable. The so called “recovery” did as much as possible to halt the return for communities of color. As media outlets praised New Orleans for its many recovery efforts Black communities remained hidden from this narrative. After the waters the inundated metro New Orleans receded, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina for affected Black residents, communities, and cultural bearers proved to be a great struggle. With “only about 60 percent of its pre-Katrina population, the city of New Orleans is smaller, older, whiter, and more affluent” (Troutt 2007, 161). The privatization of housing, raising rent, as well as a general lack of post-Katrina affordable housing has increased the cost of living for Black communities. The decision of the Department of Housing and Urban Development to demolish public housing without replacing that form of housing with affordable housing has caused generations of Black families to be uprooted from their homes. Those who owned or rented homes were not able to receive government funding to rebuild. Jobs were not provided to Blacks, and local education centers located in Black neighborhoods were put into the charter school network. All of which sheds lights on the injustices that the Black community faced following the storm.

In Musicians’ Village community residents and leaders have recognized the importance of economic and residential prosperity as tools for recovery. However, in order to reach adequate economic and residential sustainability, the recovery efforts of the city must improve at a similar
rate overall rather than just in this localized neighborhood. This is especially important in New Orleans, where the ties between place and people are stronger than most American cities. The increase in providing renewal efforts for communities of color are at the root of preserving the cultures that make the city what it is. This concept has been proven in communities such as Musicians’ Village. The physical destruction of the city, following the storm, has allowed people to reimagine the relationship between people and place whether that be in a positive way such as creating culture based neighborhoods such as Musicians’ Village or by completely gentrifying communities as seen with Treme. Although Treme is the birthplace of jazz, and the first Black suburb in America, and served as being a cultural mecca for many decades, today the neighborhood is predominantly white, with little reminders of what the neighborhood used to be. Many of the historic jazz clubs and bars have been replaced by coffee shops and traditional shotgun homes have been turned into condos.

In New Orleans, the relationship between music and place has had a long history. Regarding the post-Katrina place-making of Musicians’ Village, the consensus of all I spoke with was, “we are here to bring the culture back to the Ninth Ward and to the broader New Orleans Community as a whole. We were here before Katrina, and our music and culture will serve the city of New Orleans for many years to come.” To that end, the music and culture of Black musicians in Musicians’ Village are helping rebuild New Orleans. While much has changed in the city in the twelve years since the storm, those I spoke with continue to have faith in the renewal of music-based communities. It is important to note that this study gathered information from musicians who were active in the performance culture of New Orleans before and after the storm. The musicians and those I spoke with in this study only represent a small fraction of musicians who are aiming to preserve the Black cultures of New Orleans in its post-
disaster recovery state. Although it has been twelve years since the storm, as the study describes, much of the aftermath of the storm still affects these people in their everyday lives. Therefore this thesis can bring about awareness in which the ways this disaster has impacted Black musicians on an individual level as well within their greater community. It is for this reason that the formation of Musicians’ Village offers a lens for studying the role of cultural preservation and continuity in post-Katrina New Orleans. Furthermore, Musicians’ Village exemplifies how disaster enables people to persevere through displacement whether that be natural or unnatural such as a storm-induced diaspora or the destruction of homes by the government, when there is a relationship between people, place, culture, and music.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

By emphasizing community, and the role of people within a recovering community, this thesis examined the lived experiences of those living in Musicians’ Village. In doing so, the aim was to share their narratives and the story of post-Katrina truthfully. Additional research is needed on musicians and those involved with community reformation and cultural preservation in their post-Katrina context who were not covered in this thesis. Because there are so many who make up the culture and city of New Orleans, there are still many untold narratives about New Orleans in its post-disaster state. For example, it would be of great interest to interview those involved in the city, state, and federal government, those in the housing market, charter school system, as well as in the tourism industry. It would also be great to interview White musicians or those who identify as not being Black to understand their perspectives regarding their positionality in withholding a Black culture. There are so many more perspectives that can enhance and complement this study, so that we can fully understand the impact of disaster on musicians in a city still recovering twelve years later. Those who contributed to this study have
worked diligently to keep the cultures of New Orleans not “frozen in time”. Although there is much to be done to improve the social, economic, political, and housing situations for many musicians and those involved in preserving the city’s cultures, their dedication to New Orleans is hopeful and will be continued.
Artist Statement

The Village of Hope: A Documentary

Early in the morning on August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina, a category five storm, made landfall over New Orleans, Louisiana. The Hurricane and the storm surge that came afterwards flooded about eighty percent of metro New Orleans. Those who were affected most by the storm were low to middle-income, primarily Black residents of the city living in the Ninth Wards, who were not able to afford to evacuate or relocate elsewhere. While pre-Katrina New Orleans already had a low unemployment rate amongst the Black population, those who were near the bottom of the socioeconomic barrier were musicians, artist, and Mardi Gras Indians—those who which carry on and preserve the traditional cultures of New Orleans.

As an interdisciplinary senior project, this anthropology and film thesis investigated the social-cultural impact of community reformation post-disaster and the role of Musicians’ Village, a neighborhood formed after the storm, in post-Katrina New Orleans. I believe that the story of New Orleans cannot be told without the traditional Black cultural preservers at the center of its narrative, therefore I examined how the formation of Musicians’ Village in post-Katrina New Orleans contributes to our understanding of the post-disaster recovery of New Orleans and the role of its cultural preservation. To do proper research about Musicians’ Village, I found it both necessary and important to acknowledge the conventions of race, gentrification, tourism, and the social-historical issues of New Orleans as it contributes to our understanding of the intersection between the post-disaster recovery of an urban city and the role of its cultural practices. As James Baldwin states in “Many Thousands Gone”, “It is only in his music, which Americans are able to admire because a protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story” (Baldwin 1984, 24). I have explored the role that Black musicians play in shaping the cultural story of New Orleans and how that culture is able to be preserved although there has been a recent influx of gentrification.

The film, told in the words of the musicians and those committed to the story of the recovery of New Orleans’ culture themselves concentrates on describing the interactions that have taken place within the Village and the multitude of issues facing a city still attempting to rebuild and rebrand itself by profiling those whose connections with Musicians’ Village and the city of New Orleans illustrate a connection in preserving and passing on the unique cultural traditions of New Orleans.

The aim of the film was to interview and learn from members of the Musicians’ Village community, and other individuals associated with preserving culture and community reformation in post-Katrina New Orleans. I recruited participants by going to Musicians’ Village, and speaking with members of the community. Since Musicians’ Village is a tightly knit community, I used the method of “snowball sampling” by asking participants to refer me to other possible participants. I am also in constant contact with a handful of artist and musicians from Musicians’ Village being that my father, Dr. Brice Miller Sr., is a member of the Ellis Marsalis Center for Music. This Center serves as the epicenter of the Village and is where many of the community
members teach and perform. I interviewed faculty and staff members of the Center, in addition to visitors of the Center and Village. Interviewing visitors of the community was essential to this film thesis, because the community also serves as an epicenter for disaster tourism in New Orleans, and disaster tourism is a prevalent theme throughout the film.

Sample questions asked during making of film:
What are the characteristics of Musicians’ Village?
How does Musicians’ Village construct meanings of locality and identity of everyday life?
How does Musicians’ Village construct practices of resistance and resilience?
Why is Musicians’ Village important to you?
Do you feel displaced or does Musicians’ Village give you a sense of home?
What are the characteristics of New Orleans cultural community-based communities?
How has the Black New Orleans art and musical tradition been enabled to continue through all of the struggles caused by Hurricane Katrina?

All in all, the film, and anthropology written thesis combined, highlights the phenomena of the post-disaster recovery of a New Orleans localized music neighborhood called Musicians’ Village. I examine how the formation of Musicians’ Village in post-Katrina New Orleans contributes to our understanding of the intersection between the post-disaster recovery of New Orleans and the role of its cultural practices.

The film can be viewed on YouTube and Vimeo under the title “The Village of Hope”
The anthropology thesis can be found on Bard’s Digital Commons under the title “The Village of Hope: Community Reformation in Post-Katrina New Orleans”. I HIGHLY recommend reading the written thesis to gather a well-rounded picture of the research study.

You can stay up to date with my future work by:
● connecting with me on LinkedIn at https://www.linkedin.com/in/milanmiller
● subscribing to my blog at https://milanalicia.wordpress.com - link is subject to change as I purchase domain name
● following me on Instagram @milanalicia
Bibliography


The Ellis Marsalis Center for Music Annual Report. 2016. 1

Flaherty, Jordan. 2008. “New Orleans' Culture of Resistance”. In Phil Steinberg and Rob Shields (Eds.), *What is a City? Rethinking the Urban after Hurricane Katrina*. Athens, Georgia: University Press of Georgia.


King, Martin Luther Jr. 1963. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."


https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/new-orleans-urban-decay_us_57c05e53e4b085c1ff2910ab

http://understandingkatrina.ssrc.org/Lukes/

moses.creighton.edu/JRS/toc/2012.html.


en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musicians'_Village.


http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2017/05/second_lines_mardi_gras_new_or.html


www.commondreams.org/headlines05/0902-06.htm.


http://ilca.prometheuslabor.com/new-orleans-musicians-weather-storm

http://ilca.prometheuslabor.com/new-orleans-musicians-weather-storm


Smallwood, Stephanie E. *Saltwater Slavery: a Middle Passage from America to American Diaspora*. Harvard University Press, 2008.


Oral Interviews

Allen, Shamarr. Interview by author, New Orleans, La., December 2017
Baham, Andrew. Interview by author, New Orleans, La., December 2017
Briere, Michele. Interview by author, New Orleans, La., August/December 2017
Harvey, Keng. Interview by author, New Orleans, La., December 2017
Growe III, Alfred. Interview by author, New Orleans, La., December 2017
Miller, Brenda. Interview by author, New Orleans, La., December 2016
Miller Sr., Dr. Brice. Interview by author, New Orleans, La., November 2017
Miller Sr., Dwight. Interview by author, New Orleans, La., November 2017
Smith, Ellen. Interview by author, New Orleans, La., August/December 2017
Torregano, Dr. Michael. Interview by author, New Orleans, La., August 2017