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**‘Just Another Hurricane’: The
Lived Experience of Everyday Life
in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana in
the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina
and the BP Oil Spill**

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**Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, Anthropology**

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Abstract

This thesis offers an ethnographic analysis of everyday life in a post-catastrophe landscape shaped by two major disaster-processes – Hurricane Katrina (in 2005) and the BP oil spill (in 2010). By exploring local cultural ‘becoming’, it argues that the impact of these disaster-processes should not be conceptualised within a bounded period of ‘recovery’, but should be understood as forming part of the on-going construction of local landscape and everyday lived experience.

The community of southern Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana, where this study was based, has an on-going relationship with hurricanes and oil spills, which occur (or threaten to occur) with such frequency as to normalise the experience of disaster in local social life. Katrina and the BP oil spill were outliers of experience due to their vast scale and relative impact, but they were experienced by a community where local narratives of past catastrophes (such as the major hurricanes of the 1960s), and the direct experience of multiple smaller disaster-processes were deeply woven into local culture.

Furthermore, beyond the impact of these catastrophes this community was already experiencing widespread cultural and economic precariousness. Firstly, where local hierarchies of power (largely centred around White men) had become increasingly threatened in the latter part of the 20th century, and secondly, where local economic activity was characterised by high levels of instability and irregular employment. These catastrophes were therefore experienced in a context of already on-going structural precariousness, which in turn was impacted by the on-going ‘recovery’ from these large disaster-processes.

It argues that while material or institutional reconstruction may be successfully measured in terms of recovery goals or milestones, the *cultural* impact and ‘recovery’ from these catastrophes should be conceptualised as forming part of the never-ending process of ‘becoming’, ultimately woven into the on-going experience of mundane everyday life.

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Finally, special thanks has to go to my dear old mum, who never gave up on me.

Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Signature _____

Printed name _____

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Old familiar places
Blown away in pieces
And our people,
Homeless and scattered,
Waiting to return
To the life we knew.

– Excerpt from ‘Katrina’, Conway (2010)

This chapter provides a broad introduction to this thesis in order to offer both context and structure to the writing which follows. It begins by outlining the main contributions the research makes to the field of the anthropology of disaster and the interdisciplinary disaster studies. The chapter then proceeds to introduce the field-site in which this ethnography was conducted, incorporating an historical and geographical overview of Louisiana and Plaquemines Parish. It also provides an introduction to both Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill. The final part of the chapter discusses the research techniques and practices used to gather the data presented, and outlines the key themes covered in each subsequent chapter.

The Lived Experience of Disaster

By utilizing the deeply ethnographic approach anthropology can offer, this thesis hopes to contribute to both the sub-discipline of the anthropology of disaster and to the interdisciplinary field of disaster studies, by exploring the lived experience of a community ‘recovering’ from multiple catastrophic disaster-processes in a context where disasters are culturally normalized. The catastrophes most directly discussed are Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill, but also significant historic catastrophes such as Hurricanes Betsy and

Camille. Furthermore it incorporates the numerous smaller storms and oil spills which threaten the region on a semi-regular basis and weave through every section of this analysis.

Centring on the lived experience of the residents of Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana, located amidst the coastal bayous of the Mississippi River delta as it meets the Gulf of Mexico, it describes a region that is no stranger to disasters. Following Ingold's (2011) conceptualization of landscape as being engaged in an on-going process of 'becoming' it argues large-scale disaster can become so interwoven with social life as to form a *normalised* part of everyday experience, due to the long history of cultural adaption to the continual impact and possibility of hurricanes or oil spills making landfall in the region.

However, even this habitually precarious normality was challenged by the impact of two major 'catastrophes' (Tierney 2008) – exceptional in their scale of destruction – which enveloped the region within a single decade; one 'natural' – Hurricane Katrina (in 2005) – the other man-made – the Deepwater Horizon/BP oil spill (in 2010). This thesis shall explore the various ways in which the local community of Plaquemines Parish experienced these catastrophes as part of the on-going cultural normalisation of disaster.

Hurricane Katrina and The Forgotten Coast of Mississippi (2014) is described by its authors, Cutter et al., as the first major study into the impact and recovery from Hurricane Katrina in a location out with the greater New Orleans metropolitan area, and they have shone valuable light onto social variables (such as class or race) which either enhance or hamper a community's progress towards material reconstruction in this region. Like Cutter et al. (2014) this thesis is also a study of a non-New Orleans Gulf Coast community engaged in processes of recovery, but takes a very different approach when exploring what this recovery might mean for local people. Rather than conceptualising recovery as a linear series of 'milestones' surrounding material reconstruction and economic growth (Cutter et al. 2014), or social symbols (Hoffman 2002), or as a

community irrevocably altered by a catastrophic disaster process (Chang 2010), it instead engages directly with the lived experience of dwelling in a post-catastrophe landscape, exploring how cultural actors have folded the experience of these disasters-processes into on-going local community practices and narratives. It is this notion of cultural life in a post-catastrophe landscape during a time of disaster ‘recovery’, which is most directly considered.

The study of cultural recovery after disaster and catastrophe has been identified as a key gap in disaster-studies literature (National Research Council 2006, Tierney and Oliver-Smith 2012) and studies which do attempt such analysis generally equate it with *material-cultural* recovery; centering around heritage structures or ‘cultural’ buildings such as churches (Cutter et al. 2014, see also Phillips 2009). Instead, this thesis expands on Hoffman’s 2005 call for the diffuse nature the impact of disaster can have on culture to be further studied, and in so doing seeks to explore how these large catastrophes have become woven into on-going everyday cultural life.

Following writers such as Ingold (2004, 2011), Milton (2002), and Abram (1996) ‘culture’ is understood as an always incomplete process which emerges out of human, non-human, and environmental interaction. It encompasses normative daily life; social structures, knowledge, and practices of interaction and labour. It forms a key part of the lens through which we perceive and assess our surroundings in conjunction with our direct experience of them. It is created by ‘people doing stuff’, but it also guides and structures the ‘stuff’ which people choose to do, and is deeply influenced by the environment in which this ‘stuff’ is done. Our environment of course, includes our constant immersion within meteorological forces (Ingold 2005, Ingold 2007a), which in this disaster-prone context includes the ever-present potential for hurricanes (and indeed oil spills). More generally this thesis recognizes that an environment is part of the wider anthropocene (Crutzen 2002, Crutzen and Stoermer 2000, Syvitski 2012, Zalasiewicz 2013) whereby our current geological epoch is seen as being influenced by human action on a geological scale. Other anthropologists have sought to situate their research within this conceptual framework (Irvine 2014, Kirksey and Helmreich 2010) and the long-term processes

whereby disasters shape, and are shaped by (especially) human action cannot be ignored. While not a central theme of this thesis, it is nonetheless necessary to acknowledge that on-going processes of the normalisation of disaster fit into still larger processes of deep time (Irvine 2014).

As such, this thesis argues that ‘recovery’ from large catastrophes and smaller disasters should be considered as constituent forces within the on-going processes of mundane cultural becoming found in Plaquemines Parish. This is crucial, as while the regional scale of destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina (and the BP oil spill) is acknowledged to be remarkable, the effects and impacts of these catastrophes are significantly influenced by the local context of vulnerability in which they manifest. In this rural context, where these catastrophes were not experienced as two separate events, but as part of a single process ‘originating’ with Katrina, this vulnerability shall be established to encompass firstly, deep economic precariousness, where poverty and financial instability were endemic within the dominant industries of the Parish – oil extraction and commercial fishing – long before the hurricane or oil spill. Secondly, locally understood cultural precariousness, where traditional social hierarchies (particularly those centred around White men) were perceived to be increasingly threatened by shifts in local and national political orders in the decades prior to these catastrophes.

Finally, thirdly, woven within every aspect of this landscape, the on-going possibility and direct experience of ‘normalised’ disasters has shaped the experience of catastrophe, as it becomes a part of the everyday. Indeed, the memory of, and planning for, small- and large-scale disaster existed as part of mundane social life, and doubtless shall continue to do so. As such, cultural ‘recovery’ from a catastrophic disaster-process should be conceptualised as a never-ending, on-going lived reality, rather than a finite process with a specific end point. This thesis shall explore the overarching lived reality of dwelling within this particular landscape by foregrounding the perspective of those resident there.

Louisiana

Before beginning, however, it is first important to broadly introduce the locality in which this thesis was based, in order for the reader to better situate themselves within the discussion which follows.

Prior to the arrival of European colonial expeditions in the 16th century the area that is now Louisiana was inhabited by several diverse Native American cultures dating back to at least 3500BC. At this time one of the earliest complex mound constructions in the Americas was erected near Monroe (Sassaman 2005). Between this date and contact with Europeans, several indigenous societies have inhabited this area and there is substantial evidence of complex trading networks and religious activities in the region. Significant cultures of the region have included the Poverty Point Culture, which flourished between 1500BC and 700BC and the Plaquemine Culture of the lower Mississippi, which was at its peak between 1200AD and 1400AD, amongst many others. The modern Native American communities of the region, such as the Houma, trace their origins to many of these groups.

In 1528, the area was first discovered by Europeans by the Spanish explorer Panfilo de Narváez but despite further mapping of the Mississippi river by Hernando de Soto in 1542 it was France who laid claim to the region (Wall et al. 2008). Robert Cavelier de La Salle, a French explorer, named the region in honour of King Louis XIV in 1682 and European colonisation of the region began in earnest, along with the massive importation of African slaves into the newly established French colony of 'Louisiana' (Taylor 1984). Although the colony passed to Spain 1763 there was little tangible effect on those resident there. Between the 17th century and 1803 the colony saw significant immigration from France, Spain, Germany, Haiti and the French colony of Acadia after it had fallen into British hands, along with forced migration from Africa, and inter-marriage with Native Americans. The Acadians, who would become the modern-day Cajuns, are primarily found in south-central Louisiana, and it is their culture and cuisine which is often associated with

tourists' ideals of the region. During this period the distinct Creole culture also emerged. 'Creole' was originally simply used to designate an individual born in the colony (as opposed to the nation of France or Spain), or to represent a uniquely emergent culture amongst Black slaves, and subsequently the 'free people of colour' (Wall et al. 2008). Since the civil war the term has become highly contested, and it has come to hold personal significance for many people within the region. Many individuals in Louisiana still refer to themselves using these regionally unique ethnic designators. The relative neglect of Louisiana by France and Spain allowed diverse cultural influences from Europe, Acadia, Africa, Haiti and Native American populations to shape colonial life in a way still felt to this day. During this period the economy of the colony was built on trade via the Mississippi river, small farmers and large plantations. Slavery was very extensive, particularly in the latter.

In 1803 Louisiana was sold to the fledgling United States of America. This action brought Louisiana into the Union and enabled significant immigration from the Anglo-American east. Louisiana would eventually be divided and form part of 15 states. The state of Louisiana sided with the Confederacy during the American Civil War with several significant battles occurring in the state. During the 19th century the plantation culture of the region expanded along with increasing development of the port of New Orleans (Taylor 1984).

Louisiana, like many southern states experienced significant political unrest during the middle decades of the 20th century as local ethnic minority populations and their supporters mobilised to challenge the racially segregated system of apartheid found in the region (Wall et al. 2008). It was during this period where the political 'boss' of Plaquemines Parish Leander Perez gained his most significant national coverage with his fierce opposition of the integration movement (Wall et al. 2008); this individual shall be discussed further later in this chapter. Over the 1960s there was however a gradual state-wide shift away from racial segregation and ultimately the principle structures of state-controlled racism were gradually dismantled. At the same time, the state saw a significant

shift away from an agriculturally dominated rural lifestyle, becoming more urban centred and more heavily dependent on the oil, gas, and chemical industries.

At time of writing, Louisiana was one of the poorest and most economically divided states in America (Wall et al. 2008). Poverty and crime rates remained high in the state and educational attainment remained low. This was disproportionately true of African-Americans who were significantly more likely to live in poverty, be convicted of a crime and imprisoned, and live in or come from a single parent family. Locally perceived races therefore remained a significant feature of cultural, political and geographical hierarchies. Despite this, millions of tourists visited the state every year to enjoy the areas rich and unique history and heritage and the Port of South Louisiana formed a vital part of the American transport network, handling more cargo than any other American port (Wall et al. 2008).

Plaquemines Parish History

The region of Plaquemines Parish has not featured prominently in many peer-reviewed historical works. As such, parts of the history below are based on locally maintained oral-histories provided by members of the Plaquemines Parish Historical Association. This is supplemented by the works of Wall et al. (2008), Taylor (1984), Meyer (1981), Buras (1996), and Jeansonne (1977).

Plaquemines Parish (in Louisiana, due to its French history, counties are known as ‘Parishes’) was officially designated as an administrative entity separate from the wider city of New Orleans in 1807. During the 19th century the principle occupations for most of the residents of the Parish (1,351 in 1840) were connected to farming, trapping, and fishing. Plantations and farms producing large rice crops were common until the 1856 hurricane after which most farms switched to the hardier citrus trees, a crop still found

throughout the Parish. Throughout this time both hunting and trapping along with fishing were major economic activities, with much of their produce being sent north to New Orleans. During the 20th century hunting and trapping declined in terms of their relative economic relevance to life in the Parish.

They were replaced by development in the fishing industry, particularly the expansion of oyster fishing caused in part by extensive immigration from Yugoslavia in the early part of the 20th century. New industries also emerged in the Parish starting with the Freeport Sulphur Company in the 1930s and the rapid expansion of oil exploration between the 1940s-1960s. These new industries fundamentally altered Parish life, as they caused significant migration to the Parish from other parts of America, particularly Texas, but also the emergence of an educated middle-class. These individuals were principally managers and engineers who primarily settled in Buras and Triumph. Both Buras and nearby Port Sulphur grew rapidly and the oil and sulphur companies expended significant amounts of money to make them appealing places to live. During this time however, the Parish was under the control of the controversial segregationist Leander Perez, a politician of such influence that his political philosophy stills holds deep relevance in Parish life to this day (see below).

During the 19th and 20th centuries the Parish was struck by several hurricanes, the two most significant of these in terms of the recent history of the Parish were Hurricane Betsy in 1965 and Hurricane Camille in 1969, which caused catastrophic damage to parts of the southern end of the Parish. These hurricanes impacted local social structures, in particular, the major oil companies downsized their holdings in the Parish and began to situate key resources and personnel further north in order to minimize future losses. This began a process whereby the southern part of the Parish saw a gradual decline in graduate level jobs and an increase in less-stable employment working for sub-contractors rather than major corporations. From the 1970s until Hurricane Katrina the Parish's population has fluctuated between 25,000 and 26,000 people.

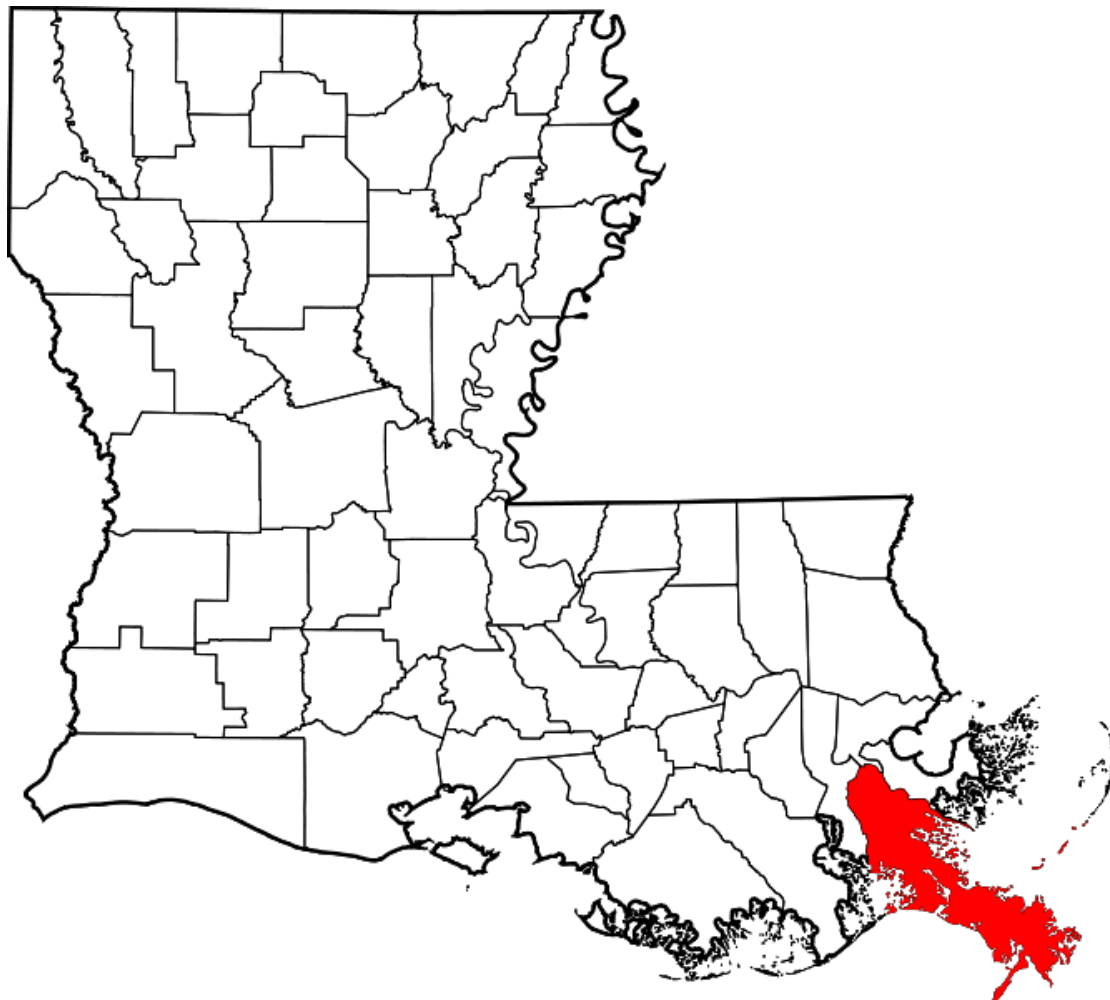
It is important to provide a brief biography of Leander Perez at this point, as he was perhaps the single most influential (and divisive) politician in the Parish during the 20th century. Although the author of one of the few published biographies of Perez was written by a historian appointed by Perez himself (Meyer's 1981 *Plaquemines: The Empire Parish*), it along with the other main biography (Jeansonne's 1977 *Leander Perez: Boss of the Delta*) and local knowledge does give us a picture of the man. During the middle third of the 20th century Perez maintained intense political and economic control of the Parish. Through extensive election fraud (described by Jeansonne 1977) he maintained indirect control of both the Parish of Plaquemines and neighbouring St. Bernard Parish from his position of Parish Judge, then district attorney, and President of the Plaquemines Parish Commission Council. Perez gained massive personal wealth through the subleasing of lands to the oil and gas industry, and was thus the principle driving force behind this industry's massive expansion in the Parish during this period. He was also responsible for the multi-million dollar fraud of the local government (again, described by Jeansonne 1977). During the post-World War 2 political campaigns to end racial segregation in Louisiana, he gained national media attention by being one of the most vocal, and well connected racial segregationists and anti-Semites in the American Deep South, and successfully repressed racial integration in the Parish for many decades.

Additional to this, he gained notoriety when then Louisiana Governor Sam Jones sent soldiers into the Parish to forcibly install an anti-Perez Sheriff, ostensibly due to claims of economic corruption and voter fraud. Despite (and indeed, because) of all of the above, he is often spoken of in utterly positive terms by many within the Parish, predominately though not exclusively amongst the White population. He is seen as the architect of the economic and population boom (the Parish's population rose from 9,608 in 1930 to 22,545 by 1960) which affected the Parish in the middle decades of the 20th century, and his fall from power and death were seen as coinciding with the decline of the Parish from cultural and political significance in Louisiana. Through his heavily mythologised persona, he continues to exert influence on local politics, and some members of the community of Buras would occasionally fantasise about the imagined strength of the Parish's response to the Katrina and the BP oil spill had Perez still been the 'boss' of the Parish.

Plaquemines Parish Geography: The Primary Field-Site

The physical geography of Plaquemines Parish is extremely unusual. The Parish is between 70 and 100 miles long depending on measurement method and is bordered on three sides by marshes and water. If one counts land, marsh, and water Plaquemines is the largest Parish in Louisiana, however the 'dry' land of the Parish upon which most artificially created structures sit is much less extensive, often only between one and two miles wide and in the most southern part of the Parish significantly less than one mile. The Parish has been built over several centuries by the deposition of rich sediment from the Mississippi River and the land would have shifted over the millennia depending on the path of the river, a process which no longer occurs due to the artificial levee (dyke) system now in place. The majority of the inhabited land of the Parish is bracket on two sides by levees of around 20 feet in height; the 'Front' levee being the one closest to the Mississippi River and the 'Back' levee being closest to the marshes and wetlands which surround the Parish. Beyond the Back levee is extensive marsh and wetland consisting of shallow canals and bayous surrounded by reed beds and copses of cypress trees. There is an extremely high level of diversity in the fauna of the area, particularly insects, fish, birds and reptiles (the largest of which is the alligator). The Parish hugs both sides of the Mississippi River on the final stage of its journey as it flows into the Gulf of Mexico.

Image 1: Plaquemines Parish within Louisiana, ©Wikicommons



The river divides the Parish into ‘East’ and ‘West’ banks of the river; these terms also being used as a shorthand to discuss the communities resident on them. Residents will seldom use ‘east’ or ‘west’ when referring to levees in the area and the designators ‘Front’ and ‘Back’ are used, as geographical orientation to the river is of greater local value than orientation to a compass point. By the same token, the terms ‘Up the Road’ and ‘Down the Road’ are used to orientate oneself rather than ‘north’ or ‘south’. The busiest road in the Parish is Highway 23 on the West bank but local people affectionately refer to this as simply ‘the Road’. Therefore when giving directions, saying “on the West bank go two miles up the Road then 100 yards towards the back levee” would make complete sense in the local context. What is crucial here is that although the Parish is long, it is extremely narrow, and the land held between the two levees will often be less than a mile in diameter. This long, thin corner of Louisiana protrudes from the base of the state far out into the Gulf of Mexico and offers an unusual geographic context in which to study cultural interaction.

Hurricanes

It is beyond the scope of this research to discuss even the smallest fraction of the number of major storm systems and hurricanes which have threatened or made landfall upon the Louisiana Gulf Coast since the establishment of the colony, as even works explicitly seeking to offer a history of such storms only discuss the most significant, such as Keim and Muler's *Hurricanes of the Gulf of Mexico* (2009). What is certain however is that such storms have always formed part of the yearly cycle of life for the communities resident there.

It was not until the 18th century that a somewhat regular record of such events began to be maintained, with 10 storms recorded having struck southern Louisiana during that century. It is impossible however to accurately predict exactly how many large storms threatened the region during this time, or indeed, prior to it. As the population of the region increased, both the number of storms recorded (29 in the 19th century), and the number of deaths which resulted from these storms also rose, with two significant impacts occurring in 1831 (where 1500 people are recorded to have died), and 1893 (where 2000 people lost their lives). Between 1851 and 2005 there have been 470 major storm systems recorded over the Gulf of Mexico, half of which reached hurricane strength (Keim and Muler 2009: 68). Of these storms, between 1956 when the practice of giving human names to storms began and 2007, there have been 26 named storms which have made landfall in southern Louisiana. This number does not however include large storms which did not reach the magnitude sufficient to be 'named' (but which might none the less still be considered cause for concern), nor the number of larger storms which threatened to strike the Louisiana Gulf Coast but ultimately 'turned' as local people might say (meaning the storm changed direction).

In order to briefly contextualise Hurricane Katrina and hurricanes in general, it is useful to offer a meteorological overview of the nature of such weather systems. Tropical cyclones (of which North Atlantic hurricanes are one type) are responsible for on average 20,000 deaths per year worldwide, and are a powerful meteorological force (Barry and Chorley 2010). The storm system appears circular, with a low pressure 'eye' encased by a spiral pattern of surrounding thunderstorms. Such systems are usually accompanied by high levels of wind and rain, flooding, tornadoes, high waves, and an extensive storm surge (which results in sea water 'piling up' and being pushed ahead of the cyclone, usually significantly higher than normal sea level). A small cyclone is one less than 138 miles in diameter and possessing wind speeds of at minimum of 74 mph. A large hurricane however can have a diameter of over 550 miles and wind speeds of over 250 mph.

The two variables are not necessarily related however, and it is entirely possible to have a large hurricane with lower wind speed or visa-versa. Hurricanes in the North Atlantic are assigned placement upon a scale based on the consistent wide speed exhibited by the storm, at a minimum of 74 mph equalling a Category 1 hurricane, at 96 mph it becomes a Category 2, at 111 mph a Category three, and at 131 mph a Category 4. The highest designation on this scale is Category 5, which must possess a sustained wind speed of over 155 mph though there are North Atlantic cyclones on record which have reached 195 mph (85 metres per second). Note that a typhoon (while from the same family of weather systems) is a term only used to designate such storms in the northwest region of the Pacific Ocean (and unlike hurricanes may form at any time of year). The key characteristics of these major hazards which are of particular relevance to this thesis however, are their significant ability to produce wide speeds and flooding which has the potential to cause extreme damage over a significant area, but that local communities often have significant prior warning when a storm appears likely to threaten.

These storms usually form during the so-called 'hurricane season' between June 1st and November 30th and it is extremely rare (though not impossible) for a storm to form out-with these dates. Hurricanes grow out of their smaller cousins tropical storms which in turn grow out of tropical depressions. For an accessible insight into the physics of the

formation of these storms van Heerden and Bryan's overview in *The Storm* (2006) offers useful context and insight. For our purposes however, it is sufficient to say that the regular thunderstorms which form during summer and autumn in the north Atlantic can – under certain circumstances – form into much larger weather systems which can – again, under the correct climatic conditions – go on to become large hurricanes. The most deadly hurricane to strike the United States was in 1900 when the storm hit Galveston Texas killing over 8,000 people. American hurricane trackers at that time had so little ability to predict the path of a storm that they had issued a warning to fishermen in New Jersey to remain at harbour (2006: 16). In 1909 maritime radio systems began a rapid improvement in the tracking and preparation for hurricanes which saw further improvements in the 1940s with the use of aerial reconnaissance and radar, and the 1960s with the first use of satellites. The 1960s also saw the creation of the National Hurricane Center, which from its base in Miami, Florida is central to local preparation for these meteorological events.

Once a system is designated a tropical storm it is given a name from a pre-determined list. During my time in southern Louisiana the only direct experience of such weather systems was Tropical Storm Lee which made landfall in Plaquemines Parish in September of 2010 (BBC News 2011a, Dequine 2011, Weather Underground 2011). Although not a full-scale hurricane, Lee still caused over \$1.6 billion in damages. My experience of the storm was of winds which were able to rock my entire camper van, incredibly heavy rain which caused a number of nearby drainage ditches to overtop, and an offer from a friend to 'bunker down' in the nearby (and much more sturdy) firehouse should the storm get too intense for my security. This experience however was mild in comparison to the magnitude of a full-scale hurricane. On average, there are around 6 hurricane-sized cyclones in the north Atlantic per year.

Hurricane Katrina

Katrina formed over the Bahamas on the 23rd of August 2005 as 'Tropical Depression Twelve' and would go on to cause over 1,800 fatalities and over \$108 billion

in property damage. It was declared a Category 1 hurricane mere hours before making landfall in southern Florida. Although it lost intensity over land, it re-intensified once it had passed over Florida and reached the warmer waters of the Gulf of Mexico. At one point Katrina was measured at a Category 5 strength but had weakened somewhat to Category 3 by the time it made landfall in Buras, Plaquemines Parish on Monday, 29th August 2005 around 6am local time. Katrina's winds were measured at more than 120 mph at landfall. After passing north-east over the Parish the storm made its third and final landfall near the Mississippi border and moved inland. After travelling a further 150 miles Katrina finally lost hurricane strength near Meridian, Mississippi but the storm's remnants were still measurable as far north as the Great Lakes on the 31st of August.

There is very little written about Katrina's passage over Plaquemines Parish, the focus instead being placed on the effects of the storm on New Orleans, which shall be discussed in chapter 2. Part of the reason for this lack is that there were very few people left in the Parish when Katrina made landfall. The Tulane University historian Douglas Brinkley notes in his 2007 account of Katrina *The Great Deluge*, "[coastal towns] didn't have as many eyewitness survivors to tell what happened, since Plaquemines Parish and the fishing camps along Barataria Bay in Jefferson Parish had been almost fully evacuated" (Brinkley 2007: 349). Earlier in the same volume he is even more emphatic with regard to Buras, stating "As far as is known, no one was left behind in Buras. All 3,348 people from Buras and its sister village, Triumph, had evacuated" (Brinkley 2007: 133).

Despite this however, there is sufficient mention for a fairly grim consensus to be formed. Brinkley goes on to write "[by evacuating], they saved their lives, for virtually all 1,146 households [in Buras] were flattened like pancakes; livestock and wildlife drowned en masse" (p. 133). Other writers offer similar insight, Ivor van Heerdan, deputy director of the Louisiana State University Hurricane Center writes in his personal account of Katrina *The Storm* "Those of us stationed at the emergency operations center in Baton Rouge knew that Plaquemines and St. Bernard Parishes to the east and southeast of New Orleans had to be decimated. Verification unnecessary, really" (2006: 95). Finally, *Disaster: Hurricane Katrina and the Failure of Homeland Security* by Christopher Cooper

and Robert Block, both journalists at *The Wall Street Journal* write, “according to rumor making the rounds [on the 29th], Plaquemines Parish...had simply disappeared, replaced by open Gulf” (2006: 129). Despite this frightening level of destruction however, it has been noted that there are only four deaths reported to be directly caused by the destruction of Hurricane Katrina in the Parish (Longman 2008).

Most of the major reviews of the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina centre squarely on the destruction of Orleans Parish (which comprises the city of New Orleans), and while the focus of this thesis is placed in its more rural neighbour in the Parish of Plaquemines it is important to at least briefly detail the meteorological events and flood protection failures which led to the disasters significant death toll and subsequent significant placement in media narrative and national public consciousness. Further than this, the local residents of Plaquemines Parish were exposed to the same level of scholarly and media coverage of the hurricane as the rest of the United States, and the fact that the overwhelming majority of this coverage was placed on a locale other than their home is a source of great displeasure to many. This will be explored further in subsequent chapters.

On Saturday 27th President of the United States George W. Bush declared a state of emergency in Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi and this was followed the same day by mandatory evacuation orders being issued in Plaquemines Parish and several other coastal Parishes. Parish Sheriff Jeff Hingle is quoted telling reporters:

“After [Hurricane] Betsy [in 1965] these levees were designed for a Category 3...You’re now looking at a Category 5. You’re looking at a storm that is as strong as Camille [1969] was, but bigger than Betsy [1965] was size-wise. These levees will not hold the water back. So we’re urging people to leave. You’re looking at these levees having ten feet of water over the top of them easily.” (Brickley, 2007: 5)

One day later, on Sunday 28th New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin issued the city’s first ever mandatory evacuation order. By that evening therefore, the vast majority of the population

of south-eastern Louisiana was attempting to make their way north and west. Many within the poorer areas of New Orleans however were either unable to evacuate (due to lack of financial resources or a working vehicle) or (unlike the residents of Plaquemines Parish who had to evacuate most years) did not fully understand the danger they were in by remaining in their homes. This would prove significant as the storm moved in.

Once Katrina moved past Plaquemines Parish the storm surge generated by the hurricane along with the extensive rainfall and high winds caused several levees within the greater New Orleans levee system, along with a number of pumping stations, to fail. This caused the unprecedented flooding of around 80% of the city, much of which was already situated below sea level (Lee, Shen, and Tran, 2009). Much of this was from the nearby Industrial Canal with most of the water emanating from “less than 400 yards on the drainage canals and 650 yards on the Industrial Canal” (van Heerden and Bryan 2006: 95). These breaches left some of the city’s poorest neighbourhoods most at risk, with the 9th ward of the city suffering some of the most significant levels of destruction. Compounding this, it has been shown that many residents of New Orleans were very ill-prepared to react to the threat or actuality of disaster (Basolo et al. 2008). The final official death toll for those caught by the rising water in New Orleans stands at 1,464 people.

Once the waters of the Gulf had subsided and local residents of southern Louisiana and the rest of the Gulf coast were able to return to their homes (or the land upon which their homes had once stood) a new challenge – that of rebuilding – presented itself. As has been mentioned, Katrina was by far the most destructive hurricane in the history of the United States in terms of the loss of property and infrastructure. It is estimated that the cost of the disaster was in excess of \$108 billion which eclipsed Hurricane Andrew which had struck in 1992 and until Katrina held this record at \$26.5 billion. The philosophy of the US government in matters of disaster re-building has been to allow private insurance companies to settle compensation for the claimants who had purchased coverage (Elliot, Haney, and Sams-Abiodun, 2010). This however meant a large number of people whom had neglected (or could not afford) to buy coverage had extremely limited resources at their disposal when it came to considering returning and re-building their homes. Many

insurance companies were also unable to cope with the huge number of claimants which are produced in a disaster of this size. This left some who had insurance with nothing, as insurance companies went bankrupt or simply refused to pay.

The impact on the region, and the Parish of Plaquemines was significant. Although very few people lost their lives in the Parish, the magnitude of the destruction of property and physical reference points in the area was almost total. Parts of southern Plaquemines were almost scraped bare by high winds, massive flooding and a large storm surge, the combined effect of which reduced many buildings to rubble, and damaged the rest, often beyond repair. Due to the network of levees surrounding the Parish the floodwater brought into the Parish by overtopped levees could not drain out and thus remained stagnant for several weeks. This, along with the chaos of New Orleans and the hesitation of the local Government to open the Parish delayed the return of many people to their property.

Once local people managed to return they began the long process of re-building their communities and homes. Financial restraints often constrained this effort however, as locals often lacked significant financial resources or proper insurance coverage to fully rebuild that which was destroyed. Even those who did have private insurance coverage had difficulties as many companies refused to honour policies either outright or in part. The response of FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) received local criticism at this juncture, and the temporary accommodation they provided has become a watchword for poor design and build quality. However, part of this criticism stems from unrealistic expectations and simple misunderstandings of the role of FEMA in such contexts. Even after six years, the evidence of Katrina's destructive path is still very apparent in the Parish with damaged and semi-destroyed buildings still visible along with clear evidence of abandoned property.

Despite their experience of multiple previous disaster-processes, local people acknowledge the catastrophic nature of Katrina by often simply referring to it as 'the

Storm'. A clear indication of this severity of impact is with regard to internal migration within the Parish, as while the total population of the Parish dropped from 25,575 in 2000 to 23,043 in 2010 the population of the Buras-Triumph census area dropped from 3,358 to 1,161, while at the same time the population of urban Belle Chasse in the north of the Parish increased from 9,846 to 12,679. This shows not only a drop in the total population of the Parish, but also significant internal migration to the north of the Parish (the area which suffered only minimal damage after Katrina).

Oil Spills

Drilling offshore for oil and gas in the Gulf of Mexico is a major industry in the region, producing, as it does, 25% of the oil used per year in the United States. Louisiana issued its first offshore drilling permit in 1936, and there are now in excess of 4,000 oil platforms operating in the state's waters.

Oil spills are a regular occurrence on the Gulf of Mexico (as in all areas of oil production) and to a large extent are seen as simply an unfortunate by-product of the process of oil extraction. Few of the spills gain national (or even local) attention as they are considered too small to individually present a major ecological impact. Beyond this many accidental spills go unrecorded in official statistics as companies seek to avoid paying fines for damages caused. It is largely through the actions of pressure groups such as the Louisiana Bucket Brigade and other environmental activists that many such spills enter main-stream discourse at all.

In the years preceding the explosion on board the Deepwater Horizon, certain Louisiana environmentalist groups had published and campaigned extensively in an attempt to highlight the repeated safety failings, oil spills, and levels of pollution caused by the oil industry, as well as a certain flippancy and culture of risk which pervaded the

attitude of many of the large corporations engaged in oil exploration on the Gulf of Mexico (Louisiana Bucket Brigade 2010). Since the oil spill several authors have sought to shed even greater light on this culture as well as offer an insight into the oil spill itself. What becomes clear throughout this, however, is that just as Hurricane Katrina was unusual only because of the size of the storm and the scale of the damage it caused, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill was likewise only notable because of its size, and the unusually high level of media coverage it received.

The Deepwater Horizon/ BP Oil Spill

This overview draws heavily on the work of Antonia Juhasz in particular *Black Tide*, published in 2011, and Gregory Button's addition regarding the BP spill to *Disaster Culture* published in 2010, which was written while the spill was still on-going. I am indebted to these writers for their investigative research.

At the time of the explosion on the morning of the 20th April 2010 the Deepwater Horizon was located in the Macondo oil field off the coast of Louisiana drilling to a depth of 35,050 feet (5,100 feet of this being water). The rig was owned by Transocean, but was at the time leased to BP and only eight of the 126 employees on board worked directly for BP. The explosion was caused by methane gas rising from the well into the drilling mechanism, and killed 11 men when it ignited. The rig sank on the 22nd of April and on the same day it was announced that there was oil leaking from the seabed.

The area where the Deepwater Horizon was drilling was a notoriously challenging well to drill. High pressure, high levels of methane gas, and the significant depth of the water combine to make the region especially hazardous. A previous attempt to drill in this area had caused damage to a different oil rig and forced the rig's blow-out preventer to activate, preventing the significant spillage of oil on that occasion. The Deepwater Horizon

was also having difficulty completing its task, and was at the time of the disaster already fifty days behind schedule. Given that it cost BP \$2 million per day to maintain this operation, Juhasz (2011) has described widespread dissatisfaction with the performance of the rig on behalf of BP.

When reviewed in full, the list of cost-cutting measures enacted by BP, Transocean, and one of their contractors Halliburton is shocking. Many of the critical safety features of the rig had either been deliberately disabled or were known to be faulty or fully inoperable (BBC News 2011b, BBC News 2011c, Juhasz 2011). Audible alarm sirens had been disabled, along with most of the monitoring devices used to regulate the flow of gases while drilling. Halliburton's work cementing the drilling apparatus in place on the ocean's floor was far below standard, as it had been given insufficient time to dry before the stress of drilling was put onto it.

The primary piece of safety equipment used in offshore drilling of this nature is known as a blow-out preventer (or 'BOP'). It is essentially an enormous clamp securely affixed to the ocean floor through which the drilling and (subsequently) the pumping of oil occur. It is of critical importance to the drilling process because it has the ability to seal the well in the event of a critically dangerous release of gasses or oil from the well towards the rig above. When this happens, the mechanism within the blow-out preventer should activate and powerful hydraulic rams should deploy which crush the pipe within the device and permanently seal the well. It is an extreme measure taken in only the most serious circumstances, which are usually life threatening. The BOP can either be triggered automatically by the rig's safety monitoring software or manually by the crew should this software fail. On the Deepwater Horizon neither worked, the monitoring devices failed, and once explosions rocked the rig and a crewmember manually activated the blow-out preventer nothing happened. It would later become clear that the BOP used by the Deepwater Horizon (like much of its safety equipment) was in dire need of maintenance and overhaul, and was not fit for task.

Two explosions, close together started a fire on the rig, killing 11 crew members and causing an immediate, chaotic evacuation of the rig. Immediately after this, a massive search and rescue operation began to recover the surviving crew members and to attempt to put out the large fire burning on the rig. Initially it was hoped that either the fire could be put out, and control returned to the rig or that the BOP could be activated manually. If either of these were accomplished there would not have been a major oil spill. Unfortunately neither were, and the rig sank on the 22nd April and oil spilled uncontrolled from the collapsed pipe. Thankfully the seabed itself did not rupture, which would have caused an even larger spill, one which would have been almost impossible to contain or stop. Estimates vary, but perhaps as much as 80,000 barrels of oil per day were released from this broken pipe.

Initially however, government and BP estimates for the magnitude of the spill were significantly lower, placing the release of oil at only 5,000 barrels per day. This critically low estimate reflected an extensive and on-going campaign of misinformation undertaken by the corporations involved in the spill, which shall be discussed further in chapter 2. A state of emergency was declared in Louisiana on the 29th of April and the same day the first oil made landfall in Plaquemines Parish. It was only after BP was mandated to release a live video feed of the release of oil at the well that independent scientists were able to offer more accurate predictions as to the extent of how much oil was being released. This oil formed itself into enormous underwater plumes as well as the more 'traditional' slicks or sheens witnessed when oil tankers run aground. The largest of these plumes of oil verified was 15 miles long, 5 miles wide, and 300 metres thick, though larger ones were reported. BP began using a chemical dispersant on the 22nd of April despite serious concerns over the environmental and public health impact inherent in the liberal spraying of such chemicals into the environment (Juhasz 2011, Shactman 2011). Ultimately 1.5 million gallons (1.8m U.S. gallons) of chemical dispersant were deployed in the region, either directly applied to the oil as it escaped the collapsed pipe or sprayed onto the surface of the Gulf of Mexico. It is now believed the total volume of oil spilled in the disaster reached 4.9 million barrels, or approximately 175 million gallons (210m U.S. gallons).

Crude oil is a toxic substance containing both VOCs (Volatile Organic Compounds) and PAHs (Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons), and spread not only through water but also by wind as an aerosol. Due to its toxic nature it kills both animals and plants. Such destruction has enormous economic impact, by reducing fish stocks and limiting tourism, but it also destroys marshland which on the Gulf is essential to limit the impact of hurricanes. While it is the case that oil enters the Gulf of Mexico's ecosystem through natural leakage, and indeed certain microbes have evolved which eat this oil, such natural leakage is at most 1,000 barrels per day across the entire Gulf of Mexico. These microbes are far too scarce to have made a significant impact on the BP spill, and the oxygen they would also consume if their population was to expand sufficiently would leave a very barren ocean.

It quickly became clear that BP's ability to stop the flow of oil from the ocean floor was severely limited, and their technology for containing oil spilling into an ecosystem was centred around the potential for a surface spill. While booms and skimmers were used, they only managed to collect around 4% of the oil spilled. Pumping directly from the well gathered 17% of it and surface burning accounted for a further 6%. Both the act of surface burning and the use of dispersant are both controversial techniques in dealing with oil spills. The former causing air-borne pollution, which can lead to respiratory problems should it blow in-land. Dispersant is even more controversial, particularly on the scale it was used here (which had never previously been done) and also when used underwater rather than on the surface (which had never been done prior to this). BP originally used Corexit 9527A but was forced to switch to Corexit 9500 which, though slightly less toxic, is still poisonous. Dispersant – as the name suggests – does not remove the oil from the water but breaks it down in a manner which allows it to better mix with the surrounding ocean. Environmentalists continue to voice concern that this practice simply removed the oil from public view, but allowed it to be consumed by an increased number of organisms and remain with the ecosystem.

The spill put an end to fishing in the Gulf during the season of 2010, and thus threatened the economic livelihood for many coastal communities. Millions were either immediately put out of work, or saw their businesses shrink in size. Some were able to gain employment in BP's Vessels Of Opportunity program, which employed local fishermen to deploy booms to contain the spread of oil but many had no such recourse. Coastal charities were overwhelmed by people who could no longer work. Health risks also began to become apparent, given how important a semi-subsistence lifestyle is to many who live on the Gulf, it was clear that many were at serious risk of ingesting toxic levels of oil (Woodward 2011). In a report one year after oil had ceased to leak, the economic picture for local business was still very bleak (Bresnahan 2011, Nolan 2011).

Throughout the summer months BP attempted several times to shut off the leaking oil from the wellhead. The first of these was an attempt to close the blow-out preventer which had failed to deploy in the initial explosion. When this failed, the company attempted to place a large dome over the well head which once sealed would allow the oil to be pumped away from the leak in a controlled manner. Unfortunately such a technique had never been tested at such extreme depths of water and was unsuccessful. Next BP attempted what is known as a 'top kill'. In this scenario dense material is pumped into the blow-out preventer before a cement cap is placed at its head, effectively creating a bung. It was found that the pressure of the well was too great, and this also failed. On the 10th July BP successfully fitted a large 'top hat' cap over the well head. This large metal structure is intended to contain the leaking oil and allow it to be pumped safely to the surface. This successfully limited the flow of oil into the Gulf ecosystem but was little more than a temporary measure. Finally, two 'relief wells' drilled below the well head and intersecting the main trunk of the oil gusher were able to pump cement into the flow of oil and successfully seal the well from the bottom. On the 19th September 2010 the well was declared 'dead'.

Pollution from both the oil and the dispersant deployed by BP has been recorded across a huge area and a significant number of birds, fish and other animals have been killed or injured by exposure to it. There have also been reports of unexplained illnesses

amongst humans who have been exposed to these chemicals and tests continue in the hope of either proving or disproving a causal link. Amidst government pressure BP and several other companies have admitted fault in their proper safety practices with relation to this well and BP set aside \$20 billion to act as compensation for those whose livelihoods have been affected by this spill. It also employed many local fishermen and other local people in emergency clean-up operations. However, the economic impact to local fishing and tourist industries should not be underestimated, and the financial impact on southern Plaquemines Parish would have been significant even if the area had not been recovering from Hurricane Katrina. As it stands, the Parish has suffered a second catastrophe which local people conceptualise as forming part of the broader recovery from Katrina, rather than as a separate, discrete process. A significant part of this environmental catastrophe is the level of uncertainty regarding the future, as some analysts have raised questions as to the long-term ecological stability of the Gulf of Mexico due to the impact of the spill, particularly as it interacts with pre-existing environmental degradation (Mendelssohn et al. 2012, Silliman et al. 2012, Tackett 2013).

Although perhaps not as significant as Katrina, this event has nonetheless entered the cultural consciousness of the region, and is often referred to as ‘the Spill’ by local people, particularly local fishermen. Occurring as it did only five years after Katrina these disaster-processes are often locally explained as being intertwined within a singular process of recovery. Without the recent impact of Katrina, the BP oil spill would still have caused significant disruption to the economic stability of the region, by damaging the two primary industries found in the southern part of the Parish. As part of a multiple-disaster process however it was significantly more locally meaningful, and thus offers a fascinating opportunity to develop our scholarly understanding of disaster-recovery.

Techniques and Practice during Data Collection

This thesis is the result of a period of ten months of participant-observation while resident in the town of Buras, Louisiana during 2011. During this time I also conducted 46

unstructured interviews in the region ranging from 30 minutes to over three hours. The names of all participants have been anonymised, and where possible terms such as ‘senior member of the fire department’ have been substituted for the informant’s actual rank.

My principle entry points into life in the Parish centred around the Buras Volunteer Fire Department, the local chapter of the Knights of Columbus¹, several local fisherman’s associations, and two local churches – St. Patrick’s Catholic Church in Port Sulphur, and Faith Temple Ministries in Triumph. I was also supported by the local Parish government and the Louisiana branch of FEMA who made their staff available to me. These spheres of interaction facilitated the development of my research in two key ways. Firstly, through forward recommendation via members of these groups who might introduce me to new potential participants, and secondly by conferring a certain legitimacy on my presence in the Parish.

This was important as I both observed and experienced a strong culture of ‘insider/outsider’ within the Parish (a topic I return to later in Chapter 5). My British accent certainly did not help my access or initial integration into the community, as at that time ‘BP’ was still being referred to incorrectly as ‘British Petroleum’ by several media and political commentators. By volunteering with the Knights of Columbus and especially with the Fire Department (I acquired a baseball cap with the department’s logo on it early in my fieldwork and seldom left my trailer without it) I sought to both distance myself from any association with BP and simultaneously be seen as contributing to local community life. Also in Chapter 5, I chart my own progress towards integration into Parish life through a series of personal anecdotes.

Most of my fieldwork was conducted in, and most of my interviewees were recruited from the town of Buras where I was based, Triumph (the town directly south of

¹ A Roman-Catholic fraternal charitable-service organisation founded in 1882 and with over 1.8 million members, most of whom reside in North America.

² Though this understanding was given further refinement and development in his subsequent publications

Buras), and three towns further north; Empire, Nairn, and Port Sulphur (see Image 2 below). I consider these four communities to constitute my ‘primary’ field site. I gathered additional data in the northern town of Belle Chasse and on the east bank of the Parish in the town of Port à la Hache. Several interactions and interviews also took place beyond the Parish border, in New Orleans, Gretna, Lafayette, Baton Rouge and Galliano in Louisiana, in Bay St. Louis and Gulfport in Mississippi and Tuscaloosa in Alabama. Given the heavily publicised nature of both the BP oil spill and Hurricane Katrina, I continued my observation of how these disasters were being presented in the mainstream press even after I returned from the field.

Image 2: Plaquemines Parish map with key towns noted, ©Wikicommons



Coffey's *The Ethnographic Self* offers a summary of a 'field site' which captures much of my experience during my fieldwork:

“Fieldwork takes place in a variety of social and cultural settings. We use the term ‘the field’ to refer to a heterogeneous group of locations and contexts. Everyday life as an area of social enquiry makes the boundaries of observation and analysis almost limitless. While generalizations about the field are difficult, and often unhelpful, all fieldwork sites will have at least one common factor. The field is a site peopled by social actors and, implicitly, by the social researcher. The primary task of the fieldworker is to analyse and understand a peopled field. This task is achieved through social interaction and shared experiences. It follows, therefore, that fieldwork is dependent upon and guided by the relationships that are built and established over time” (Coffey 1999: 39).

In this case of course, these relationships encouraged my research to focus on the lived experience of the everyday, which included the normalised experience of disasters.

My data collection was however also shaped in other ways due to the networks I was able to access. Many of these networks were significantly shaped by the prevalence of particular gender roles within the Parish, thus my data exhibits a notable masculine gender bias. Around a quarter of my interviewees were female and although my participant-observation was somewhat more gender-balanced it would still not be close to an even representation. This reflects the networks of participants which I was able to access within the particular gendered social structures of the Parish. Once this is acknowledged, it can provide key insights to assist the researcher navigate a particular social context (Rivière 2000). In particular the local volunteer fire department of which I became a member and the local chapter of the Knights of Columbus with whom I worked were both extremely gendered organisations. To a lesser extent this is also true with regard to race within the Parish as it is certainly true that more of my respondents were White than Black. It would therefore be of great value for further research to be conducted within rural communities on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico which focussed more explicitly on the experience of

women and African-Americans, and I discuss these possibilities further in the concluding chapter of this thesis.

More generally, the nature of this field-site made interviewing an important supplement to participant-observation during data gathering. Due to the maintenance of clear delimitations of public and private spheres within the local community (a topic I discuss in relation to 'normative' social life in chapter 3) my interactions with local people were initially highly restricted to certain public spheres such as those discussed above. Interviewing proved a useful tool; not only in gathering primary data, but also as a means to establish my credentials as a 'legitimate researcher' in a way that participant-observation did not. The embodied process of conducting a formal interview was generally more easily understood locally to constitute the 'doing' of social research than, for example, spending a morning working as a deck hand on an oyster boat. Often these interviews led to further social interactions and sometimes speeded the decline of the public/private restrictions mentioned.

Most of my research however was conducted outside of these interviews, and my weekly observation and participation in Parish life was usually structured by the local institutions mentioned above. The weekly training sessions with the fire department, the bingo night organised by the Knights of Columbus, and attendance at either St. Patrick's Catholic Church or the non-denominational Faith Temple Ministries on Sunday ensured a regular weekly routine. Beyond this, I divided my time between the fire house (where members and their friends often congregated informally), the local marinas (where I engaged with local fishermen), local bars and restaurants, Buras library, and chatting with neighbours who lived near my camper van and their friends. I also participated in less frequent interactions with local people, such as parties, crawfish boils and BBQs, political rallies, meetings of local charities and government bodies, the local high-school's American football matches, and responding to emergency call-outs as part of my voluntary service with Buras fire department, amongst others. The emergency responses to fires or automobile accidents often also led on to a certain amount of socialising and 'banter' in the immediate aftermath of a successful call-out.

The data gathered during this participant observation was perhaps less ‘formal’ than my recorded interviews but was richer. As this research places a deep focus on the everyday normality of living in a landscape partly shaped by disaster, it was essential to participate and observe this intersubjective, embodied, mundane normality unfolding. As such, I took extensive field notes after every such interaction, usually once I had returned home, or in my car before driving back. Reflecting on the notes made in these field diaries would often generate questions, which I would put to respondents in interview settings, the answers to which then informed my subsequent observations and field notes. This on-going reflective process mirrored my progress in the community from being considered an absolute outsider, to being granted certain insider privileges, and highlighted details in local interaction which I had previously been unaware.

While I attempted to conduct my research in an overt and open manner, it was not always possible to make such a position clear in every public setting in which I found myself. For example, as part of my involvement with Buras Volunteer Fire Department I participated in a large charity crawfish boil-off with several thousand attendees, where it was impossible to adequately explain my role as a researcher to every person present. Additionally, I would occasionally be introduced by friends of mine as someone “writing a book about life down here”. I considered this an adequate summary of my role in the Parish, but it did not perhaps offer a *complete* overview of my activities in any given context. However, amongst my key informants I was able to fully explain my role and purpose as a resident of the Parish.

This thesis is ethnographic in nature and therefore places significant emphasis on local narratives and meaning, a focus found in most anthropological works and discussed critically by Dresch and James (2000) amongst others. Furthermore I agree with Hockey and Forsey (2012) that the critical structures of ethnography can be deployed as easily within the interview context as in participant observation. This emphasis has allowed many

of the keys themes analysed below to emerge from interactions with local people and has proven extremely useful in identifying locally cultural specific topics upon which to focus.

Furthermore it has influenced the language used at certain points in the thesis, particularly when connected to naming places, or disaster-processes. Local people often switch between referring to their local Parish as 'Plaquemines Parish', and 'the Parish of Plaquemines' and this thesis therefore also uses both. Furthermore when referring to the major catastrophes most acutely studied here 'Hurricane Katrina', 'Katrina', and 'the Storm' where all used to refer to the same catastrophe, and while the oil spill is 'officially' referred to as the 'Deepwater Horizon/BP oil spill', local people usually refer to it simply as the 'BP oil spill', the 'oil spill', or 'the Spill'. This thesis reflects these locally meaningful designators and uses all of the above throughout.

While this research did not explicitly set out to utilise a phenomenological approach, it is undoubtedly the case that phenomenology has been a significant influence to the final thesis. It is therefore useful to reflect upon the value of phenomenologically informed social research, and how this has ultimately strengthened this thesis. Furthermore, as part of this discussion it is crucial to briefly discuss two key theorists to the overarching argument presented below, Tim Ingold (2004, 2005, 2011) and Cheryl Mattingly (2010) and how their work offers a key foundation upon which to build much of the analysis which follows.

Knibbe and Versteeg (2008) have conducted a useful review of the critical role phenomenology can play in shaping anthropological research, and their work is of great value in succinctly reflecting on this topic. They demonstrate that deep ethnography, and the embodied immersion it offers can tie closely to an approach based on phenomenology. By placing the anthropologist as a sensory participant in the experience of the life-worlds of those he researches, a research path can be plotted which foregrounds their lived experience of reality. Embodiment here is key, and the mutual experience of having and

being bodies is that which allows the intersubjective production of meaning (Csordas 1990), and a focus on normative everyday life (Ferguson 2006).

By utilising the work of Stoller (1997) Knibbe and Versteeg (2008) demonstrate how the focus of phenomenological anthropology is centred around “the way in which meanings become and are *reality* to the people themselves: how meanings appear to them and coincide with the practical everyday world in which one needs to survive” (p.51). Such a goal is central to this thesis’ attempts to foreground the local perspectives and meaning-making of the residents of southern Plaquemines Parish and how they relate to disaster, as part of mundane, everyday life.

With the above stated, this research also follows Knibbe and Versteeg (2008) in recognising that through the creation of the anthropological text, and the research process which has led to its creation, the anthropologist is placed in a somewhat singular position both while in the field and once returned ‘home’. This thesis therefore does not make pretence to present a purely abstract exploration of ‘experience’ alone, and seeks to utilise a range of scholars to help structure, and add critical depth to the analysis offered.

Ingold’s (2004, 2005, 2011) conception of a landscape as an on-going process has been key to providing part of this analytical insight into the meaning-making of local people, a discussion most directly considered in chapter 5. With this analytical perspective, the processes of recovery engaged with by local people can be understood as not appearing as a result of a cause-effect impact of large-scale disaster, nor as following a recovery model generated outwith the field site, but as a constituent element in on-going everyday life, understood in the broadest sense. However, the process of recovery engaged by local people, while a part of this broad, everyday normality, has been given special attention within this thesis, as this research seeks to contribute most directly to corpuses of literature based around disaster studies.

Thus while landscape in this view can be understood as a ‘plenum’ (or always ‘filled’) local people might experience a disjuncture to a specifically post-disaster landscape where embodied experience of ‘damage’ and ‘destruction’ is extensive. As such, recognising how processes of *willing*, emerging as a constituent part of local disaster-processes, as they form part of the continuing emergence of landscape, is key to bridging the conceptual gap in how a local person experiences the re-immersion into local processes of the everyday. Mattingly’s (2010) work is of great value here in exploring this process of willing in the aftermath of trauma, as it demonstrates how willing is not in fact an individualistic direct action, but is a deeply intersubjective process, intrinsically forming part of the wider life-world of local people. This discussion of willing is most acutely considered in chapter 6.

Finally, as part of the agreement reached to gain the support of the Parish government to conduct research in the area I agreed to make my final thesis available to both the general public of the Parish and the local government. It is hoped that following Borofsky’s (2011) framing of public anthropology as a means of making available anthropological evidence to public discourse, this study can be of use to the community of southern Plaquemines Parish in their on-going and continuing existence in this post-disaster landscape.

Chapter Overview

This thesis comprises a total of eight chapters including this introduction and the final concluding remarks. Chapter 2 provides conceptual and empirical context for the main findings of this thesis, by introducing the interdisciplinary field of disaster studies and the sub-discipline of the anthropology of disaster. Reflecting on key theoretical contributions made within these areas it traces the broad development of these corpuses, and focus on certain key terms which have become central to the study of disaster such as

‘vulnerability’. Furthermore the topic of recovery after a disaster shall be especially considered, as it is within this broad area that this thesis most directly contributes. This introductory chapter is followed by the main empirical findings of this thesis by establishing the local context of vulnerability of this field-site, then analysing how the impact of these catastrophes has manifest within this community.

Chapters 3 and 4 begin by exploring the notion of *precariousness*, which it is argued forms an influential shaping factor in the lives of local people, alongside the normalised nature of disaster. It is argued that precariousness as part of one’s lived experience formed a critical facet within local culture and social structures prior to Katrina or the oil spill, and in fact these disasters can only be understood after acknowledging how this state intertwines with local vulnerability to disaster. Chapter 3 focuses on the perception of moral and cultural decay both within the wider United States and locally within the Parish, which threatens the stability of traditional local hegemonies and power structures. This chapter gives particular emphasis on the challenge to a particular White, male hegemony originating in a specific interpretation of 1950s normative American ‘values’.

Chapter 4 foregrounds the experience of poverty and economic precariousness within the Parish, phenomena which pre-date these disasters, but which established a particular vulnerability which is relevant to our understanding of these catastrophes. The over-arching narrative of these two chapters articulates a community where threats (including smaller disasters) to local lifestyle and livelihoods were recognised long before the impact of Katrina or the BP oil spill was felt, but which these catastrophes compounded beyond the community’s ability to entirely ‘recovery’ from. This experience of precariousness is a significant feature of locally constructed vulnerability to catastrophe, just as the on-going memory and planning for disaster is woven within this experience of precariousness.

The remaining chapters examine in more detail the experience of recovery of local residents, as the cultural normalisation of disaster intersects with the direct experience of Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill, within this rural post-catastrophe context of vulnerability. Chapter 5 begins by examining the complex landscape of the Parish in the context of on-going disaster with explicit focus on the negotiation of 'insiderness' and 'outsiderness'. It is an oft-remarked expression in the Parish that one is either a 'local, stranger, or a stranger you know', and negotiating this plurality of identities takes on new significance when traversing the material-cultural trauma which local communities have undergone due to hurricanes and oil spills. Negotiating (especially) the 'insider' identity is especially complex when a local landscape has been so dramatically shaped by the impact of a catastrophe, and it is argued that such cultural process exist largely outside the material re-building of one's house.

It is useful to next explore the direct processes by which a member of this community directly weaves the experience of catastrophe into their lived experience of mundane, on-going disaster. Chapter 6 therefore explores such processes as willing, and inter-personal discourse in order to frame the process whereby an individual comes to terms with the disaster-processes which impacted their community, within the local cultural context of wider precariousness and vulnerability discussed in chapters 3 and 4. This chapter deeply focuses on local emotional and cultural responses to these catastrophes, and these responses are shown to be deeply related to many of the wider topics explored throughout the thesis as a whole.

Chapter 7 explores the direct experience of planning, evacuation, and return, by considering how a local person understands and experiences home and family during times of such crisis and turmoil. In particular, this chapter reflects on how ideas of 'home' are challenged, affirmed, and even constructed through the direct experience of major disasters in a cultural context structured by multiple of experiences of previous evacuations and returns, and within a wider on-going process of economic and cultural precariousness. This element of on-going cultural construction is crucial, and it clearly underlines the centrality

of on-going disaster-processes in the lived experience of mundane everyday life before, during, and after the experience of catastrophe.

This chapter shall be followed by one concluding the thesis and summarising the principle arguments set out in each preceding section, as well as suggesting avenues for further study.

Chapter 2 – The Literature of Disaster

Introduction

Before engaging directly with the data offered for analysis in this thesis, it is useful to first offer an overview of the study of disaster, as both an inter-disciplinary field, and specifically within the anthropology of disaster. By exploring the historical use and development of this field of enquiry, this thesis can be better situated within the wider literature of the discipline, and the necessity for a culturally focussed investigation of a community ‘recovering’ from large catastrophes made clear. As such, as well as offering a broad overview of both disaster studies, and the more recent anthropology of disaster sub-field, the specific area of ‘recovery’ from disaster shall be foregrounded, as it is here this thesis more explicitly fits. Several strong reviews of the broad field already exist, and I am indebted to these authors for their overviews (Button 2010, Hewitt 1983a, Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 2002, National Research Council, 2006, Oliver-Smith 1996, 1999, 2002, Tierney et. al., 2001, Tierney and Oliver-Smith, 2012).

This chapter shall first outline the emergence of an interdisciplinary disaster studies. Within such a discussion, the contributions of multiple disciplines should be noted, as a separate sub-field of disaster anthropology did not fully emerge until the 1990s. As such, it is crucial to note the substantive contributions of such disciplines as geography, sociology, psychology, as well as anthropology towards the theoretical foundations of this thesis. In particular, key terms such as ‘vulnerability’ shall be discussed, as an understanding of the complex social variables which influence how a ‘hazard’ becomes a ‘disaster’ in a given context is critical when investigating this topic.

Once this historical framing has been established, this chapter shall move on to discuss the emergence of the sub-field of the anthropology of disaster, and shall note the unique contribution the engagement of anthropology can offer the wider field of disaster studies. In particular, the relationship between local social actors and broader global forces, and insight into the direct experience of disaster-processes as they manifest in local social structures. This discussion shall lead into analysis of the disasters this thesis most explicitly focuses on (Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill) and therefor explicitly frame the position of this thesis within both the anthropology of disaster and more broadly within disaster studies.

Disaster Studies

When reviewing the historically broad field of disaster studies, the critical pivot point within the theoretical corpus centres around the concept of ‘vulnerability’, and the adoption of this term fundamentally shifted the focus of more recent studies of disaster. As such, studies of disaster emerging since the 1980s show a notable difference in their focus to those produced earlier. This review shall therefore begin by discussing disaster studies as a broad field historically, before moving on to analyse recent conceptualisations of the term ‘disaster’. Particularly, recent studies which have come to view disaster as a *process* rather than a discrete event. Once this broad field is introduced, it is useful to discuss two key terms, the first of these, ‘vulnerability’, is, as shall become clear, critical to recognising the centrality of how social and economic variables shape how a particular disaster-process plays out, and the emergence of this term opened up new perspectives on the nature of ‘disaster’ itself. The second of these is the study of ‘recovery’, which is the specific body of literature this thesis most directly contributes to. Studies of ‘recovery’ generally presents a community several years after the immediate aftermath of catastrophe has passed, and offer a different focus to the discussions of, for example, immediate aftermath or disaster preparation which often form the core of much of the corpus of disaster studies. As shall become clear through this discussion, ‘recovery’ is an under-researched, and contested

term within theoretical debates, and this thesis offers significant opportunities for the development of this concept within disaster studies.

Historical Disaster Studies

Social scientists have attempted to understand the impact and ramifications of large-scale disasters since at least Samuel Prince's investigation of the Halifax explosion of 1917 in *Catastrophe and Social Change* (2013), first published in 1920. Historically, the field of disaster studies primarily focused on the immediate response of a population to an external, somewhat objectively understood threat to a state of equilibrium and normality. Indeed, in *Man and Society in Disaster* (1962) Gideon Sjoberg offers the following definition of disaster;

“a severe, relatively sudden, and frequently unexpected disruption of normal structural arrangements within a social system, or subsystem, resulting from a force, ‘natural’ or ‘social’, ‘internal’ to a system or ‘external’ to it, over which the system has no firm ‘control’” (Sjoberg, 1962; 357).

In a similar vein, Charles Fritz in the edited volume *Contemporary Social Problems* published in 1961 offers this answer to why the social sciences should study disaster;

“The impetus for systematic studies of human behaviour in disaster developed primarily from two interrelated practical needs: first, to secure more adequate protection of the nation from the destructive and disruptive consequences of potential atomic, biological, and chemical attack; and second, to produce the maximal amount of disruption to the enemy in the event of war” (Fritz, 1961: 653)

Later, he goes on to state that;

“Many findings of disaster research are being utilized by national, state, and local agencies to develop more effective preparation for disaster warning, control, relief, and rehabilitation in peacetime.” (Fritz, 1961: 654)

Others writing in this period offer similar understandings of this topic. Framing both disaster and the society it supposedly disrupts in this way offers insight into the intellectual position these scholars are adopting, and the assumption of a singular normality to social life has been significantly challenged by subsequent writers, discussed below. This can also be said of the inclusion of such phenomena as atomic attack within their theoretical models, reflecting the particular concerns of those writing at the peak of the Cold War, concerns which now fall under the umbrella of conflict, rather than disaster studies in more recent discourse.

Napier (2013) describes a disaster simulation carried out by the United States government in the 1950s designed to simulate a nuclear attack. The intention was to allow deeper understanding of how a population might react to such an attack, and thus allow better structures to be developed to control local populations and their reaction to disasters. During the middle decades of the 20th century, much of the research done within disaster studies assumed a purely reactive population, and disaster research therefore sought to create systems to better protect said populations.

Kenneth Hewitt's (1983a) extensive exploration and critique of this broad positioning of the field offers an excellent starting point for an examination of the study of disasters by the social sciences prior to the acceptance of social 'vulnerability' as a key term within disaster studies discourse, as it has for other similar overviews (Hoffman and Oliver-Smith, 2002, National Research Council, 2006, Oliver-Smith, 1996, 1999, 2002, Tierney and Oliver-Smith, 2012).

In 'The Idea of Calamity in a Technocratic Age' (1983a), Hewitt unpacks the key assumptions made within the field, and demonstrates how these dominant paradigms served to limit understanding of the study of disaster rather than expand it. The focus of these earlier works he discusses was based on assumptions surrounding an objective external threat and a reactive local population. As shall be discussed extensively, this proposition has come under widespread critique by many subsequent authors, as has the focus of disaster being connected to warfare. Such a critique reflects wider changes across the social sciences towards a more pluralist and reflexive form of critical engagement.

Other reviews of the literature of this period have likewise highlighted similar problems within these historical conceptualisations of disaster. In their extensive review of

the state of social science research into disaster the National Research Council of the National Academies (Committee on Disaster Research in the Social Sciences) (2006) describes the traditional division within this field between hazard research and disaster research, which were historically conceptualised as falling within separate focuses of study. Most such studies within this broad field were concerned either with a focus on hazard vulnerability or hazard mitigation (hazard research), or a focus on emergency response and disaster recovery (disaster research) (National Research Council 2006). This parallel evolution has since lost its clear distinction, and as shall be discussed below more recent studies recognise the necessity to view the study of disaster from a more holistic framework.

Through this mutual evolution the concept of ‘disaster’ has been explored and conceptualised in multiple forms which reflect the underlying dualisms inherent to these historical understandings, in particular a divide between a reactive population and an external ‘disaster’. Oliver-Smith (1999) while discussing these definitions notes Quarantelli’s (1985, 1995) dissatisfaction with the lack of consensus in the field, and his summary of ‘disaster’ being defined variously as;

“1) physical agents, 2) the physical impact of physical agents, 3) an assessment of physical agents, 4) the social disruption resulting from an event with physical impacts, 5) the social construction of reality in perceived crisis situations which may or may not involve physical impacts, 6) the political definition of certain crisis situations, and 7) an imbalance in the demand-capability ratio in a crisis situation.” (Oliver-Smith 1999: 21).

Oliver-Smith goes on to state that out of these varied definitions of disaster, a clearer focus did emerge, and more recent debates surrounding the definition and use of the term ‘disaster’ reflects a more coherent discussion. In particular, the recognition that different social variables (such as class or race) will result in a given hazard manifesting as a ‘disaster’ in strikingly different ways depending on context. The critical shift in the study of disaster, and the contemporary debates this shift sparked, will be considered over the next sections, with an overview of contemporary disaster studies, and discussions of the specific term ‘vulnerability’ and its centrality to recent literature, and finally the study of ‘recovery’ as the specific corpus this thesis most directly contributes to.

Contemporary Disaster Studies

Though as this section shall demonstrate there is wide acknowledgement that ‘disaster’ must be understood as both part of wider social processes and as a concept which is historically situated within scholarly and mainstream discourse, the delimitations as to exactly what makes a disaster a disaster remains ambiguous (i.e. why a hurricane might be labelled a disaster while the AIDS virus traditionally has not been). While the particular use of the term ‘disaster’ within specifically anthropological discourse shall be considered at a later point in this chapter, its use and critique within wider, interdisciplinary discourse shall be considered below.

In the *International Encyclopedia Of The Social And Behavioural Sciences* (2001) Kreps offers the following definition for disaster:

“Disasters are non-routine events in societies or their larger subsystems (e.g. regions and communities) that involve conjunctions of physical conditions with social definitions of human harm and social disruption” (Kreps, 2001: 3718)

A position which succinctly explains how many contemporary studies of disaster have framed this phenomenon. Others have sought a more extensive overview of the term, and Hoffman and Oliver-Smith (2002) offer a somewhat more extensive description of the nature of ‘disaster’, and the lived experience that many go through while living through such times. In their introduction they note:

“Disasters do not just happen. In the vast majority of cases, they are not ‘bolts from the blue’ but take place through the conjuncture of two factors: a human population and a potentially destructive agent that is part of a total ecological system, including all natural, modified, and constructed features. Both of these elements are embedded in natural and social systems that unfold as processes over time. As such, they render disasters also as processual phenomena rather than events that are isolated and temporally demarcated in exact time frames” (2002: 3).

By thus acknowledging disasters as the result of an intersection of a vulnerable population and geophysical event, by framing the discussion of disaster within this wider temporal context, and recognising that such disasters exist within pre-existing relational systems, these authors foreground an understanding of disaster as a process contrasting to historical uses where a reactive population was at the mercy of external geophysical events. Central to this is the concept of ‘vulnerability’ discussed below. These framings serve as acceptable starting points from which to build an understanding of the study of disaster in contemporary social theory, as it underlines the intersection of physical hazard with social life.

In addition to this, they go on to define what the term ‘hazard’ means within their discourse, as they argue one cannot understand ‘disaster’ without also understanding this closely related term;

[a hazard is] “the forces, conditions, or technologies that carry a potential for social, infrastructural, or environmental damage. A hazard can be a hurricane, earthquake, or avalanche; it can also be a nuclear facility or a socioeconomic practice, such as using pesticides. The issue of hazard further incorporates the way a society perceives the danger or dangers, either environmental and/or technological, that it faces and the ways it allow the danger to enter its calculations of risk.” (Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 2002; 4).

This intersection blurs the lines between the previously mentioned historical distinction between those studying ‘hazard research’ and ‘disaster research’, and the geographer Cutter (2001) has critiqued the previous separation of these fields of study as limiting the complexity and breadth of the analysis offered. In Tierney et al.’s *Facing the Unexpected* (2001) this point is further developed from a more sociological perspective when she states:

“Disasters originate in the fact that all societies regularly face geophysical, climatological, and technological events that reveal their physical and social vulnerabilities. In response, societies engage in activities and develop technologies that are designed to provide protection from such threats. However, such measures

often prove ineffective and can themselves become a source of added vulnerability when extreme events occur” (Tierney et al. 2001: 4).

They go on to place disaster as the centre-piece to what they describe as a temporal cycle surrounding a given hazard: mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery (2001).

While it is valuable to acknowledge the importance of the interaction between hazard, disaster and society, the above does not offer sufficient clarification as to what disaster and the study thereof entails. When overviewing this core topic, the National Research Council (2006) follow Perry and Quarantelli (2005) regarding the key assumptions made within the broad field regarding the nature of ‘disaster’. They understand disaster as non-routine events involving particular physical conditions with social definitions of harm and disruption, which are outside the ‘norm’ of local social life. They state that a disaster must have physical impact, as well as subjective impacts and locally emergent definitions and interpretations. These impacts are disruptive to social systems but are also intertwined with other dynamics of change. They state that a disaster’s characteristics should be considered out with its consequences and antecedents. They also state that the defining and classifying of disasters (particularly in relation to other similarly defined events) is meaningful in and of itself, therefore theoretical modelling is crucial. Beyond this, the study of disaster should be scientific in nature in its study. They also state that disaster can be the catalyst for collective action. Finally and interestingly, they state that a disaster demonstrates the difference between a society’s expectation of, and actual experience of physical impact of a hazard, and that a “fully anticipated event would not be defined as a disaster” (National Research Council 2006; 19). While some of these assumptions certainly hold true regarding the experience of Plaquemines Parish, the local experience of disaster as – to some extent – normalised, offers interesting potential to develop an understanding of disaster as a fundamental feature of local social life.

Other research has focused on the wider aftermath of a disaster, thus recognising that there can be diverse impacts to such a process, out with the direct effects generated by

the hazard in question. Kim Fortun's *Advocacy After Bhopal* (2001) is one such example, where the writer worked within a local activist group. Fortun situated her work within the wider global environmentalist movement and focused much of her methodology on collecting data from activists, trade unionists, lawyers and others involved in the on-going battle for compensation in Bhopal, India. By doing so, she was particularly effective in establishing that the process of recovery after a disaster has occurred can last long after a token compensation payment has been made, a topic discussed further below.

There has also been discussion amongst social scientists as to whether so called 'natural' disasters (such as hurricanes or earthquakes) should be approached from a radically different perspective to 'man-made' disasters (such as oil spills). Some, such as Norris et al. (2002) have argued that there appears to be a higher level of correlation between other factors in terms of the psychological impact of disasters (such as pre-disaster vulnerability, or impact severity) than there is in relation to the nature of the disaster itself. Others however have offered an alternative perspective. Freudenburg (1997) argues that technological disasters can have a significantly higher impact than other types of disaster. Two of the studies Freudenburg draws upon (Smith et al. 1986, and a paper presented by Goodman and Vaughan 1986) are of particular interest here, as they discuss communities which had experienced both 'natural' (flooding) and 'technological' (a chemical spill) disasters in close temporal proximity. These studies appear to support his conclusion by exploring the relative weight local people gave to these disasters within their narratives. This thesis however, does not, and indeed the local context of Plaquemines Parish would suggest that the relative impact of a given disaster is intrinsically determined by the direct ramifications to an individual or group based on their context of vulnerability. Specifically, the BP oil spill – though catastrophic in scale – was largely experienced as a feature of the on-going recovery from Katrina, rather than a secondary disaster-process. This appears to be broadly the case even for those most directly impacted by the Spill, such as commercial fishermen.

Although many theorists have used terms such as 'disaster' and 'catastrophe' interchangeably, some have called for greater distinction to be drawn, particularly when

creating policy plans to deal with the impact of a major event of this nature. Although scale is certainly a key and obvious distinction, some theorists argue that the differences are more wide-ranging. Quarantelli, in 'Just as a Disaster is not Simply a Big Accident, so a Catastrophe is not Just a Bigger Disaster' (1996) presents what he feels to be a summary of the critical distinctions found between these experiences of hazard. Focussing primarily on organizational behaviour in the United States, he notes that disasters should be distinguished from an accident or emergency due to: 1) The involvement of multiple government and aid agencies, 2) the loss of autonomy and freedom experienced by agencies and individuals during the response to the event, 3) the emergence of non-normal performance standards and social norms during such times, and 4) the distinct interaction between public and private bodies whereby normal rules of property habitation (for example) might be temporarily suspended (1996).

He goes on to describe how, much like an emergency, a catastrophe has unique features distinguishing it from a disaster. He states that the distinguishing features of a catastrophe are as follows: 1) that the scale of the destruction relative to the pre-event baseline will be significantly higher during a catastrophe than a disaster, 2) it is impossible for local officials to fulfil their normal roles and responsibilities during the event, and well into the recovery period, 3) the normal community functions in a given social context are interrupted, social institutions both formal and informal cease to function across a wide region, 4) help is unavailable from nearby communities (1996).

Tierney (2008) is another theorist who has considered these distinctions and expanded upon the categorisations offered by Quarantelli (1996). She also notes that the scale of the event is a key signifier of the difference between a disaster and a catastrophe, but like him also discusses qualitative differences as well as quantitative ones. Several of her designators are similar to the above such as noting the loss of key systems of economic and social support, and the inability of local (or even regional) formal emergency response system to activate. The key additional designator she discusses is the idea that catastrophes cause multiple 'cascading' events which might take several forms (such as flooding

damaging a chemical plant which then contaminates the surrounding area as described by Smith et al. 1986).

The work of these authors is primarily aimed at improving governmental planning and response programs to large-scale events of a ‘catastrophic’ scale, but it is still of interest to consider the ramifications of their work for a thesis which focuses on the cultural impact and recovery from disasters *and* catastrophes. Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill were two of the largest destructive events of their relative kind to ever impact the region of Plaquemines Parish, however, the local, direct experience of these disaster-processes does not allow either of them to fit exactly into the category of ‘catastrophe’ as presented above, nor do the above understandings adequately account for the *cultural* significance of a catastrophic disaster-process. This therefore offers an opportunity to reflect upon the use of such terminology in a context where smaller-scale disasters (such as category 1 hurricanes or oil spills of only a few hundred barrels) occur on a semi-regular basis, but where multiple disaster-processes of a ‘catastrophic’ scale (a direct hit of a category 3 hurricane and an oil spill of 4.9 billion barrels) only rarely impacted upon a community, and never before in combination within a short temporal span. Furthermore such a discussion is of particular relevance at a ‘cultural’ level, as Quarantelli and Teirney both have a significant focus on the immediacy of a given disaster-process rather than its longer-term ramifications. As such, this thesis understands the semi-regular ‘disasters’ experienced by the Parish to contribute to the cultural normalisation of disaster-processes which is a feature of the on-going lived experience of the local landscape, but where ‘catastrophes’ have formed significant outliers of experience, causing a relatively more significant constructive element to local cultural life, and historical narratives.

This focus on culture links to the work of other scholars who have sought to critique many of the assumptions most contemporary risk and disaster scholarship is built upon, alongside a re-engagement with the notion of disaster-as-process to further explore both how the experience of disaster impacts on emerging cultural processes, and also how culture constructs the way ‘disaster’ is itself conceptualised. As mentioned above, it is to

this broad corpus of literature engaging with culture and disaster to which this thesis most directly contributes.

Ophir (2010) has used the term ‘catastrophization’ in his discussion of governmentality in relation to disaster-processes. He stresses that while the majority of recent political theory has been based on assumptions regarding the power of governments being threatened by disaster-processes, he has framed disaster and risk narratives as a part of state-authored structures. From this perspective, he looks firstly at how ‘disasters’ are used by strong states as a spectre to shape opinion and discourse, then secondly at their role as part of the relationship non-governmental organisations and weaker states maintain as part of a self-perpetuating cycle of dependency. At a broader level, he discusses how catastrophization combines the gradual accumulation of ‘objective’ threats to a population, and the corresponding discourse surrounding their identification (or dismissal), which builds towards a catastrophic event. While primarily connected to his major argument regarding the use of ‘disaster’ within governmental discourse this broader point regarding the distinction, and relationship between ‘evils’, as he calls them, and locally meaningful discourse is relevant to a community where disaster weaves within the fabric on the everyday, such as the Parish of Plaquemines.

This discussion of culture, and its relevance to disaster studies has recently gained greater prominence in disciplinary debates. Kearnes, Klauser, and Lane (2012) open their discussion of contemporary studies of risk by highlighting the need to critique the foundations of risk research, so to explore how terms such as ‘risk’ came to be produced and applied in the manner in which they are. They go on to show how institutional structures of risk assessment and management can in fact be highly constrained by the social and political norms in which they are situated and can even unintentionally exacerbate the vulnerability of certain groups. Their work is of particular interest to this thesis as, following Smits (2011), they discuss how the region of Japan where the 2011 earthquake and tsunami most affected had in fact a long history of similar disasters of various sizes. This tsunami therefore was unusual (though not unprecedented) only because of its large scale. Despite this history, local defences were designed to protect

against more frequent, yet much smaller tsunamis due to the prevailing risk management priorities of local government bodies. As shall be discussed, this is similar to Plaquemines Parish and its relationship to hurricanes and oil spills.

Continuing this critique in the same volume Merli (2012) has shown how contemporary risk research often downplays the significance of religion within local cultural meaning-making in the aftermath of a disaster. She goes beyond this however, and argues that religion can play a central role within political and non-governmental power structures (amongst others) and thus cultural norms can have far-reaching impact on the vulnerability of local people, and the processes of recovery emerging in the aftermath of a disaster. Thus, she argues, conceptualising impact and recovery without considering cultural processes limits risk researchers.

Other writers are also choosing to focus on culture and everyday life in the aftermath of disaster, and their critique is of great value to disaster studies more broadly. In their review of anthropological research into climate change Crate (2011) notes the growing importance that culture has in the study of climate change resistance and impact. This once again foregrounds the critical role culture has in framing understanding and reaction to hazardous forces, and structuring the context in which they manifest. Beyond this however, it allows community based studies to interweave with a broader, global perspective, as the nuances and local complexities thus emerge within climate change discourse to the strengthening of both local, and transnational research.

This community and cultural focus is crucial, but as Rigg et al. (2008) discuss one can look still deeper, at the personal context of individuals and small groups. Doing so presents the victims of disaster as actors with agency, inhabiting an intimate and meaningful social world. While they acknowledge the concern that such a localised focus might obscure regional disparities in wealth and vulnerability, they argue that by so explicitly foregrounding the cultural context in which the aftermath and recovery from a

disaster manifests, the richness of the lived experience of the everyday can be presented and analysed.

Now that some of the key discussion within disaster studies have been reviewed, it is useful to analyse the key concept of 'vulnerability' and 'resistance', as they have proven to be central theoretical foundations within contemporary disaster studies discourse.

'Vulnerability' and 'Resistance'

Emerging towards the end of the 1970s, and most acutely articulated throughout Hewitt's (ed) (1983b) *Interpretations of Calamity* a deep recognition of the socio-cultural forces which play key roles in disasters emerged within disaster studies. Michael Watts' highly significant contribution to this volume 'On The Poverty Of Theory: Natural Hazard Research In Context' outlines in detail the historical context out of which previous assumptions regarding the impact of disaster was made, and offers key insight into the limitations of these assumptions, as well as exploring the need for a more nuanced understanding of disaster, which better represents specific local context to emerge.

Watts argues that "hazard theory has been framed by concepts and assumptions which carry a historically specific view of nature, society and man and hence...of the relations between them" (1983: 231). Following Walker (1979) he goes on, through close consideration of both his empirical work in Nigeria and wider literature to explain how severe drought and the disaster caused by it in this region has emerged out of a particular historical context, deeply influenced by colonial relationships. He argues that the social relationships of production are what structure a household's ability to respond to the threat of drought, and thus the impact such a drought might have.

The idea of ‘vulnerability’ has been widely adopted, and others have developed it beyond this more materialist focus. Blaikie et al. (1994) were particularly significant in this, and the following definition has been widely used:

“By vulnerability we mean the characteristics of a person or group in terms of their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist, and recover from the impact of a natural hazard. It involves a combination of factors that determine the degree to which someone’s life and livelihood is put at risk by a discrete and identifiable event in nature or in society” (Blaikie et al. 1994: 9).

This definition remains largely unchanged in their second edition of this work, and while these authors note certain refinement to the concept, its fundamental core remains unchanged (Blaikie et al. 2004).

Expanding on this description of vulnerability they explain that certain groups within a society are more at risk to a given hazard than others. Such differences are often tied to variables such as gender, race, class and other social factors (2004). As such, a ‘vulnerable’ population is one which is particularly at risk of the effects of a given hazard. Whereas they note that other authors (such as Eade 1998, Wisner 2003) have broadened this discussion with the term ‘capacity’ which can be used as a shorthand for a given group’s ability to resist the harmful effects of a hazard and the ease by which it can recover. Similarly the term ‘resilience’ has been deployed by quantitative researchers to better understand the ability of structures (both social and material) to absorb the effects of disaster without being destroyed (Cimellaro et al. 2010), though others have suggested a more complex use of the term as shall be discussed below.

The principle strength in framing disaster research in terms of ‘vulnerability’ is based on a conception of disasters being part of a local cultural process, an idea historically most directly originating with the contributions to *Interpretations of Calamity* (Hewitt (ed) 1983b). Disasters are seen here as processes which affect both the social life of a

community and the natural world in which it resides, and although such a distinction between cultural and natural worlds has been challenged (see for example Ingold 2011), the concept retains significant value in framing the highly contextual nature of the impact of a given disaster. As such, Hoffman and Oliver-Smith (2002) argue that nothing is *inherently* a disastrous event; instead an event becomes a disaster through the vulnerability of a given community (see also Oliver-Smith 2002).

Examples of this within recent disaster studies work are plentiful. Leak (2013) has demonstrated that large-scale disaster (in this case an earthquake in Haiti) rarely result in an egalitarian impact, writing:

“It is true that the earthquake did not discriminate on social grounds when it struck...But those 39 seconds of dreadful equality quickly passed in the blink of an eye: the very moment the tremors ceased, the chances of survival were conditioned by money, power and influence” (2013: 398).

Leak also went on to demonstrate how pre-conceived media constructions of Haiti fed into the mainstream discourse of the disaster, a topic which shall be discussed further below.

Disasters (and the potential for disasters) can give us deep insight into the wider cultural practices, beliefs, and social structures in a given society, as well as local understandings of vulnerability and risk. This was of particular interest to Eric Klinenberg (2002), whose research into the 1995 Chicago heat wave (and the deaths caused by it) enquired as to why so many people died alone. Through his study of the disaster he was offered insight into the lived experience of the loneliness and isolation which had become normalised for many of the elderly population of the city within certain racial and class demographics. These demographics are often most at risk from disasters of this nature.

Petterson et al. in their 'A Preliminary Assessment of Social and Economic Impacts Associated with Hurricane Katrina' (2006) offer a wide reaching overview of the impact and aftermath of the disaster one year after the storm made landfall. Their focus is centred on the impact on local social orders, and within this, they particularly discuss how the disaster has exacerbated pre-existing social trends and that recovery efforts have in fact been converted into a means to further concentrate wealth into the hands of the already wealthy.

They note that physical triggers such as large-scale disasters like Katrina create the impotence for administrative action and reaction and that it appears Hurricane Katrina has been much the same. Moving beyond the government's response to the catastrophe they recognise that Katrina has been the cause of massive internal migration. In previous cases in North America, victims of such forced migration have been quick to return to their point of origin, though those migrating from Hurricane Katrina are demonstrating a somewhat different reaction. The writers point to several factors as the cause of this which range from the scale of the disaster to the relative poverty of many of the evacuees, all of which limit the ability to return. Their work was largely centred around the city of New Orleans, and among the social changes felt in the city there has also been a shift in ethnicity, with a significant rise in the proportion of the population identifying as Hispanic. This influx of Hispanic people are largely being employed in the reconstruction efforts, efforts which are leading to allegations of cronyism and waste, along with political tussles over which neighbourhoods are 'worthy' of re-building and preservation. These political debates have often formed along racial lines (2006).

This discussion of vulnerability can often focus on a specific variable, and Lakshmi Fjord and Lenore Manderson (2009) argue that during times of disaster those with disabilities are placed in a position of significant risk, far in excess of their non-disabled neighbours. Their suggestion is that disaster studies and policy makers should place provision for disabled persons at the centre of their planning, and that in fact all those living through disaster should be thought of as suffering from varying levels of impairment. Planners should cease only planning for their able-bodied constituents, and

instead prepare for catastrophe in a manner which would account for the needs of the most vulnerable – persons with disabilities.

Of particular relevance to this thesis, McGuire's 'Louisiana's Oysters, American's Wetlands, and the Storms of 2005' (2006) notes that even prior to Katrina making landfall the Gulf Coast oyster industry was already under threat, creating a particular context of vulnerability. McGuire's is one of the few studies which directly mentions Plaquemines Parish, and is especially insightful given how central the oyster industry is to the economy of the Parish. The paper begins by introducing Empire, Plaquemines Parish as both near where Katrina made landfall and Louisiana's 'oyster capital'. In this extensive investigation McGuire examines how the impact of the hurricane could be potentially devastating to the oyster industry of the coast and the tourist industry of New Orleans, both of which rely on each other – the former for the market and infrastructure of the latter, and the latter for the uniquely fresh seafood and cultural heritage of the former.

McGuire also notes the deep familial ties present within the seafood industry, with different branches of the same family handling the catching, processing, and selling of oysters. This inter-dependence makes each family vulnerable to natural disasters as they are unable to turn to a family support network for support – as each branch of the family will be equally struggling. However, McGuire also notes that even before the destruction of hurricane Katrina the local seafood industry was in decline, dealing as it was with inexpensive imports from Asia and elsewhere, and also battling negative public perception over the safety of raw shellfish. This decline in Louisiana seafood production was a recognized problem before Katrina made landfall and an established part of popular culture as shown by the negotiation of shrimp (prawn) import rates from China forming part of an episode of the popular political drama *The West Wing* (2004). Such a recognition moves our understanding beyond a more simplistic view of disaster as an externalised, or singular phenomenon, and recognises the plurality of experiences which manifest in the aftermath of such a process. The long-term decline of the fishing industry was a significant variable in McGuire's understanding of the aftermath of Katrina because of the particular context in

which this research was conducted. Recognising local vulnerability therefore allows the particular local context of a given disaster to be teased out and highlighted.

In *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerabilities And Disasters* (2004) Blaikie et al. offer a broad overview of the particular vulnerability living in a region where coastal storms (particularly hurricanes, cyclones, and typhoons) are common. While highly state-centric in their focus, they underline how variations in wealth and other socio-economic factors can cause huge variation in terms of the risk of damage, and ability to swiftly recover from, large coastal storms. Of particular relevance to this thesis, is research which highlights how bureaucratic failure and racial bias has had a significant bearing on the impact of certain disasters within the United States historically, with Hurricanes Hugo (in 1989) and Camille (in 1969) discussed. They also go on – with great foresight – to predict that a direct hit on the city of New Orleans would cause a major catastrophe.

Blaikie et al. also go on to discuss several studies connected with the particular vulnerability of rural agricultural and fishing communities where economic activity is often highly tied to ecological factors (2004). Because these contexts are often tied to seasonal activities, high availability of labour, and certain expensive pieces of machinery, poorer farmers and fishermen have been shown to be particularly vulnerable to the impacts of coastal storms (Chambers 1983). This particular type of vulnerability was examined further in the context of Plaquemines Parish with comparative research by Ingles and McIlvaine-Newsad (2007) studying the impact of Katrina on the fishing industry of Empire. In particular, they highlighted how significant the loss of up to 65% of the fishing fleet during the storm was to the economic activity of the area. They did however note that local people still considered fishing to be an important aspect of community life, thus highlighting the need for a cultural investigation of the role fishing plays in this region.

This is not to say that the term ‘vulnerability’ has gone without critique by disaster scholars however. As has been discussed by Bankoff (2006) the underlying assumptions

running through much of the discourse on vulnerability, and particularly its application as a concept within hazard mitigation and development discourse are fundamentally Western and technocratic. By discussing both Hurricane Katrina and the Indian Ocean tsunami, he argues that discourse surrounding vulnerability reduction often mirrors power hierarchies already present and largely centres on the idea that an application of preventative technology is fundamental to protecting populations. This discourse however obscures the multitude of locally-emergent strategies for vulnerability reduction, and artificially limits the options available for those working in this field. He concludes by criticising the assumption that non-Western nations should always be encouraged to adopt (often) expensive technological solutions to their vulnerability, and instead, that Western disaster response and development agencies should learn more from the community-based responses and adaptations found in non-Western countries.

Bankoff (2007) has further developed this position by charting the historically situated nature of disaster, and what this means for our conception of vulnerability. By doing so, he highlighted that local relationships with hazard often have significant historical precedent, and by investigating how disasters were considered historically our wider conception of 'vulnerability' can be broadened beyond its narrow contemporary use. What's more, this historical perspective moves an understanding of disaster beyond pure destruction, and acknowledges how disasters can be significantly impactful in changing social and economic structures.

Others have also critiqued the term 'vulnerability' such as Cardona (2004), who has argued that a more holistic understanding of risk and vulnerability is needed, in order to reverse the increased levels of vulnerability experienced by many communities. He argues that a lack of interdisciplinary focus on risk, and its role within considerations of vulnerability has diminished risk management and hazard reduction programmes. He argues that this is especially true with regard to the impact risk can have on a society when a given study only focuses on one facet of that context such as economics or politics.

As mentioned above, some have argued that the term ‘resistance’ (or ‘resilience’) is primarily useful as an antonym to ‘vulnerability’, allowing those using this terminology to contrast a ‘vulnerable’ community to a ‘resistant’ one. Others however, have argued that the term should be considered as a separate concept, as doing so broadens the toolset available to those studying disaster through analysis of how a community might be both vulnerable *and* resistant. This section shall finally critically discuss the term ‘resistance’ as it has been framed in recent debates within disaster studies and thus outline its value both as an opposite to vulnerability, and as a related though fundamentally separate term. Two reviews of the term have been especially useful in critiquing this concept, and I am indebted to Galillard (2010) and Manyena (2006) for their overviews.

Manyena’s (2006) extensive review of the term considers it in relation to four of the key questions emerging out of debates on this concept in recent years. Firstly, while he acknowledges that some have viewed resilience as a new paradigm for disaster risk reduction discourse (such as McEntire et al. 2002), he ultimately argues that ‘resistance’ fills a critical gap in disaster reduction *terminology* by allowing scope to consider the building of something new, rather than the focus on reduction of negative variables which vulnerability offers (Manyena 2006). However, he does acknowledge that there is scope for the building of a separate paradigm built around the idea of ‘resistance’ in the future. With this established, he moves on to consider whether ‘resistance’ should be considered as either a process or outcome, as he argues the answer to this question might be fundamental to the establishment of this new paradigm. While definitions have been diverse, he argues that there has been a move away from an outcome orientated understanding of the term (such as Wildavsky 1991), and towards a process orientated one (such as Pelling 2003). By conceptualising it as a process, thinking has moved away from a more reactive, paternalist understanding, and towards one which foregrounds the strengths and goals of local populations with a view to reduce their risk from a given hazard.

With the foundation of this term set, Manyena (2006) then moves on to consider the relationship between the terms vulnerability and resilience directly by reviewing the

position of those who see resilience and vulnerability as opposite ends of the same idea (Blaikie et al. 1994), as opposed to those who see the concepts as being related, but fundamentally separate (Gilard and Givone 1997). Those who argue the latter prefer to measure vulnerability and resilience separately, arguing that placing a societies' relationship with a given hazard on a single, all-encompassing scale is too simplistic. The former might be a somewhat functional tool for addressing certain critical needs of a local community, but its homogenising nature limits its value for perspectives seeking a more complex, or holistic understanding of a given society. Finally Manyena (2006) considers the question as to whether resilience refers to humans, the physical infrastructure, or both, and concludes that there is no clear consensus on this point. There exist multiple perspectives on who or what should be counted as either (or both) vulnerable or resistant, and he calls for disaster planners to place local people at the centre of their work in both reducing vulnerability and building resistance.

This concept has also been considered by Gaillard (2010) alongside his discussion of the related terms of 'vulnerability' and 'capacity'. Here, he goes beyond Manyena's review to focus more acutely on the function of these terms within development policy initiatives. In particular, he focuses on reconciling natural science and social policy perspectives with regard to development, and especially with regard to climate change. He stresses that applying external scientific 'solutions' to the problems of climate change can only be effective with participation with local communities, and as such, acknowledging the indigenous knowledge of these communities is crucial in building resistance. He concludes that only by combining large-scale initiatives to tackle climate change and development issues with local disaster risk reduction programmes can large-scale resistance building occur.

This section has discussed two of one of the critical concepts within the broad study of disasters. Since the early 1980s it has been widely accepted that the social and cultural context in which a disaster occurs greatly shapes how that disaster-process will play out. Now that the broad historical and contemporary study of disaster has been reviewed, and the key pivot point of the term of 'vulnerability' explored, along with the

related term of 'resistance', it is important to analyse what is meant by research focussing on the 'recovery' from a disaster specifically, and thus offer an overview to the field to which this thesis most directly contributes.

'Recovery' after a Disaster

The focus area within disaster studies most directly relevant to this thesis is that of cultural recovery in the aftermath of a disaster. As such, the idea of disaster 'recovery' should be given special attention within the wider discussion of contemporary disaster studies as a whole. This section shall first consider historical attempts by social scientists to examine the recovery after a disaster, and then discuss more recent studies. Recovery is an area identified by the National Research Council (2006) as having a shortage of literature connected to it, particularly studies which consider the longer-term process of recovery, as most disaster studies literature has focussed on the more immediate impact of a given disaster-process, or focussed on the means of preventing future disasters from impacting a given area. Furthermore, the recognition of a lack of theory in this area has been blamed on a dearth of studies which assess the recovery from multiple disaster-processes (Olshansky, Hopkins and Johnson 2012). In many of the studies which have been produced we see the tacit assumption within most literature that deals with 'recovery' that both the goal of recovery, and its inevitable destination is the return of a community to a state similar to pre-disaster stability. Although some studies do foreground how the impact of disasters or catastrophes can be catalysts for social or economic change, there is significant room for a study which conceptualises 'recovery' not as a finite process, but as the on-going weaving of catastrophe into the normality of social life as shall be shown below.

Two previous literature reviews in particular have proven extremely useful in offering an overview of the historical development of this sub-field: Tierney and Oliver-Smith's (2012) 'Social Dimensions Of Disaster Recovery' and 'Research on Disaster

Response and Recovery' in the National Research Council's *Facing Hazards and Disasters* (2006).

Tierney and Oliver-Smith (2012) discuss several key theoretical works upon which they base their criticisms (such as, Bolin 1976, 1982, Drabek and Key 1984, Haas, Kates, and Bowden, 1977, and Oliver-Smith, 1992 [1986]). Both this, and the National Research Council (2006) begin at the same point of departure; by critiquing research in this area for equating the recovery of a given social context with the rebuilding of the physical structures which it used to contain, then go on to outline similar areas equally considered to be theoretically lacking.

Frederick Bates and Walter Peacock (2008 [1993]) offers a key example of this. In this volume they attempt to create a model for assessing damage and recovery based on material losses during a disaster. Their goal is to account for the apparent differences in the relative financial losses of a disaster striking a Western industrialised city compared to it striking a non-Western city. While it is certainly essential to acknowledge that a larger financial investment being required to repair damage to the former than the latter should not be considered to automatically suggest a larger impact or more substantial recovery, it is impossible to make such claims by simply focussing on material recovery alone. By demonstrating the varying *social* significance of particular material-cultural objects, subsequent research has thus shown the limitation of focussing on the material cost of a disaster alone (Arlikatti et al. 2010). With this said however, Arlikatti et al. and others still present a trajectory of disaster recovery which assumes a return to a pre-disaster 'normality' once the disaster-process is considered to be complete.

A focus on material re-building is however found in many studies of disaster recovery, and the vast majority of Phillips' (2009) *Disaster Recovery* focuses on the study of the material recovery of a region after a disaster has struck. Indeed, even the chapter ostensibly focussed on historical and cultural recovery principally discusses the rebuilding

of historic landmarks and culturally important buildings, rather than offering a discussion of cultural practice as an embodied, on-going processes engaged in by social actors. While there is extensive discussion of various theoretical models used in the study of disaster, her focus is still very much centred on rebuilding efforts, and the social or structural impediments and advantages different social groups face when engaging in such activities. Likewise, while social vulnerability is mentioned by Kates et al. (2006) in their comparative work assessing how the reconstruction of New Orleans after Katrina measures against historical recovery efforts, this is still largely in the context of the limiting or improving a community's ability to rebuild.

Other authors have sought to move the concept of 'recovery' away from equating physical reconstruction with social recovery and toward a conception which places these two areas as mutually reinforcing though not intrinsically tied. Such a move sheds a critical light on studies which sought to conceptualise the recovery of social units in neat recovery 'phases'. Critically engaging with Drabek (1986) and Quarantelli (1982), Tierney and Oliver-Smith (2012) explain how such approaches struggle to account for regional variations in vulnerability and capacity for recovery. Such structures also ignore local agency in designating and achieving key recovery milestones, and assume a singular linear progression, which is often not found. Such critique can clearly be seen in the work of authors such as Berke et al. (1993) who describes how locally emergent development strategies can be far more efficient than basing recovery planning on pre-determined assumptions and Neal (1997) who, while not going as far as to call for the removal of the concept of 'phases' of recovery entirely, states that their current use is overly simplistic, and would require significant overhaul to account for the nuance of a given disaster context.

A key study which must be considered which broadly equates material recovery with recovery in general, is the previously mentioned *Hurricane Katrina and the Forgotten Coast of Mississippi* (Cutter et al. 2014) which is described by its authors as the first significant study of the recovery from Hurricane Katrina outside the metropolitan New Orleans area (though two of these authors had previously published on this topic at an

earlier point, reaching many of the same conclusions (see Burton, Mitchell, and Cutter 2011)). This study focussed on community level rebuilding exercises at several locations along the Mississippi coast, and sought to measure the speed of rebuilding activities within different communities, before analysing why certain locales can be seen to be recovering faster than others. Although this study offers far ranging insight into how particular social variables (particularly class and race) impact on the speed at which recovery occurs, there is a clear, central focus within this work on the material rebuilding of these communities. This focus produces rich data exploring rebuilding in these rural communities, which are alike in many respects those with which this thesis engages. However, as shall be argued throughout this thesis, replacing a destroyed property does not necessarily equate to social recovery, and by using the more holistic approach offered by anthropological enquiry (discussed further below) a deeper understanding of what ‘recovery’ might mean beyond the act of rebuilding homes or other property can be explored.

Other contemporary researchers – while acknowledging the weakness of older models – have sought to utilise an idea of recovery based around phases in contemporary research, and sought to move away from a material-culture focus in their work. Chang (2010) deploys a (quantitative statistics based) model to describe the port of Kobe’s return to an economic ‘new normality’ for example. However, Hoffman (1999) lays out three phases, which she organises primarily around social symbols: the first of these, ‘the crisis’ is typified at the moment the disaster strikes by individualisation and isolation caused by what she describes as a form of liminality where a survivor is distanced from sociocultural context and identity. During this stage however, once the principle threat has passed, there also emerges in the immediate aftermath an urge to aid and rescue fellow survivors despite pre-disaster cultural divisions such as class or race. This communal action continues into the post-disaster timeframe. Furthermore survivors will experience a deep shift of perspective, where they come to alter their perceptions regarding previously held norms.

The second phase Hoffman describes is ‘the aftermath nexus’, the phase begins after the disaster-event has passed, and may last several months or years depending on the scale of disaster and local context. The central dynamic at the commencement of this phase

is a unity of local actors into a single collaborative union with a common bond. This single collective however is often bounded by locally emergent designations about how much loss or damage signifies a 'true' sufferer of the effects of the disaster. This phase begins the process of reconstructing homes and cultural lives. Their cultural response and goals and capacities for recovery are based on pre-disaster cultural norms. During this stage survivors also begin to frame the disaster in ceremony and symbolism. Often such rituals often occur at sites of greatest destruction and are integral to the emergent identity of 'survivor'. Over time tension develops with the survivor community and nearby unaffected groups, as well as national governments, over the perceived imbalance of financial investment and aid offered. The relationship between aid givers and aid receivers breaks down. At the same time, the temporary unity of the survivor group begins to break down, and alongside this there forms a debate surrounding the 'correct' narrative of what occurred.

The final phase Hoffman identifies is 'the passage to closure'. This phase begins in an amorphous zone after the second period's conclusion but generally when the majority of the population has resettled in the region. Any remaining survivors unity fades and individuals reintegrate with wider society. This coincides with the fading of ritual practices which emerged in the aftermath of the disaster. Survivors emerge from liminality with a renewed identity of which the disaster constitutes a part. Any political or semi-formal support groups dissolve and only the anniversary of the disaster is marked. There can however be lingering resentment towards (for example) government bodies if there is felt to have been an insufficient response to the disaster. She notes that disaster can at times be a force for major social change, while at other times can result in no significant change at all (see also Semaan & Mark 2012).

While Hoffman's model is of partial relevance to this thesis, it does not fully account for the lived experience of local people in the aftermath of Katrina and the BP oil spill in Plaquemines Parish. The focus on symbolic memorial and liminality do not appear to have significant relevance to local people, and while the idea of the catastrophe forming part of a person's identity is deeply relevant, this is done in conjunction with a long-term

state of surviving multiple smaller disasters. Furthermore the formative nature of disaster and catastrophe in cultural life throws into question the idea of ‘recovery’ as traditionally understood. If being a ‘survivor’ of disaster becomes part of a person’s identity, and if they are living in a house built new (or newly bought) after the major destruction of a catastrophe, then discussing recovery in a conventional sense as something which might have an end point is somewhat misleading. Instead, as this thesis argues, social and cultural ‘recovery’ from major catastrophe becomes woven into the on-going lived reality of dwelling within a post-catastrophe landscape as it is constantly constructed by organisms and other forces.

Moving away from models of recovery, it is clear that the social and cultural context in which recovery occurs is central to our understanding of that recovery. Factors such as class or race have profound effects on local social trajectories of recovery. Tierney (2005) makes this case in ‘Social Inequality, Hazards, and Disasters’ stating, “Just as they permeate all aspects of social life, the effects of class, race, and gender manifest themselves before, during, and after disasters” (Tierney, 2005; 126). Other research appears to support this notion that local vulnerability to disasters also feeds directly into the process of disaster recovery, and Barrios (2009) relates this critique with a wider challenge to universal ideals of ‘development’ and the hierarchies of knowledge which were produced between program managers and local residents in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch in Honduras (in 1998), based on their relative power relations. This work also highlights one of the key over-arching themes of the edited volume from which it was part, *The Legacy Of Hurricane Mitch: Lessons From Post-Disaster Reconstruction In Honduras* (Ensor (ed) 2009), which is that previous work on disaster recovery has underrepresented the significance of forces of local and global change, as well as globalisation, on recovery processes at a local level.

By examining how the loss of a community’s resource base through ecological destruction causes the community itself to decay and potentially collapse, Dyer (2002) has shown that without suitable mitigation or compensation, communities affected in this way struggle to maintain pre-disaster activities and lifestyle. Dyer also shows therefore how a

disaster such as the Exxon-Valdez oil spill was caused by more than simply the release of pollution into the ecosystem, but by the political marginalisation of affected communities, and the absence of proper financial compensation for them.

Conceptualising the nature of recovery itself has recently come under further critique within the social sciences (Tierney and Oliver-Smith, 2012). As previously mentioned, Chang (2010) argues that rather than a return to a pre-disaster context communities in fact move towards what she describes as a ‘new normality’ (see also Chang 2000). Her quantitative research shows through macro level statistical analysis that the recovery of Kobe port after the 1995 earthquake did not result in its return to pre-disaster levels of economic output. While this change clearly follows wider shifts in the local economy that were present prior to the earthquake, the disaster also had a significant impact upon the local socio-economic context. Such economic patterns where a major catastrophe in fact *increased* future vulnerability to disaster-processes can be seen in research connect to fishing communities on the Gulf of Mexico, where the impact on fishing profitability, in turn negatively impacted local economic stability, accentuating a downward direction already present in the community (Ingles and McIlvaine-Newsad 2007). It is interesting to reflect on these ideas at a local, cultural level within a context such as Plaquemines Parish, where a relatively straightforward progression from disaster to recovery (such as described by Hoffman (1999) above) has clearly not occurred.

Beyond these discussions, many of the points raised in earlier sections of this chapter can impact upon the recovery from a disaster, such as the scale of destruction caused or the nature of the disaster itself (in that, as above, some have argued a difference between ‘natural’ and ‘man-made’ disaster). Additional to these it is important to note that scholars have identified the immediate post-impact response to a disaster as potentially having significant influence regarding the longer-term recovery effort in a given context. Norris et al. (2007), for example, discuss community level resilience and adaption in the context of disaster recovery. The rapidity with which aid reaches a disaster impact site – for example – can have a major influence on a community’s recovery. Indeed, some scholars have argued for recovery to effectively begin before a disaster strikes with pre-

event planning (Tierney and Oliver-Smith, 2012). Based on the familiarity local residents in Plaquemines Parish have with the process of evacuation and recovery from smaller-scale hurricanes and oil spills however, it is better to conceptualise their preparation for these hazards as something on-going, rather than is discrete ‘before’ and ‘after’ stages.

Temporal considerations are also important in this area, and Tierney and Oliver-Smith (2012) in their review of the literature connected to disaster recovery discuss several dynamics connected to both the length of recovery processes, and the challenges posed during research in this area. They note that the formulation of a model of ‘recovery’ can be problematic as local people might reject such models:

“The idea of socially acceptable rates and outcomes for recovery is an important one, because the perceptions and judgments of those affected by disasters are a key element in social recovery itself” (Tierney and Oliver-Smith 2012: 131).

Disparities in macro and micro experiences of recovery (i.e. large-scale economic recovery of a region, but the inability for certain individuals and groups to return after displacement) are one area of recent discourse as discussed in Finch, Emrich, and Cutter (2010). They note that a broad brush to the study of recovery does not account for the return of particular individuals to an area after a disaster-process, thus if new residents migrate to a region after a disaster it can obscure the fact that those who had previously resided in the region were unable to return.

Another area of note is the relationship between pre-disaster institutions such as the government, and the presence of ‘civil society’, such as discussed in Trader-Leigh (2008), and a strong influence from these bodies has significant positive or negative influences on social structures in the aftermath of a disaster. As Lindell and Prater (2003) have discussed, access to this aid can be structured by factors such as class and wealth, as well as competency with regard to navigating government bureaucracies. This links to the discussion of ‘vulnerability’ above, as social context can play a significant role in disaster recovery long after the impact of the specific hazard has passed.

Tierney and Oliver-Smith (2012) argue that the cultural dimension of social recovery is an area which has been significantly under-researched. However, they acknowledge that a critical feature of any disaster-process is inevitably its impact upon local culture. Hoffman (1999, 2002) has discussed how a disaster can adversely affect the cultural lives of survivors, and in 'The Worst Of Times, The Best Of Times' she states:

“People’s recovery in the aftermath of disaster constitutes the Janus face of a major catastrophe, the social countenance laid over the physical reality. It can be a time of not just material but social devastation, fragmentation, and despair. For many, it can also be, quite remarkable, a time of social cohesion, purpose, and almost glory” (Hoffman, 1999; 134).

In a later publication Hoffman goes on to describe how metaphors and symbols are powerful tools deployed by local populations in the sense-making process of disaster recovery. She writes:

“peoples’ (sic) explanations of disaster tend to rely on creative, often mythological, imagination. The belief systems of people experiencing or expecting calamity are rife with symbols dealing with their situation, and their cosmologies are vibrant with metaphor” (Hoffman, 2002; 113).

Her research in California during the Oakland-Berkeley firestorm in 1991 showed her that for many, the disaster offered them a chance for a “clean slate” or enacted “creative destruction” (2002: 139). Such a metaphor allowed local people to view the destruction of their homes not as a catastrophe from which they could not recover, but instead as an opportunity to build a new, and better future. Clearly however, in this discussion there remains a tacit understanding that recovery is closely linked to processes of physical re-building.

Notions of the clean slate or re-building ‘from scratch’ are relatively common within institutional and media narratives in the aftermath of a disaster as Nygaard-Christensen (2011) has shown. Fitting into the idea that recovery is akin to material reconstruction these narratives are often based within a particular visual portrayal of images of destruction which appear as static voids requiring re-filling through intervention, rather than the more dynamic cultural process with meanings reaching beyond the boundaries of the disaster at hand, this thesis discusses below.

Conversely, in a different context post-disaster symbolism can have a radically different form. During research in northern Japan in the aftermath of the 2011 tsunami, Fuyubi Nakamura (2012) became involved in the ‘Omoide sagashi-tai’ (or ‘memory search’) which had the goal of recovering items from the wreckage which had deep personal significance to those affected, but which perhaps had little obvious or intrinsic value (and thus might be removed when the land was cleared). This work particularly focused on the recovery of photographs and photo albums. She writes “for most of the survivors, reclaiming pieces of their past in a material form, gave them strength, as proof of their life and the hometown they had lost” (2012: 21) and this shows a marked contrast with the experience of the residents of California presented by Hoffman. In this case, locals sought a symbolic connection to their lives before the tsunami struck, and metaphors such as ‘memory search’ imply that by finding these objects locals could hold their memories as something physical and tangible, as objects which had survived the tsunami just as they had.

The final key point made by Tierney and Oliver-Smith (2012) is that the recovery process after a disaster cannot be understood as occurring in a vacuum, but rather as part of wider regional and global processes. They discuss the use of the term “complex humanitarian emergencies” (2012: 138) in relation to instances where recovery processes are complicated by disasters and (for example) civil wars intertwining and reinforcing each other. Wider events such as the financial crash in 2008 can also – they argue – directly impinge upon recovery processes, even in regions without a direct stake in such events. Finally they, following archaeologist Michael Moseley’s work (2002), note that multiple

disaster events in a short period of time can have significant ramifications to any recovery process. His work in the Andes suggests that local populations had historically been adept at surviving minor disaster-processes, but that the impact of multiple disasters overwhelmed local capacity and caused significant social collapse and outward migration.

The National Research Council (2006) in their review of the literature surrounding disaster recovery highlighted several sub-fields within this broader corpus, reflecting the diverse topics of study and methodologies theorists have used. Some studies have been psychological in nature assessing the extent to which the psychological impact of disasters impinges upon recovery. Some studies demonstrating a clear correlation between psychological distress and the impact of disaster (Freedy et al. 1994), while data from other studies was more ambiguous (Shoaf et al. 2004), suggesting that while disasters clearly do have an impact on psychological health, this does not necessarily translate into an impact where medical intervention would be necessary. In short, there does not appear to be a universal experience of psychological damage from a disaster, further reinforced by, for example, the very different emotional responses to near total destruction in Japan (Nakamura 2012) and California, USA (Hoffman 2002).

Other areas of focus include the recovery of households, businesses, and the regional economy of an area. Studies focussed on households have noted that the intense disruption to locally normative household units can have wide-ranging knock-on effects to the recovery of entire regions, and cause increases to such problems as domestic violence and financial debt (Bolin 1994). Other studies into aid after disaster have shown a particular bias for nuclear family units and therefore additional hardship for single parent households, particularly those headed by women (Fothergill 2004). Furthermore, research has also shown the pre-disaster trajectories of class and racial discrimination have a particularly significant impact on the locally experienced recovery of a household after a disaster (National Research Council 2006).

Studies of the recovery of businesses and wider economic regions after disasters have shown that disasters can have distinct impacts on private business due to the loss of infrastructure and markets which accompany such events (Alesch et al. 2001). However, there is also evidence to support the conclusion that businesses in general will recover from the effects of a disaster, unless pre-disaster trajectories of economic decline were already present (Webb et al. 2003 see also Ingles and McIlvaine-Newsad 2007). Indeed, some studies have suggested that global economic trends are far more significant in terms of impact than a disaster could make (Friesema et al. 1979).

The National Research Council specify the study of community level recovery as a priority for investigation due to its relative dearth of literature taking it as its focus. Earlier studies of communities in the aftermath of disaster presented a fairly positive appraisal of recovery, suggesting that overall impact of these disasters was negligible (Friesema et al. 1979, Wright et al. 1979). Recent studies have questioned these earlier appraisals and have sought to explore more local (as opposed to regional) understandings of the nuances of community based recovery (Chang 2010). These recent studies have suggested that disasters can indeed cause major problems for the long-term recovery of communities. Other research, while broadly supporting this position, has stressed that the pre-disaster vulnerabilities of a community play a key mediator and predictor in determining wider community recovery after disasters (Bolin and Stanford 1998). Local experience in the Parish of Plaquemines surrounding the major catastrophes of the 1960s would appear to support the position of community resilience after catastrophe, but that this does not diminish the major long-term processes such experience creates.

Two related studies into the recovery of communities which is of particular relevance to this thesis, as well as being somewhat indicative of much disaster-recovery literature, are Cutter et al.'s (2014) *Hurricane Katrina and The Forgotten Coast of Mississippi* (which places itself as “the first and only study to examine the impact of Katrina on the Gulf Coast outside New Orleans” (2014: 14)) and the related ‘Evaluating Post-Katrina Recovery in Mississippi Using Repeat Photography’ (Burton et al. 2011). This research analyses the recovery of several communities of various size in coastal

Mississippi in the hope of asserting which were quickest in returning to pre-disaster conditions and which were lagging behind, along with what geophysical, social and economic factors might contribute to these disparities. Their analysis suggests significant variation in the levels of recovery experienced between many of the communities they targeted based on the metrics chosen. Using statistical analysis, repeat photography, and interviews with key informants they draw out such variables as race, class, level of storm damage, and the impact of events such as the BP oil spill as significant modifiers to a community's return to a pre-Katrina state.

The methodology and theoretical assumptions this study is based upon however have resulted in significant differences in the nature of the data gathered as compared to this thesis, despite a shared desire to broaden the post-Katrina focus of study beyond the city of New Orleans. It is probable that Plaquemines Parish has demonstrated comparable variation in access to recovery resources based on certain social indicators (such as race or class), however, by using qualitatively based methods with a focus on local lived experience and cultural practices, informed by an Ingoldian understanding of landscape as process this thesis challenges the notion that recovery to a pre-disaster state can ever be truly achieved. While measuring rates of return, and the speed of rebuilding are clearly of value when discussing the aftermath of a major catastrophe, they do not tell the whole story. This thesis hopes to fill this gap, by analysing the cultural, lived experience of life in this post-disaster landscape.

Now that the interdisciplinary field of disaster studies has been given an overview, along with key terminology such as 'vulnerability' and the key sub-field of disaster recovery, the next section shall explore the unique potential for anthropology to contribute to our wider understanding of disaster. Although the study of disaster has only recently emerged as a major focus of study amongst anthropologists, it nonetheless offers great potential for theoretical and methodological expansion within interdisciplinary disaster-studies.

The Anthropology Of Disaster

While it has been useful to offer an overview of the broad field of disaster studies above, and in particular areas where there is significant overlap with the relatively newly emerged anthropology of disaster, it is also necessary to focus specifically on the anthropology of disaster itself, and explore the unique potential it has for research into catastrophe. This section shall first briefly outline historical anthropology studies of disaster before moving on to offer an overview of more contemporary research in this area; in particular, it shall highlight the key insights anthropologists have offered in the study of the multidimensionality of disaster-processes.

Historical Disaster Anthropology

The first anthropologist to give significant attention to disaster was Anthony F.C. Wallace (1956a, 1956b, 1957) who published several studies in the 1950s but the subject did not receive widespread attention from anthropologists until the 1970s, and in particular since the early 1990s (Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 2002). One of the earliest studies by an anthropologist on hurricanes on the Gulf Coast was Paredes' 1978 'Hurricanes and Anthropologists in Florida' which attempted to find a correlation between those who evacuated in the lead up to a hurricane's landfall and certain demographic indicators. However, this study did not form part of a discipline-wide focus on hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico and until Hurricane Katrina made landfall in 2005 there was no significant corpus of writing on this subject. Paredes (2006) makes this point himself in his Introduction to a 2006 Special Issue of *American Anthropologist* on Hurricane Katrina. Published almost 30 years after 'Hurricanes and Anthropologists', he draws a comparison with the volume of anthropological writing published in the aftermath of the category 5 Hurricane Camille in 1969 and the category 3 Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The anthropological community largely ignored the former while the latter has drawn

significant interest, the current thesis included. He comments on the recent emergence of the anthropology of disaster as a major sub-field of the discipline of anthropology.

Early anthropologists who did comment on disaster were generally doing so while their 'primary' research goal was something quite different, in that they travelled to a particular locale to study something other than disaster, but a disaster had affected the community nonetheless such as Schneiger (1957) and to a lesser extent Firth (1959). Where theoretical models were produced explicitly for the anthropological study of disaster these tended to adhere to closely defined (and externally created) 'stages' of disaster impact and recovery (such as Wallace 1956b), which like similar models described above have largely been supplanted by contemporary writing. In general however, the corpus of writing drawn on by contemporary anthropologists to offer historical perspective to their theoretical writing is very similar to that described above within the wider field of disaster studies, and is dominated by geographers and sociologists.

Contemporary Disaster Anthropology

Since the mid-1990s a distinctive anthropology of disaster has begun to emerge which offers clear potential for development within the study of disaster. Indeed, it has been argued that the particularly holistic nature of much anthropological research makes it particularly effective as a means to develop the study of disasters (Oliver-Smith 1996). Three of the key anthropological writers who have studied disaster are Anthony Oliver-Smith, Susanna Hoffman, and Gregory Button who have each made significant contributions to the emergence of an anthropological study of disaster.

As has been discussed above Hoffman and Oliver-Smith (2002) have offered extensive insight into the nature of disaster and how it should be studied. Beyond the above discussion however, Oliver-Smith has explored this concept as it specifically relates

to anthropology over several publications creating a significant theoretical construction widely used by anthropologists studying disaster. In 'What Is A Disaster?: Anthropological Perspectives On A Persistent Question' (1999) he argues that due to the extremely wide variation in the phenomena which might cause a disaster (which are as wide-ranging as droughts, earthquakes, and nuclear accidents) it is better, following Wittgenstein (1973), to consider disasters as sharing certain 'family resemblances' rather than universal similarities. He goes on to argue that part of what makes disaster complicated to unambiguously define is the complexity caused by the multiple events and processes which unfold within it over an irregular time-frame. This multiplicity and shifting nature of disaster, along with the totalising nature of a disaster-process causes a confrontation with multiple local and external perspectives and socially constructed realities. As a result, he writes that "disaster is a contested concept, with 'blurred edges,' more a set of family resemblances among a wide array of physical and social events and processes rather than a set of bounded phenomena to be strictly defined" (Oliver-Smith, 1999; 21).

Despite this caveat regarding the complex nature of disaster, he does analyse certain key features which in his view are central to a developed understanding of this construction. He broadly follows the sociologist Quarantelli (1985, 1995), discussed above, in his attempt to pin down a broad definition of disaster, but goes on to argue that disasters are less "geophysical extremes...and more as functions of ongoing social orders, human-environment relations, and historical structural processes" (Oliver-Smith, 1999; 22). Moreover, he states that out of Quarantelli's list of possible definitions, a set of key questions emerged relating to our understanding of disaster which are now engaged with by theorists.

One such debate centres around discussions of the 'objective' and 'subjective' origin and impact of disaster (Oliver-Smith 1999). He argues that it is still important to note the continued necessity to weigh one's understanding of disaster between an objective phenomenon at one extreme, and a social process on the other, a topic which this thesis somewhat challenges, and shall be discussed further below. Beyond this, another key debate centres around the 'non-routine' nature of disasters. Oliver-Smith argues that some,

such as Horlick-Jones (1995), have conceptualised disasters as disruptive to routine life, social structures and systems of meaning. What this lacks however is a close critique of the assumptions surrounding the normality disasters are alleged to disrupt. Following Hewitt (1995) he argues that in most cases a hazard should not inevitably become a disaster, but that local vulnerability causes this to occur.

Focussing more on drawing out a clearer understanding for anthropological study, he argues that while a behavioural model of understanding disaster can provide interesting data regarding disaster-processes, it is only one facet of what can be studied (Oliver-Smith 1999). He draws out four key areas he finds compelling as topics for anthropological engagement:

“1) [a society’s] internal social and economic structure and dynamics in relations to 2) its external social and environmental relations, 3) the nature of its overall adaptation, and finally, 4) how this knowledge can be employed to reduce disaster vulnerability and damage.” (Oliver-Smith, 1999; 25).

He assumes throughout that disasters are as embedded within social and cultural structures as they are in the environment, and that it can be seen as symptomatic of a society’s “total adaptational strategy” (1999; 25, see also Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 2002) within its multi-faceted environment.

Ultimately, he follows Ingold (1992) in understanding the relationship between societies and their environment as being mutually constructive, leading to the conclusion that;

“disasters occur in societies. They do not occur in nature. However, disasters do not originate exclusively in societies, but rather emerge from social environmental relations and the institutionalized forms those relations take.” (Oliver-Smith, 1999; 28).

Thus in his view they represent a breakdown of a given society's ability to interact with wider processes in symbiosis (Oliver-Smith, 1996, 1999). His position for anthropology in this area is thus;

“disasters are best conceptualised in terms of the web of relations that link society (the organization and relations among individuals and groups), environment (the network of linkages with the physical world in which people and groups are both constituted and constituting) and culture (the values, norms, beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge that pertain to that organization and those relations)” (Oliver-Smith, 1999; 28)².

He does however refine this point, by including a discussion of vulnerability, as he notes that the proximity of a potential hazard does not innately create a disaster process (1999).

The multiplicity of competing interests within a given society can lead to an imbalance of a society to maintain an adaption to its environment, creating a historically rooted context of vulnerability, leading to the potential for a disaster. Oliver-Smith calls for the necessity of a ‘political ecology of disasters’ to be developed in order to explore this construction of vulnerability and the disaster-as-process with a focus on “the dynamic relationships between a human population, its socially generated and politically enforced productive and allocative patterns, and its physical environment” (Oliver-Smith 1999; 29).

Thus, for example, he argues in a later publication that the goals of international development, where it seeks to increase material prosperity, can in fact increase a community's vulnerability to disaster through ecological damage, thus creating tension between the simultaneous goals of reducing material poverty, and protecting against future disasters (Oliver-Smith 2013) and policy makers are increasingly being warned that the impacts of global climate change caused by increasing material prosperity might have far-

² Though this understanding was given further refinement and development in his subsequent publications (see below).

reaching affects in terms of increasingly vulnerability to hazards (Oliver-Smith et al. 2012).

Button (1999, 2010) has also engaged with the concept of disaster, but with a focus more directly on the media and political construction and manipulation of the term ‘disaster’ and the implications of this for survivors and victims of such events. In so doing, hierarchies of knowledge can be created whereby particular discourses surrounding what ‘really’ happened during a given disaster become influenced by politically powerful actors, often at the expense of politically marginalised local populations. His understanding feeds directly into the next section, whereby the multidimensionality of disaster is discussed.

Moving away from broader understandings of disaster in general, others have also explicitly engaged with regions affected with multiple disaster events within a short temporal span (Moseley 1999, see also 2002). Moseley (1999) uses the term ‘convergent catastrophe’ within his archaeological research into Andean community collapse, where he argues that historical evidence suggests a society can survive several large disasters over a long historical period without significant disruption to regional social stability. Multiple disasters within short periods however can cause disruption beyond the capacity for communities to recover, and can cause significant economic or cultural collapse, or radical response and major social restructuring. Ray-Bennett (2009), who defines ‘multiple disasters’ as follows;

“two or more natural hazards that affect a vulnerable population in the *same* region, singly or in combination or collaterally, at varying magnitudes, and at different times.”
(Ray-Bennett 2009; 277)

Tierney and Oliver-Smith (2012) have also considered this topic, and while noting how little has been published on the effects of multiple-disaster events stress the need for policy decisions pertaining to regions affected to take into account the unique complications such processes can cause.

Additionally, the idea of a disaster ‘ending’ in a discrete and easily defined way has been offered critique by Hastrup (2010). Her research on tsunami survivors suggests that the direct experience of this disaster has not truly ended, and local people remain highly cautious and mindful of the ocean and its movements. Hastrup argues that:

“As an experience continuing to feature in people’s lives long after its occurrence, the tsunami was not seen by survivors simply as an event of the past but equally as a threat to a durable present and an anticipated future. The absences that I deal with here are therefore not just the concrete material losses suffered by the villagers on account of the tsunami, but additionally, the attendant absence of the ability to act in the present habitual social setting and to plan ahead for a time to come.” (Hastrup 2010: 101)

She argues in a later section that this disaster was not experienced as an event, but had in fact “seeped into the survivors’ lifeworld” (2010: 101), and aptly demonstrates the far-reaching cultural impact a disaster can have on community life in terms of that community’s relationship with disaster itself.

Finally, Hoffman and Oliver-Smith (2002) have discussed how methodologically, anthropology is well suited to offer key insight into disaster process. Its holistic *modus operandi* can highlight the disaster process as beginning long before a destructive event actually occurs, thus better exploring a wide range of factors contributing to local vulnerability. Once disaster does occur, anthropology can be well suited to draw out locally emergent symbolism, interpretation, and attachments which all contribute (or mitigate) the impact of such an event. This can be particularly effective for the better targeting of both emergency, and long-term aid to survivors.

Related to this, a discussion in *Social Anthropology* surrounding an article by Revet entitled “‘A Small World’: ethnography of a natural disaster simulation in Lima, Peru” (2013a) shows how anthropologists can use their methodology to study those who are involved with the planning for disasters. Here, Revet shows how the ‘world’ of international disaster preparation has become a sphere where a limited number of

(normally White and Western) individuals interact with each other and local elites, ostensibly to prepare local populations and officials for disaster contingencies but with limited real success. Indeed, this focus on international and local elites interacting was criticised by Revet, who discovered that the local populations participating in this practice had little interest in the results, and in fact suggested several more pressing concerns they had which were not featured in the simulation. Napier (2013) develops this idea, and suggests that the principle reason governments and agencies are keen to engage in what he calls 'disaster play' of this nature is in fact to mitigate their own responsibility. By conducting such practices in the public eye they can be seen to be preparing for disasters which, when they occur, allow the government to make claims that any destruction or loss of life was inevitable, given how prepared they were. Revet (2013b) goes on to claim that ideas of disaster preparedness implicitly assume that a disaster will happen, and that notions of 'risk' are therefore meaningless in this context.

Moving beyond the more general discussion of disaster anthropology, it is important to offer an overview of one of the key areas where anthropologists have contributed to the study of disaster, by discussing the multidimensionality of disaster, and Oliver-Smith (2002) has described how disasters will be experienced and interpreted in a multiplicity of different ways based on the unique perspective of those experiencing it. Researchers studying such processes are therefore confronted with the multiple imagined realities of those situated within such times, as disasters usually impinged upon every facet of social life.

Button (1999, 2010) has written extensively on how these multiple-perspectives and interpretations can be structured within hierarchies of power and knowledge. By manipulating, hiding, and prioritising certain viewpoints and data sets, powerful actors and the media can construct a narrative of the 'true' impact of a given disaster which might be wildly different from the narratives and experience of local, marginalised groups who often are most significantly affected by a disaster (in terms of relative material or cultural impact). Button therefore stresses that within a full understanding of a disaster-process we

should take into consideration the social construction of both disaster, and the uncertainty surrounding it.

This section has offered an overview of the specifically anthropological study of disaster-processes. The holistic focus of anthropological research offers great potential for studying the broad impact of catastrophe, and this thesis seeks to contribute to this corpus with its focus on Plaquemines Parish, and in particular Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill. Most research on these catastrophes however has focussed on a different field site, and the next section shall offer a brief overview of the scholarly work already published on these catastrophic disaster-processes.

The Literature Of Hurricane Katrina And The BP Oil Spill

Before concluding this review, it is useful to offer an overview of some of the key topics which have been studied by interdisciplinary disaster scholars relating to the two large catastrophes which provided the impetus for the thesis which follows. In Checker's 'Anthropology in the Public Sphere, 2008' (2009), it is noted after all, that Katrina has caused an upswing in the number of anthropologists studying disaster. As shall become apparent, the bulk of this literature (particularly with regard to Hurricane Katrina) has focussed on the experience of the city of New Orleans. Indeed, at time of writing virtually no social research had been conducted outside this metropolitan area with only a few notable exceptions (such as Cutter et al. 2014, Ingles and McIlvaine-Newsad 2007, McGuire 2006). While this is certainly valuable for this thesis to an extent, the experiences discussed in many of these reports differ significantly from those of residents of Plaquemines Parish. As such, studying a well-documented disaster within a fresh context engages with the centrality of vulnerability emanating from local cultural context, and also challenges dominant 'official' narratives surrounding large disaster, as the local experience of catastrophe in the rural Plaquemines Parish should be no less significant than its more famous neighbour in New Orleans, yet at present this has largely been suggested by the weight of literature as shall be shown below.

Administrative Failure

A significant proportion of the scholarly work published on the impact of Hurricane Katrina has focused on the various administrative failures of the local and federal government who (it has been shown) neglected to both maintain the city's flood defences to their highest possible standard and failed to fully evacuate the city's population prior to the storm (Brinkley 2007, Cooper and Block 2006, Dyson 2006, van Heerden and Bryan 2006). Additional to this, there has been extensive critique of the many failed medium-term responses to the disaster (Button 2010). Adeola (2009) has shown that the impact of this disaster was (at least in New Orleans) magnified by these administrative shortcomings, and highlighted a newly emergent mistrust regarding the government's ability to offer flood protect.

Oil Exploration

Oil spills have been used by authors to highlight wider corporate cultures in this region. Pine (2006), noted that the abilities of clean-up crews to deal with large oil spills was seriously limited when compared to the industry's technical knowledge regarding how to extract the oil in the first place. This concern was shared by many within both the academic community and industry whose worries had (until the BP oil spill) largely fallen on deaf ears (Bourne 2010). The BP oil spill itself, brought into stark relief this widespread inability to counter oil spills, and several authors have used the spill to critique the wider model of oil exploration in the Gulf of Mexico. One, Bond, has shown in 'The Science of Catastrophe' (2011) that oil corporations historically base their perceived preparedness to respond to an oil spill on their ability to counter the *last* major spill. In this case, the oil corporations of the Gulf of Mexico were ready to tackle a spill comparable to the Exxon-Valdez in Alaska, which, as it was a large tanker running aground in an arctic climatic

region had little in common with an oil well leaking deep below the ocean's surface in the Gulf of Mexico.

Juhasz (2011) in particular has been highly critical of BP's efforts to clean the oil spilled during this disaster. While the government was ostensibly in overall control of the response to the spill, she argues it was largely employees of BP who would issue orders and direct clean-up and compensation efforts. She has also argued that the compensation programs offered to local residents were inadequate for their needs. Clean up operations have been critiqued by others, such as Broy and Doesmagen (2011), who conducted a self-reported survey of residents of several coastal communities including Plaquemines Parish in order to better understand the impact exposure to the oil spill, and the dispersant used to counter it, might have on human health. Using statistical analysis they discovered that a significant portion of the local population had come into direct contact with either oil or dispersant and many were reporting medical issues which they believed were linked to this.

Furthermore, Daina Harvey, in 'A New Geography of Trouble' (2012) notes that both Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill share certain institutional and cultural similarities. Primary amongst them is the fact that both Katrina and the spill were both 'worst case scenarios', which had not been sufficiently planned for. Her research also suggests that the emotional and symbolic impact of living through a second large disaster so recently after Katrina was deeply felt, and the concern experienced by local residents in the 9th ward of New Orleans had a significantly negative impact on their emotional well-being.

Race and Class: Vulnerability In New Orleans

Similar to Klineberg's (2002) analysis above, wider social structures largely invisible at other times were brought into sharper focus during the impact of the disaster, in particular with regard to racism and class. The racial element to the impact and response with relation to Hurricane Katrina has been a major area of research for many within the social sciences, anthropologists included.

Some have taken an unequivocal stance on the true root of the experience of racial discrimination the Black population of New Orleans faced, as shown by Rodríguez's scathing 'The Meaning of "Disaster" Under the Dominance of White Life' (2007) which conceptualises the poor treatment of the Black residents of New Orleans as simply part of on-going systemic, institutionalised racism. There is a strong consensus that (at least in New Orleans) the Black population suffered a disproportionately high level of hardship compared to their White neighbours. Salaam (2007), for example, states that the aftermath of Katrina simply served to highlight an already present (and often ignored) racial divide experienced throughout American culture.

Dyson in *Come Hell Or High Water* (2006) develops a similar argument, and amongst an extensive examination of the various ways in which African Americans were disadvantaged in this context draws attention to much of the negative commentary by certain political commentators (both secular and religious) who portrayed the high levels of destruction and loss of life in New Orleans and amongst the Black communities in particular as either the result of negligence and ignorance on the part of the population or, as evidence of divine judgment against a-moral communities and the actions of those within them. Furthermore, in Elliott and Pais' 'Race, Class, and Hurricane Katrina' (2013) the authors set out evidence to suggest that both race *and* class were factors which magnified the hardship of those who lived through the storm, but that as much of New Orleans' Black community was also poor they were doubly disadvantaged by this disaster.

These racial and economic disparities have also been studied by Cutter and Emrich (2006) who have written about how differing geographic and economic situations prior to the hurricane have led to varying levels of vulnerability, and thus impact, as the hurricane struck. They also note that these varying local contexts and situations mean that a 'one size fits all' approach to aid relief and re-building efforts has exacerbated these social disparities. Thus the social and economic inequalities present prior to a disaster are magnified during and after such events. Cutter and Emrich argue that hazard prevention and compensation efforts should take this into account when investing in the region and that those identified as most vulnerable should be the primary beneficiaries of such investment. Related to these discussions of power disparity and vulnerability, qualitative researchers have highlighted that the 'ownership' of a given disaster (i.e. establishing a position to declare what has occurred, and who was most significantly affected) constitutes a significant influence on the perceived impact (and long-term effects) of the disaster itself (Dyer 2002).

Such a discussion of 'ownership' can feed into every element of disaster recovery, and in the case of New Orleans, Dawdy (2006), has utilised a term more usually associated with archaeological writing, taphonomy (which is the process through which that which archaeologists study is formed) to frame and conceptualize the actual process of clearing the land of debris in areas most badly destroyed by the hurricane. She reflects on the process and politicization of how individuals (and governments) come to determine what is 'debris' and what should be preserved.

Migration and 'Refugee'

Studies focussed on Katrina have also extensively investigated this in southern Louisiana, but as above, most of them have focussed on either New Orleans or the more urban parts of St. Bernard Parish (Oliver-Smith 2006).

There has been a measurable drop in the total population of the city of New Orleans, while the population of neighbouring land-locked Parishes to the north have risen (Myers, Slack, and Singelmann 2010). This study also demonstrated that outward migration was higher in communities considered to be poorest in the pre-storm landscape, suggesting a clear correlation between income and ability to return. Others could not return to Louisiana at all, and Jenkins (2006) has chosen to study how this arrival of internal migrants from southern Louisiana might affect the United States as a whole, making therefore an interesting methodological choice to study how the migrants might shape their refuge, rather than how the migration or refuge shapes the evacuees.

Masquiere (2006) has discussed how many within the Deep South and especially in southern Louisiana found the use of the term 'refugee' both inaccurate and offensive. Although this word was used extensively in the mainstream press to describe those fleeing the hurricane many felt that associating those from New Orleans with groups which until that time had exclusively been a non-American 'other' was both belittling of those from New Orleans, but also created a wedge between these individuals and a notion of 'the American' which could be used to limit the rights and protections many felt should have been afforded to these citizens with greater commitment by government bodies.

Several researchers have developed the lived experience of temporary evacuation in order to better understand the experience of trauma and community in the post-disaster

context. The writers Lee et al. found in 'Coping With Hurricane Katrina' (2009) enormous levels of psychological trauma amongst those who had been hardest hit by the storm. They compared this with a measurement of 'psychological resiliency' in order to better understand how well an individual might be expected to cope with such large-scale disaster. Others have explored more community-based lines of study, Morrice, in 'Heartache and Hurricane Katrina' (2013) demonstrated that for many a return to the communities from which they had evacuated was considered a goal which (they hoped) would enable the individual in question to gain proper closure on the experience of displacement. This was unfortunately not always possible.

However, this desire to return to one's community – if realised – is something research suggests can be indeed hugely beneficial to both an individual's long-term psychological recovery and the survival of a community's identity. Burley et al. (2006) have aptly demonstrated this in the context of Grand Isle, a rural community similar to Plaquemines Parish in several respects. Unfortunately, Elliot et al. (2010) have shown that maintaining social networks is often crucial in maintaining strong community support, but that those with limited financial resources (who were often the hardest hit) often struggle to cover the necessary costs of returning to an area where most infrastructure and employment has been destroyed, and then re-building their homes. Li et al. (2008) additionally noted that strong communities can be essential in the preparation for hurricanes too, through informal networks of information sharing, and in 'neighbourliness' and a desire to look out for those living nearby you.

Aid and Recovery

The receipt of aid and its effect on recovery has also been discussed in the context of Hurricane Katrina. Ethrude (2006) is one such effort, while involved in relief work on the Mississippi Gulf Coast in the recent aftermath of Katrina, Ethrude was struck firstly by how comparatively little of the money flowing towards the re-building effort was making it into the hands of local businesses, and how the vast majority was going to large corporations,

many of them from out with the local context. Secondly, he remarks on the widely held dissatisfaction with the relief effort in general, and the feeling that local wishes and opinions are not being considered during the re-building processes.

Lipsitz (2006) also comments on the problematic dynamic the current aid initiatives have brought to the re-building efforts, this time based in the city of New Orleans. This research argues that the unequal distribution of resources, rather than being an accident, or simply a by-product of cronyism is in fact part of a wider 'counter-revolution' against the civil rights movement, which has worked to de-value social welfare and rights movements while promoting an ideology of elite values as 'natural' (2006).

Such analysis also dovetails with local interpretations of the renewal of New Orleans post-Katrina. Breunlin and Regis (2006) seek to closely focus on the experience of place making, resistance, and recovery in the post-Katrina landscape as seen from the perspective of a neighbourhood social club. Their analysis found that local people did not view the urban renewal projects as existing in a vacuum left by Hurricane Katrina, but instead as part of a long history of urban renewal initiatives which had been enacted over the history of the neighbourhood. Social clubs of the type these writers studied are important in re-establishing the place attachment and community integrity of some of the more historic black communities in New Orleans such as Desire or the 9th Ward, and the general ignorance of city-wide planning to them is detrimental to both the potential success of these plans, and the renewal of these communities (2006). Basing their thinking on Simon's (2004) writing that people should be considered as 'infrastructure', Breunlin and Regis state that it is organisations such as these social clubs which will be the real foundation for the re-building of New Orleans, not top-down urban renewal projects.

With regard to the BP oil spill, Timothy Haney (2012) uses the model of 'ecological debt' to analysis the experience of Louisiana in the context of national United States patterns of wealth and consumption. This model was primarily developed to

demonstrate that within global consumption patterns rich 'Western' nations tend to extract wealth and value from poorer, marginalised nations leaving them with poverty and pollution. Haney suggests that within the United States this can also be found, whereby the rich north of the country enjoys cheap petrol prices through the exploitation of southern states, particularly Louisiana.

The Media's Response

Understanding the media's response to both Katrina and the oil spill is of particular use, as many residents of Plaquemines Parish were deeply immersed in its narrative while these catastrophes played out. This has led to a great deal of dissatisfaction with the way the media described those who survived the hurricane. As shall be discussed below the media primarily framed the disaster as striking only New Orleans which then subsequently was over-run by violence and looting. Local people were therefore dismayed that their own (i.e. non-New Orleans based) experience of the hurricane was ignored, but also that they were associated with this violence within the broad label of 'survivor'. Although scholarly critique of the media's message is presented below, little to none of this was apparent in the local narratives of the people of the Parish of Plaquemines.

Most scholars agree that the response of the media after Hurricane Katrina was extremely misleading as to what actually occurred on the ground. Many of the most sensationalist stories 'discovered' by the media such as the alleged murders in the Superdome or widespread violent looting have emerged as being untrue (Campbell 2010). Certainly there was looting in the direct aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (indeed in his personal account of surviving Katrina *Heart Like Water* (2007) Clark discusses this) but like Clark the vast majority of people were gathering supplies critical for their survival such as food, medicine, and bottled water. This negative portrayal however delayed the arrival of aid to the city due to security concerns over its arrival (Campbell 2010).

Garfield (2013) has suggested that this constructed picture of the disaster victims has in effect labelled them as 'unworthy' of sympathy or aid. Part of this comes from negative racial stereotyping which entered reporting. Given that many of those pictured in these desperate situations were poor and Black it became easy for media corporations to create a narrative based on themes of barbarism and lawlessness, one which not only played into the worst stereotypes of American popular culture, but also tarnished the reputation of the city itself.

In contrast to the above, what is perhaps most interesting in the analysis of the media's response to the BP oil spill is the manner with which BP successfully controlled the flow of information to the media, and waged an extensive public relations campaign in order to very aggressively promote their own version of events as they unfolded during the disaster and in the direct aftermath. This was often to the anger of some local politicians, amongst them Plaquemines Parish President Billy Nungesser (New York Times 2010).

BP managed to successfully control and distort information to such an extent regarding the spill that often the media were unable to present the full extent of BP's negligence (Button 2010, Hertsgaard 2013). As the disaster progressed and the clean-up operation got under way BP's attempts to control of the media increased with (as some have argued) the staging of several 'clean-up' operations designed to showcase the corporation's commitment to environmental protection, but which were in fact little more than fiction orchestrated for a television audience (Buskey 2011, Button 2010). Reporters were, however, allowed easy access to recipients of compensation money (Allen 2011). Reporters who managed to gain access to some of the volunteers participating in the clean-up work expressed concern at the lack of safety equipment and training they had (Alvar, 2011).

What is perhaps of even greater concern, however, is that the message constructed by the media has at times neglected to investigate the actions of BP and instead attempted to cast the recipients of compensation from BP as greedy fraudsters. In a message reminiscent of the negative portrayal of the poor Black population of New Orleans in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, Barker (2011) christened local recipients of compensation as 'spillionaires', and suggested that a large number of Gulf Coast residents were becoming extremely (and fraudulently) wealthy by exploiting the compensation process. The substance of this article has been criticised by many, foremost among them Allman (2011) and the validity of Barker's claims are cast in serious doubt.

Conclusion

This chapter has offered an overview of the broad, interdisciplinary field of disaster studies, as well as the anthropology of disaster, and the sub-field of study centred around community and individual level recovery in the aftermath of a disaster. It is to these literature corpuses this thesis wishes to make a contribution. It shall do so in three key areas, which offer particularly fertile ground for the development of the wider field.

Firstly, The National Research Council (2006) have highlighted the recovery after a major disaster to be an area scholars should focus on. In particular, they note that longer-term recovery (as opposed to more response-focused research) is particularly critical. Beyond this broad call for study, Tierney and Oliver-Smith (2012) have highlighted specifically the need for the study of communities which have experienced multiple disasters over short temporal spans. The Parish of Plaquemines presents a fascinating context to expand on existing scholarship in these areas, as at the time the data gathering occurred five years had passed since Hurricane Katrina, and one year since the BP oil spill. Additionally, it can be argued that processes of recovery were still on-going from the large hurricanes of the 1960s, especially amongst older residents. Furthermore, by focussing specifically on *cultural* recovery, new insight can be offered into the recovery process

itself. Many previous studies have been based on an assumption surrounding a destructive disaster-process which would ultimately be resolved, allowing a community to return to a (perhaps modified) version of pre-disaster normality. This thesis conceptualises disaster recovery in a different way, and stresses the need to view such processes as on-going constructive forces as a landscape is eternally 'constructed' by the organisms and forces within it. It argues that a given culture is always incomplete and ever-evolving, thus 'recovery' is not something which can have a distinct 'end' but in fact becomes woven within the lived experience of mundane, everyday life.

Secondly, what makes these data of particular interest is the local experience of disaster, and the threat of disaster, to be somewhat normalised. Hoffman and Oliver-Smith (2002) notes this as a critical area of study, as it offers an opportunity to better understand hazard as constitute parts of a wider mutually-constructed landscape within which humans are an active part. It also offers scope to engage with 'disaster' as a concept, as the locally-emergent lived experience of disaster as a normalised process offers insight into the way scholars might frame their studies of catastrophe in such contexts. These are some of the key observations made within this thesis with relation to Plaquemines Parish, as the local communities are threatened with the possibility of large-scale catastrophe with great regularity, alongside the equally prevalent impact of much smaller hurricanes and oil spills which directly influence local culture. As such these 'normal' disasters have significantly influenced the manner in which the much larger catastrophic processes have impacted this community.

Thirdly, while the corpus of writing published so far on the two major catastrophes most extensively discussed in this thesis has been broad in its theoretical scope, it has not extensively engaged with communities outwith the greater New Orleans urban area. By choosing a different field site, with quite different cultural context, processes of social change, and constructed vulnerability, these well-documented disasters can be viewed from a new perspective, which highlights the necessity for locally grounded discourse in discussion of the impact, aftermath, and recovery from major catastrophes of this nature.

Chapter 3 – Precariousness Part

1: Power, Inequality, and the

‘Local’

Introduction

This chapter shall focus on the perception of social and cultural changes to a particular ideal of normative everyday lifestyle in the Parish. The discussion of such changes form central components of narratives surrounding their community discussed amongst many local people. Such discussions centre around ideas of a moral or cultural decay within the Parish which has taken place over the past several decades, but which has become particularly acute due to the impact of these two catastrophes. These discussions primarily focus on the perceived decline of proper moral and cultural codes of behaviour within wider American society, but in particular within the Parish itself, and the economic shifts discussed in the chapter which follows this one, are often seen as part of this process of cultural decay. These ideas are often closely tied to racial stereotypes (both a negative ‘other’ and a positive ‘self’), and the supposed decline of moral and cultural codes of conduct has often coincided with the relative decline (or at least challenge) to the notion of a White-controlled cultural hegemony. When taken together, this chapter’s focus on social and cultural precariousness, and the next chapter’s focus on economic precariousness demonstrate both how Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill were deeply embedded within on-going processes, but also how these disasters develop these processes in their turn. These discussions hold deep relevance to many local people, but in particular those who might identify as White and male. Although not the exclusive focus of these chapters, it is particularly interesting to reflect upon how a somewhat historically privileged sub-set of the local population has directly experienced shifts in a constructed cultural ‘normality’, and much of the analysis presented here reflects their particular viewpoint.

The experience of disaster has impacted all aspects of social life, so that even the measurement of time is changed by it – local people will often discuss ‘before the Storm’ and ‘after the Storm’ to orientate the memory they are discussing. Although I do not wish to suggest that this hurricane has in some way changed the fundamental manner in which time is experienced in this local context (a notion critiqued by writers such as Gell 1996), I instead find James and Mills’ question – “[h]ow do embedded ideas and practices marking time affect the way we act, even the production of collective events?” (2005: 1) – to have great value here, in a place where, as the author John Green might say “[i]magining the future is a kind of nostalgia” (2005: 68). As shall be discussed in the following ethnographic examples there was a widespread perception that the quality of life in the Parish has been in major decline since an imagined golden age in the 1950s. The Storm has acted as something of a catalyst for these feelings, and thus when local men discussed the Parish ‘before the Storm’ (and often, how the Parish might one day be after it is reconstructed) they often used this imagined golden age as their template.

This chapter therefore seeks to explore this so-called decline from the perspective of local people, with particular emphasis on the perceived threat which is posed by the growth of a ‘trailer trash’ population within the Parish, and the breaking down of traditionally established racial boundaries between Black and White populations, situated alongside broader cultural shifts in what constitutes normative ‘America’. The perceived ingress of cultural stereotypes which are associated with these groups into a narrowly defined ideal of American culture presents a threat to ideas of a local, normative (White) hegemony. This chapter links closely with Chapter 5 and the ‘othering’ process connected with the ‘local, stranger, and stranger you know’ identities commonly referred to in the Parish, but places the focus much more explicitly onto the construction of this ‘local’ identity, primarily as reflected amongst the White participants of my acquaintance, but also as viewed by non-White participants. How these ideas are threatened, strengthened, and stay the same in the aftermath of two large catastrophes is of particular interest to our analysis. After a discussion of the creation of ‘Whiteness’ as a racial, cultural, and moral identity within American society (a term often submerged within a hegemonic narrative of ‘real’ American society), this chapter shall then discuss how these notions play out within

the Parish in the aftermath of these catastrophes, both in the relationship between locally understood categories of 'White' and 'Black' and also between the relationship between 'White' and 'White Trash'.

In the next chapter the economic precariousness of the Parish of Plaquemines will be discussed, as a means of situating both Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill within the economic context of the local community. What becomes apparent is that many local residents of this region were in an economically vulnerable position long before these catastrophes impacted upon the local area. With this said however, by framing these catastrophic disaster-processes within this historical context, it becomes apparent that such processes can and do magnify economic hardship already present, as well as create new problems which local people must overcome.

Taken together, these two chapters outline a clear picture of vulnerability and precariousness, based in deeply cultural processes which form the context in which disasters are experienced, both as discrete events, and as on-going formative cultural forces. As has been previously discussed, what becomes designated a 'disaster' does not exist outside of social life and these chapters offer broad insight into such cultural networks, and the wider nature of local vulnerability which magnified the impact of the on-going process of disaster in the Parish of Plaquemines.

I am sure that most of my respondents would be keen for me to state that there is an important difference between people who are 'trailer trash' and people who simply live in a trailer. The distinction was mentioned in conversation from time-to-time and it is in this perceived dualism where we find particularly interesting potential for intellectual inquiry when developing an exploration of the 'precariousness' of life in the Parish. Such an aversion to labels of this nature have been noted by other writers (such as Hartigan 1992, and Hurley 2001) and forms an interesting framing device for studying normative assumptions regarding American culture.

As has been previously mentioned, the participants accessed during the ethnography of this thesis were predominantly White. This has resulted in the analysis of this chapter to focus much more heavily on the experience of White individuals in the Parish as opposed to any other group³. A complete picture of the power dynamics and processes of 'othering' within the Parish in the aftermath of these catastrophes as it pertains to race would require research more explicitly focussed on the examination of this topic to fully draw out. It is hoped this chapter might begin this process, and offer a starting point for future research into the creation of racial inequality in this particular context. Additionally to this, by focussing on the framing of a particular cultural understanding of 'proper' social engagement by a socially powerful group's insight can be offered to better understand the wider systems of inequality.

Constructing Us and Them

Conceptualising the 'other' as a system of symbolically and socially constructed boundaries is a fruitful lens through which to understand the positioning of local people within the post-disaster landscape of Plaquemines Parish (particularly when it comes to understanding locally delineated 'races'). Authors who have utilised such a model have been able to offer insight into the positioning of locally understood 'races' in a given context, but also how such 'races' regulate the dynamic boundaries erected which surround such constructions as they relate to ideas of 'morality' and 'cultural norms'. As has been pointed out, there is nothing inherent or intrinsic about a 'race'; such a term exists primarily as a social and cultural construction, and should thus be understood by researchers with this in mind (Wilson 2002). With this said however, this positioning of the term as a cultural construction must be balanced with an understanding of how such constructions are often intimately tied to skin colour and other physical attributes, and acknowledging the centrality that 'the body' can take in any discourse related to race is

³ Data from the 2010 US Census suggests that almost 70% of the local population identify as White, while 23% identify as African American.

crucial (Wiegman 1995). Bourgois and Schonberg (2007) analyse this dynamic using the term ‘ethnicized habitus’ to critically examine how norms of everyday interaction can be structured on the basis of skin colour as it intersects with particular formative power dynamics. This is of course doubly relevant after a catastrophe, where recovery (in the sense of material reconstruction) has been shown to be impacted by variables such as race (Cutter et al. 2014).

By examining the idea of ‘race’ within a framework of power dynamics, inequality, and moralistic boundaries authors such as Wray (2006) and Wilson (2002) have demonstrated that by actively constructing and maintaining the boundaries of ‘otherness’ associated with the notion of other races, a person is simultaneously positioning themselves within a complex social structure. Within the construction of ‘Whiteness’ (which reflects much of the content of this chapter) this process of ‘othering’ and self-construction is often intended to implicitly (and perhaps unintentionally) protect and reinforce the position of ‘White’ as the more powerful and privileged category within any social hierarchy (Hage 2000). Within this understanding of race it is important to acknowledge that White people are also racialised within society (Frankenberg 1999). As many writers have noted however, understanding the construction of social inequality with reference to only one cultural dynamic can lead to an incomplete picture of social relations (Lindisfarne and Neale 2013) and, rather, that we should recognise that a plurality of factors often combine to structure the lived experience of social inequality and the generation of the ‘other’. In this case, the role of class, adherence to a particular code of morality, and on-going relationships with disasters are of relevance to our understanding.

As such, it has been noted that the designator ‘White trash’ or ‘trailer trash’ should be understood as a complex cultural othering mechanism intended to diminish the target upon which the label is conferred, distance the speaker from this ‘other’, and additionally, reinforce the superiority of the speaker within the locally understood social hierarchy (Hartigan 1997). The designator ‘white trash’ is itself an interesting – and arguably contradictory – label. Wray’s *Not Quite White* (2006) charts the lexicological usage of the term over time, and observes the juxtaposition of ‘White’ (a term usually synonymous with

cleanliness and purity) with 'trash' (a term which symbolises dirt and that which is unwanted). By combining these ideas, Wray argues, the speaker creates a category of person suspended outwith the system of mainstream cultural values, a tainted 'other' which must be distinguished from oneself. This is not to say that attaching these particular meanings to these terms is unproblematic, particularly when considering the history of racial (and to a lesser extent class-based) domination present in the Deep South of America. As with many comparable labels both the definition and application of such terms is suspended within a network of power relations, which can offer insight into the way language can be co-opted to implicitly reinforce a particular worldview, as associating 'White' with 'purity' aptly demonstrates.

By considering such a term within a wider framework of the study of race and boundary theory, writers have been able to better understand the conceptualisation of 'White' as an 'invisible' race within social hierarchy (Wilson 2002). Here, understanding the construction of inequality more generally becomes crucial, as the terms 'White trash' and 'trailer trash' often have strong class, cultural, and moral connotations (Hartigan 1997, Hurley 2001, Wray 2006). Thus by confining multiple negative assertions regarding poverty, immoral behaviour, and deviance from cultural 'norms' to a group separated from so-called 'White' culture the speaker is able to maintain an illusion of moral and cultural hegemony and superiority. This process is equally applicable to the designation and production of any derided group within a given context.

Although the term 'White trash' was initially coined by Black slaves in the antebellum deep south to refer to the poorest white farmers of Celtic origin (Wilson 2002), it has, since the Great Depression and World War 2 gradually come to be synonymous with trailer park living, and living in mobile homes more generally (Hurley 2001). These two events established that trailer parks could provide cheap living environments for those on low incomes, but as a result would irrevocably connect the idea of poverty with that of mobile homes. During this period, mobile home manufacturers divided their product line between their more traditional roles as a temporary recreational vehicle, and a new focus on permanent, affordable housing aimed at lower middle-class returnees from World War

2 (Hurley 2001). Over the next two decades however it became apparent that residents of trailer parks were not able to maintain the normative middle-class lifestyle which emerged in the post-war period (Hurley 2001). As a result, trailer parks (and those resident in them) came to be associated with deviant, immoral, and alternative lifestyles.

This connection of trailer park residents with notions of moral impropriety is a major factor in the positioning of the residents of such places outwith the 'mainstream' of cultural norms. Like other derogatory labels such as 'redneck' or 'hillbilly' these stereotypes are presented as a homogenous group (Darling 2009a), which can often spread to engulf any resident of a rural, agricultural community, which are often presented as being culturally homogenising (Darling 2005). Traditionally, these homogenous stereotypes (whether they be trailer park residents, 'rednecks', or 'White trash') are presented as lacking a sense of rootedness, being transitory, and lacking in a sense of pride relating to the maintenance of their homes and properties (Counts and Counts 2001, Hurley 2001).

Unlike terms such as 'redneck' however – which has undergone something of a reimagining in recent years (Brooks 2000, Darling 2009b) – the terms 'white trash' or 'trailer trash' remain almost universally terms of derision. In popular media they form shorthand reference points for any number of social ills, from carelessness and drunkenness, high levels of illiteracy, to even include the murderous antagonists of the 1972 film *Deliverance* and other horror or action films (Hartigan 1992). This is reflected in news reporting whereby one of the negative side-effects of Hurricane Katrina has been an individual's 'decline' from a fixed property to a mobile home (Dewan 2007) or a piece covering voters who were both supporting the election of Barack Obama while also (to the writer's surprise) displaying symbols commonly associated with these 'redneck' labels such as the Southern Cross (Burkeman 2008). While Dewan's (2007) piece does offer a somewhat more nuanced and in-depth analysis of the lived experience of his interviewees post-Katrina it still (along with the rather sensationalised Burkeman article) maintains the positioning of the trailer park lifestyle as backward and undesirable.

The above discussion of the creation and maintenance of White privilege through the cultural ‘othering’ of socially defined stereotypes provides the framework for the remainder of this chapter. By examining how this privilege is seen to be threatened by the social and material changes in the Parish over the past half century, and in particular since the Hurricane and oil spill, we can track the increasingly perceived feeling of precariousness which is felt by those possessing this privileged identity (which as shall be shown, is used as the baseline for an un-problematic ‘American’ identity). This chapter shall therefore focus primarily on the experience of White identity in relation to the ingress of ‘White trash’, and also by the de-segregation and equality activism utilised by African-Americans within wider American politics. Throughout, what becomes clear is that the ‘recovery’ from Katrina and the oil spill is woven within processes already well-established within Parish life, processes which these catastrophes have influenced within the wider on-going relationship local people have with normalised disaster-processes.

Declining America

Understanding how ‘White’ identity is understood and experienced in Plaquemines Parish, and how this has been affected by the various disasters within this region is crucial in establishing what it means to be a ‘real American’ in this context. As has been discussed above, there are many complex cultural and moral aspects to understanding this construction which forms part of boundary maintenance of this identity.

This section shall examine the local understanding of the position of America itself on the world stage, the position of Plaquemines Parish within American politics, and the relationship local people of the Parish have with certain constructed ‘others’ who, like the white trash mentioned above, do not fit within the dominant ideal of normative Parish identity. What is shown is a complex and multi-layered set of relationships encompassing the individual, the community, and the wider nation. This section ties closely in many

places with both the following chapter relating to the experience of wider economic precariousness and chapter 5 below.

Life in the Trailers

Since the Storm struck Plaquemines Parish a large number of people who formally had owned houses made of brick or wood are now resident in ‘trailers’ (mobile homes) or ‘campers’ (caravans or RVs of various sizes). Some of these trailers are quite large, often containing a sitting room, kitchen and more than one bedroom. Locals generally use the shorthand ‘-wide’ to discuss the size of their trailer (in that a ‘triple-wide’ trailer is a size larger than a ‘double-wide’ and so on). As mentioned in the introduction, there is a great deal of local resistance to the idea of becoming associated with the broad national stereotypes connected with ‘trailer park’ living. As a result, it is usually considered preferable to own a trailer to a camper, and a triple-wide trailer is preferable to a double-wide, i.e. the larger, less mobile, and the closer your trailer is to a fixed house the better. Furthermore, despite widely held stereotypes (mentioned above), trailers and campers in Plaquemines Parish are not commonly arranged in trailer ‘parks’ so often seen in film or television but are instead usually placed on the exact spot (the foundation ‘slab’) of the owner’s original house. Indeed, every effort is made to re-constitute a particularly historical constructed idea of normalised American lifestyle experienced before the Storm which the newly experienced reality of life in a mobile home is thought to threaten. For example, as will be discussed elsewhere in this thesis the volunteer fire-fighter Buck made a deliberate point of describing to me his insistence that his newly purchased camper should sit exactly on top of the slab of his former home.

The negative associations of trailer park life (and the so called ‘trailer trash’, ‘rednecks’, or ‘swampies’ as the inhabitants of these sites are sometimes derogatively referred to as) and the stereotypes common to that lifestyle are well known in the Parish, and are considered by those who lived in fixed homes of brick or wood prior to the Storm to be distinctly different to the lifestyle of local residents. Becca discussed this while

speaking of her life since Katrina. She was intensely displeased with life in a trailer, and while her partner discussed with me how it is unfortunate that trailers depreciate in value (in the same way an automobile might) or how their trailer had been specially strengthened to better resist harsh weather, she instead focussed on the more intrinsic cultural and lifestyle associations which are connected to life in a trailer. It is her wish to leave the trailer (and the Parish entirely) and settle in what she described as a “real house”. Certainly there has ‘always’ been a contingent of residents in the Parish living in mobile homes, but based on discussions like the one above with Becca, and with men in the firehouse it is clear that such individuals were considered to be the poorest, and lowest educated residents of the local community. They were described as individuals whose lifestyle coincided with the wider stereotypes mentioned above, and whom one might ridicule, but not relate to. Now that living in mobile homes and trailers had become the standard for residence in the southern end, this socially constructed boundary had been challenged, as one of the key material signifiers of cultural difference used by local people had been removed.

On a separate occasion, but on the same topic, while volunteering at the fire department and during the lead up to the department’s annual crawfish boil⁴ one member of the department described the need for a good insurance policy to cover them in case “Joey from the bayou” should show up. This was not a reference to a particular person, but to an archetype. The implication here was that the type of individual to which the speaker was referring to was inherently a liability to an event such as was being planned, due to their intrinsic inability to conduct themselves in a manner which ensured the safety of themselves or those around them. In both this and the discussion of trailers above we see a clear distinction being drawn by the speaker, between themselves and a constructed economically and culturally deprived other.

Such distancing placed the speaker in a more personally appealing social class, and positions them with the hard working foundation of American values. One of the important means locals used to distinguish themselves from such undesirable stereotypes was with

⁴ An annual fundraiser for the department in which over a hundred teams compete for the votes of around ten thousand people by boiling the tastiest crawfish on the day.

notions of ‘hard work’. During a discussion about politics (and particularly taxation) at the firehouse Desmond stated that the middle class man has it hardest in America, as the richest don’t pay tax, and the poorest claim welfare benefit, paid for by the tax-paying middle class. He described himself as “a middle class man”, and thus his view on the share of the tax burden he carried was deeply significant to him. Beyond this however, his positioning was connected to both ‘othering’ and precariousness: the *producers* in America – those who make a tangible, necessary, and wealth-creating contribution to society – were people much like himself, while the others were there simply to take from him that which he produces. Later in my fieldwork in a conversation with my neighbour and landlord Thanh I found myself placed within these undesirable groups when he upbraided me in a moment of frustration because I “don’t have to work” and “have no worries”. In Thanh’s view, ‘work’ was connected with physical exertion, and the activities of the ethnographer (along with the likes of lawyers and politicians) were not in his view work as such. What we have in these examples is an unquestionably positive positioning of the speaker within their narrative based on their work. Contrasting with examples such as Billy or Harry in the next chapter, Desmond and Thanh found their work (and the placement within society this supposedly gave them) to be of intrinsic value, both to them as a means to distinguish themselves from the ‘trashy’ other, and as part of a wider process of wealth creation which would collapse if they were to withdraw their labour from it. Interestingly, both of these speakers sought not only to distinguish themselves from the poorest within society, but also some of the richest, with white collar and management jobs being cast in a negative light. It seems likely that this additional process of othering stemmed (or at least had been magnified) from the acute experience of precariousness and isolation experienced during both Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill, where bureaucrats, politicians, and those involved with the insurance industry were considered to have massively disappointed those in the Parish.

Similar to Desmond’s use of his employment as a means of distancing himself from a negatively defined ‘other’, a local pastor and development activist stated that the general population of the Parish – the local zeitgeist, if you will – was unwilling to ask for help when they were in trouble, and were much more likely to simply “make do”. He was speaking at the time during a meeting where he was calling for continued economic support for the vulnerable within Plaquemines Parish but by doing so in this manner shifts

the focus of his statement away from a picture of a weak and ensnared population and instead defined them as stoic and hardy – persons who were not asking for charity, but people who deserved it. This conception of the people of Plaquemines Parish was not simply part of broad political rhetoric, but also important for some at a personal level. While interviewing a senior member of the Plaquemines Parish Oysterman Association, and during an extended discussion of the numerous personal misfortunes that had befallen both him and the oystermen of the Parish – Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill included – he described himself as being “lucky in life”. For him, what was important was that he still had his family, and that he was still able to go out oystering.

The message in these examples seems to be that even if someone has little money, they may not wish to be labelled as being in ‘poverty’. Such examples must also be considered within the impact of these catastrophes, which demonstrate how pre-existing cultural norms and expectations shape and structure the local experience of continuity and change in this post-catastrophe landscape, themes which this thesis continually returns to.

The Decline of the Parish, the Decline of America

One comment I heard repeated several times throughout my research in the Parish was how much better the Parish used to be. This would probably be expected in a community which had so recently experienced the level of major destruction that the Parish had gone through, but to my surprise it emerged that most speaking on this subject were often not in fact referring to the recent (pre-Katrina) history of the Parish, but were in fact harkening back to the middle of the 20th century; the era of the notorious ‘Judge’ Perez, and the economic expansion of the 1950s and 60s. As will be further discussed in chapter 7 this constructed period of ‘before the storm’ has become a shorthand for the desired goal for the recovery projects of the Parish. In order to better frame that analysis however, it is useful to discuss what local people considered to have been so desirable about this period, and a discussion of this nostalgia more generally. This section shall now conduct this enquiry.

During my time in the Parish I attended several meetings with members of the local Plaquemines Parish Historical Society, a group which allows members to both learn about the Parish's history and also become involved in preserving that history should they wish. This group was kind enough to give me several historical photographs of life in the Parish from their collection, I have included three of these as a representation of the homogeneousness of the portrayal of everyday life depicted in these historical narratives, and the normative cultural assumptions this portrayal reinforces. My experience of attending these meetings however would lead me to suggest that the main reason many of the members of this group attended its meetings is the excuse they offered to reminisce about their memories of the past. During one such meeting, held in Buras at one of the churches, the speaker who had been tasked with giving a presentation that afternoon failed to turn up. This afforded the members an opportunity to spend the afternoon sitting in the church's garden enjoying the refreshments and sharing memories and anecdotes from their childhoods. Even at meetings where there was a more formal presentation the question and answer session afterwards would often very quickly become more of a discussion of personal memories.

As many of these members were either middle aged or seniors, the memories in question often focuses on the middle part of the 20th century, coinciding with what they might describe as the imagined 'golden age' of the Parish. Such public acts of remembrance were an important part of actively constructing this narrative of an idealised past, and thus influenced the perceptions of younger members of the Parish, many of whom also described this period in this way. These semi-formal gatherings allowed perhaps the most obvious opportunity to discuss this time period, the "good old days" as one put it, but a great many of the older generation in the Parish would publically talk fondly about these decades outwith such meetings. Abe, a senior fireman in the fire department took some enjoyment from one particular photo given to me by the historical society which displays a group of men and a fire truck, believed to have been taken on or soon after the founding of the Buras Volunteer Fire Department. Abe believes that he remembers the truck from when he first joined the department, though by then it was not in use. The reader will note that the individuals pictured and the composition chosen for this image neatly correspond to a particular imagining of White, middle-class, masculinity.

Image 3: Historical photos of the Parish 1



Image 4: Historical photo of the Parish 2



Image 5: Buras Volunteer Fire Department original members and engine.



Memories of this nature however were not confined to discussions centred on the historical society, and alongside fond memories of days gone by there were often mention of the perceived decline or decay of both America and the Parish since that time, and with a view to how this might manifest in the future of the Parish. This was often brought up in connection with the difference in response and aftermath noticed between the hurricanes of the 1960s, Betsy and Camille, with Katrina. It was argued that after these two hurricanes there was a great deal more support offered by the local government and (in particular) local corporations to assist local populations. Such an assertion both links closely with the constructed history mentioned above, and was a reflection of the material reality of the Parish at the time. When local residents made this statement they are usually contrasting the rapidity with which the major oil corporations for whom they worked returned to repair the damage to their installations and re-start production, with the much slower response of the far smaller sub-contractors which at time of writing dominated the local economy, discussed more fully below. More generally however such an unfavourable contrast stemmed from a generalised dissatisfaction with the state of American politics, and the relative position of White hegemony. Furthermore they also demonstrated the continuing relevance of these historical catastrophes as cultural reference points, and hint at processes

of 'recovery' still on-going, particularly with regard to the older members of the community who lived through these past hurricanes.

As has been mentioned elsewhere in this thesis the 1950s and 1960s saw significant economic growth in the Parish and there was a much stronger emphasis on being what might be called a 'company man'; someone who holds a loyalty to his employer beyond a simple utilitarian exchange of labour for a wage, and in turn a responsibility from that company to provide for the wider needs of that employee. In the case of these hurricanes this manifested firstly in a commitment to maintain the employment of their workers during clean-up operations (indeed many oil men were apparently the ones conducting these repairs) but also allowing workers access to the heavy machinery owned by the corporation to re-build their own property during evenings and weekends. Sally remarked on this particularly in her interview, as her and her husband were newly-weds at that time and had only been resident in their house for a matter of years before it was destroyed in the 60s, an experience which had clearly lost most of its emotional trauma over time, but which was nonetheless clearly still significant to her own personal narrative.

This contrasted neatly with the experience of many in the aftermath of Katrina, where Buck described a feeling of being "punished" for wanting to come back. In contrast to the accounts from the aftermath of Hurricanes Betsy and Camille there was reported to be significantly less support offered to local residents from their employers in the aftermath of Katrina. Indeed, the dominant locally constructed historical narrative in the Parish of these events conceptualised the aftermath of the hurricanes in the 1960s as a time where private corporations supported their employees in their efforts to rebuild their lives, while in the aftermath of Katrina in the 2000s local people largely had to act without significant external support. Whether such accounts provide an accurate representation of the lived reality for most people in the Parish in the 1960s (particularly given that many local people were independent fisherman and thus would not have had an employer, paternal or otherwise) is less significant than the prevalence of such narratives when local people critiqued their own experience in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. This ties closely to wider comparison between the 1950s and 1960 and the 2000s.

Buck, and many other men in the Parish (many of whom might not have clear memories of the 1950s and 60s – or were not yet born such as Bob) still spoke of this era as the best of times in the Parish. Bob, a man in his early twenties described the Parish as being good in the 50s but that it “sucks” now, reflecting his judgement of a wider shift in American cultural life found across the nation (see also Putnam 2000). Others such as Abe, Burt, or Jamie discussed with me several times the various amenities or business that they remembered from their youth; the bowling alley, the cinema, the dancehall and others – all places which closed (or burnt down) long before the storm. By living within a community which supported such features and amenities, the residents of Plaquemines Parish could more easily participate in the embodied normality of middle-class American life (bowling is one example discussed by Hurley in his 2001 book *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks*). With the absence of such amenities and with an increasing number of mobile homes in the Parish, they appeared to be concerned that the region might become culturally aligned with the constructed stereotypes of ‘redneck’ or ‘White trash’ within a wider assumption of the homogeneousness of the ‘backward’ rural landscape (see also Darling 2009a, 2009b).

These discussions of the previous closing of businesses and the decline of the Parish sometimes led to debate regarding the future of the Parish. One such discussion posited that Belle Chasse was fast becoming an extended suburb of New Orleans, and might one day become little more than a commuter town. This idea was met with great disapproval as it went against the ethos of independence and of a community set apart so favoured by many in the southern part of the Parish. This fear contrasted with the more positive emergence of the so-called ‘authentic’ American rural culture grounded in rootedness and ‘real’ work so valued by Brooks’ *Bobos in Paradise* (2000) but also actively promoted by many rural communities across America (Darling 2009a). These men’s identity were therefore threatened by the loss of the normative middle-class identity endorsed during the ‘golden age’ of the 50s and 60s, *and* the loss of the emerging ideal of the rooted, hardworking, authenticity of the rural frontiersman.

The placement of the aforementioned middle-class man in the society of the Parish was at times a subject of concern in these discussions, both in terms of the decline of the Parish and the wider decline of America. Over the years since Betsy and Camille, and certainly since Katrina, there was generally considered to have been a shift in the cultural demographics of the southern part of the Parish, with the exodus of ‘traditional’ middle-class families, and the perception of an influx of a number of the aforementioned ‘trailer trash’ community that Becca was so keen to distance herself from. This fear of the incoming ‘other’ seemed more based in a more generalised fear than in specific examples. A member of the Sheriff’s department, Kev, spoke about this more generally, as he believed there had been rapid increases in immigration to the United States during his lifetime, and that now the proportion of “normal Americans” (by which he was generalising from his own social status and political views as a template) was becoming fewer and fewer.

This has meant that the lived experience of cultural identity of many within the Parish had been one of weakening political power (as affluent and educated neighbours moved north), shirking local amenities (as local shops and business closed), and a small but significant influx of people considered culturally dissimilar. Coinciding with this at the national political level there had been a gradual liberalisation of American lifestyle with the ending of racial segregation, the promotion of equality for women and homosexuals, and the implementation of what some locals described as “socialist” welfare policies by Presidents such as Clinton and Obama. Calls for concern were encouraged by the conservative news broadcaster Fox News – which is a trusted news source for much of America’s Republican base. The days of the legendary ‘Judge’ Perez, mentioned earlier in this thesis are over, and many of the White, hetero-normative men of the Parish felt that they were now an uneasy fit for a modern world not of their making.

Certain specific changes to the Parish wrought by the effects of Hurricane Katrina had compounded these fears of increased precariousness to the lifestyle and culture of the

southern Parish. The stress placed upon families by the economic vulnerability magnified by the effects of Katrina should not be underestimated, and was a notable feature of the community life of the Parish. Instances of domestic abuse across the southern end of the Parish are beyond the scope of this inquiry to accurately estimate but research by Jenkins and Phillips (2008) has shown that there has been a noticeable increase in instances of domestic violence in the New Orleans area since the Storm. They go on to say that those experiencing economic precariousness, and those who have gone through the stress of a disaster are statistically more likely to commit and be the victim of acts of domestic violence. Furthermore they note that Katrina in particular was significant in causing problems in this area, as financial assistance programs often allocated resources to the 'head' of the household (who was usually determined to be the man) thus further disempowering women in this context. My fieldwork would suggest that their assertions were equally valid in the context of Plaquemines Parish.

During the course of my fieldwork I was aware of several occasions when domestic abuse, or violence within the household was present, either as a threat or actualised. On some occasions I was informed of it occurring, such as early in my fieldwork by Barbara, a neighbour of mine who explained that her husband had been put in jail for several months for striking her, or later, when Harry explained he had received the black eye he was sporting during an argument with Kate. On other occasions threats of violence could be distinctly heard being shouted through the thin walls of local trailers. This was part of life in trailers; that anything said at even a moderate volume carried out into the street beyond. Hurley (2001) has noted that his lack of privacy is one of the limitations those living in trailers face when attempting to conform to the 'norms' of suburban, middle-class American lifestyle. As with most of the negative themes discussed through this thesis, Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill had magnified the problems found in this area. Furthermore, others have already written on the wider negative impact Hurricane Katrina has had on local marriages, and there has been a significant increase in divorce rates across the entire region (Times-Picayune 2011). There is no reason to suspect that Plaquemines Parish was exempt from this.

Indeed, Arland, who prior to Katrina had worked as the director of a programme aimed at providing support to those who suffer issues of mental health in the Parish, believed that more than ever before the residents of the Parish needed major support in tackling severe problems of mental health. In particular, conditions related to depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. He went on to say that unfortunately his programme was disbanded in the aftermath of Katrina, and thus his opinion was based purely on his social circle and informal observations in the Parish. Nonetheless, the opinion – even an informal or circumstantial one – of a senior, experienced mental health worker and long-time resident of the Parish cannot be dismissed. Jenkins and Phillips (2008) note that mental distress can be a significant factor in exacerbating instances of domestic violence, and that Hurricane Katrina not only increased the number of individuals suffering in this manner, but also decreased the amount of support on offer to those facing mental illness (see also Picou and Hudson 2010). Hurricane Katrina has thus likely increased the rates of domestic violence within households in this region, and in the case of Plaquemines Parish had brought these instances of violence into a much more public sphere (due to relative lack of privacy offered by trailers compared with fixed homes). This, combined with an increase in levels of mental distress further decreased the stability of the identity of the normative American middle-class man, and generated increasing levels of cultural precariousness within the lived experience of life in the Parish.

Politics in the Post-Disaster Landscape

Within the context of this supposed decline, it is now fruitful to tackle the experience of politics and politicians as understood by local men more directly, as an element to the on-going construction and experience of community identity. This section shall both examine views on wider, national politics and more local interests. I was fortunate during my period of study to witness a hotly contested election for the Parish Sheriff (a position somewhat equivalent to a Chief Constable but with additional judicial responsibilities). These political discussions were conducted within the context of Barack Obama, the country's first African-American President, being publically described as “the greatest threat to our country” by senior Republican Rick Perry (Harnden 2011). Overall the view of both politics and politicians in the Parish was extremely negative.

Mistrust of and cynicism regarding politicians in Plaquemines Parish was extremely widespread. It was largely taken for granted that a politician – any that were mentioned – were corrupt in some sense, whether it be multi-national corporations paying off individuals at the federal level, or money intended for re-building and recovery after Katrina being siphoned off at the local level. Dan made this point whenever discussion at the fire department turned to politics; in his view the only reason an individual became involved in politics was to take money in this way. It was suggested by George in one of these discussion that the principle reason so many buildings – buildings which in his view could have been saved – were demolished after Katrina was that demolishing them then rebuilding them would allow corrupt politicians to profit from the process. A similar theme was emphatically expressed by Martin and Victor, two men I met through attendance of Faith Temple Ministries, a local church.

Indeed, Martin was so keen for his view on this matter to be heard he picked up my Dictaphone and shouted into it during the recording! Both of them were highly sceptical that all the money intended for the fishermen in the aftermath of the BP spill actually reached those it should have. In their view a great many people, but especially politicians and their friends, took significant portions of this money wrongfully. It was rare – if at all – for these allegations to have any real evidence to support them. In almost every instance no evidence was needed; all present were already in full agreement with the speaker. Of course, Louisiana does have something of a reputation for corrupt politicians, even of re-electing them. Miguel joked about this during the lead up to the local elections, that in Louisiana politics was cyclical, with the electorate voting for a charismatic ‘rogue’ who is impeached, then a competent administrator who they grow bored of, who is therefore replaced by another charismatic ‘rogue’ who is impeached.

It was reported to me that this was in fact the reason the election of the Sheriff was so intensely contested the year of my study; the out-going office holder was not standing in

the election because of an on-going, and very serious, investigation by the FBI into his financial activities. An election where the incumbent will not be standing is always of interest to those who follow politics and as polling drew nearer the local election became a major talking point. Often it was simply the case that each candidate was discussed, then dismissed as unsuitable. Other occasions were different; one such was a political rally for one of the candidates thrown by Desmond's wife. The rally largely consisted of friends, and friends of friends coming together to partake in a large BBQ, the copious consumption of alcohol, and to listen to some live music. Even here however, the corruption of politicians was still widely discussed and rather universally accepted. During such discussions at a political rally I constantly expected the speaker to add a post-script to their narrative stating that the candidate we were all supposedly in attendance to support would not be similarly corrupt, but this never happened. It is possible that the speakers considered such statements as unnecessary – that attendance at such a rally constituted implicit endorsement of the morality of the candidate in question, or it could be that they expected their chosen candidate to be just as untrustworthy as the rest, based on the discussions at the event and after, the latter seems more likely.

The contradictions in such a stance do not seem to be problematic to local people. While being interviewed in Buras, one locally serving politician made this point with something of a sigh; that for many local people there was even something of a pride in the corruption in the Parish – being able to get a speeding ticket forgiven faster than one's friends, petty offences going without punishment etc. and this focus drew people's attention away from the larger corruption of many politicians. On a similar topic, a boat captain involved in the clean-up of oil in the Gulf of Mexico described how the deployment of vessels to clean up operations in the Gulf was often dictated more by which politicians were able to best gain media attention and "shout the loudest" rather than necessarily where there was the most oil. Although not corruption in the same vein as discussed above, this does demonstrate how political pressure could interfere with supposedly independent operations such as the clean-up activities.

There were of course exceptions to the above rules. Sometimes if an individual had a personal relationship with a particular politician – or if they had known his father – they might make an exception for that individual from any generalisation about the untrustworthiness of politicians. Billy Nungessor, who during this research was the president of the Parish was one such divisive politician. Nungessor was a larger-than-life political personality and a passionate and determined speaker, as such his ideology was fairly polarizing. This polarization would usually come with either allegations or denials of corruption – those who disliked him either because of his policies or style would often additionally accuse him of corruption, while his supporters would usually make a point of mentioning that he was honest. Or, as Bob – who broadly liked Nungessor – put it, that he was already wealthy when he got the job, so unlikely to be tempted.

When discussion of politicians moved away from discussions of corruption there was a more general dissatisfaction with the state of the nation. At one point in my research I asked Dan why he thought Louisiana so consistently voted Republican in most elections, and he responded that it wasn't always the case, and that more people had voted Democrat until Clinton had taken that party “as far left as you can go”. Although voting patterns in the region show that the swing from Democrat to Republican began earlier than this, there is no doubt that such a switch did indeed occur. Recently, voting patterns in Louisiana (with the exception of the more liberal New Orleans) tend to lean conservative Republican and Plaquemines Parish was no exception. I had several enjoyable debates with members of the fire department, local Pastors, and in particular one local lawyer on political matters of this nature. The lawyer in particular entered into these discussions with fervour as there were – as he explained – so few liberal, left-wing people resident in the Parish he could debate with.

Obama in particular was the target of significant critique and ridicule. Some of this was certainly racially motivated but his policies were also the subject of local ire. At one point I overheard Nungessor being compared to Obama – which in the context in which it was said was certainly not intended as a compliment and indeed was likely intended to distance him from the imagined cultural hegemony of the middle decades of the 20th

century and link him squarely with the more liberal and plurality-orientated political mainstream which elected Obama as President. Dan's preference for national leader was in fact the former Vice-Presidential candidate Sarah Palin (so often ridiculed for her 'redneck' affiliations (Darling, 2009b)) but when this was suggested the other men present were somewhat less enthusiastic. One went further, believing that women were in general not "strong" enough to handle senior political office (thus again linking the decline of America with the weakening of the White male's position of power in wider society, in this case in relation to gender equality). This same individual also believed that only those who had served in the American armed forces should be eligible for election to the Presidency.

The above has presented an overview of many of my conversations on the subject of politics and politicians in the Parish, with the overwhelming opinion of them being in the negative. Woven through such discussions, the experience of catastrophe can be clearly seen featuring as an element within wider discussion, highlighting the on-going relationship with disaster local people experience. What follows is a discussion of something that perhaps might be a significant contributing factor to this displeasure; the intense feeling of abandonment and marginalisation of the southern Parish, which encompassed ideas of both material and cultural precariousness.

On several occasions local people were most passionate in their accounts to me when discussing examples of occasions where they did not feel they were given adequate input on events which affected their lives, or when they felt they were being marginalized by wider politics. The Army Corps of Engineers were often a particular target for this sentiment in relation to their protection of the Parish. As has been mentioned previously Plaquemines Parish was protected on both sides by high levees which hold back the river on one side, and the marsh on the other. These levees are maintained by the Corps, and although they did indeed prevent the annual flooding of the Parish by the Mississippi River, this also prevented much needed sediment from flowing into the marshes beyond, intensifying the destruction of these marshes and thus lessening the protection of the Parish each year. Local people considered this lack for foresight on the part of the Corps

inexcusable, and while I was resident in Buras there were several discussions of the need for mechanisms to counter this problem, most often, the need to create ‘spillways’ to transport water (and sediment) across the Parish and into the marsh beyond. The part of this account which is so troubling to local people is that recognition for the need of the replenishment of the marshes was well understood in the region, and there was the overriding opinion that had local people be consulted such issues might not have arisen. This lack of agency was, after all, more akin to the undesirable marginalisation of ‘White trash’ populations within mainstream political processes than to the agency offered to politically active racial and class-based elites. It does appear however, that this marginalisation may be changing, as there were moves for increased inclusiveness of the local population in such decisions (Dilella, 2011a).

Similar feeling was often expressed when criticising either the Parish government or FEMA (or both) with regard to the reconstruction in the aftermath of the hurricane. Often such critiques would include an appeal for ‘local people’ to have been consulted prior to decisions being made on these matters. An example of this was the debate surrounding whether to re-locate the Parish seat and courthouse from its traditional home in Point à la Hache to the northern town of Belle Chasse where it had be temporarily housed since Hurricane Katrina. During the time of my study this had become a major point of discussion with local people, as the prospect of the re-location from the more damaged south to the northern Parish connected with many of the wider processes discussed through this thesis, but particularly in terms of cultural precariousness. When discussing it the senior Knight of Columbus Morgan spoke – with real emotion in his voice – about the fact that there had already been three previous votes to move the seat to the north of the Parish in the past; all three had failed. He felt that to have yet another vote on the same matter was grossly unfair, and underlined how politically marginalised the south of the Parish had become. Unlike the majority of respondents mentioned thus far in this chapter Morgan was not Caucasian, and his opinions expressed above reflected a more generalised idea of the marginalisation of the southern part of the Parish, rather than one based on White political privilege.

Such feelings of neglect and powerlessness were particularly strong in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill. It was reported by several people that the intense media focus on the city of New Orleans – and the absence of any coverage of anywhere else – was a significant magnifier to the trauma of their experience in the immediate aftermath of the storm. Sally was one of those who spoke on this matter. She had evacuated with her daughter and daughter's family and spent much of the weekend of Hurricane Katrina's landfall searching the internet for any mention of Plaquemines Parish in the coverage on the news; the absence of any was a major frustration of hers – she would have preferred to know one way or the other rather than being left in the dark. This feeling was of even greater concern to the families of those emergency personnel who had remained in the Parish during the storm. Both Jamie (a fireman) and Gillian (an Emergency Medical Technician) discussed the anxious worry their families were put through waiting for any news of their situation in the Parish – news which was not forthcoming on any national television network. The above left residents feeling ignored, and de-valued, and in the shadow of the city of New Orleans. These accounts reflected more closely a generalised feeling of political precariousness than they do a specifically cultural-racial othering, but nonetheless form part of the on-going concern of the decline of the Parish over recent decades.

This feeling of marginality was felt by some in the aftermath of the BP oil spill as well, particularly with regard to the moratorium on oil exploration imposed by President Obama. Many whose livelihoods depended on oil exploration were deeply cynical about this decision, and felt that Obama had played politics more than anything else – wishing to be 'seen' to be acting for a national audience, when in fact the moratorium worsened the economic impact of the spill on local communities by putting even more people out of work. This view was also expressed by some of Louisiana's political representatives (Rushe 2013). Similarly, though moving away from discussions of disaster for a moment, the members of the Plaquemines Parish Historical Society likewise felt overlooked and overshadowed when preparations began in the region to commemorate the historic battle of 1812 which (then) would be happening the following year. Plaquemines Parish had not been included in these preparations, despite several stages of the battle being fought in the Parish. At the meeting this was discussed it caused a good deal of annoyance but not, I think, a great deal of surprise.

The Threat to 'Local' by the 'Other'

This feeling of marginalization and of being forgotten by wider political actors had influenced local experiences of the political and cultural positioning and social boundary maintenance of the Parish in relation to the wider politics of the Deep South, and of American more generally. As was discussed in relation to Leander Perez, and in particular with relation to the sending of American troops into the Parish in the 1940s, the Parish of Plaquemines has perhaps always had something of a 'frontier' spirit; romanticised in local discourse as slightly separate from wider national political life, and to a certain extent this continued during this study. As has been mentioned above, this idea of the rooted and rugged frontier had been a part of much of rural America's identity for some time (Brooks 2000, Counts and Counts 2001, Darling 2009b) and an attempt to construct such an identity locally had taken on a new meaning within the aftermath of catastrophic disaster-processes.

Buck, a volunteer firemen and one of the most colourful characters I knew during my time in the field, on one occasion upbraided me for having left the Parish *at all*, stating that his usual mantra was "I ain't goin' north of Belle Chasse". Belle Chasse is the northernmost town of the Parish and the main point of entry or exit from it, and as far as Buck was concerned there was very little beyond that point that was of interest or value to him. Few in the Parish would probably be quite as emphatic in their dismissal of the rest of the world as Buck was on this occasion but nonetheless his remark offers a starting point into a widely shared unease in the Parish with regard to the rest of America. Morgan – as will be discussed more extensively in subsequent chapters – considered the most important part of life in the Parish the security he felt in being able to leave his house unlocked, and leaving his keys in the ignition of his vehicle, security he could not imagine finding anywhere else. A number of individuals who at some point in their lives had moved away from the Parish for periods (often connected to work in the oil industry) mentioned their eventual return to the Parish in terms of relief. This happened to Burt during my study, as

he was sent overseas for over a month. He hated it so much that when he returned he vowed he would quit his job if they ever forced him to do it again. As will be shown in Chapter 5 the idea of the 'local' possessed a great deal of moral legitimacy and authority in the life of the Parish, here however, we see more clearly the maintenance of this label placed in opposition to the relational forces, and dynamic boundaries which might threaten, or alter it.

On another occasion when discussing a trip I had made to New Orleans to enjoy a local jazz festival with Miguel, the previously mentioned lawyer and his wife there was consternation amongst members of the volunteer fire department as to why we would have bothered. New Orleans held a particularly negative position in the 'mythic' landscape (Tuan 1977) of many people in Plaquemines Parish. Many people of my acquaintance avoided the city entirely, and others were extremely selective in their exposure to it. Over the course of my fieldwork it was described as a "crapshoot", "over-run with gangs", and even "a warzone", and the media's portrayal of the city in this way in the aftermath of Katrina had certainly contributed to such a reputation. Several people – upon hearing that I occasionally visited the city – advised me in the strongest possible terms to be careful during my visits, often additionally cautioning me against leaving the French Quarter (the principle tourist section of the city), or from going out at night.

Sometimes the speaker – such as Mike, or Sally – mentioned that in the past they had been comfortable visiting the city but in recent years that had changed. Sally now only went to the city when her daughter would accompany her. Generally these fears stemmed from the perceived extensive gang-related violence which was said to dominate the city. Certainly the city did have an extremely high murder rate, and there were doubtless neighbourhoods it would be wise to avoid, but in my experience of visiting the city several times over the course of my fieldwork I did not experience or witness any trouble. A deeper understanding of this relationship might reveal wider stereotypes surrounding the emergence of African-American political culture in the civic structures of the city which (as with the sections above) had undermined the previously existing imagined homogeneousness of the local 'good old boy' political and bureaucratic networks. This

was particularly meaningful in relation to the previously discussed portrayal of the city by the media in the aftermath of Katrina.

Following on from this, another reason offered for the avoidance of the city of New Orleans was the people who lived there. As mentioned above, New Orleans consistently voted Democrat in most elections, and it was considered (much like Atlanta, Georgia, or Austin, Texas) to be something of a liberal stronghold in the heavily conservative Deep South. Such a position was unlikely to gain it supporters in a highly conservative community such as Plaquemines Parish. This positioning however could manifest in unexpected ways, late in my fieldwork I decided to attend 'Southern Decadence' which is one of the largest gay festivals in the American Deep South, largely to discover what the reaction would be from my acquaintances in the Parish – several of whom had made homophobic remarks at some point in my presence. Although my participation in this did draw certain comments, it did not provoke any major reaction against either homosexuals or the city of New Orleans. The general consensus, best summarized by Pete was that New Orleans was already full of weird people, so if they wanted to host a large gay festival – let them; it was no real concern of his, and did not affect his life in any way. Such was the cultural distance of the city from his life.

Other parts of the United States also had particular placement within the local positioning of the Parish in wider American, and Deep South politics. California was cited on several occasions as being an especially poor example of what truly represents 'America'. It is probable that similar to New Orleans, but on a much larger scale, the liberal mentality which is associated with the state was regarded as the near antithesis of local political beliefs. In many respects, California was considered something of a liberal Democrat stronghold in national American politics, and this had placed it as the principle target for critique of 'the left' or 'hippies' in conversation connected to national politics. This even manifested in the aftermath of the oil spill, as one of the captains involved in the clean-up operations noted that the specialist crews sent to help from the California oil fields were far less competent than those based in the Gulf of Mexico.

New York was another regular target for anti-liberal sentiment, and this was particularly prevalent when Hurricane Irene made landfall in the city and its surrounds in August 2011. While watching the events unfold on a friend's television Becca, who was also present, expressed satisfaction at the scenes of flooding. When I questioned her on this she stated that "them northern folk, during Katrina, they didn't care about us, they said 'it's just water' well guess what, this is just water too". On another occasion, while eating lunch at the café connected to the petrol station in Port Sulphur I witnessed an elderly local man pinch the bottom, and plant a kiss on the cheek of a young woman waiting at the counter who was ordering some coffee to go. The woman was outraged at this, and the owner of the café asked him to leave, and gave the woman her coffees for free. After she had left however, he turned to me and explained that the lady had been a visitor down from Maine, and if she hoped to spend any time in the Deep South she would have to "loosen up" and "take a joke". The feminist reaction to this event to one side, it is interesting that the café owner thought it relevant to inform me that the origin of the woman was Maine, part of 'Yankee' New England.

This leads us to discuss the continuing, and widely felt division which remained relevant to any understanding of politics in the United States; the continued relevance of the Deep South as a distinct cultural and political bloc. While chatting to an elderly couple conducting maintenance on their pirogue⁵, I noticed their neighbour was flying both the American Flag, and the Southern Cross (the rectangular variant of the square Confederate army's flag, often now referred to as simply the 'Confederate Flag') next to each other and I enquired if this was not a contradiction given my association of Confederate symbols with rebellion against the Union. They claimed that there was no contradiction, as the Confederate flag represented wider southern culture and values as a part of the United States.

⁵ A type of small, flat-bottomed boat common to the region.

There was a great deal of pride with regard to this flag, and the wider cultural associations connected to it. The flag was widely displayed in the Parish (and I also observed it in my travels across the South more generally) primarily flown as one traditionally would expect, but it was also displayed on car licence plates and bumper stickers, belt buckles, t-shirts, and a wide array of other mediums. ‘Yankee’ culture (such as what one would find in California, New York, or Maine) was seen as being quite distinct from the lifestyle in the South, and intrinsically inferior. Luka – who ‘piloted’ for oil rigs in the Gulf – spoke on this broad subject of intrinsic distinctiveness, and described the south as the “breadbasket” and “foundation” of America. It is worth pointing out that this discussion of the Confederate Flag has not been included in my reflection on race in the Parish below. Although my understanding prior to living in the Parish was that this flag had deeply racist connotations (and indeed I still believe it can), those with whom I discussed it with were often adamant it no longer represented such things, and although the majority of people who I witnessed wearing (or who owned) Confederate flags were Caucasian, they were not exclusively so. This very deeply felt division reflected a multi-layered separatist identify within the local community of the Parish, firstly as one separate from the United States entirely, and secondly as part of the wider identity of the Deep South which was considered something desirably separate from what has become the mainstream culture of America.

Image 6: Flags of the Confederate States of America, flown in Buras.



There was even perhaps the beginning of a feeling of division within the Parish itself, which was largely considered a new development since Hurricane Katrina. As has been mentioned elsewhere in this thesis the storm changed the demography of the Parish, causing major migration towards the northern part of the Parish. This had left a significant population imbalance, which, when manifest in the re-drawing of local political subdivisions would see a significant reduction in the number of Parish council seats allocated to the south. Even local government officials acknowledged that the urban / rural divide between the north and south of the Parish had been significantly magnified by the recovery of the Storm, and this was leading to different operating practices becoming common for the two areas – such as the urgency of demolishing derelict or abandoned buildings. The Principal of Phoenix High School joked about this from the perspective on the east bank of the river during his interview, stating that there were those in his community who would not entirely object to the east bank of the river being “annexed” by the neighbouring St. Bernard Parish to the north-east. The uncertainty of this potential new development for the Parish of Plaquemines was perhaps best summarized by Morgan when he stated that even with these new divisions they were all still one Parish, “but maybe not”.

The Position of ‘White’ and ‘Black’ as Distinct Races

Finally in this section, the constructed divisions between the ‘Black’ and ‘White’ races shall be considered. As discussed in the opening section of this chapter with regard to the ‘othering’ construction of ‘White trash’ being used to reaffirm the position of cultural precedence experience by many White members of the Parish, boundary theory is a useful means of establishing the particular local context within which the idea of ‘race’ manifests. Race remained an area of deep division across America, and in particular across the Deep South as hate groups continued to thrive and prosper (Johnson 2011). This is an unpleasant subject to study, and to write about once one recognises that there are still many within contemporary America – a country which prided itself on ideals of equality of opportunity – who considered skin colour to be a significant measure of a person’s intrinsic cultural or

moral values. With this said, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina had fostered surprising developments in speeding the reduction of racial division in the Parish.

During my period of fieldwork there were people who I met who overtly and deliberately used language intended to demean and insult others within the community, based on personally defined 'races' usually forming at the intersection of skin colour and negative cultural stereotypes. As Wilson (2002) has argued it is important to explore the nuances found between those who consciously and deliberately deploy racist language and sentiment within a social context, and those who participate in systems of othering and the on-going construction of racial hierarchies without a self-critical awareness of their participation in such actions. During one interview with two brothers in the Parish any topic of conversation which in any way linked to wider politics was brought by them during our discussion to promote a message of the inferiority of African-Americans, or, as they were called by them "niggers". During this lengthy interview they explained their view that Blacks and Whites were not in fact the same species, that I should be careful when visiting New Orleans because it was full of Black people who are inherently and biologically prone to criminality, and that the influx of Asian people to the Parish had brought diseases to local citrus crops. These examples barely scratch the surface of the varied topics covered in this conversation, but it offers the reader a window into a worldview which was still present within this local context. It is worth noting that these brothers were both elderly, and were brought up during the racial apartheid of the Deep South. As such, it is probable that during their formative years they were exposed to viewpoints of this nature as if they were normative truism, while subsequent generations lived in increasingly liberal and egalitarian political and social contexts as has been mentioned above.

While there were few people of my acquaintance who maintained such overt and deliberate hatred of African-Americans, many White males of a broad range of ages would (unwittingly or not) participate in an extensive process of 'othering' based largely on crude racial stereotypes designed to maintain the moral and cultural legitimacy of their own privileged position within wider American political culture. Hearing the word "nigger"

was not uncommon, and often broad racist generalizations were made by Caucasian men in the Parish in relation to the Black population of Louisiana and America. Relating to the discussion in the next chapter regarding those claiming benefits from the government – supposedly supported by the excessive tax burden of the speaker – it was often the African-American community who were assumed to be the most guilty of abusing this system, and least likely to be those who contributed to the creation of value in America. Although ‘White trash’ populations were also the target of such statements, this was far less frequent. Black single mothers were accused of producing multiple babies to ensure they received support from the welfare state, and young Black men were noted to have higher rates of imprisonment than White men in the Louisiana penal system. This was largely blamed on certain negative aspects of African-American culture, such as rootlessness and a disregard for mainstream (i.e. the speaker’s) cultural and moral values.

The perceived separateness of White and Black culture was discussed several times. During a discussion with a local Pastor he related his view that America was trying to blend two cultures together which were incompatible, and that by attempting this the breakdown of the nuclear family (which had already occurred in African-American culture) was being hastened in White culture as a result. This same Pastor was sceptical President Obama was in fact a Christian as the President claimed, and challenged his legitimacy to stand for President at all. This challenge of legitimacy (based largely on the accusation that he was born outside the United States) was also made to me on several occasions by others. Racist language is also used in idioms out with conversation directed explicitly at African-Americans and more than once I heard someone use the expression “niggaring” to describe the work someone was doing. This was used to describe a lacklustre or slap-dash approach to a given task, and (often unthinkingly) further built the negative stereotypes surrounding the constructed Black race while simultaneously placing the (White) speaker in a position with the authority to pass such judgements (and thus suggest that they could have done a better job).

Hispanics and those of south-east Asian origin were seldom – in my experience – described in quite the same language as the African-American population. The former

were generally referred to as simply ‘Mexicans’ and were largely discussed not as human beings with agency, but instead as a tool or machine needed to complete the manual labour of a given project. A turn of phrase heard often in the Parish would be to “get some Mexicans”, which would be used on a check list which also included any materials or tools one might need to buy or rent to complete whatever project was being attempted. While the Black population might be attributed numerous negative social stereotypes the ‘Mexican’ population was largely invisible, discussed much as one would discuss a tool or machine. Hispanic deckhands are usually paid significantly less than ‘American’ ones (White or Black), and it was remarked to me by a Vietnamese-American oysterman that an ‘American’ deckhand was his own man while a ‘Mexican’ deckhand was really yours. The latter was considered preferable for this individual. Racial stereotyping and widespread ubiquitous ‘othering’ against the Asian population of the Parish was in my experience far less extensive than against either African-Americans or Hispanics. Although they were all labelled under the general designator of ‘Vietnamese’ (irrespective of where they actually were born such as Cambodia, Laos, or indeed, the United States) there was less obvious tension between them and the White authors of the views presented in the paragraph above. Part of this might have stemmed from the relative isolation of the Asian community within the Parish, as many within it did not speak fluent English. It also might have stemmed from the relatively recent migration to the region, as opposed the long history of racial strife between Caucasians and African-Americans, and indeed between Caucasians and Hispanics.

Dr. Martin Luther King was a target of particular ire by several people within the Parish. On one occasion he was described as “nuthin’ but a shit-stirrer” and on another there was unhappiness expressed at the newly unveiled statue of him in Washington D.C. where their principle complaint was his proximate position “with the Presidents” and the implication that he was an equal footing with them. On a third occasion during a discussion praising the work of Leander Perez, one of the stated achievements of this man was his opposition to King’s anti-segregationist movement. Interestingly, some of the men expressing this negative view of this individual did not – in my experience – express any other racist sentiments, and indeed appeared to have several strong friendships with African-Americans. Their unhappiness in this instance appeared to be directed in a very personal way. To better understand this phenomenon Hage’s *White Nation* (2000) can offer

us insight. In it, he suggests the liberal movement which so keenly offered racial equality to non-Caucasians can in fact operate in a manner which actually maintains existing power structures by maintaining the rights of inclusion and exclusion solely for themselves to arbitrate on. By defining the terms, manner, and recipient of this 'inclusion' the White liberal can in fact reinforce the very segregation he seeks to undermine. Dr. King by contrast was not a man to sit idly by and wait for equality to be offered to him. He challenged not only the inequality of the American nation, but also the White man's authority to set the terms of that equality (or inclusion). Upon reflection, this is a significantly more radical position, and Hage's insight perhaps offers fresh perspective on the slow pace of racial integration in America at time of writing.

With this theoretical insight in mind I would like to suggest that within the Parish there are many whose boundaries of racial inclusion and exclusion were more complex than a simplistic divide between skin colours. Personal relationships and friendships make the maintenance of unequal power relations dynamic and complex. This was especially manifest with relation to inter-race relationships, which were still considered a deeply controversial undertaking across much of the American Deep South. Early in my fieldwork this was highlighted to me while chatting to a waitress in a café in Belle Chasse. She was discussing with me her high school prom which had recently occurred and she mentioned that her family had forbidden her from taking her date of choice. When I enquired what their objection was she explained that the notion of a young White man taking their (Black) daughter to the prom was unthinkable, despite her preference for him, and his for her.

This subject appeared several times during my research following this, one such occasion was while I was visiting the barber in Port Sulphur. Rather than have you face the mirror on the wall of the shop, the owner of this establishment preferred to spin his customers to face the television set he has on the opposite wall so that he (and they) could continue to watch whatever is on. On one such occasion he was watching the film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* which was released in 1967 and centres around the theme of interracial marriage. It was clear from the barber's conversation that he still considered the

film to be rather controversial. He would certainly not be the only one, as a poll conducted amongst Republican voters in the nearby state of Mississippi found that 46% of them believed inter-racial marriage should be illegal (Webster 2011).

Morgen, a member of the Knights of Columbus and an African-American mentioned this topic – the distinction between those who believe one race to be inferior to another and those who did not deliberately discriminate based on race, but who were in favour of segregation in terms of inter-marriage – during his interview, and suggested that it was at least a positive development (the fact that within the Parish he had noted a decrease in the former in favour of the latter – showing a gradual shift in opinion over his lifetime). On a related theme, I overheard on two occasions during my research distinctions being made between “niggers and black folk”. When I pressed for an explanation of this it was explained that the difference was the same as between “trailer trash and White folk”. Here again we see the distinction mentioned earlier between those who contribute to America and those who do not. What is interesting here is the grouping of “White folk” and “Black folk” being considered within a positive category, and “niggers” and “trailer trash” being derided and excluded from more mainstream culture. Here we see an example of the speaker choosing to specify in his use of the racist “nigger” in that he was not including African-Americans whom have achieved membership of the group of morally positive, hard working Americans with which he identified. Whether such categorisation was really a duality between morally superior and morally inferior or a four tiered hierarchy with ‘white folk’ at the top and ‘nigger’ at the bottom was never made clear to me but here we see the nuanced and multi-layered conceptualisation of inequality present in the opening of this chapter best expressed; whereby inequality and racial othering becomes dependant on multiple interlocking social facets which combined to create classifications and stereotypes for an individual. In this case, it shows that in this local context racial identification through skin colour alone was not sufficient to conceptualise the lived experience of race and identity.

While the picture of racial politics in the Parish presented above appears to be predominantly based on the continued maintenance of inequality and hierarchies of power,

there were signs of greater integration and the deconstruction of boundaries within the Parish. The various Black, Creole⁶, Native American, and Asian respondents of my acquaintance actually offered a fairly positive picture of race relations within the Parish. Most of them acknowledged that there were problems with racial discrimination and segregation within the Parish, but this was maintained by an ever-dwindling minority of people. Furthermore none of my non-Caucasian respondents reported to me occurrences of racism that they had personally experienced in the Parish. Even many of those of the oldest generation in the Parish who grew up with apartheid as normalised recognised that although their generation had deeply ingrained racial prejudices, their children and grandchildren largely did not. Furthermore the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina had offered unexpected opportunity for the further deconstruction of racial boundaries in the Parish. Prior to the storm there were four Catholic churches in the southern part of the Parish offering Sunday Mass. At the time of this study, due to the destruction of the hurricane only St. Patrick's offered this. This had meant that the four congregations – which prior to the storm had been informally divided along racial lines – must all worship under the same roof.

Other signs can be found in the Knights of Columbus, which prior to the hurricane was described as something of an 'old boys club'. Post-Katrina, these barriers had broken down, and the fraternity had seen an influx of American-American and Asian members working with those White members who have returned to the Parish to together carry out the mission they were charged with by the local Catholic priest at the beginning of the hurricane season – to act as guardians of the Parish in times of disaster. Perhaps the most significant development in this area however was the merging of the high schools on the west bank of the Parish. Prior to the hurricane, these schools were significantly divided along racial lines, particularly Buras (White), and Port Sulphur (Black). Since the Storm they were all taught in the same institution, and it seemed likely that the entrenched boundaries of race and the stereotypes which maintained divisions caused by it would begin to steadily erode as these children grow into adulthood. Such developments towards integration were generally seen as positive by many (though of course not all) of my

⁶ In the context of Plaquemines Parish 'Creole' was usually described to me as a discrete ethnic origin distinct from either White, African-American, or 'mixed' race. Indeed, during one of my interviews I had to apologise to one of my respondents for mistakenly identifying him as African-American.

respondents (particular non-White participants), and the recovery from Katrina had speeded processes of the eroding of these boundaries.

Conclusion

To conclude this section, we have explored the complicated relationship residents of Plaquemines Parish had with what might be described as the cultural values of ‘real’ America. By examining themes such as race, politics, and the nostalgic relationship with a ‘golden age’ of the past we see a community grappling with a rapidly changing wider world, and struggling to hold on to its cultural identity. The impact of Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill had been formative in the on-going negotiation of this relationship.

By engaging with local structures of the ‘other’ based around symbolically and socially constructed boundaries, deep insight is offered into locally constructed ‘races’ which could form a key feature in local community life. Rather than being based around simplistic ideas of skin colour alone, such dynamics intersect with class and moral norms to not only distinguish between White and Black, but also between White, and other Caucasians who did not correspond with a particularly constructed idea of what it means to be ‘White’. This often centred around the relationship local people had with mobile homes or ‘trailers’, a place of residence far more common since the Storm.

Such discussions fitted into wider ideas of a perceived ‘decline’ of both America and the local Parish. This came from a local critique of the changes to mainstream American culture over the second half of the 20th century, and in particular the liberal and progressive politics which gained traction after the civil rights and feminist movements. This perceived decline in American was interwoven with the local history of the impact of hurricanes, with an imagined ‘golden age’ of Parish life coinciding with the 1950s and

early 60s which was threatened by Hurricanes Betsy and Camille, and which Hurricane Katrina made all the more remote.

Wider political life in the Parish also fed into such discourse to create an overarching sense of cultural and political precariousness which Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill magnified, but certainly did not create. As such, a notion of cultural ‘recovery’ to pre-catastrophe ‘normality’ would be impossible, as the locally constructed understanding of life before the Storm had already significantly diverged from ‘normal’ American life. The local on-going experience of disaster fed into this experience, and forms part of the political and social context Katrina impacted. These ideas link closely with a similar process of economic marginalisation and precariousness which is discussed in the chapter which follows.

Chapter 4 – Precariousness Part

2: Economy and Social Welfare

Introduction

In the last chapter, a broad framework of cultural ‘othering’ was established through which to better conceptualise a particular understanding of moral and cultural ‘normality’ as distinct from other locally defined social and racial groups each placed within a wider moral hierarchy (with the speaker usually defined as at the ‘top’ of such a local structure). One of the key points made throughout this structuring, was one of middle-class normative values and a rejection of particular stereotypes associated with poverty.

However, such a positioning obscures and rejects much of the lived experience of extreme economic precariousness which was common for many who lived in the Parish. In this chapter, I hope to explore this notion of economic precariousness in this local context, and show that while the experience of Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill had certainly magnified this experience, it was never the case that those living in the Parish experienced universal economic security and affluence prior to these disasters. For the purposes of this chapter, I follow Standing (2013) in his understanding of ‘economic precariousness’ which is based around the inherent risks of the capitalist model being placed onto those working within it (rather than those investing in it), and also draw influence from Waite’s (2009) formation of a critical geography of precarity. I would not however place this local community within Standing’s wider grouping of the emerging ‘precariat’, which he describes as lacking a coherent (traditionally understood) class-based identity, but who share a vulnerability to market forces and a disconnection between their personal identity and their profession. Unlike this group the residents of Plaquemines Parish are still often

deeply culturally invested in the employment they participate in (and the locale in which this labour is conducted), a topic which will be explored further in chapter 5.

Vulnerable Employment and Vulnerable Communities

How local people experience and define wealth, poverty, and class for both themselves and their wider community is a topic of great interest to any reader interested in understanding economic precariousness in any context. Over the sections which follow I wish to explore the direct, lived experience of those who dwell in the post-disaster landscape of Plaquemines Parish as it relates to wealth and poverty. In this section I hope to present an introduction to this particular experience of poverty, and the perceived absence of any means through which to escape it.

Such instability of employment prevented an individual from building up any financial capital, and additionally prevented them from extensive financial forward planning. This instability greatly weakened their economic power in the community, and had historically disadvantaged them in such areas as applying for health insurance as shall be discussed below, as well as hindering their ability to re-construct their material possessions in the aftermath of a disaster.

Uncertain Incomes

During an interview with Angela, a local government employee who dealt directly with providing support for claimants of social security benefit in the Parish, she described the people of the Parish – even before the hurricane – as being the “working poor”. Over the course of this interview she discussed the economic hardship faced by many within the Parish who were forced to seek assistance from her office on either an occasional or

regular basis. Her turn of phrase – “working poor” – is a significant one, and was a socio-economic label expressed either directly or indirectly by many within the Parish. The poverty of Plaquemines Parish described here was not the same type of poverty as outlined in, for example, Stack’s *All Our Kin* (1974), or Meyer’s *American Rust* (2009) – that of mass unemployment suddenly hitting once prosperous working class communities, nor is it the spectre of ‘trailer trash’ which as previously mentioned goes beyond an economic understanding of poverty and destitution. Instead, (especially prior to the hurricane and oil spill) opportunities for unskilled and semi-skilled work were relatively plentiful, but irregular, and very poorly paid.

Two of my neighbours during my study epitomise this well. Billy and Harry were both employed as deckhands on local fishing boats prior to the oil spill, work which appointed them an income sufficient for the ‘basics’ of life in modern America – rent for a trailer and money to buy food. This notion of the basis for life was described to me one evening by Billy, and he went on to explain that beyond it he had little if any disposable income (for such activities as spending a night drinking in a bar), and furthermore that this income was tied to the captain’s who employed them as deckhands; if their captain didn’t wish to work, or if the captain’s buyer didn’t want to buy their catch then they were effectively – if temporarily – unemployed.

On more than one occasion I encountered both these individuals spending their day dejectedly sitting on the front steps of their trailer with little to fill their time with except watching the occasional truck drive past on our street. In this manner these individuals lived in a perpetual cycle of famine and feast, where weeks might go by with little or no income where they and their families would have to rely on loans of money from friends or captains and sympathetic landlords, followed by weeks of constant employment where they were able to pay back much of the money owed, followed by another session of unemployment and so on. Many of the (often very public) arguments happening within these families during these periods of unemployment were centred around a lack of money. Later during my research it was reported to me that Harry was placed in jail for a brief period due to his inability to pay child support; although I was no longer in contact with

him at this point in my research I can easily believe his on-going financial troubles could have led to this. This economic vulnerability had been capitalised upon by some researchers in this region by offering cash incentives to participate in studies on the effects of the BP oil spill or Katrina, and Harry and his partner Kate had participated in such studies purely due to the cash incentive.

The vulnerability of those in the Parish was brought into stark relief during both Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill. Deck hands such as Billy and Harry who worked in the ‘cash in hand’ culture of the Parish were unable to produce documentation of income – as there *was* no documentation – and thus were unable to claim compensation for lack of earnings. Angela also spoke extensively about this topic, as her office was inundated with requests for aid from families both unable to work due to the oil spill, and unable to claim compensation from BP due to their lack of documentation. It goes without saying that such individuals did not have reserves of capital which they can fall back on during such times.

Even many of those working in the more reliable oil industry had only a limited income beyond that needed for necessities, as Katrina demonstrated within the Parish. Very few within the community were able to rebuild homes that were destroyed (having to purchase ‘trailers’ instead), and most who did had to take out new mortgages – and the accompanying debt to do so. Abe lamented angrily about this, as he had worked his entire life with the goal of being able to pass some money onto his children upon his death. Now, because of Katrina and the need to rebuild after it, it is likely he will have to pass on debt instead. Cutter and Emrich (2006) show that the opportunity for every American to own their own home is not evenly spread across the United States, and that residents of the Gulf Coast (despite being especially vulnerable in ‘trailers’) are far more likely to be unable to afford their own home.

The precariousness of the employment within the fishing industry, even out-with the BP oil spill or Hurricane Katrina was demonstrated during my study when Thanh

suddenly lost the buyer of his oysters due to an unusual pinkish colour in the flesh of these oysters. This left Thanh unable to work for a number of weeks despite there being plenty of oysters available for harvesting. Even beyond this personal experience the wider market values of both the fishing and oil industries can fluctuate greatly, leading to very real impacts on the livelihoods of local people.

A precursor to Thanh's sudden lack of a buyer was felt across the entire American shrimp industry in 2001 when the market was flooded with cheaper, imported shrimp originating in East Asia. Audrey, a political activist for the Louisiana fishing industry described how this influx caused the value of the shrimp being caught by American fishermen to collapse. The influx referred to was caused by the seafood in question failing to meet the quality controls imposed in Europe and Japan for consumable produce. America had significantly lower quality controls on food, and thus received a glut of seafood. According to Audrey, the market was beginning to improve again by 2005, when Katrina destroyed the industry once again. Katrina was therefore experienced in this context as part of the on-going precariousness of fishermen within a global marketplace and the wider on-going context of a relationship with disasters.

Maintaining a positive relationship with the 'buyer' of your seafood can be crucial to maintaining one's long-term future, and this was demonstrated not only in the above examples but also specifically in the aftermath of Katrina, where David – the owner of a local marina – found it necessary to buy crabs from outside the Parish in order to keep meeting the needs of his clients. He was willing to lose money in the short term in this way rather than risk his buyers finding alternative sources for their seafood while the local industry in Plaquemines Parish was recovering. The oil industry is similarly affected by fluctuations in market values. A local pastor mentioned a steep fall in the value of oil causing the income of many in the Parish to drop during the 1980s. This caused migration out the Parish and several local churches closed as a result. It was this situation which inspired him to take up preaching, as he felt the Parish was being hurt by a lack of spiritual leadership.

A Lack of Insurance and Healthcare

The economic vulnerability of the local population was magnified by certain structural problems faced within the Parish, particularly with relation to the lack of access to medical facilities and wider issues of insufficient insurance coverage. This section shall first discuss the link between healthcare inequality, and how this can increase socio-economic vulnerability, before moving on to discuss how a lack of insurance coverage (both health insurance and home insurance) caused a similar increase in vulnerability, and hindered re-building efforts during recovery.

The link between healthcare inequalities magnifying socio-economic inequalities has been well established in the America context. Abraham (1993) has demonstrated how the poorest in America struggled to access healthcare institutions in any but the direst circumstances, and how this lack of access can leave the poorest extremely vulnerable. Those who lack financial resources were usually unable to purchase private health insurance, and at the time of my study the public alternatives were, as Abraham (1993) has shown, largely inadequate, as the Affordable Care Act had not yet been enforced in Louisiana. Access to healthcare has been shown to be especially difficult for rural communities (Hayward et al. 1997) even without the added complications of a post-disaster landscape, and although it has been noted that such an inequality did not translate into higher mortality rates in rural areas, it is none the less problematic that healthcare provision is not equally accessible to all. Recent research has demonstrated that the market-based model of healthcare in the United States has led to an increasing inequality of access for those living in poverty (Rylko-Bauer and Farmer 2008) both in terms of availability of health insurance and more broadly in terms of accessing care at all. With a link established between socio-economic vulnerability, limited access to health insurance, and healthcare inequality, this section shall review the experience of local people with regard to accessing healthcare, before moving on to discuss their relationship with the insurance industry (both health, and home insurance).

When this study was conducted, the nearest hospital to Buras was approximately 50 miles away, beyond the Parish border. This lack of a hospital, or access to any significant medical resources were often cited as major problems felt within the Parish, particularly at the southern end. This was reported many times to me as one of the major reasons people (particularly the elderly) did not return after Katrina, but it had a tangible impact to those who had returned also. During my first night of training at the local fire department I was given a tour of the various trucks to give me an overview of the various systems I would subsequently be trained in. While most of this equipment was standard fire-fighting gear one of the trucks also had an extensive provision of emergency medical supplies including a 'baby delivery kit'. Although the image of these (male) fire fighters having to assist in the delivery of a baby caused a good deal of laughter and banter amongst the men present, Mathew explained to me that should both the ambulances which operate in the southern end of the Parish be in use responding to calls, the dispatcher had no choice but to send the fire department or sheriff's office to medical emergencies. These ambulances were actually provided by the Parish itself, as the private hospitals in the area did not station ambulances in the Parish.

This vulnerability was underlined more than once by an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) stepping into the fire department to request we be ready to assist should the need arise – the second ambulance being unavailable on that evening. Part of the problem of course was the long distance one needed to travel to a hospital even once one was inside an ambulance. A fellow volunteer fire fighter, Pete, recounted to me an incident where one of his employees suffered a stroke while working at one of the industrial plants at the southern tip of the Parish. The ambulance took over an hour to get him from the southern end of the Parish, through New Orleans rush hour traffic to the University Hospital where he received care. Finding a means to overcome the long journey time to reach medical care was a problem for several people of my acquaintance, and on more than one occasion I gave Kate a lift beyond the Parish to attend treatment for her on-going health problems – a trip she would not have been able to make without help from myself or her other friends in the southern end of the Parish.

More importantly however, a problem many within the Parish faced in relation to healthcare is their lack of health insurance (and thus lack of access to any healthcare facilities at all). Hurricane Katrina caused the closure of the charity-based free hospital in the city of New Orleans and this left anyone in the region without health insurance in a state of extreme vulnerability. Most of those on the lowest incomes in the Parish could not afford the payments associated with this insurance. Pete, while continuing his account of the stroke victim went on to state that although he received sufficient care to save his life, his lack of insurance meant that he was discharged from hospital almost immediately, without the opportunity for follow-up care or rehabilitation. Even those who did receive on-going care often had to make choices on their treatment not based on their needs as patients, but on their ability to pay. Kate for example, was forced to buy less effective, but cheaper pharmaceutical drugs to regulate her medical condition, purely because she was unable to pay the extremely high cost of the non-‘generic alternatives’.

By thus outlining the structural problems felt by individuals in the Parish in this area – healthcare provision – it is easy to see that families on lower incomes and who cannot afford health insurance were disproportionately impacted by medical concerns, and the worry associated with this. At the time of study many Republican-led states, Louisiana included, were resisting the implementation of President Obama’s flagship ‘Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act’ thus it was impossible to ascertain what impact this new provision would have on local populations once fully adopted.

Moving away from a discussion of healthcare and health insurance, a major area of structural vulnerability in the Parish was a lack of insurance coverage more generally, in particular, a lack of home insurance. Home insurance is a significant area of interest in a discussion of economic precariousness, particularly in an area prone to large scale disasters such as Hurricane Katrina. In interviews with senior FEMA employees it was consistently stated that the role of that organisation – once the immediate danger of the natural disaster had passed – is to remove itself from the local landscape as much as possible and let local

people re-build on their own. They did provide money and resources for local large-scale public works projects (such as the new schools in Plaquemines Parish which are discussed below) but they hoped that people would have their own insurance policies in place for personal rebuilding projects. Unfortunately, as was discussed by a local insurance broker in Port Sulphur this was not necessarily the case. Even then, with the memory of Hurricane Katrina fresh in people's memories there were still many people within the Parish who lacked even the most basic insurance protection, and there were another group of people who buy insurance only during the peak hurricane season of June 1st – November 30th. It may seem surprising to the reader that many within the Parish might not have insurance coverage, given how important an infusion of money would logically be if one's house was destroyed in the aftermath of a significant catastrophe, but there were several reasons preventing some people from taking out such coverage.

Firstly of course there were simply those who cannot afford such coverage. Angela spoke on this topic but so did several of the religious leaders of my acquaintance, and all mentioned that the payments for full insurance coverage were simply beyond the income of many within what – as has been described – was a poor Parish. Beyond this there were those who do not have home insurance because they rented their property, and this lack of coverage for this reason was one of the major causes of houses not being re-built after the Storm; as landlords simply chose not to re-invest. However, there were those who own their home and could afford insurance who simply chose not to purchase it, and thus lacked protection from large disasters. This can of course be for a number of reasons but one cited by Buck one evening was his deep distrust of the insurance industry itself due to their poor performance in the aftermath of Katrina. As has been widely reported, many people were left with worthless policies as local (and national) insurances companies were either unable or unwilling to pay out to their policy holders. Many local firms went bankrupt, and some of the larger companies found loopholes or technicalities to prevent local people claiming (what they believed) to be their due.

The message here was fairly simple; if they didn't pay last time, why would they pay next time? However beyond this straightforward explanation we see an extension of

the generalised mistrust felt for white-collar insurance brokers mentioned in the previous chapter. There is a very strong ethos – as has been discussed – in the Parish connected to hard, physical work and fair rewards, indeed those who are positioned as a ‘drain’ on society were widely derided, however this perspective also promoted an ideal of fair compensation when it was considered due. The fact that so many people who had paid money into a policy for many years only to find it worthless at their moment of greatest need was considered by many a major betrayal.

Additional to this, there was also a large amount of inaccurate information circulated by word of mouth in the Parish regarding the insurance policies on offer. One such area of confusion was the government designated ‘V-Zones’ which are areas listed as especially vulnerable to flooding. According to many local residents Plaquemines Parish had been recently re-surveyed in the aftermath of Katrina and subsequently designated such a zone. According to some, this would mean their insurance premiums had either vastly increased in cost (or had already done so), or that they were now unable to receive insurance at all. Having discussed this extensively with a local insurance broker and with several FEMA officials it seems that most of this information was in fact, false. Certainly the Parish had been surveyed since Katrina, but such data was not (at the time of study) being used in any official capacity as it was still being analysed. Furthermore the previous surveys of the Parish had already placed the bulk of it in a high-risk V-Zone long before Katrina struck, and finally none of these officials or the insurance broker foresaw a significant rise in insurance rates once the new surveys became standard. It is unclear exactly where these stories emanated, and the FEMA officials I repeated them to were both surprised and disappointed by their prevalence. Often those who informed me of these inaccurate facts were those – such as Buck – who were the most outspoken against both the government and FEMA and thus it is plausible that rumour and supposition was repeated as further evidence of how unsatisfactory such bodies were, which – due to the disconnect largely seen between the information officially accessible to local people and these locals’ potential to access such information – went unchallenged. When I relayed the actual position of FEMA as it was outlined to me back to local residents of Buras I was usually met with extreme surprise, and often a certain amount of scepticism. Very occasionally the reaction of local people was that I had been lied to by the officials at FEMA.

What all of the above amounted to was firstly, a significant part of the Parish population who were either uninsured or under-insured with regard to their property and thus less able to effectively respond should another catastrophe threaten the Parish in the future, but where many felt giving money to unreliable insurance companies was a waste of their resources. Secondly, there were a number of residents who lacked basic health insurance or access to healthcare, which leads to an exacerbation of wider systems of inequality, and increased vulnerability amongst (often) the poorest members of the local community. This context exacerbated the impact of Hurricane Katrina and impacted processes of recovery and preparation for future disasters as shall be shown below.

Planning for an Uncertain Future

During my fieldwork I put the notion directly to David, the owner of a local marina, that anyone in America could achieve the ‘dream’ of making a million dollars. I was standing on his dock watching him and a young hired hand sort crabs by size to be sold on. We were exchanging banter with the young hand about his plans of success and future riches and I put the above question to a sceptical David, to which he simply laughed and shook his head. Many within the Parish have similarly long since ceased believing that the notion that a secure economic future is available to them. Many would agree with a local café owner who (upon hearing who I was and what my research centred around) informed me that around there one could only get “coffee and a hard time, but the hard time is free”.

In Plaquemines Parish, the emphasis for improving the security and potential for stability for the future was generally placed by many with improving and expanding the local education system. At the time of study illiteracy and low educational opportunities were serious problems within the Parish. On more than one occasion I witnessed

individuals who were either functionally or entirely illiterate. This was something readily noticeable in local restaurants, where one could occasionally see the menu being read aloud to one or more members of an assembled party, and sometimes by the wife to her partner. On other occasions people claimed either to myself or others that they could “read well” – suggesting to me that they felt the need to pre-emptively prevent themselves from being accused of being unable to do so (and perhaps become associated with the negative stereotypes of ‘trash’ discussed in the previous chapter). An example of this occurred one evening while training in the fire department, when a young man drove up and asked to be considered as a volunteer. One of the questions asked of him was whether or not he could read, he said he could, and that he was the member of his family who *could* read and did so for everyone else. Problems of literacy also had knock-on effects into a local man’s employability, especially within the oil industry.

Good literacy was obviously essential for employment within this sector and it was noted by several people of my acquaintances who were themselves oil-men that a major problem with recruiting within the Parish was that many of the applicants fail basic literacy tests. This forced oil companies to look elsewhere to hire workers. This problem was also of significant impact during the oil spill. A representative of the local Catholic Charities organisation recounted to me that many of the individuals he worked with who had struggled during the oil spill were those who had signed forms from BP either without being able to read them at all, or, while the individual could read, they did not possess the legal vocabulary to fully understand the minutiae of the documents. Even entering the claims process for compensation at all was challenging for many within the Parish, particularly those with limited literacy. This issue hit the non-English speaking communities especially hard. Plaquemines Parish contained a small but significant community of south-east Asian origin, particularly from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, a number of whom had a very limited understanding of the English language either written or spoken. This placed an additional barrier to their access to economic resources connected to the claims and compensation process, and according to the charity worker mentioned above also hampered their ability to find work within the clean-up and coastal restoration activities in the immediate aftermath of the spill. Many others have studied the unfortunate repercussions a local community suffers where bureaucratic systems are imposed upon a community which lacks experience in legal procedure. Examples such as

Hawai‘i in the 19th century (Daws 1974, Kent 1993), or in Alaska after the 1989 Exxon-Valdez oil spill (Dyer 2002, Button 2010), demonstrate that a lack of understanding of bureaucratic processes can result in the marginalisation of whole communities. This can result in local populations becoming detached from their livelihoods, and becoming unable to claim a full measure of financial compensation for harm caused to their ecosystem by a third party (such as Exxon).

This problem of a lack of education was recognised by many within the Parish, and there were those who were working hard to target and lessen the impact of this structural limitation. A major limitation since the impact of Hurricane Katrina had been the absence of quality educational facilities in the Parish such as libraries and (particularly) schools. Many of these facilities were either entirely destroyed by the storm or were placed into such a state of disrepair that the decision was made to demolish them soon after. The reconstruction of these facilities in the years since the storm had been a major investment of capital on behalf of the local government and FEMA and had the potential to significantly boost educational performance in the Parish. The newly constructed Buras Library, opened in 2010, exemplifies this, with a computer cluster with access to the internet and a large children’s section with associated after-school and holiday programmes, all intended to promote literacy in younger members of the Parish. Unfortunately, at the time this study was conducted (less than a year after its opening) the library lacked many books. This was a point of amusement between the librarians who worked within the library; that they had such a modern building, raised on stilts to protect it from future hurricanes, but very few books to put within it! However, their plan to restock the library was on-going with the intention of rectifying this problem.

What was not complete at the time of my study (several years after Katrina’s landfall) however were the schools being constructed to replace those demolished after Katrina. As will be discussed more extensively in chapter 6, the demolition and merger of the high-schools on the western side of south-Plaquemines caused intense controversy within the Parish. Nonetheless, at the time of this study construction was well underway for the permanent home of the newly created South Plaquemines High, and on the east

bank of the river the re-construction of Phoenix High School was about to begin. The plans for these new schools are certainly impressive in both their academic and sporting facilities and in their hurricane protection – both will, like the new libraries and community centres be raised up on stilts higher than the level the water reached during hurricane Katrina. The wider campuses also included similarly modern and raised teachers' apartments.

The Principals of both of these high schools were extremely passionate and committed to the on-going reconstruction of the education system in the Parish. Both spoke at length about the positive impact education can have on a young person's life, particularly in terms of lifting them out of the poverty of the Parish, and of thus providing much needed economic security. Both also mentioned that the view of education within the Parish is slowly beginning to change away from one where education was devalued and mistrusted, to one where it was valued in the same way they themselves saw it. This belief would perhaps be reflected in some of the fishermen of my acquaintance who hoped their sons would attend college (university) to become an engineer or doctor, rather than following them into the fishing industry as often they had done with their fathers – a shift discussed further in chapter 5. The Principal of South Plaquemines in particular was very positive about the newly unified school, seeing it as part of the gradual recovery after the storm, not simply in terms of bringing the Parish back to the position it once held, but to exceed that position through eroding the divisiveness he saw as being part of having three separate schools in the major towns of the southern Parish.

The hurricane also had caused a change in the recruitment of teachers to the Parish. It had for many years been necessary to provide incentives to encourage teachers to come to the Parish, such as the previously mentioned teacher housing unit being built in Buras, or, (as in the case of Paul, a volunteer with the Knights of Columbus, who taught in the Parish for a few years after graduating from college) to relax the requirement for the individual to have a qualification in teaching. While this was still true to a certain extent, both Principals reported that they had received an influx of young, newly-graduated teachers from across the country who felt they could offer a particularly meaningful contribution in areas hit by the hurricane. Both these men were also cautiously positive

about the future of the Parish's youth, noting that there were abundant resources in the Parish. They also both saw hope in the diversification of Parish industry, with hope of an expansion to the port of New Orleans with an associated training facility offering employment in the Parish beyond this resource extraction. These two Principals both recognised the challenges they at that time faced – leading schools which were situated in temporary, prefabricated accommodation, and teaching children who suffered from what was described by one of them as “a unique set of challenges”, but were hopeful that there was both a positive future available to both their students, and the Parish as a whole.

Part of the on-going debate over opportunities for a prosperous and stable future in the Parish came to a head during the debate surrounding the previously mentioned vote to relocate the courthouse and Parish seat. One thing that was mentioned by the Principal of Phoenix High School (which draws students from several nearby towns including Point à la Hache) as a concern to him was that the permanent removal of these institutions from the east bank of the Parish would hurt the long-term prosperity of that community. This belief was a significant point of conversation by members of the Knights of Columbus while they gossiped at a rather quiet bingo night at St. Patrick's Catholic church. The general consensus was that without the courthouse there would be “nuthin' left” on the other side of the river – no industry, no jobs in administration, and not long after that (it was presumed) no community at all. Re-building these institutions was therefore seen as an effective means to breathe new economic life into communities which – as was suggested – had been largely neglected.

It was also argued that moving the seat and courthouse north to Belle Chasse (which had been comparatively spared by Katrina and was generally considered to be far wealthier than the rest of the Parish) would be an example of the more prosperous north taking something valuable from the already impoverished south, thus further reinforcing the emergence of cultural division in the Parish, hinted at earlier in this thesis. This idea that all a community needed to prosper is a little investment and something to create jobs reflects the wider view on prosperity held by many within the Parish, and links back to the construction mentioned in the previous chapter about the importance of being employed as

a designator of positive identity and moral worth. It was stated to me by several people that it was always possible to make money in the Parish, indeed this was one of the great strengths of living there. Both oil men and fishermen of my acquaintance stated that with the correct attitude and hard work there was always “a dollar to be made”, as Thanh might say, within the abundant unskilled labour market of the Parish. This is possibly an extension to the notion of the “working poor” mentioned by Angela near the beginning of this chapter, and certainly links to ideas surrounding the ‘proper’ conduct of an American discussed in the previous chapter. This philosophy ran deeply through the Parish, at the widest-level – in relation to the courthouse – and at the personal level – that those who cannot find work are presumably simply lazy.

The Charity Of Strangers

“Thank God for the oil spill” is not a phrase I thought I would have heard spoken by a fisherman on the Louisiana Gulf Coast during my research into the aftermath of the most significant oil spill in the history of the United States, but it was. The relationship between the people of Plaquemines Parish and ideas of charity, compensation, and fraud was more complex and at times, perhaps even contradictory, than I could have imagined before visiting the region. In particular, in relation to how these themes connect to our understanding of economic precariousness and cultural othering, and of the future for this Parish, as it rebuilds itself in the post-disaster landscape of Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill. This section shall examine this relationship.

The compensation offered to people within the Parish of Plaquemines through the government, charities (particularly faith-based charities), and (particularly in the case of the BP oil spill) by corporations has had a significant impact on the economic recovery of the Parish, particularly in the short-term aftermath of these major disasters. The quote opening this section – “thank God for the oil spill” – was made by an oyster fisherman who had invested both the money he received as compensation for lost earnings from BP, and the wages paid for his involvement in clean-up activities during the Vessels of Opportunity

programme. This fisherman had used this money to purchase land, a new trailer, and a second boat which he planned to have outfitted for shrimping (allowing him to fish whichever was more profitable at a given moment). These investments coincided with what his long-term plans for his family had been before the spill, but the large injection of cash all at once had allowed him to meet these personal goals sooner. He was certainly not alone in this, and another fisherman of my acquaintance – this time the crabber Leon – who was one of the most negative about the impact the oil industry had on the natural habitat of the Parish, nonetheless acknowledge that the oil spill had similarly allowed him to take a short-cut on his material recovery from Hurricane Katrina – allowing him to purchase a pleasant brick house which had survived the flooding in the Parish and a new, much larger boat. In general in the fishing industry the larger one's boat the greater potential one has to make a larger profit.

This influx of capital was also to a lesser extent available from FEMA in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. One locally based FEMA official explained to me that the maximum payment a family could receive was \$26,200 and a FEMA trailer. Although I was not aware of any person who had received this maximum amount, several of my respondents had received at least some money through FEMA, and many had at some point lived in a FEMA trailer. Sally spoke with real warmth about both the trailer and FEMA in general. Gaining access to a FEMA trailer allowed her and her husband to return to the Parish. They parked it in their drive way and after FEMA had demolished the remains of their ruined house they were able to get to work rebuilding their property. What is crucial in the above examples is that they represent uses of such money which correspond to pre-existing social norms of positive behaviour. The money gained by these individuals was invested in equipment useful in their work environment, allowing them to more quickly return to or enhance their position of economic productivity. Sally's trailer on the other hand, rather than tarnishing her with stereotypes connected with 'trailer trash' was instead re-imagined as a temporary step on the process of recovery from the storm. In both cases, what was made clear is that this assistance was necessary due to the extreme nature of the Storm and Spill, but it was temporary.

Examples of similar non-monetary assistance were often crucial in allowing local people the opportunity to return to the Parish. One particularly memorable anecdote on this subject came from the Principal of Phoenix High School. In his view, the majority of the reconstruction efforts in the aftermath of the storm had been directed to the west bank of the Parish until the commander of the Arkansas air force reserve force chose to move his company across the river and helped this Principal clear wreckage from his school grounds. The Principal described this as “a profound moment for the east bank” and an Arkansas state flag signed by every member of this regiment proudly hangs outside his office to acknowledge the work they did for the school. Moving beyond the immediate aftermath and looking at what all of this investment and aid means for the Parish at a general level, discussions with local politicians and senior members of FEMA were encouraging. As one FEMA official stated the investment which comes into an area after a major disaster such as this can be the equivalent of fifty years worth of public works happening in less than a decade. With strong leadership therefore these funds can be directed to dramatically modernise and improve the facilities and infrastructure of a region. Just as the fishermen above had invested in larger boats, local politicians have invested in new schools, libraries, and community centres which will hopefully be able to survive any future hurricanes.

Of course the reason for this high level of charitable support is the high level of need within the Parish for exactly this type of support. Several charitable organisations operated in the Parish in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and some continued to do so, even several years after the storm. The Committee for Plaquemines Recovery (or CPR as it is known) is a collaborative effort by several smaller charities, local government, and certain local churches formed to steer and oversee much of the charitable re-construction of the Parish. Similar organisations were formed in neighbouring communities after Katrina struck, but all except CPR have now been disbanded. A major reason for this was of course the continued need for charitable work to be done in the Parish to assist residents. While I was resident in the Parish I joined a group of Lutherans from the north of the United States who had travelled to the Parish for a week of ‘service’ as it was referred; volunteering with a charity which constructed houses for those left destitute – the Fuller Center. Although the Fuller Center’s mission in the Parish came to an end towards the end of my fieldwork it was remarkable to me that there were people still waiting to relocate to

the Parish five years after the hurricane, and who were unable to do so due to their lack of resources.

CPR continued to provide support for those wishing to return to the Parish beyond the end of my time studying in Plaquemines and there was no indication at that time of the cessation of their activities. Indeed, during an interview with an official from Catholic Charities who was working with fishermen who had been impoverished by the oil spill he stated that his organization was in fact expanding their presence in the Parish due to the high need of assistance they found there. Three local religious leaders reflected to me on their role in the Parish in this matter, as in the aftermath of the storm they had found the resources of their churches stretched to their limit by the need to offer financial or material assistance to the most destitute members of their congregations. This financial support was at times still needed even during my period of study. What this suggests is the very real need for the support mechanisms mentioned in the previous paragraphs as the people of the Parish of Plaquemines were often in need of what one member of the Fuller Center described as “a hand up”.

With this said, there are certainly those in the Parish sceptical that the money and support which has entered the Parish in the aftermath of both the Storm and the Spill was wisely, and appropriately spent, in direct contrast to the ‘deserving’ recipients mentioned above. This has also been reflected in national media, with the now infamous ‘spillionaire’ accusation widely reported in relation to those supposedly cashing in on the BP oil spill (Allman 2011, Barker 2011). Accusations and discussions of corruption were not uncommon during my research, and would often lead into, from, or be part of wider discussions of benefit fraud, and a perceived unwillingness to work on the part of the racially or culturally defined ‘other’ discussed in the previous chapter. These discussions would usually position the speaker as one who did not commit such fraud and would often link to ideas of the social hierarchy of the Parish previously discussed.

While being interviewed, Arland, who spoke at length about the significant economic vulnerability in the Parish and emotional trauma many had gone through, also spoke about the many abuses of the system. He mentioned an individual who described himself as a religious pastor, and had been used by national aid agencies to distribute aid in the southern part of the Parish in the aftermath of the storm, but who had in fact stolen both money and resources from the donor bodies. He also spoke of individuals who had – as he saw it – wasted their compensation money they had received from BP and FEMA by spending it in casinos, or on luxury goods, rather than investing it for their future. This clearly links to the discourse present in the previous chapter, and reflects a certain perspective regarding the ‘appropriate’ use of one’s money, one which links back to certain normative ideas connected to a local understanding of 1950s values. This often fed into ‘othering’ discourse, whereby the speaker would usually be framed as having appropriately used his compensation money, while a vaguely defined ‘other’ did not.

Others in the Parish also spoke of people having wasted their compensation money, and such discourse continues the positioning of positive ‘self’ and wasteful ‘other’ within a particular understanding of ‘hard work’, and ‘appropriate’ uses for money received as compensation. Leon, after outlining the investments he had made with his BP compensation money answered my query as to how others had spent their money with a shrug and “down the casino”. Indeed, when describing his own reaction to the oil spill David, the owner of a local marina, had tried to show that there was no oil affecting large parts of the local fishing grounds, but according to him many fishermen in the wider region were more interested in asking for compensation from BP than supporting him in this. The extent to which this is true is unclear, however BP appealed against the requirement to offer compensation to all those eligible at that time, stating that as the definition stood they were being inundated with spurious claims (BBC News 2013). At time of writing it appears that they had successfully won the right to more stringently assess the validity of claims being made to their compensation fund, and limit the money being paid out through it (BBC News 2013).

Desmond described how he had been denied compensation from FEMA because he was 'ineligible' while others whom he described as "drug dealers" claimed thousands of dollars. This conversation continued into a wider discussion of on-going benefit fraud, and it was his opinion that an honest, working man (such as himself and the others present) did not know how to abuse the system and thus were unable to claim benefits or economic compensation either during times of tragedy, or as part of on-going economic support. As such, his life was made harder while the constructed 'other' against which he spoke was able to live comfortably on the copious, fraudulently acquired benefits his labour ultimately paid for. It was not only other individuals who were critiqued in this manner. Local government and FEMA were both the target of criticism because of decisions they made. As has been mentioned above, the decision to not immediately rebuild a health centre in the Parish was heavily criticised by many, with one elderly couple, who I chatted to while they outfitted their pirogue for a morning's fishing, describing how money had been instead wasted building community centres which (in their view) were never used. Buck went further, and described the misuse of his "tax-dollars" as nothing short of criminal. Many people in the Parish could describe instances similar to those presented above, where unworthy individuals received money or support erroneously, while more deserving individuals (themselves or others) were denied.

Even many of those who are not critical of the relief effort believe the time for charity in the Parish had passed. Speaking at his home, Bob – while grateful for those who had come to the Parish over the years to help rebuild – believed that it was now time for the Parish to move forward on its own. He was highly critical of those still seeking aid from FEMA so many years after the Storm had struck, and very much saw it as time for people to stand on their own. Bob's father was even more emphatic than this, suggesting that some of those coming to help rebuild the Gulf Coast were now doing so for the wrong reasons – they were now coming as disaster tourists more than people genuinely wishing to help. Interestingly however, these were individuals who no longer received charitable aid of any kind, and it seems unlikely they would have held this position if they had still required such support. Ultimately, Bob's view was also the position adopted by the Fuller Centre, which was the last faith-based rebuilding charity to be operating in the southern end of the Parish. During my period of research their mission in the Parish ended and their members moved on to other projects. Late in my research I visited one of these individuals

who had joined a similar project in Tuscaloosa, Alabama which has been devastated by a large tornado. The overriding message of many within (especially) organisations such as the volunteer fire department and Knights of Columbus was gratitude for the help received in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, but it was now time for the Parish to grow on its own.

Indeed, there was also a strong desire to support others who experienced similar disasters. During my study Japan suffered a major tsunami in the north of the country and Faith Temple Ministries, a church in Triumph which I attended, held special prayers for the victims of this disaster, and offered a special collection to send money to disaster response organisations. There was also a strong tradition of what might be described as ‘neighbourliness’ in the Parish, by which I mean that individuals were often willing to do small favours and acts of kindness for both friends and strangers. Early in my fieldwork, while staring at a flat tyre on my car and wondering how I would get my car the 50 miles to the nearest mechanic to buy a new one, a complete stranger pulled up beside me and suggested I follow him to his house where he would repair my wheel and give me enough air in the tyre to get me to Belle Chasse. This he subsequently did, while joking he became well practiced repairing his vehicle’s tyres while moving building materials to his house in the aftermath of Katrina (due to the debris strewn across the roads).

Later in my fieldwork I joined my neighbour Thanh and several of his friends in the replacement of the motor of his fishing boat. During this work, Josh – a volunteer at the fire department – happened to drive past and, recognising both myself and one of the other men helping Thanh decided to join us in the work. After being introduced to Thanh he set to with a drill and proved a significant help in the proceedings. Josh, mentioned above was a new volunteer at the fire department, and both it and other charitable institutions such as the Knights of Columbus had seen an influx of new volunteers since Hurricane Katrina, many of whom had a wish to “give something back” after having received help during the aftermath of the storm. Charity therefore should not be considered a unidirectional flow, and there is a significant movement in the Parish to participate in such activities in their turn.

Conclusion

The previous chapter discussed the lived experience of cultural and political precariousness as experienced within the Parish. Precariousness, which was influenced, and to a degree magnified, by the impact of the large catastrophes Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill. This chapter has also examined the state of precariousness in the Parish, but has examined this phenomenon as it pertains to the economic context of the local community.

Even before these catastrophes impacted life within the Parish large sections of the local populace worked within irregular or unstable employment. Such is the nature of the oil and fishing industries that unskilled and semi-skilled jobs were (at least until these disasters) relatively plentiful, if unreliable and poorly paid. Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill brought this vulnerability into stark relief and demonstrated that many members of the community lacked the security of even moderate financial resources.

Two structural limitations directly connected to this topic relate to many local people who found themselves without adequate insurance policies when the hurricane struck to protect their properties, and without health insurance to protect their families. This lack of coverage, and (often) the lack of financial stability conducive to regular payments to secure such coverage, leaves local people unable to react to the challenges of large disasters or ill health with either rapidity or (in the case of home insurance) with the ability to replace their material possessions with exactly what had been lost. As such, even if this thesis were to opt for a model of recovery assessment similar to Cutter et al.'s (2014), which assessed material reconstruction, it would have to conclude that 'recovery' had not occurred, and was unlikely to occur for decades if ever. Given the cultural significance trailers have within the local community (as discussed in Chapter 3 above)

this challenge to the equation of recovery to a return to pre-disaster normality is doubly challenged. With this said, given this precariousness is rooted in pre-disaster socio-economic structures it equally does not signify an unprecedented cultural or economic shift caused by these catastrophes either.

Such precariousness led to an inability for many within the community to adequately plan for their long-term future. Living in a precarious present economically, makes preparing for a future which will certainly contain further large-scale disasters challenging, and indeed forces us to consider the idea of ‘recovery’ from a disaster in a new light.

This means that there will probably always be some fraction of the local population who will continue to have experience of interactions with charities and other bodies seeking to provide them with emergency relief or financial compensation. Such a reliance on aid in this way links closely with the cultural challenges to moral legitimacy discussed in the previous chapter, and directly impacts the possibility of achieving a simplistic stability in relation to the on-going relationships this community has with large scale disasters.

With the context of local precariousness established over these two chapters, it is clear that the nature of ‘disaster’ in this context is far from simplistic. Even before Hurricane Katrina or the BP oil spill threatened the Parish there were on-going processes of ‘everyday’ disaster which influenced local cultural norms for the residents of this region. It is hoped this investigation of precarious will help frame the discussion in the chapters which follow, as the notion of recovery from these catastrophic events continues to be considered.

Chapter 5 – Insiders in the Aftermath of Catastrophe

Introduction

Maps of Plaquemines Parish neatly list a series of place names descending south from the Parish border: Belle Chasse, Jesuit Bend, Port Sulphur, Nairn, Empire, Buras, Triumph, Boothville, Venice, and many more. The first time I drove through the Parish I had difficulty finding most of them. Belle Chase was fine, that was the first one you pass through, Port Sulphur has a large yellow sign welcoming you so I worked that one out, and Venice is basically the last one you reach before open water so at that point my options were to stop or strike out for Cancun. As for the rest I didn't have a clue, in fact Buras (where I ultimately lived for a year) I drove straight past without even realising it was there. The metaphor I used to best describe the man-made buildings of the peninsula was that of a ploughed furrow, down which someone had loosely scattered a handful of seeds. My problem was that I was expecting neat, clearly defined urban borders from which I could easily bracket off one town from the other, the reality dumbfounded me as the towns bled into each other. There were no obvious 'main streets' full of shops, industrial zones for oil refineries and machine shops, or residential neighbourhoods. Most of the time – so it seemed to me – everything was just 'thrown in' together. As an outsider, I felt deeply confused and completely lost – something of an achievement given the dry land of the Parish is often less than a mile wide and at times has just a single road running north/south. One thing I did find out that day, however, was that there isn't much you can really learn about Plaquemines Parish by looking at a map.

Image 7: Welcome sign at Port Sulphur



The complex social structure of Plaquemines Parish existed firstly as a place of binary opposites, where concepts of ‘insiderness’ and ‘outsiderness’ were constantly negotiated, along with a perceived and constructed conflict between the opposing industries of commercial fishing (the general term applied to the predominantly independent professional fishermen on the Gulf of Mexico) and the oil and gas industry (which is comprised of some of the largest multi-national corporations on Earth and their subsidiaries and contractors).

Secondly, however, this place also existed as one that was simultaneously shared, fluid, and mutually-constructed, where simplistic dualisms was undermined by the very processes which might appear to support them. By exploring how these simultaneous experiences of place emerge and play out in the aftermath of two significant catastrophes, insight can be offered into what constitutes ‘insiderness’ and how one’s experience of place changes or stays the same when a landscape with which you were familiar is disrupted in

such a significant way. The relationship between these themes shall be the primary topic covered in this chapter.

Specifically, it shall begin by critically examining the dualism constructed by much of the media narrative during the oil spill and assessing such a division from the perspective of local people. While it will be shown that there were broad connections between 'local' and the fishing industry, and 'outsider' and the oil industry, these divisions were embedded in complex historically and geographically rooted processes, quite separate from the narrative the media chose to portray.

In the second section of this chapter however, this simplistic dualism will be challenged, and a more nuanced exploration of the tripartite structure of 'local', 'stranger', and 'stranger you know' shall be offered which shows how even between the apparently competing industries of oil and fishing it was impossible to draw clear boundaries around or between such categories. The local lived experience of 'insiderness' resisted simplistic understanding, and these categories were shown to be both fixed *and* malleable.

Finally, this chapter shall explore how the active construction and re-construction of the material culture and physical geography of this landscape affected those participating in it. In the first two sections of this chapter the construction of place and the development process of local landscape are shown with a greater emphasis on the intangible cultural and symbolic construction of these features, in this final section however, the material element to this understanding is brought to the foreground and critically examined. This is of particular relevance to an understanding of 'recovery' within disaster studies, which has often focused on this material reconstruction.

At the beginning of each major section in this chapter I have presented a brief vignette representing my own progression over the course of my fieldwork, from a position of absolute outsider (above), to an individual afforded certain privileges of 'insiderness' by the end of my period of study. While such accounts are far from the theoretical focus of this chapter, it seemed appropriate from a methodological standpoint to acknowledge that while I studied the creation and maintenances of these boundaries, I myself was also deeply caught within this particular web of relations. First however, we must briefly consider what we mean by the term 'landscape' in this context so to better situate what follows within wider writing on this theme.

Locating Landscape

While the idea that 'landscape' exists simply as the stage upon which social life happens has been challenged by several authors (for example Gow 1995, Hirsch 1995), the writing of Tim Ingold provides particular potential for engagement with the lived experience of dwelling amidst the recovery from a major catastrophe. For him, 'landscape' exists at the intersection of the material and meteorological reality of the cultural world, and the temporally situated lived experience of each organism dwelling within it. As such, any landscape is in a constant state of construction (what he refers to as 'becoming') as it is continuously and endlessly shaped by the organisms and other forces similarly 'becoming' within it. Our experience (both of the landscape specifically and more broadly) emerges through the ever-evolving process of construction acted out by every living being, as we mutually construct the landscape in which we dwell (Ingold 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2011).

As such, a 'post-disaster' or 'post-catastrophe' landscape highlights in broad terms the on-going experience and construction of southern Plaquemines Parish, but with particular acknowledgement of how normalised disaster and large-scale catastrophe can be significant forces in the process of the shaping of this landscape. The idea of non-organic actors forming part of the process of the construction of landscape is not unprecedented in Ingold's (2005) writing, and in 'The Eye of the Storm' he offers an understanding of

weather as a medium, rather than a spectacle, and as something that can have a deeply formative role in social life.

Within this emergent landscape, humans and other animals interact in meaningful ways in order to actively and implicitly construct ‘places’ (Gray 2011, Gregory 2011). Rodman (2011) has argued that rather than simply a setting for social life, places should be engaged with as emerging out of uniquely local cultures, social structures, and power dynamics. As such, we should take seriously the significance that culturally constructed places can be invested with by local people in a given landscape. As such, while a place might be considered as a bounded point within a broader landscape, such a point is not objectively fixed, but continually shaped and defined by the on-going process of dwelling engaged in by local people (Richardson 2011).

These ‘places’ are usually afforded a communally accepted name (Helleland 2012), though of course, naming is a practice itself caught within particular power structures. Naming does however, give insight into where the locally significant boundaries between one ‘place’ ends and another might begin. However, this should not be taken as signifying a rigid cultural structure imposed upon a passive ‘nature’, but rather as signifying the dynamic interaction of a local population engaged in processes of ‘becoming’ in culturally meaningful ways. Gray’s (2011) work particularly underlines this, as he describes his participant’s role in ascribing meaning to places as part of their active engagement with local landscape. This engagement simultaneously formed part of their affirmation of an ‘insider’ or ‘local’ identity, a process deeply relevant to parts of this chapter.

In the context of the Parish of Plaquemines therefore, culturally constructed ‘places’, exist within a wider post-disaster landscape, and their continued construction and performance help to shape this landscape, as part of its wider process of ‘becoming’. I understand both places and landscapes to be geographically situated but not intrinsically tied to any specific aspect of physical geography. They emerge out of the cyclical and

reciprocal process of ‘becoming’ engaged in by every creature and the physical and meteorological forces in which they dwell. Landscape is something active, not passive, and emerges out of the uniquely local relationships found within it. This active construction is deeply connected with local understandings of insideness as shall be shown, and intersects with the on-going normalisation of disaster.

The Binary Opposites of Southern Plaquemines Parish

The first fieldnote I wrote upon moving to Plaquemines Parish begins like this:

‘19/01/11

Arrived in Port Sulphur.

Hotel worker very friendly but informs me that around here you have ‘locals, strangers and strangers you’ve met’.

I really did feel like a stranger at that moment, the definitive outsider. I wasn’t as bad as I had been on my first brief visit to the Parish (I now knew where Buras was!) but I was still far ‘beyond my comfort zone’ as they say. I didn’t even know what to wear! My usual outfit in my native Scotland is a pair of heavy jeans and a thick hoodie – which was never going to work in Louisiana’s warm spring temperature. But what to replace it with was a mystery to me. Every time I opened my mouth to speak heads would turn to listen, and people would comment that I “had an accent”. For the first few weeks I accumulated a small pile of pieces of scrap paper, envelopes, and napkins upon which people had sketched out rough maps to help me reach the grocery store, the local marina, a friend who had a room to rent, etc. Through this landscape I blundered with my funny accent, hand-drawn maps, and wrong clothes trying to find something that I might call a ‘place’, In reality I was a place all to myself, a walking ‘other’ and most definitely “not from down here” as was pointed out to me more than once.

Introducing the Parish's Binaries

The relationship between the three categories mentioned above; 'local, stranger, and stranger you know' had deep significance to local understandings of Plaquemines Parish. This was a locally constructed and negotiated trio, a construct that can be applied both to others and oneself, with meanings that can change depending on situation. At its core was a concern surrounding 'insiderness', 'outsiderness', and those semi-outsiders who are granted the privileged access to place of the insiders. Similarly, and especially during the BP oil spill, media agencies and other bodies not located in the Parish itself portrayed a dualistic narrative of the 'local' fishermen threatened by the 'outsider' mistakes of the oil and gas industry. Both this internal notion of 'local' and 'stranger' and the media's categorisation of fishing vs oil feed into what Tuan (1977) might describe as a 'mythic' understanding of place (described below), which allows us a lens through which to explore how the boundaries of insider and outsider manifested in this post-catastrophe landscape alongside the local on-going relationship with disaster. This section shall reflect on how these constructed separations and boundaries can have real impact on the social structures of Plaquemines Parish, particularly in a post-disaster context. This will begin with a discussion of the media's dualistic narrative created in response to the BP oil spill, followed by exploring the contrasting locally emergent conceptions of the 'local, stranger, and stranger you know', before finally (once an explanation of what he means by this terminology) utilising the ideal of Tuan's 'mythic space' to develop our understanding of how these insider/outsider divisions can manifest in this local landscape.

An Appealing Media Narrative

The structured labelling of 'insider' and 'outsider' were not only constructed at a local level, but were also projected onto those within the Parish by many within the mainstream media, which was in turn watched and interpreted by those living in the Parish. This was particularly prevalent during the 2010 BP oil spill.

During the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico the rural fishing communities of southern Louisiana found themselves the subject of a global news audience (Barcott 2010, Bourne 2010, Symington 2010). Modern 24 hour news agencies and the widespread dissemination of information on the internet meant that interested parties from around the world could be constantly ‘awash’ with the BP oil spill. It turned out that there were a great many interested parties, and global interest in every detail of the spill led to a new vocabulary entering day-to-day conversation the world over. Soon ‘blow out preventers’, ‘junk shots’ and ‘top kills’ became common currency amongst those a world away from the marshes and bayous of the Gulf of Mexico (BBC News 2011b, Markey 2011).

Live reports ‘from the field’ led to a televised audience being given a window into the backyard of the residents of Grand Isle or Hopedale. Plaquemines Parish was also in the midst of this media frenzy, firstly with Parish president Billy Nungesser appearing on national news in his trademark bombastic fashion (New York Times 2010), and then later as U.S. president Barack Obama visited Venice marina with a full media entourage (CNN 2010). The contrast to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina could not have been more marked – suddenly the communities ‘down the road’ (as locals refer to the southern end of the Parish) were all over the front page.

As this audience soaked up the media’s message, they were presented with a compelling ‘David and Goliath’ story of the weak and fragile environment and its noble, independent fishermen who were locked in an epic battle for survival against an all-consuming, dangerously aloof, and unambiguously destructive corporation (Bresnahan 2011, Heitman 2011, Mervin 2011, Satchfield 2011, Shactman 2011). It was a compelling narrative, and one which resonated with a viewing public disenchanted with so called ‘big business’ still largely seen as culpable for a period of major global economic crisis beginning in 2008. There was certainly some truth to it, as anyone who chose to analyse the appalling attitude to safety the corporations fostered leading up to the disaster (or the conduct of the then BP Chief Executive Tony Hayward in the aftermath of the spill) could

see (BBC News 2010, Gambit News 2011, Times-Picayune 2012a, Vergano and Koch 2011).

While this simplistic duality was primarily intended for a national or international audience it was watched by locals as well, and (as shall be described below) featured as part of the local response to the oil disaster, as both the lived experience of the damage caused by BP and this message of corporate ‘outsiderness’ met the widely accepted (in southern Louisiana) belief of the economic benefits of the oil industry’s presence.

“Stranger You Know”

The phrase “locals, strangers, and strangers you know” (or “have met”) was an oft repeated local turn of phrase used as a shorthand by people who would place themselves in the first category (‘local’), and occasionally in the third (‘you know’), to differentiate people in the second (‘stranger’) or third categories from themselves. What this demonstrates however, was a widely held cultural construction relating to notions of insider and outsider, with the addition of a fluid and contested stage somewhere between the two, generally applied to people who were treated as insiders but who were not born in the Parish, and thus began as ‘strangers’.

The hotel worker mentioned in the opening of this section was the first person to use this expression to me but she was certainly not the last. On one occasion when I complained to some friends that I was having difficulty convincing fishing captains to take me out with them beyond the levees I was met with laughter, as they explained that I was still a ‘stranger’ to these captains, and they would be unwilling to take me out until they were convinced I wasn’t going to reveal their prime fishing spots to others. I asked this group of friends what I was to *them*, and after a brief, humorous discussion it was agreed that I had reached the ‘stranger you know’ category. They went on to explain that to be

truly 'local' you not only had to be born in the Parish, but you also had to have ancestors who were born there too. This is not to claim that this was the universal definition for these terms, nor that these fishing captains would have taken a 'local' person who they did not know out with them on their boat, but it did mean that in *this* instance the defining characteristic of my identity which was relevant to them was my perceived lack of connection to the local landscape. This example aptly demonstrates the contextual nature of this labelling, both 'stranger' and 'stranger you know' were both applied to me simultaneously and apparently without contradiction.

Morgan, a friend of mine and senior member of the Knights of Columbus cited this as the central dynamic in his attachment to his home in southern Plaquemines. While we were speaking on one occasion outside his house he pointed to every other structure in sight and was able to name the family resident there. He went on to claim that he could leave his front door open while he went shopping⁷, a feeling of security which would be impossible to maintain – he claimed – if he lived anywhere else. I challenged him on this by pointing out that somewhere else might not be threatened by other problems, such as hurricanes every few years, but he was un-fazed. For him, to be situated in this local network of relationships placed him within a centre of trust and security and outweighed any concern he might have regarding hurricanes. Hurricanes were a part of the local landscape, the concerns of life beyond the Parish were 'other', non-local problems and thus significantly more threatening. He also went on to note his concern with the larger number of 'strangers' at that point coming into the Parish (in this case clean-up workers connected to the oil spill) who threatened his notion of security and trust, and thus his secure rootedness in place. It is interesting therefore to note that from his view the potential threat from hurricanes was part of everyday normality, while the potential threat from unknown people coming into the Parish was unusual and somewhat troubling.

Further to this, it was mentioned to me more than once that in the aftermath and clean-up of Hurricane Katrina 'outsiders' came into the Parish to steal things. While

⁷ Giving me this knowledge was perhaps a statement of trust suggesting I had reached the 'stranger you know' category in this context also.

recounting life in her FEMA trailer, Sally mentioned that she used to hide her personal generator at night and while away from her property because she was worried about strangers coming into the Parish and stealing things. During my time living in the Parish I was not aware of many stories which suggested that locals stole from each other in the aftermath and clean-up from Hurricane Katrina, but I did hear several which suggested there was a threat from strangers coming into the Parish looting from elsewhere. These stories seldom contained specific examples, and were often in the ‘friend-of-a-friend’ format and often (though not universally) based on hearsay and rumour rather than direct personal experience. This links to wider ideas surrounding a supposed shared understanding to normative behaviour in the Parish which are discussed in greater detail in chapters 2 and 3. Such accounts feed into wider stories of (for example) the city of New Orleans being described to me as a “warzone” or “crapshoot” and reinforces ideas of the dangerous ‘other’ beyond the borders of the Parish. With this in mind, it is doubly heartening to reflect that Morgan (mentioned above) chose to place trust in me as he did.

Finally, as was discussed above, while discussing a recent trip of mine to New Orleans, Buck upbraided me for leaving the Parish *at all*. He stated that he saw no reason to head north of Belle Chasse, and that even there he didn’t feel comfortable; it being too far north of his home, a position that links closely with Tuan’s (1977) idea of mythic space, discussed below. More than one of my respondents commented that they felt uncomfortable leaving the Parish, particularly in relation to New Orleans which, while only an hour and a half’s drive north, was viewed as sharing few cultural similarities with Plaquemines Parish. Others went as far as to warn me off ever going there, telling me that it was a dangerous city, George (a member of the fire department) went as far as describing it as a “warzone” due to the violence there. When I asked if there was crime or violence in the Parish I was assured that there was neither.

These four examples hopefully given an insight into fairly widespread ideas of the relationship many within the Parish articulated between an ideal of the ‘local’ (someone who one knows well, shares a historical ‘rootedness’, and participates in Parish life) and the stranger (an unknown individual who it is assumed comes from beyond the Parish

border, and who is less worthy of trust). Between the two is the ‘stranger you know’, the outsider treated as an insider, born outside the Parish but whom has gained a connection to the local landscape and the trust of (at least) the speaker at the time.

Of course, others within the social sciences have also published on comparable pluralities of ‘insiderness’ and ‘outsiderness’ based in other social contexts. Miyares (2008) writing about the experience of ethnicity and ‘insiderness’ in Hawai‘i states that “ethnic identity and cultural assimilation are flexible, and can be constructed and reconstructed as individuals move through the social contexts of their daily lives” (2008: 515). This tallies with the experience of other writers in this region, and Judith Schachter has written about her own experience negotiating the ‘hapa haole’ (or half-foreign’) local identity during her own fieldwork (2010). Other writers have focused more explicitly on the direct experience of so-called ‘liminal’ groups such as the Amiches of Ethiopia and Eritrea (Riggan 2011). These ethnic Eritreans born in Ethiopia exist in a cultural spaces held between these two nationalities and – as Riggan explains – deconstruct simplistic notions of a singular and simplistic ‘Eritrean’ identity. The ideal of the ‘stranger you know’ therefore converges with the wide literature on ‘insiderness’ and deepens our understanding of both the power relations, and fluid cultural dynamics implicit in the positioning of this group within the wider social context.

Experiencing Mythic Space

‘Mythic space’ is a term coined by Tuan in his 1977 book *Space and Place* (see also Bourne 2009). He states that our direct geographical and cultural knowledge is still largely based on our direct experience, and while most Americans (who he discussed) have access to better knowledge of global or national geography than at any other point in history, this knowledge is held collectively, not personally. Our direct experience by contrast is limited, and we ‘fill in the blanks’ in our understanding by projecting an imagined landscape onto those regions that we do not know well based on our preconceptions and particular cultural context. This, taking his cue from the mythic lands

described in classical mythology, and the lands of legend sought by Renaissance explorers, is what he describes as ‘mythic space’.

Within the context of Plaquemines Parish this lens can be employed to better understand one facet of the local relationship between the commercial fishing and oil and gas industries, this being the placement of the oil industry – though not intrinsically those local people who work for it – as the ‘outsider’ or intruder, and the fishing industry – as a collective of similarly-employed people – as local, and ‘insider’. Thus – at this level – the media’s dualistic attitude to work on the Gulf of Mexico was accurate, though as shall be described later in this chapter it does not encompass or explain the full range of experience those working in oil or fishing create.

Commercial fishing (and those who work within this industry) held a uniquely significant role within local community life in Plaquemines Parish. For these fishermen (and many other respondents of my acquaintance), this fishing industry was something ‘local’, and had a moral authority connected to this ‘insideness’. The oil and gas industry (though not necessarily those who worked within it – see below) on the other hand were to a certain extent conceptualised as alien, newcomers, and part of a world which did not originate (and thus does not have the moral authority) of true Parish life.

Fishermen often saw themselves (and were seen) as a form of continuity stretching back into the history of the Parish, with many fishermen having learnt their trade from their fathers and grandfathers before them. Many of these families had lived in the Parish for so long in close proximity to their kin that the very street names have been changed to their surnames. As has been discussed widely, ‘naming’ can be an important aspect of establishing ‘rootedness’ and ‘insideness’ in the context of place (Duranti 2011, Gray 2011, Helleland 2012). Many oilmen by contrast lacked a local pedigree. When oil extraction began to grow as an industry in the middle of the 20th century the incoming oil companies would often choose to hire experienced workers from other parts of the US,

particularly Texas, Mississippi, and Alabama. Many of these incomers chose to remain and make their lives in the Parish and often married into local families, sometimes having lived in the locale for more than five decades. Despite this however, they would often introduce themselves and be introduced as being 'from' somewhere other than the Parish 'originally'. They thus existed as self-identified 'strangers you know'. A classic example of this was the senior fireman Abe, who was a well-known (and well-liked) member of the community and who had spent almost his entire life in the Parish yet was still 'from' Alabama.

This is not to say that Abe was treated as a 'stranger' or 'stranger you know', simply that he never lost (or set aside) the label of his pre-Plaquemines Parish rooted identity. The idea of rootedness shown here perhaps links with the observations of David Brooks in *Bobos In Paradise* (2000), where certain regions within America were perceived to possess deeper and more permanent identities than the rest of the country. Although he describes the communities of rural Montana, the residents of the southern Appalachian Mountains, or indeed the people of the Parish of Plaquemines might also be appropriate examples of this phenomenon.

Further challenging this simple dualism of 'local' and 'stranger' somewhat were the children of these non-local oilmen, many of whom were following their fathers into the oil business (often into the same company). Members of this generation, who were 'born n raised' in the Parish, and had participated in a life-time of Parish events (baptism, school, local sports leagues, games of pool in the bar, and fishing excursions 'beyond the levee') appeared to largely be accepted as 'local', even if their father was still 'from' somewhere else.

With this challenge to a simple dualism stemming from personal relationships, and indeed, friendships, acknowledged however, the idea of fishermen being anchored in a locally produced history and oilmen coming into the Parish from elsewhere (despite the

fact that a great many ‘born n raised’ people work in the oil industry too) is deeply rooted in the broad culture of the Parish, and carried into the perceptions of the oil and commercial fishing industries themselves.

Linking this idea to Tuan (1977) offers insight into the placement of the oil industry as an outsider, which existed separate from the local life of the Parish. Oil extraction and processing occurred behind high fences, on platforms and in refineries which were out-of-bounds to many within the Parish. Fishing by contrast was more accessible, and local marinas were well-frequented social centres (primarily but not exclusively by men), and the marshes and bayous beyond (and the fish they held) could be reached by anyone with a recreational fishing boat. This means most adults in the Parish had at least experienced fishing in the surrounds of the Parish, while only a few had ever drilled for oil. More than this however, few if any had participated in even a fraction of the many different lines of work involved in oil’s complex journey from under the Gulf of Mexico to petrol in the pump, where as moving oysters from the bayous to the dinner table was comparatively more straightforward. Additionally, most fishing captains were independent businessmen and being one’s own boss was mentioned as a major positive feature of the fishing lifestyle. The largest oil and gas companies by contrast had their head offices outside the Parish, often in Texas or (in the case of BP) the United Kingdom. This is not to suggest this division was centred exclusively in the direct experience of the material world however, but rather – following Munn (2011) – an idea of spatial exclusion centred on a bodily nexus and ‘field of action’ which allows for the exclusion of the body from some places, and not from others. She writes:

“Since a spatial field extends from the actor, it can also be understood as a culturally-defined, corporeal-sensual field of significant distances stretching out from the body in a particular stance or action at a given locale or as it moves through locales” (2011: 94).

While the bayous of Plaquemines Parish are a far cry from the sacred Aboriginal spaces of Australia, the theoretical implications suggested by Munn still hold relevance here. Thus we gain insight into the experience of ‘open’ places connected to the fishing industry and ‘closed’ spaces connected to the oil industry using this model.

A great deal of an individual's understanding of the oil industry therefore (especially for those who do not work within it) came from vague politically coloured ideas about what the industry could (or perhaps should) be doing. The oil industry tended to be portrayed as an inherently positive force by both the United States Republican Party and the conservative news broadcaster Fox News: two institutions whom many within southern Louisiana held in very high regard. For many within the Parish the gap in direct knowledge of the activities of the oil and gas industry was filled (certainly prior to the spill) by assurances from these two bodies of the beneficial nature of oil exploration. Although this positive message from (in particular) these two institutions was suspended for a time during the crisis itself, soon after (and certainly during my residency in the region) the message had reverted to one which supported the expansion and de-regulation of the oil industry. In general, even amongst many fishermen, local people seldom commented upon this apparent contradiction, unless they actively rejected the over-arching message of these institutions, which was rare. The oil industry then, can be seen to exist in a mythic field of relationships, within a landscape often not directly experienced by members of the Parish.

After the oil spill, when it became apparent that a range of safety measures had been compromised in the pursuit of cutting costs, not just on the Deepwater Horizon but (as several of my informants pointed out) right across the Gulf, one would perhaps expect that this mythic ideal would be challenged, given the greater insight into the actual day-to-day workings of the oil business on the Gulf. To a certain extent this is the case, anger at BP and in particular its former Chief Executive Tony Hayward is widespread and still acute across the entire region and Plaquemines Parish is certainly no exception.

Over time however, the focus on BP and Tony Hayward had moved attention away from the wider issues of the drilling for oil both in the Gulf of Mexico (which was still described by oil workers as the 'wild west' of global oil exploration) and more generally

issues of global environmentalism and the sustainability of an oil-based economy. The oil business as a whole had managed to avoid the widespread loss of its position as a somewhat vaguely understood but generally beneficial 'other' and managed to hide behind BP which was claimed to be an irresponsibly acting anomaly. Indeed, when I would enquire if the moratorium on oil exploration imposed by the Obama Presidency just after the oil spill was a positive step I was usually met with an emphatic response to the negative. In late 2012 the Obama administration auctioned off large areas of the Gulf to allow new exploration and expansion of the oil industry (Merchant 2012), but prevented BP from acquiring any new possessions (Goldenberg and Macalister 2012). This would suggest that BP – rather than the oil industry per se – has been blamed for this disaster, and the expansion of oil production on the Gulf of Mexico would continue. As a result, this profession continued to be dangerous, and accidents and deaths on the oil fields continue to the time of writing (Times-Picayune 2012b, Schleifstein 2012, Warren 2012).

A friend of mine, Dan, was one of the most vocal speakers on the topic of the moratorium, and would rage about the loss of jobs to the Gulf of Mexico as companies sent oil rigs elsewhere, and this opinion was shared by many in the region (Rushe 2013). Others were more moderate, exemplified by Pastor Mark, who was a supporter of the oil industry in general but felt there should be greater compensation to local communities and particularly with regard to coastal replenishment. How the greater ramifications of the long-term effects of the BP oil spill might change this relationship (particularly if there is a long-term ecological crisis) is unclear but amongst most of the informants of my acquaintance there was no widespread call for the cessation of oil exploration in the Gulf of Mexico (indeed, often quite the reverse was felt).

By utilising Tuan's idea of mythic space this section has demonstrated how directly dwelling amidst a particular landscape can have deeply social and cultural ramifications, in this case, in terms of the placement of two locally important economic activities within a framework of 'insider' and 'outsider'. The physical isolation of the oil and gas industry contrasted with the proximate nature of the fishing industry, and fed into the varying cultural significance of the two. It also demonstrated that a landscape in which we are not

geographically situated, can still be the basis for the construction of local cultural dualisms. Indeed, the inability to experience 'placeness' directly via the oil industry for many within the Parish directly influenced their constructed preconceptions relating to that industry, preconceptions that may change if the spill causes a major ecological crisis at some point in the future, and thus brings a long-term directly negative effect on the local ideal of place.

The Shared Space of Oil and Fishing

My landlord and neighbour Thanh, a full time oyster fisherman, agreed to take me out with him into Washington Bay to show me the life a fisherman like him leads. Like many of the poorer fishermen in the area he was a 'cooner', that is to say that to gather his catch he had to submerge himself up to his waist in the waters of the Gulf of Mexico and reach down into the opaque, murky water to grab oysters by hand. He had attached his boat to himself via a length of rope, and he would throw the oysters he gathered onto the prow where a specially built shelf allowed his deckhand (and me) a place to separate the oysters from each other. Oysters need to anchor themselves to something solid before they will grow, and often the thing they anchor themselves too are other oysters. Therefore it was the job of the deckhand to use a heavy, blunt hatchet to break them apart so they can be packed into sacks. The work was gruelling, and far more physically demanding than the body of a PhD researcher more used to sitting in seminar rooms or browsing libraries could take for prolonged periods. Later, Thanh grew tired at having to pull his large boat against the current and he and his deckhand used a small pirogue he had brought along to gather oysters, leaving me in the larger boat moored nearby. I used this opportunity to rest my aching muscles and snap a few photographs, one of which shows these two oystermen hard at work in the foreground, and a line of massive oil platforms looking equally industrious on the horizon.

Image 8: Oystermen at work with oil rigs in the background.



As has been shown in the previous section, local and media constructions of insiderness and outsidership can have real implications in the experience of place in post-Hurricane Katrina, and post-BP oil spill Plaquemines Parish. As is so often the case however, simple, neatly framed dualisms limit our understanding in a complex, actively constructed world. By exploring how individuals move from being an ‘outsider’ to one granted the privileges of an ‘insider’ we gain greater understanding of the terms themselves but also how the concept of landscape, and placeless is locally created and re-created in the context of Plaquemines Parish. This section begins by deconstructing the supposedly fixed boundaries of the oil and fishing industries, and shows how these borders can be understood as more fluid and malleable than has been shown above. It shall do this firstly by examining the physical locality in which these industries operated, the space ‘beyond the levees’, and secondly, how these industries manifested in the neighbourhoods and homes of those who work for them. This section shall then conclude by showing how movement between these two supposedly competing industries was an important feature of the local economy.

Beyond The Levees

To begin our understanding of the shared nature of this space we must return to the physical environment of Plaquemines Parish, the use of this space and the way in which it has been shaped by humans over the last two centuries. Despite the constructed divisions discussed above in relation to both local and media constructions of ‘local’ and ‘outsider’, both the commercial fishing and oil and gas industries operated in the space ‘beyond the levees’. Both therefore also reflected certain notions of ‘insiderness’ and transcend the simple dualism of fishing being local and oil representing the ‘stranger’ by both conducting their activities in the same place, and thus both being active participants in the construction of this landscape.

The levees of the Mississippi River were constructed in an effort to regulate the flow of the river and limit the flooding along its length, while the ‘back’ levee (the levee bordering the marsh and swamp) was built to provide protection from the storm surge of hurricanes. Their gradual construction and federalisation has resulted in a break from the established lifestyle that had been found in the Parish up until that point, and points to the long-term relationship local communities have had with the risk management of disaster. Before this there did not exist a physical break between the life of the Parish above sea level (i.e. on dry land) and that of the marsh and river beyond. Prior to their construction, the life of the river and marsh flowed into the Parish, both metaphorically and indeed quite literally, as the yearly floods of the Mississippi River were anticipated and deliberately built into the agricultural cycle: providing much needed irrigation during the summer and (due to water flowing across the Parish and into the marsh beyond) much needed replenishment of both cultivated land and the marsh beyond due to the deposition of the rich sediment carried by the river. With the levees this flooding from the river ceased to be as regular a feature of life in the Parish and the river and marsh disappeared from view behind large banks of earth. This physical boundary changed the wider landscape of the Parish, and the marsh became a space less accessible and less frequented, particularly by women.

Plaquemines Parish was rather unusual in many respects, but perhaps most immediately noticeable is the fact that it was a coastal community, bordered on three sides by water, where the majority of the population lived within a few hundred yards of large bodies of water or wetland but where none of this was visible from one's doorstep. The watery highways of the marsh are concealed from the road, and exist in a hidden world inhabited primarily by those who fish, and those who drill for oil and gas. Here we see the first great contradiction to the notion of a division between the workings of these two industries, in that they both operate in this space 'beyond the levee'.

Image 9: Ship moored on Mississippi River higher than a house.



While crabbing with a local fisherman, Leon, I enquire how one tells a naturally occurring channel or bayou in the marsh from one which was cut by the oil industry; he

responded that the difference was simple; natural was curved, man-made was straight. The channel we were navigating at that moment was as straight as an arrow and ended in a perfect T-junction. Later on the same trip this fishermen had to be especially careful when adjusting the lengths of the floaters he uses to mark the position of his crab pots while placing his traps in a large bayou due to a heavily dredged channel cutting across it more than a dozen feet deeper than the naturally occurring bayou surrounding it. This channel was once a thoroughfare for large vessels connected to the oil industry but has now become a favourite crabbing spot for this fisherman. Here we see in stark relief these two industries inhabiting common water, with the man-made channels of the oil industry providing choice fishing grounds and access routes for this fisherman. This challenges the previously mentioned dualism of a clear divide between the two industries by demonstrating the active role both industries play in shaping this landscape, and constructing culturally significant places within it.

Later, on a different fishing trip this time with my landlord and neighbour Thanh and my neighbour Billy (a Vietnamese oysterman and his deckhand), Thanh describes how the channels cut through the tall grasses and marshes by the oil industry were contributing to the erosion and reduction of these same grasses and patches of vegetation. I asked him if he was angry or concerned about this erosion to which he shrugs and replied “not really, it just mean there more room for oyster”. While there is no doubt this blasé attitude would not be shared by all fishermen on the Gulf of Mexico, there is an underlying acknowledgement – often silent – that such alterations made by the oil industry can be beneficial *as well* as destructive to the economy of the Parish when utilised by the fishing industry.

It was clearly the case that many independent fishing captains have colonised the spaces used and abandoned by the oil industry with zest. Man-made channels in the marsh provided efficient transportation between fishing spots, and many of these fishing spots had been created or expanded by the actions of the oil business. However, while fishermen had used some of the side effects of oil exploration to their advantage, the destruction wrought by the oil industry should not be underestimated. Both the erosion caused by the

ingress of salt water, and the simple removal of sediment (which due to the levees on the river is not replaced) caused the marsh to shrink by as much as 15 square miles per year, even before the BP oil spill (Barcott 2010).

Of equal or (more recently) greater concern was the spillage of oil. There were many people on the Gulf who make their entire living cleaning up the many oil spills that were part and parcel with offshore drilling. During a conversation with one such individual – a clean-up boat captain called Martin – he sought to impress upon me the sheer number of spills there are in the Gulf that he (and the many other full-time clean up crews) have to respond to 365 days of the year. While the media had focused on the Deepwater Horizon because of the scale of the catastrophe, for him – as he described it – it was almost just another day at the office. In this way Martin and others who had experience in this area were keen to impress upon me that the damage being caused by the oil industry was a long-term, on-going process that had been happening for decades. A local amateur historian and former oil worker in the Parish, Larry, believes he first noticed the marshes shrinking in the early 1980s. Neither of these individuals however, were against the oil industry continuing to extract resources from the Gulf of Mexico, simply that they wished there was greater action to restore the marsh alongside this extraction. Although so far this thesis has primarily focused on the on-going relationship local people have with hurricanes and how this structured their experience of Katrina, it is important to note that to a lesser extent they also had a similar on-going relationship with the destruction caused by the oil industry which influenced the social and cultural reaction to the BP oil spill.

What is clear then, is that both the oil and fishing industry utilised almost every part of the Gulf to the greatest extent of their abilities and need, and that clear distinctions between a ‘local’ fishing industry distinct from an ‘outsider’ oil industry broke down during the lived experience of the shared life of the bayous beyond the levees. Like the farmers mentioned by Gray (2011) who created their relationship to ‘place’ through walking across the mountains of their homeland, the oil workers and fishermen created their ‘place’ in the bayous by traversing them, and working in them. The two industries functioned, not so much side-by-side, as on top of each other, as they each searched the

Gulf for the resources they each prize so highly. Both would probably claim a certain legitimacy over the entire region and there is little doubt that both will continue to harvest their respective crops in a mixture of peace and friction for many years to come. This is not to argue that these industries are equal in terms of their potential to threaten the other of course, as it is highly unlikely even a large accident caused by a fisherman would impact on the oil industry, simply that both industries exist in a shared landscape, utilised by both simultaneously.

Within the Levees

These industries did not only overlap in the space beyond the levees of course, and oil men and fishermen regularly interacted in their home environments and neighbourhoods. Living in such close proximity both reduced the perception of ‘otherness’ when relating to the industry one was *not* employed by, but could also lead to tension during times of crisis, such as the BP oil spill.

As has already been said, the two dominant economic activities of the southern part of the Parish were connected with fishing and oil extraction; this had been the case since the middle of the 20th century. When investment in oil (and sulphur before it) began in the Parish, however, the various large companies involved found that it was necessary to also invest in the infrastructure of the Parish, in particular, housing for the skilled workers they were hoping to entice to the area from other parts of the US. The oil and sulphur companies bought large stretches of land, particularly in Port Sulphur, Buras, and Triumph and built a large number of houses for their employees. These tended to be grouped together in fairly dense blocks which would lead to people of not only the same industry, but the same company living next door to one another. Following the tradition of the region, the local street names came to reflect this, so that alongside streets named after the family living there, there also came to be streets named after the company who employed the people who lived there. As such, driving down Highway 11 from north to south you

will at one point pass on your left: Gartoucies Lane, East Crest Drive, East Gulf Drive, Pipeline Drive, and Burney Lane.

It appears that five things broke down this pattern: the increasing desirability of living in the Parish due to its modern schools and low crime rate; the disappearance of the sulphur industry; the decline of paternal capitalism and the rise of neo-liberal capitalism⁸; the completion of the new highway 23 which allowed a much faster and easier commute from New Orleans; and the two major hurricanes of the 1960s – Betsy and Camille. In the latter part of the 20th century the practice of providing homes for employees largely disappeared and along with this the practice of automatically living alongside those one works with.

Now, almost any given street in southern Plaquemines Parish had a diverse mixture of people finding employment in an equally wide spectrum of professions. Oil men and fishermen often lived next door to each other, they became close friends, they went to eat each others BBQs and crawfish boils, and their children played football in each other's gardens. Living in such proximity during the oil spill led to tension between those working in fishing, and those in oil, and it was mentioned to me how thankful many were that the ban on fishing had been lifted, meaning local fishermen were no longer restricted from working. Several people described how this particular catalyst from friction was now behind them and 'normality' had been restored.

However, one participant, Eddie, who was employed during the clean-up servicing and giving out the radios used by the boat captains employed in clean-up activities did mention that as a visible 'face' of the oil spill clean up he would still periodically receive an 'earful' by a fisherman unsatisfied with their lot, but that this happened less and less frequently. Furthermore, even families felt the strain, and one of the most distressing anecdotes recounted to me surrounding this issue was regarding two brothers (one who

⁸ A process also mentioned in the chapters related to ideas of precariousness earlier in this thesis.

was working as a commercial fisherman, the other on the oil rigs) who had not spoken since some particularly heated words were exchanged surrounding the oil spill and the wider picture of oil extraction on the Gulf of Mexico during the peak of the Deepwater Horizon disaster. There is a contradiction here between the ‘normality’ stated above, and the continuing presence of disruption from this catastrophe. Again, it is useful to return to an understanding of recovery as an on-going process, and to acknowledge that the experience of the oil spill has now been woven into the landscape of this region. On the whole, however, and in particular now that the well has been closed and fishermen are once again able to ply their trade on open water, oil men and fishermen are able to once again live side-by-side without this particular cause of direct aggravation or incident.

The final area to consider when examining this shared landscape of the oil business, seafood industry, and the community of Plaquemines Parish within the levees is the ever present, direct and obvious benefits given to the Parish by hosting a strong presence of the oil industry. When visiting the community centre in Buras one cannot fail to notice the enormous gold and red Shell logo which features prominently next to the centre’s name on the sign outside. Many of the public works projects completed in the Parish prior to hurricane Katrina (and several since then, such as the aforementioned community centre) were funded either in whole or in part by the oil, gas, and sulphur industries. As a local politician explained to me, it was often expected that in addition to the taxation of revenue generated from resource extraction conducted in the area, the interested company would also have to make a contribution to the quality of life of the residents of the Parish. The value of oil such as it was large corporations were usually more than happy to throw in a public works project or two if it sweetened the deal enough to allow them the access to the resources they wanted, and local people reaped the benefit of modern, quality facilities.

Facilities paid for – as many local people pointed out – not by local taxation of the populace. How low the taxes in the Parish were was repeated time and again by local residents as a major advantage of living in the Parish, and the ‘positive’ relationship with the oil business was, it was argued by Burt amongst others, the reason for this. From this

perspective therefore, the oil industry was viewed as something of a necessarily evil (or perhaps a 'stranger you know'), one that is tolerated for the practical benefits it brings to the region, but without any deep historical, or personal ties to the community.

Movement Between Oil and Fish

Moving beyond the use of the physical space directly by this generalised sketch of each industry, the lived experience of those people working within these bodies must next be shown, and especially how notions of insiderness and outsiderness break down at the individual level. When thinking of these two industries as simply the employment of a person rather than the competing behemoths of the Gulf of Mexico it gives quite a different perspective on their interaction within this landscape. It is this perspective of course, that ethnography is uniquely able to offer.

Nowhere was this better exemplified than by my neighbour Billy. As has previously been mentioned, Billy's primary occupation was that of a deckhand on an oyster boat, however, when work was scarce in the fishing industry he would take work as a hand on an oil rig. While he did not particularly enjoy work out on the rigs, he didn't enjoy oystering that much either. For him, both were simply a means to an end; that end being money in his pocket. The equivalency of these two industries in his mind reflects the view of a significant number of the poorest members of the community.

His brother-in-law felt the same way, and would base his employment on the changing seasons, with the warmer months of summer (and the increase in oyster fishing that brought) seeing him working as a deckhand to a fishing captain. In the winter however, when many captains reduce their number of hours spent in the Gulf of Mexico, he would usually seek work on a crew boat ferrying supplies and personnel to the rigs. Working hard in the former offered greater financial rewards, while the latter offered a

stable, regular income. Combining the two offered him a lifestyle that both he (and his wife) found satisfactory.

These two examples show two men who were born and raised within the Parish and who would certainly be considered 'insiders' by any measure, yet who were neither exclusively oil men or fishermen. Instead they took from both industries what they needed at a given time and transcend the idea that any industry possessed an inherent 'outsideness'. This also highlights how discourse can run counter to lived experience in a given social context. In this case the discourse of 'local' fishing and 'outsider' oil is challenged by the active participation in both by these men without apparent diminishing to their own status.

Similarly, there were many who worked within the oil industry who moonlighted as fishermen during their time away from the rigs. Due to the work schedules of oil workers they often did not follow the '9am-5pm, 5 days a week' schedule common to many other professions. Instead, they might spend a number of days 'at work' in the rigs in the Gulf of Mexico, followed by several days 'off' at home (many of the oil workers of my acquaintance worked on a 7/7 schedule, meaning seven days at work, seven days off). More than one of my female respondents who would describe herself as a 'homemaker' remembers going shrimping with their husbands during his 7 or 14 days off from working offshore. This was usually while they were still 'courting' or while they were newlyweds, and almost always stopped once their first children were born. Indeed, it was earning this extra income that allowed one acquaintance of mine – Audrey – to actually afford her wedding dress, ceremony, and reception. Audrey's husband continued the practice of heading out into the bayous during his time off in order to earn a little extra money until he retired from the oil industry.

Many of those men working for the oil companies who did not moonlight as fishermen still enjoyed fishing in the surrounding bayous. Taking a few beers, a few rods,

and a few friends into the bayou was a common local recreation, and it remained one of the key methods used by local men to relax. Many men (oil or otherwise) owned a pirogue, a vessel perfectly suited for negotiating the shallow marshes and bayous that surrounded the Parish, and those that didn't own one themselves were often glad of an invitation to join a friend. Indeed, the first offer I received to go fishing after I arrived in the Parish was from a volunteer fireman (and life-long oil man) named Buck, not from any of the local professional fishermen of my acquaintance. These fishing expeditions were one of the principle social occasions men chose to participate in, often accompanied by the consumption of a case of beer. Later in my research, I enjoyed a day's sport during the 'Boothville-Venice Fire Department Fishing Rodeo' with my friend Bob, and although we didn't catch a single fish the case of beer we took with us and sunny summers day ensured we had a suitably pleasant time. The enjoyment that came from a day's fishing, and the connected ideal of a sustainable 'living off the land' lifestyle was often expressed as one of the primary reasons Plaquemines Parish was so enviable a place to live, and this is doubly true for those oil men who, due to the nature of their employment, could live anywhere in the broad Gulf Coast region of the Deep South – it was often commented upon locally after all that people commuted to the heliport in the Parish (and from there on to the rigs) from as far away as Arkansas and Alabama.

Moving from men moving between one industry and another, we must consider the growing number of second generation oil men in the Parish, and my friend Bob recounted to me how upon leaving school there was no question of him doing anything but following his father into the family business of servicing the chemical storage tanks used by the oil business. Likewise Burt and Jamie, both senior members of the volunteer fire department, had never worked within the seafood industry in any capacity (and had spent most of their lives in the oil industry) and yet maintained clear status as local 'insiders'. This suggests not only that local constructions of 'insiderness' were not determined by economic occupation in this context, but also that as an increasing number of men born and raised in the Parish were building careers in the oil industry and not in fishing, and it is possible that the previously mentioned perceived dualism between the two industries will collapse somewhat as these men grow older.

At the same time, those former ‘strangers’ who came into the Parish had settled, and now contributed to the social and cultural life of the area. Nothing underlines this more than recognising that Abe, the current Chief of the Buras Volunteer Fire Department (and one of the more respected members of the communities of Buras and Triumph) was in fact born in Alabama, and came to the Parish in his early 20s looking for work. This volunteer was famous for his long service to the people of Buras in the fire department, and in particular his quick return to the Parish after the Storm to man the fire department using antiquated equipment donated from fire departments in other parts of the United States. An individual such as Abe clearly shows that the ‘local, stranger, and stranger you know’ model mentioned previously is highly contextual, and underlines how important personal involvement in Parish life, and personal relationships and friendships can be to notions of local identity, as well as the potential fluidity of this supposed structure.

Men working in the oil industry who live in the Parish would often turn, therefore, to the ‘natural’ environment of the Parish and the seafood industry for this moral legitimacy. I was often struck in my conversations with men working in the oil business how often, and how fervently they wished to impress upon me how much pleasure they took from the flora and fauna of southern Louisiana and the Gulf of Mexico.

Two rig workers – Brad and Louis – would speak with genuine pleasure when describing the various sea birds who would use their oil rigs as resting posts while hunting, and the sight of dolphins in the area they worked in was considered a real treat (the absence of this fauna near the rigs drilling the relief wells seeking to stop the leak during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill was for them the real personal indicator of the magnitude of the disaster). Certainly some fishermen also took pleasure in describing their connection with their landscape (Leon in particular) but it was usually less explicit and less vehement. I interpreted this to mean that the oil workers wished to distance themselves from the appalling environmental destruction caused by the industry they worked for, while also reaffirming their personal position as an active and engaged participant in the local natural ecosystem. Fishermen by contrast did not feel this need to justify themselves to this extent,

as it was implied purely from their occupation (rightly or wrongly) that this connection and respect for the natural world was present.

The future of the ‘traditional’ fishing industry passed from father to son may also be in decline, further challenging the constructions previously discussed regarding insiderness and outsiderness. Many fishermen encouraged their sons not to follow in their footsteps and instead get a university degree in engineering, and from there, a good job in the oil business because they feel it offered a more secure future for them. But even though this advice was given with a solid, pragmatic foundation, many fisherman felt a certain cultural disquiet about giving it, and a nostalgic wistfulness that they felt unable to encourage their sons to follow in their footsteps. The concern here is that the loss of ‘traditional’ industries and lifestyles would threaten the security and sense of place which is the foundation upon which life in the Parish is so often built. This of course links back to the decline of a particular power hegemony discussed previously.

Although it was hard to unambiguously call someone an ‘oil man’ in the Parish, it was also not always easy to label an individual a ‘fisherman’ either. While it was not the case that someone would drill for oil recreationally, there is undoubtedly a more pragmatic attitude to employment within the oil business than was initially presented. Although the intensity of the competition amongst fishermen to be employed by BP amongst those cleaning up oil did not – in my view – signify a large-scale cultural overlap between the two industries (given that fishermen often had no other source of revenue) it was however the case until several years ago that fishermen could elect to be trained by professionals specialised in the cleaning of oil spills so that they could be better equipped should the need of their services arise. More generally however there was an attitude amongst fisherman (especially deckhands as has been previously shown) that the oil industry was a fall-back option for when times were hard in the seafood business.

This became extremely apparent during the spill itself as deckhands (who were usually paid cash in hand and thus had no official documentation or evidence of their labour) found it difficult to claim compensation from BP. As they also were denied their primary income on the fishing boats many had no choice but to seek employment on the rigs. This has already been mentioned above in relation to my neighbour Billy, but it was a common phenomenon reported across the community, and indeed one of the services offered by the local Catholic Church was support during the (temporary or permanent) transition between the fishing and oil industries. This mobility between the two industries was an important safety valve for the many unskilled and semi-skilled labourers which call Plaquemines Parish home, particularly in the aftermath from catastrophe.

Actively Constructing Place

One evening, around mid-summer, while house-sitting for some friends of mine in Nairn, Louisiana, I was sitting at my computer, perhaps 10 or 11 o'clock in the evening typing up some notes from the day's activities when I became aware of sudden flashes of light out of the corner of my eye. Intrigued, I left the house and walked into the garden, searching for the source of the flashing light. As I walked beyond a bank of trees I realised that it was being generated by a lightning storm the like of which I had never before witnessed. Huge ribbons and banks of light cascaded from one side of my vision to the other, rolling across my entire field of view. What struck me next was how quiet the evening was. Nairn, like all of rural Plaquemines Parish is never silent of course, there is always the steady hum of insects, the cries of animals, or the rumble of a car or truck on its way up the Road or down the Road, but there wasn't the sound of thunder. It was disconcerting at first, to perceive such a majestic and huge display of weather, but to be aurally removed from it. I realised that what I had thought was simply a large storm, was in fact a massive one, seen from an enormous distance away. I, in turn, was tiny; a dot on the face of the earth. I probably should have been more concerned – after all, weather in Louisiana in the middle of summer is no laughing matter – but I had no desire to pull myself away from this sight to turn on the weather channel or find an update on a local news website. This was between me and the world around me – a sentence more laced with meaning than I at that time realised.

This section shall discuss both local, and volunteer efforts to (re)construct the Parish in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and (to a lesser extent) the BP oil spill. A crucial element in understanding the negotiation between ‘insiderness’ and ‘outsiderness’ in this context is how this deliberate and active rebuilding of the landscape has had a mimetic relationship to the sense of selves of those involved, as this section shall seek to analyse this phenomenon in depth. As Ingold (2011) has convincingly argued, landscape is not a static, objective stage upon which social life occurs, but a constantly emerging process which human interaction constantly helps to shape, and is shaped in turn. By using this as our base, we can better understand how local people actively, and dynamically negotiate the supposed borders of the ‘local, stranger, and stranger you’ve met’ trio during recovery from these catastrophes, by exploring what it means when the construction of landscape becomes a deliberate, goal-orientated project actively engaged with by local people.

Local Reconstruction

Those who quickly returned to the Parish after the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina experienced ‘place’ in a way familiar to fellow survivors of large-scale catastrophes. The total loss of possessions, property, and the familiarity of friends and landmarks was an experience which was challenging to fully prepare for, no matter how ‘normalised’ disaster-processes might be. As has been stated many times, this thesis rejects an equation of ‘recovery’ with the re-building of pre-disaster structures by highlighting how the impact of catastrophe can long-outlast such rebuilding. Related to this, is an understanding of how a place can retain its ‘placeness’ when it no longer bears any physical similarity to how it once appeared. Furthermore, that one be called an ‘insider’ when the material-culture of the community which one was once ‘inside’ has been flattened by a catastrophe. This demonstrates that these cultural constructions remain relative unharmed by the impact of catastrophe, and presents a fascinating new layer to our analysis of disaster-processes. How this intersects with work to re-build the Parish shall be discussed below.

One of my respondents, Mike, had this account of searching for his house on his first return to the Parish after the storm:

“my wife said ‘you’ve passed it up’ we was stopped over there [points south west]. I said ‘what do you mean we’ve passed it up?’ she said ‘I got a post right there where our gate was at’. I said ‘ok’ we parked over there and walked...my son’s house was over there and it just had some 2 by 4s sticking up, here everything was flat, you had a little debris where my daughter’s beauty shop was, the big house was gone. Flat. The [garage] that was here, this was gone, I had a big [garage] over there, 20 foot by 40, it was all brick, strong, gone. All gone. Now, from here where I lived, [gestures south] down below everything wiped out. From here this way [gestures north] the houses they just floated away and were still there, so I think tornadoes hit here”.

This shows how the memory of what was once in the place we were sitting was still a relevant orientation through which he could conceptualise his immediate landscape. But it was also a memory of a landscape entirely changed. Several of my respondents gave accounts similar to this one, and it reflects the sorrow within the insideness found in a long relationship with a particular place, which had (at least the material world) been so dramatically altered. Another respondent, John, was living in his parents’ old house, which he had moved onto his property after he decided that his own house was too badly damaged to be repaired. A third, the crabber Leon, used the money he received from compensation for the BP oil spill to move his family into a ‘real house’, and out of the ‘temporary’ (as he had always envisaged) trailer he had been resident in since the Storm. These respondents on one level had ‘recovered’ from this catastrophe – in that all of them have managed to re-inhabit permanent dwellings in the communities they lived in prior to the catastrophe – but at a deeper level such ‘recovery’ shall always be structured by the memory of what they once owned, and how the houses in which they now dwell were replacements for other homes they lost.

What we see in these three examples are men – all long-term residents within the Parish – who each lost the house they had lived in prior to the Storm. It is worth noting that one's house is shown to be a consistently significant centre of place attachment (Lewicka, 2011) and in each case that house was situated in a locale of equal attachment and significance: each man proudly declared himself 'born n raised' in southern Plaquemines Parish. Yet when that physical structure was destroyed and the surrounding community was left in ruins, there remained a positive attachment to place, and a stable experience of 'insiderness'. This suggests that place attachment does not require a landscape to retain even moderate visual or material consistency to remain a persistent feature of one's sense of self. The changes to the physical landscape appear to have had an equally minimal impact on the insider status of these respondents, as all would describe themselves (and be described) as quintessential 'locals'. This links back to the wider themes of 'insiderness' described above, and highlights the importance of personal and cultural relationships in such distinctions in addition to length of residency or ancestry. It might also link to research connected to linguistic orientation based on cardinal direction, rather than referential objects (Haviland 1998), as their position 'up the road' or 'down the road' (described in chapter 1) remains a relevant reference point, unchanged by the catastrophe. Furthermore it allows deeper insight into the nature of disaster recovery, and how it relates to local cultural and social structures.

It is worth noting that all three of these individuals were quick to return to the Parish after the Storm (indeed because of his job as an EMT John did not leave), and all had significant 'hands on' experience of the rebuilding of their homes and properties. This fits with Ingold's understanding of meaning being 'gathered' from landscape through actively living within (and thus constructing) it, yet perhaps goes further, and suggests that when a person is consciously and deliberately seeking to (re)construct a place they had/(have) an attachment to the process of creation can be important in re-creating both their sense of place, and insider status, which might otherwise have been threatened.

This is not to say of course that the Storm had a universally neutral effect on local experience of place or 'insiderness'. For some, Hurricane Katrina had a detrimental effect

on the attachment felt with the place. One such man who, like those mentioned above, had worked hard to return to his property quickly after the Storm – Bob – confided to me on more than one occasion that if another hurricane were to take his house he would not return to the Parish. On another occasion he (and his fiancée) spoke at length about their plans to leave the Parish as soon as they could afford it. Their relationship with this landscape in the aftermath of the Storm had, in their view, removed the possibility of a positive future for them if they were to remain.

Similarly, one of the most common memories repeated by many within the community regarding the immediate aftermath of the hurricane was the absence of life and living things. The landscape was described as “grey” (Emily) or “dead” (David) and what life there was left was that most associated with decay and filth – a bingo player of my acquaintance named Sally remembers there being nothing but “rats and flies” and that there weren’t any birds. This experience of place as a hostile, and unwelcome landscape – a place where humans perhaps do not belong – is a remarkable counterpoint to the previously mentioned continuity in ‘insideness’.

However, this experience of place while it was dead and destroyed was coloured by positive memories of the place as it was prior to the storm, and projections of what it would look like once it was repaired. Sally, after all, has memories of this dead landscape from a time when she and her husband were working to repair their damaged house. Similarly, one’s experience of the place now that many of the signs of destruction had been removed (and flowers and trees were once again flourishing in the ecosystem) was coloured by memories of that blasted and desolate landscape of memory. This was shown clearly in Mike’s account at the beginning of this section. In this case however, Sally sought to distance herself from it by buying a hummingbird feeder, and took great pleasure in watching these birds flitting around her porch while she drinks her ice tea. The above suggests that while individuals are able not only to maintain multiple simultaneous attachments to many places (Buciek et al. 2006, Hay 1998, Lewicka 2011), they can also maintain multiple experiences and attachments to the same place over a relatively short temporal span.

Volunteer Reconstruction

Volunteers who came to the Parish initially to assist with re-building efforts, and who chose to relocate to the Parish present an insightful context in furthering an exploration of the movement between ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’, and particularly with reference to the locally constructed ideal of ‘local, stranger, and stranger you’ve met’. At a time when the population of the Parish as a whole had dropped, and there was an internal migration of approximately 30% to the northern part of the Parish, the decision of these volunteers to act against this pattern is certainly worthy of comment.

One such man, Mathew, who I met through the fire department, recounted his personal relationship to the Parish to me. He became aware of the Parish through his connection to his University’s campus ministry and in turn, the ministry’s connection to Faith Temple Ministries in Triumph. He made several trips to the area (the first of which in November 2005) working with Faith Temple to provide disaster relief and recounted his first impression of the magnitude of destruction he witnessed, describing his experience as one of ‘disbelief’ and remarking that for the entire journey through the southern end of the Parish the vehicle which he was in (which contained nine colleague students) was utterly silent – such was the shock induced by what they saw.

Along with his fiancée and other volunteers he worked in the Parish in disaster clean-up, living in a make-shift bunkhouse connected to Faith Temple. After one such trip, while returning to their home in the north of the United States, he turned to his fiancée and said that he felt that they were “supposed to be down [there]”, she agreed, and from then on they planned, and eventually moved to southern Plaquemines Parish; a place that for the entire time they had known it had been a landscape strewn with destruction. He goes on to say that for a time they debated whether it was the right move to make, but in the end the

connection they felt to the place won out. He makes a religious explanation for this move, and believes that God “laid upon their hearts” the desire to be in that particular landscape, and instilled in them a deep connection to southern Plaquemines Parish. Their experience was certainly not unique, and other people within that same group also decided to relocate and join them.

Mathew went on to humorously describe himself as a ‘half-way insider’, which perhaps best reflects his (and many other former volunteers) placement within the Parish. This partial ‘insideness’ had not developed through long-term residence (as we saw earlier with Abe), rather, I would argue that this connection had been generated through the active, and embodied relationship entered into during his work in reconstruction, and certainly he appeared to be a popular and respected member of both Faith Temple Ministries and Buras Volunteer Fire Department, suggesting that his self-appraisal was correct. Contributing to the reconstruction of places in the aftermath of a disaster therefore has particular relevance when one seeks to understand the construction of ‘insideness’.

This is not to say that they had renounced their ties to their original home (again, like Abe), and indeed they could foresee a future where they moved back north at some point, but this has not hampered the growth of a deep attachment to southern Plaquemines Parish. This phenomenon was reported by other temporary volunteers also, regardless of whether they chose to permanently relocate to the Parish or not. One, Mary, described to me how emotional she became when it was time for her to leave the Parish and return to her home.

This suggests that the process of rebuilding the landscape from desolation to regeneration entered into by Mathew and others led to a parallel shaping of his self. While, as Ingold writes every landscape is a “plenum” (2011: 191), or completely filled with matter, with our culturally determined knowledge-base we may not understand it as such, despite how overwhelming to our direct experiential selves such an experience might be. A

landscape which has suffered massive destruction would thus perhaps be described as the antithesis of ‘filled’. Thus the process through which it evolves and develops from that point can influence the concurrent development of self in profound ways, in the case of Matthew, fostering a sense of deep commitment to that place, which alongside the religious significance of his calling to work in the Parish has led to a deep attachment to the place, and the ability to quickly move away from classification as an ‘outsider’.

Conclusion

Late in my fieldwork I attended a public consultation in a local auditorium regarding the proposed relocation of the Parish seat from its historic site in Point à La Hache to Belle Chasse, where it had operated from since the destruction of Point à La Hache during Hurricane Katrina. One of the speakers was a young man in his mid-twenties who worked for a professional quantitative research firm based in New Orleans. He'd shown up for the meeting in a somewhat ill fitting business suit and from his accent had probably grown up in New England. He presented his findings, talking about 'statistically significant' questionnaire data and 'topographical surveys', and ultimately recommended the relocation of the Parish seat with immediate effect. His presentation was met with loudly vocalised derision from the audience, but the most significant strike against him was perhaps made by an elderly lady wearing a loose-fit Hornets t-shirt and white shrimp boots who declared that he couldn't possibly have anything of value to tell the community because he "wasn't from round here". She sat down to boisterous applause. Not long before this I had been hanging out in the firehouse with several other volunteers one night after maintenance drinking a beer or two and "intercourseing around" as Abe might say, when two newcomers pulled up in their truck and joined the gathering. They were known to Abe and Burt but I had never previously met them, and when I next spoke a few minutes later both of them focussed on me intently and one barked "where you from?", clearly having heard my accent. Before I could respond Burt held up a hand in placation and explained that I was "down here writing a book" and – most importantly – that I was "alright". After checking that I did in fact live in Buras and was a volunteer at the department the two newcomers relaxed and began discussing my research and findings with me, showing real interest in what I had to say: agreeing with me at

times, challenging me at others, but at all times demonstrating an open-minded critique of what I had to share.

This chapter has focused on the experience and mutual construction of this post-catastrophe landscape with particular reference to notions of ‘insiders’, ‘outsiders’ and the places they traverse, expressed primarily in the locally constructed expression ‘local, stranger, and stranger you know’.

After offering a definition of landscape relevant to the local experience in Plaquemines Parish which focused on the intersection of the situated interaction between humans, other living organisms, and geological and meteorological forces, as a mutually constructive process it discussed how place can be experienced as a fixed duality.

This duality focuses on both media, and locally constructed perceptions of ‘insiderness’, and the ideal of an antagonistic relationship found between the two major industries of the region – commercial fishing and the oil industry. By utilising Tuan’s notion of ‘mythic space’ (1977) these two constructions converge to place the oil industry as a lesser-understood ‘other’ residing in a locale of moral inferiority contrasting with the commercial fishing industry which has a local origin, and thus taps into locally understood, pre-existing moral structures.

The second section demonstrated how the perceived simple dualisms of ‘oil vs fishing’ and ‘insider vs outsider’ were challenged through the lived experience of the everyday in the Parish, firstly by the actual day-to-day experience of fishermen and oil men, then by re-construction of the Parish in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The former focussed on the shared space of the Gulf of Mexico, from which meaning was gathered by both the fishing and oil industry, the malleable divide between these two

industries (whereby people would move between them depending on their personal need), and finally on the shared 'home' landscape of the residential communities of the Parish.

In the latter, it was shown how Ingold's ideas of a mutually constructed landscape can be intensified by an *active* pursuit of (re)construction. This process formed part of the maintenance of 'insider' status for those who no longer recognised the landscape of their home, and conferred it upon some of those who came to the Parish to offer clean-up and reconstruction assistance to local residents. What is crucial here in our understanding of recovery however is that the insider status of residents did not need to be 'recovered'. Unlike their homes, their identity of local men of the Parish was not significantly damaged by the impact of the catastrophe. As has been discussed throughout this thesis, the experience of disaster was part of their shared identity, and thus their experience of Katrina was embedded in a pre-existing relationship to disaster-process.

This balance, and division of the experience of 'insiderness' and 'outsiderness' is nowhere better exemplified than when one looks at the internalised division and union that each individual in the Parish connects with their sense of self. Ultimately, when trying to answer questions regarding the division (not) present between and amongst the local community of Plaquemines Parish and the oil business and seafood industry, no simple analysis can be offered.

Our thinking narrows to the individual and his personal relationship and negotiation of this landscape. Like notions of place, this one must be recognised internally to exist at all, and like all landscapes it is gathered by the active participation of living within it. The fishing business was seen as the champion of a romanticised past but was viewed as having a problematic future, while the oil business will probably always be the great intruder but an intruder which brought financial investment and jobs to a poor group of people. Fishermen encouraged their sons to turn away from the bayous and get university degrees in engineering or medicine, while oil workers delighted when dolphins play near their rigs

and are distraught when leaking oil chases them away and within the Parish all live in the aftermath of catastrophes and the on-going experience of mundane disaster-processes. In this final view of residents of the Parish, we see that the border between oil and fishing is very real and very deep, but is also culturally constructed and malleable. Men of the Parish can be both oil men and fishermen, at the same time as being either an oil man or a fisherman, and perhaps in this we see the true contradiction of the lived experience of life in the Parish.

Chapter 6 – Willing to Recover

Introduction

No discussion of how the devastation brought by Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill would be complete without taking time to study how local people fold the experience of catastrophe into their on-going relationship with disasters. There is still significant physical evidence in this landscape of the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina, and even those who have permanently returned to the area are (usually) now resident in trailers bought since the Storm as discussed in chapter 3. This is a landscape deeply embedded in processes of normalised disaster as this thesis argues, but which has also recently experienced an extreme and note-worthy outlier in its on-going process of dwelling within a disaster-prone landscape. While this is a community well used to the threat of disasters in a generalised sense, the impact of a catastrophe once actualised on this scale is note-worthy, as is the processes through which local residents seek to conceptualise, and normalise such catastrophic disaster-processes. In so doing, the local community can be seen to fold these large-scale outliers of experience (Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill) into pre-established processes of the everyday. This chapter shall offer insight into the process whereby these catastrophic events are ‘tamed’ within the local discourse and memory, and reimagined as part of the on-going process of dwelling within the Parish.

It shall do this by breaking its analysis into several key structures. Firstly, by deploying the theoretical model of the phenomenological anthropologist Cheryl Mattingly (2010), a discussion of ‘willing’ shall be offered to frame the deeply rooted process of ‘becoming’ outlined in previous chapters. This model gives insight into the process both individuals and their broader community undertake when personal or communal trauma occurs, in order to overcome such trauma and fully re-engage with the constructed normality of the everyday, in this case, on-going social life in a post-disaster landscape.

Once this discussion of internalised processes has been completed, the chapter's second section shall discuss how 'recovery' is encouraged in individuals and their communities through personal relationships and active participation in community life. Socialising through storytelling, in the form of either banter or moaning formed a hugely significant element in an individual's on-going process of normalising the impact of these disasters, and sharing one's experience of such times in a socially sanctioned forum is a crucial part to the process of overcoming.

Finally, this chapter shall present a brief discussion of the process of overcoming for those who did not return to the Parish, as offered from the perspective of one embedded in local structures present there. While it is beyond the scope of this enquiry to do more than comment that such process were undoubtedly underway, it is important to acknowledge that even those residents who did not return to the Parish of Plaquemines could still interact with the on-going process of overcoming for those who did.

Recovery Through Willing

Willing is an area often neglected by anthropologists (Murphy and Throop 2010), and is usually left to disciplines which have a tradition of focussing more closely on the individual such as psychology or philosophy. By doing this however, we have ignored a crucial element to the sense of self and of purpose of every individual, and of every community. This section shall therefore examine this process of willing and how it is relevant to the people and communities of southern Plaquemines Parish. The work of Cheryl Mattingly (2010) is the basis for this analysis, as her theory is a useful framework from which to begin an understanding of this deeply complex, personal, subjective, and on-going experience. This section shall firstly, offer an overview of Mattingly's structure, so to better conceptualise the analysis which follows. Secondly, it shall use the four components of Mattingly's model to present insight into this process within the local context of the Parish of Plaquemines.

In 'Moral Willing as Narrative Re-Envisioning' (2010) Cheryl Mattingly sets out a rich and concise framework by which anthropologists might utilise a conception of willing (i.e. an act of volition), not in terms of measurable actions, but instead as situating oneself in a wider process, whereby one re-imagines one's sense of self in terms of a new community-based narrative. Her understanding of willing frames it as a cultural phenomenon, not as a moment of singular and deliberate choice, but as a continual mode of operation to which an individual attempts to hold to. Such a construction allows her to bring a 'moral' dynamic into her understanding, as part of this framework for action to which an individual attempts to maintain, is an understanding that it will allow them to act in the 'correct' manner in a given circumstance. In unpacking her understanding of moral willing she lays out four key features which distinguish this type of willing from previous models which focussed on discrete action, or, as Ortner (1984) points out, pragmatic rationality: 1. Refocusing attention forms a better basis to discuss moral willing than discrete decision making: 2. Internal reorientation is as crucial as outward action when discussing the 'doing' of moral willing: 3. A narrative rather than atomistic concept of action is needed in such activity: 4. "A concept of moral willing cannot be disconnected from a notion of self" and this self is both social (created in community) and narrative (2010: 55). Despite her stated focus on *moral* willing the general ideas she presents have application and relevance far beyond this one area. Furthermore, in the case of southern Plaquemines Parish, willing oneself to remain in the Parish had become a moral good in itself, and the very fact of living in that place was in itself viewed as a commendable activity.

The example she provides to explain this process is a discussion of an African American mother who had to deal with her young son receiving serious burns to his face due to the neglect on the part of his cousin who was at that moment responsible for his care. This mother had to make many moral choices with regard to her relationships with her now disfigured son, her niece and her sister, and Mattingly describes these not only in terms of a series of certain discrete decisions which the mother made but mainly, and more importantly, as a re-orientation whereby she came to view and experience the world in a

new way. Her personal crisis was thus resolved by coming to terms gradually with this event from a position of ever increasing internal moral strength. A clear example of this is her decision not to become bitter or angry with regard to her son's condition or at the cause of it. It would not have been possible for her to come to this position through a single discrete decision, but rather as part of a lengthy process, which involved her entire community helping her. Certainly, she may have initially vocalised her position in the language of a single decision, but deeper acceptance of her new reality would have taken far longer. According to Mattingly's (2010) research the mother in question now believes herself to be a better person as a result of this process of willing.

Part of the experience of the residents of Plaquemines Parish is clarified through this lens of moral willing. Most members of this community lost not only every personal belonging they owned, but also every familiar physical reference point in their community (shops, schools etc.). Many of those who chose to return to southern Plaquemines Parish had undergone a process of moral willing in some respects similar to the one described above. But rather than maintaining a relationship between family members, the locals of the region had maintained and reaffirmed their relationship to their home and community, as part of the on-going construction of a landscape where disasters are 'normalised'.

While this region was somewhat used to the close proximity of disasters, the special circumstances and massive impact of Hurricane Katrina (and to a lesser extent the BP oil spill) has caused severe strain on local populations and threatened their longevity. It has been noted that many within the Parish chose not to return to their homes in the aftermath of the Storm. By examining Mattingly's four criteria for moral willing this section shall offer insight into the process by which local people managed the trauma of the impact of the Storm, and redefined it as part of the on-going processes of everyday life within a landscape where disasters are to some extent, normalised.

Refocusing Attention

When discussing the experience of how a member of southern Plaquemines overcame the crisis of hurricane Katrina (and to a lesser extent the BP oil spill) a model of re-orientation (explained below) can be more useful than one of direct action. With this said however it is important to note that there are instances where a direct action model is more appropriate, most important in this is the decision to actually return to southern Plaquemines and choose to continue to make it home. Many former members of the community decided to remain in the locale to where they fled the Storm rather than return, and this chapter will conclude with a brief discussion of their unique experience of this phenomenon. For those who did choose to return to southern Plaquemines and continue to make their lives in that part of the Parish, the years after the storm had been an on-going normalising process of ‘becoming’ in this landscape which has been significantly impacted by catastrophic disaster-processes. Whether it was with bricks and mortar, filled church pews, or bumping into a friend in the supermarket these processes are built on a strong foundation of willing.

The emotional impact of what these residents experienced should not be underestimated: many people in Plaquemines proudly called themselves ‘born n raised’ but often not only they, but their parents and their grandparents were also born and raised in the Parish. As has previously been mentioned, families came to live in close proximity to each other with houses and property being passed down through families for generations. Indeed, some families lived in the same place for so long that the street they lived on took on the family name (Longman 2008: 112). When they returned after Katrina however, the landscape was unrecognisable, almost every man-made structure was destroyed and everything they had owned was scattered across many square miles.

As was discussed in the previous chapter, Mike laughed while he recounted missing the turn off to his property on his first journey back after the Storm and having to

double back when he realised his mistake: the Acadian house in which he had lived for decades had been utterly destroyed along with every other landmark in the neighbourhood. Later in the same interview however, his smile dropped and the emotion of this experience overcame him for a few minutes. He was discussing why he had chosen to come back, and his answer was simply “this is ma’ home”. This response had been repeated across dozens of conversations with local people and its simplicity belies a deep process of reimagining. Home for the people of southern Plaquemines had become symbolic of a deep struggle for cultural survival and they are proud of their role in this on-going process.

The various ‘steps’ on the road to recovery: evacuation, ‘refugee’, return, temporary accommodation etc. had not been experienced as separate discrete choices but as a continual process from the time before destruction to an imagined future of a return to ‘normality’ (which, as has been shown in earlier chapters is a complex term reflecting the cultural nostalgia of the Parish, and ultimately an impossible goal to ever truly reach). For many of my respondents, their evacuation began as each of their previous evacuations had began, and even once they realised that on this occasion the hurricane was about to make landfall there remained no question of their eventual return to the Parish. In his catalogue of messages painted on walls in the immediate aftermath of Katrina in New Orleans artist Richard Misrach (2010) shows in *Destroy This Memory* (a collection of some of his photographs) a wide range of emotional response from anger and despair to simple practicality, but the theme I wish to draw attention to here is one of rebirth. Whether conceptualised in simple terms; ‘We will rebuild’, or as part of the larger politics of the region ‘the South will rise again’ the visual display of a reorientation away from passive victim to active re-builder is clear.

This reorientation away from a narrative of being a victim of an unprecedented catastrophe, to a re-builder of one’s community and wider normality is crucial, and comes in many interesting and perhaps surprising forms. Miguel spoke with delight about the first night he connected a generator to some portable lights on his property. That first night he did not point them at the ground or towards where he was working to clear his land, but at the sky and towards the road and the Gulf of Mexico: everywhere in fact where outsiders

might be. He wanted to display as blatantly and defiantly as possible that “he was still here” and “he was here to stay”. For him though, this simple act was an important step for him in affirming that his community had not been destroyed, but was in fact, continuing to develop.

Some do not wish to see the Parish ‘put back as it was’ but instead hoped to use Katrina as an opportunity to make the Parish ‘better’ than it was prior to the Storm’s landfall. Their experience of loss had been tempered by what they saw as the emergence of opportunities for development, and the hope that with the correct attitude and resources the Parish could come back even stronger than previously. As has been discussed previously, often the individuals most vocal in such planning were those such as high school Principals, and local political activists. These educators in particular described their responsibility as one of improving the life chances of their students to succeed by providing not only a good education, but also wider emotional and social support. These examples show a determined effort by local people to re-engage with their homes and communities and re-establish themselves within the process of everyday life.

Internal Reorientation

The process by which Mattingly’s respondent prevented feelings of anger and bitterness to overcome her was connected to a long term process of changing herself and to envision the world differently, something which can be referred to as internal re-orientation (2010: 65). She goes on to say that willing here “involves a change of heart” and “overt, discrete acts of will are just a sporadic manifestation of this transformation” (Mattingly 2010: 65). In the case of Plaquemines Parish it is easy to see how bitterness and despair might easily have overcome local people, though this is not the way locals of my acquaintance described everyday life. On a hunting trip I was part of one man stated that he did have moments of despair initially but that he simply had to stay positive and move on. On another occasion a local oyster fisherman quipped he had to “get better or get bitter”.

This experience of internal re-orientation is perhaps best observed in the local religious practitioners on whom the community at times such as these would lean heavily on.

One local Pastor described returning to the Parish to find his church in ruins with debris carpeting the entire area. His father (who had accompanied him) looked about and, deflated, stated he had no idea where they would even begin to put the place back in order, the Pastor simply looked at the debris under his feet and said “well a’ guess I’ll start right here”. In another conversation, this time with local Catholics, they described their initial fear that the Arch-Diocese would choose to close down the local churches of southern Plaquemines Parish, and it was only through massive effort on the part of their local Priest and certain other individuals that two of the Catholic churches successfully reopened. These discrete acts, such as the Pastor picking up the rubble under his feet, or the Catholic Priest refusing to allow his ruined church to be abandoned reflect an internal process whereby they have accepted the hardship of their current reality and begin the process of weaving it into their on-going process of ‘becoming’ within the context of their previous relationships with disasters.

It is worth noting (as has also been mentioned above) that several of the local volunteer organisations have seen certain changes to their membership and role since Katrina, and have played an important role in the emotional recovery process for many individuals and families (a phenomenon also noted in the Lower 9th Ward social clubs by Breunlin and Regis (2006)). Two such organisations are Buras Volunteer Fire Department and the south Plaquemines Parish chapter of the Knights of Columbus. Although these two groups might initially seem rather different (the former is a secular branch of the emergency services tasked with protecting Buras from certain hazards such as fire, while the latter is a branch of the Catholic church which works to improve the quality of life for those less fortunate both within the Parish and beyond) the similarities are striking. Both are volunteer driven⁹, both are organised locally, while both are technically connected to

⁹ Although the Buras Volunteer Fire Department does (since Hurricane Katrina) employ a small number of professional fire fighters the current Fire Chief, the vast majority of first responders, and all the social members are volunteers. As a result, it makes more sense to consider the local fire departments alongside

much larger institutions, both are predominantly male, both are deeply concerned with improving Southern Plaquemines, and both have seen their memberships change somewhat since Katrina.

As individuals returned to the Parish and decided to rebuild rather than leave, some experienced a shift in terms of both their consciousness and their priorities. Whereas prior to the Storm the idea of volunteering with such organisations would not have been appealing, afterwards, when faced with their homes reduced to rubble and many within their communities unable or unwilling to return, a number of men felt a strong desire to become active in community life and work in any way they could to actively put something back into southern Plaquemines Parish. Such a desire also links to the discussion in the previous chapter on the (re)construction of landscape and ‘insiderness’, and many of these new volunteers now find their insider status reaffirmed in this new, embodied way.

This influx of new people has been particularly interesting in relation to the Knights of Columbus, as was discussed in chapter 3, prior to the Storm the two local chapters had something of a reputation for being ‘Whites only’. The then head of the chapter, Morgan, who was himself African-American related to me that the combination of many of the older members choosing not to return to the Parish – thus leaving a shortage of volunteers – and the merging of the two local chapters; along with this newly found drive of many local men to become more involved in community matters led to an unprecedented opening of the order to new members from a much wider variety of racial background.

The Buras Volunteer Fire Department has also seen an influx of new members in an effort to balance the loss of many volunteers in the aftermath of the Storm. Many of

voluntary organisations such as the Knights of Columbus rather than professional bodies such as the Sheriff’s Department in this instance.

these men express a feeling of duty to protect the community they call home in a more active sense than simply living in the place would allow. For the new (and returning) members of both these organisations, the destruction of Katrina caused something of a shift in their values and made them realise that their homes were not something to be taken for granted, and instead were something which must be protected as well as actively (re)constructed – both physically and emotionally.

One of the reasons why the recent BP oil spill was so challenging on the community of southern Plaquemines Parish was that it interrupted this on-going process of internal recovery. When describing the oil spill local residents (particularly fishermen) tended not to discuss it as an isolated event, but rather something connected with the on-going recovery after the Storm. Many individuals who had only recently been able to replace their destroyed boats were unable to use them for fishing. While BP employed a large number of fishermen in clean-up operations, and has offered limited financial compensation for damages done, the emotional stress of being prevented from engaging in the embodied normality of working as fishermen only a matter of years after they began the process of recovery from an unusually catastrophic on-going disaster-process was very great. This emotional stress was compounded by the loss of their subsistence lifestyle, with local fishermen estimating that as much as 5% of their catch was used to feed their families and (perhaps more importantly) their extended families and the less fortunate members of their community. Many fishermen took the time to give the occasional bag of oysters or shrimp to elderly or very poor members of the community in order to help sustain them. This process reinforced the community disaster-process healing of the area and was a major loss to the area when the Spill prevented it from occurring.

Narrative Concept of Action

In Philipp Meyer's *American Rust* (2009) a post-industrial town is shown slowly decaying due to unemployment and the decline of the community. The picture painted is fairly bleak. Southern Plaquemines Parish is also an American community undergoing a

crisis of economics but the response here has been far more positive. A huge part of this is the assumption that things in the Parish can be made better (along with a view of how this will occur), if not quite to the extent they were before the Storm, then nonetheless markedly improved from the situation at present. This is what Mattingly (2010) might describe as a narrative concept of action. Part of this probably comes from historical experience, where the fortunes of many communities on the Gulf of Mexico have been tied to both a fickle oil industry which contracts and expands with an almost unregulated rapidity and unpredictability, best shown in novels such as Gautreaux's *The Next Step in the Dance* (2005), and of course, previous deep personal experience of smaller disaster-processes and large catastrophes. The personal narratives of the residents here, as well as the community narratives of the various towns allow many people in the Parish to look to the future with hope.

The story of the 2007 state victory of the South Plaquemines High School Hurricanes (the school's American football team) is an example of this. Longman's *The Hurricanes* (2008) covers this story in detail, as he follows the merger of the three high schools of southern Plaquemines Parish into one school. The students now thrown together by this disaster name the football team of this school the Hurricanes, and the book follows their journey to become state champions just two years after the Storm damaged their communities. For many (particularly the young players and their parents) this victory served as a vindication of their decision to return to the Parish and invest emotionally and financially in an area that continues to have an uncertain future. As was stated above, the Principle of this high school spoke with sincere passion about the role of his students in the shaping of the Parish's future. To him, the Parish had for too long been overlooked by state politics and indeed had actively sought to distance itself. By promoting an ethos of critical thought within his school he hoped to foster a more global outlook amongst his students which would aid them in forming a future that goes beyond the borders of the Parish, if not physically, at least in their perspective and aspirations. For him, the merging of these schools could be a unifying force which helps the southern part of Plaquemines Parish act as a single political force which might help ensure its continued future.

Other people have experienced this narrative of re-building in other ways, many of them both subtle and direct. One such example was during a conversation at the Buras firehouse regarding recent Corps of Engineers plans to fortify the levees around the Parish. Some of the local men were sceptical about the long term effectiveness of such a strategy given the levels of erosion which occur daily around the Parish but one hit back by discussing several live oaks he had recently planted on his property. This man, a local truck driver and volunteer fireman called Josh went on to enthusiastically state that he would be dead before the trees had fully grown, but that that his children would see them. His attitude therefore was not that one should obsess and worry about whether or not the Parish would survive, but that people should simply take it as read that the Parish *would* survive and thus each man should act accordingly, and in particular should invest in the landscape and infrastructure.

This individual took great pride in his property and was in the process of purchasing several lots which adjoined his land, and one of his favourite past-times seemed to be cutting his grass and keeping the ‘natural’ environment around his house maintained to his satisfaction (indeed, he would usually refer to his *wife’s* house and *his* land). It made sense therefore that a desire to invest physically in the future of the Parish would manifest in his case in planting trees, as well as volunteering with the fire department, the implications of which have been discussed above.

Moral Willing and the Self

Mattingly describes how her respondent experienced a total altering to her sense of being in response to her son’s accident (2010: 67). For her, the process by which she came to terms with her son’s injuries has changed her outlook on life and the way she reacted to events and situations. She claims she is now a better and less judgemental person as a result. While there were those who might choose to frame their reaction to the Storm in this manner (particularly in terms of narratives of ‘strength’) they were balanced by those whose moral or personal lives appeared to have undergone no such

transformation. The difference in context is crucial here, as in Mattingly's example a single person overcame a personal crisis with the help of her wider community, while in Plaquemines Parish many personal crises occurred simultaneously to a community collectively. What has certainly occurred, however, is the positioning of these large-scale catastrophes within on-going processes of recovery, embedded within continuing everyday life. One can therefore only understand local direct experience of this catastrophe in relation to its connection to on-going processes of normalised disaster.

With this said, some within Plaquemines Parish have indeed reported similar changes and re-evaluations, but perhaps most interesting are those who came to the area to undertake aid work and charity re-building, some of whom chose to remain and make their lives in the Parish. While discussing this process with a couple who co-ordinate Christian volunteers in re-building efforts the wife tells me how she received a 'calling' to do these works and in so doing her life's priorities shifted along with her goals and she decided to leave her life in the north east of the United States to better focus on her work on the Gulf of Mexico.

This response when faced with the crisis unfolding as a result of the Storm clearly shows an altering of self. After spending time with one such group of volunteers from Indiana it is clear that many who do not have any direct connection to the region itself can experience Katrina and the effects of the devastation it caused. In this case, a group travelled over 1000 miles by bus in order to participate in a weeks work building houses for individuals who were still living in temporary accommodation. Catastrophes such as Katrina can cause people who live outside the area directly affected to take action, and to become involved in efforts to re-build. In this case religion played an important part of the motivation involved in this action with one volunteer in particular confiding to me that he had felt something missing from his spiritual wholeness which this direct service in God's name had filled. By taking action he, and many other members of the group were praising and serving God in an embodied way and were answering both a personal and divine 'call' to act to help those who had suffered during the Storm. Such a behavioural shift would not have occurred had they not experienced Katrina at some level.

At times however this desire to do works can flow in the opposite direction. During a visit to a similar re-building project in Tuscaloosa, Alabama (an area severely hit by recent tornados) a couple from Mississippi explained to me that since their own house was destroyed by Katrina and subsequently re-built by volunteers they now embark on a week of 'service' each year. This story was made all the more poignant when it was explained that the group they join on this yearly service is in fact the same group from Ohio who re-built their home in the aftermath of Katrina. This signals both a desire to pass forward the support they received after the catastrophe which impacted them, and the same kind of spiritual motivation discussed above, as this couple experienced the Storm as a spiritual turning point in their lives, showing them the value of serving God in such an embodied manner. Although this is only an isolated example, the charity's group leaders (who were members of staff co-ordinating the many groups who engage in this week of service) have met dozens of such people who have built this week of service into their lives in the aftermath of having their homes similarly rebuilt in the aftermath of Katrina.

Beyond the area of volunteering other examples of individuals experiencing what they might consider an improvement or development to their sense of morality and experience of acting in a more moral or positive way are evident though not universal. This can be studied in Plaquemines Parish most easily in terms of institutional change, firstly in terms of volunteering and community involvement as has been shown previously in relation to the Knights of Columbus and the various Volunteer Fire Departments who had both seen a crop of new members stepping forward having been inspired by the events of the hurricane and the change of perspective this had brought. Outwith this overt and direct manifestation several other such shifts were apparent such as the major change experienced by the Catholic church in the area. Prior to the storm there were four separate churches each of which served a particular racially bounded community. With locals describing one being the 'Black' church, one being the 'White' church and so on. Although this was not caused by officially sanctioned segregation (and indeed the Catholic church has long championed racial *integration* in the region), it was described as the de facto reality for the broad majority within the southern Parish. As has been previously

stated the hurricane caused major upheaval to the structures of Catholic worship within the Parish with two churches closing permanently and one of the churches massively scaling back the services it offered.

The large church in Port Sulphur (St. Patrick's) had thus become the centre-point for those who follow this faith in the southern end of the Parish. Consequently, this had led to a blending of the four formerly separate congregations and thus a much more significant level of racial integration than one would have found otherwise. As has been discussed earlier in chapter 3, the local response to such changes are embedded within pre-existing patterns of cultural precariousness, but many see it as broadly a positive step, one which was ultimately inevitable and which the hurricane expedited.

One Dead in the Attic is a collection of the newspaper articles written by the New Orleans based columnist Chris Rose (2007) detailing his experience of life in the devastated city and his evacuation and return. Although it is largely based in the city of New Orleans, the experience of which was often, as has already been discussed, wildly different to the experience of rural Plaquemines Parish, many people within the Parish recommended it highly as containing a fair and detailed representation of many of the challenges – both emotional and physical – they themselves experienced.

One anecdote from this volume is particularly relevant here. Trash was fairly common in New Orleans, but telling strangers off for dropping it was not and when Rose describes an argument he had with a stranger because he had thrown rubbish from the window of his car onto the ground, we see an illustration of the theme expressed throughout his text of building a better city than had been before, which begins with one's own action. It perhaps seems a small or inconsequential thing – particularly given the magnitude of destruction and 'trash' caused by Katrina – but for the writer it was this very magnitude which should bring home to people the value of what they had in the city of

New Orleans, and how they should take greater responsibility in preserving it, as he was now determined to do.

Although it is certainly of value to discuss changes which the hurricane and to a lesser extent the oil spill brought it is important to remember that at core this is the same community which evacuated at the end of August, 2005, and they continue to engage with their community life within structures of the everyday, experienced as a continuity from before the Storm hit.

Recovery Through Personal Relationships

Storytelling forms an important part of the creation and maintenance of social relationships, and in a region which had experienced catastrophe these stories were often part of a reconnection and renegotiation with a person's experience of both culturally constructed place, and their role in the landscape that surrounds them (Burley et al. 2006). Stories can take many forms and be intended for many different audiences, some are informative, some moral, and others humorous. In all cases however the story's teller attempts to impart some meaning or information onto his listeners, which the listeners in turn may interpret, question, or ignore. In the case of Plaquemines Parish this communal and community storytelling and narrative creation is a central part in the process of willing and recovery, both in relation to catastrophe, and at other times of personal or communal crisis and trauma. One particular type of narrative form, and arguably one of the most important in this context, is what might be called 'banter'.

Banter breaks down the classic dualism of story's teller and story's audience and instead places all participating members within a shared constructed 'performance'. Generally humorous or amusing in tone, banter also is often used as a form of satire to both challenge socially accepted norms, unusual events, or important people. This

combination allows for complex and sometimes controversial ideas or events to be shared and discussed publicly without fear of reprisal due to the 'joking' nature of the interaction. Essentially, people are allowed to discuss serious or taboo matters in a non-serious way. In most cases there is one or a small number of principle story tellers who 'lead' the topic of conversation, with the remainder of the group interjecting with comments, additional details, humorous asides, or exclamations of agreement or derision. Over the course of a lengthy social interaction which might cover several topics the principle storyteller may shift around a group of participants several times, often rapidly.

Such a form maintains a strong emphasis on performance, and I participated in several such 'performances' during my fieldwork, particularly after a training or maintenance session at the local fire department. Locally, it would appear the narrative came in one of three forms: firstly where the principle story teller discusses a third party whom is not present, or an institution or event which the listeners are familiar with, but are not closely connected to (such as firemen discussing an insurance company): secondly, where the focus is on an individual who is present in the company or an institution or event which the listeners have a deep relationship with or are active members of (such as firemen discussing their own firehouse): thirdly, when the focus of the story is oneself or an event uniquely connected to oneself. Locally, there appeared to be a strong connection between banter as a narrative technique and masculinity, and men would often engage in such activity in a single gendered environment, while I found such performances less common out with such context. Whether similar dynamics played out in female single gendered environments in the context of Plaquemines Parish is beyond the scope of this study to assess.

Consumption of alcohol was common in such a context as was swearing, sexual language and crude reference to sexual practice, sexism, hyperbole, and raucous laughter. Amongst men, banter was normally dominated by two things: laughter and moaning, and in a context where disasters, and the threat of major catastrophe, are common, banter had served as an essential mechanism to allow a diverse variety of social processes to occur. This section shall discuss a selection of these processes including: promoting community

support networks, reducing the unimaginable to the mundane, normalising extraordinary activities and context, establishing an individual within a grounded timeline based on a movement from a destroyed past towards an imagined prosperous future, and establishing gender norms and the generation of an embodied, gendered sense of self. All of this was enormously important in situating this catastrophe within the on-going experience of the everyday, overcoming the effects of it and moving beyond it.

As has been discussed above, the communities of southern Plaquemines Parish (and indeed much of the Gulf of Mexico) undertook a large scale process of communal willing where multiple personal tragedies occurred simultaneously alongside large community wide and regional disasters which in turn compounded each other in a cyclical process. It was only through collaborative efforts within and between communities, and with certain external bodies such as faith charities and FEMA that such a cycle could be broken and inverted, and local people often spoke of how important sharing resources with friends and neighbours was in terms of managing the effects of the catastrophes. A central element to this communal, collaborative action was simply the existence of informal community support networks, which facilitated interaction such as the banter mentioned above.

It is important to note the centrality the pre-disaster existence of friendship groups can be to a community's recovery in the aftermath of catastrophe. One of the key topics discussed during interviews on the subject of recovery was one relating to the return – or not – of neighbours and friends after the Storm and how heartening – or discouraging – this could be. Even during the period of research in 2011, families were still in the process of moving back to the Parish after being displaced by the hurricane which struck in 2005, thus the challenge to a social network is felt over an extended period – it was not simply the case that friends and neighbours return (or not) quickly after a disaster takes place, sometimes such a return can take many years.

Often, these returnees were adult couples who chose to remain wherever they had evacuated to, allowing their children to complete their education in a stable environment. Often once these children graduated high school or left home their parents were able to move back to the Parish. This type of return, while not common, was certainly a noteworthy example of a type of development experienced in the region many years after the initial evacuation and return had occurred.

Whatever the circumstances of the return, the broadening and strengthening of social groupings and norms was of great importance to local people. When these groups did convene banter was often one of the principal modes of interaction encouraged and indeed lengthy, humorous stories, countered by equally humorous quips and remarks were often the centrepiece for a group of men sharing a case of beer of an evening and “shootin’ the shit” and the weekly training sessions at the fire department usually dissolved into such sessions. Being able to meet at the end of a day and share such stories in the company of other men, many of whom had undergone the same deeply traumatic experiences that they had, was a crucial part of the recovery process and hugely significant in maintaining the internal re-orientation towards normality mentioned above.

Just as their participation in these groups strengthened the entire region of Plaquemines Parish, so in turn did the increasing stability and quality of life in the region support one’s reorientation and – fundamentally – reassure these men that there was still continuity with pre-storm normality to be found in this region and that it was the correct decision to return and re-invest in the town from which they evacuated. Part of the appeal for individuals to become involved with such organisations as the Knights of Columbus or the local Volunteer Fire Departments, was undoubtedly the camaraderie and esprit de corps found there. These organisations had taken on the feel of something of a fraternity, where one of the unstated goals of the organization was the support of the emotional welfare of its members, and members, and friends of members would also gravitate towards the fire house to socialise even when there was not training or another ‘official’ reason for them to be there.

Such sessions of banter formed a central part of the process through which these men came to incorporate a huge catastrophe into the more mundane experience of everyday life. Local discourse and ‘banter’ in the Parish often challenged the enormity of the scale of Hurricane Katrina by focussing on personal, humorous anecdotes related to it. A popular theme for such stories, at least amongst men of my acquaintance, was discussion of instances of embarrassment during defecation in the immediate return after the Storm. Sanitation infrastructure had largely been destroyed along with the local buildings, and thus individuals ‘roughing it’ in the southern part of the Parish were largely forced to improvise in this area. Occasions where the participant was stumbled upon, observed, or suffered some misfortune during such activities were sometimes shared with great amusement during such discussions (Bates 2012).

Such stories helped to reduce the unimaginable to the mundane. Indeed, there are few activities that are *more* mundane. By combining narratives of the experience of the loss of one’s homes and communities with narratives pertaining to such a common place bodily function it appealed to a group’s collective experience on two levels: the one which was acknowledged and to be shared and ‘enjoyed’ with the banter; and the unacknowledged one whereby the destruction of one’s material property was taken-as-read. Many stories shared a similarity in the foregrounding of mundane activities, during the return to the Parish, and they shared a similar narrative function to the one discussed above. What links them all was a deep grounding in utterly unremarkable everyday tasks, which had been made amusing due to some embarrassing circumstance created by the hurricane, which in turn allowed the hurricane itself to be approached as a more mundane and relatable event.

Another major point of discussion amongst local men was comparing experiences relating to claiming insurance in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, or compensation from BP in the aftermath of the oil spill. Often both of these processes would be discussed in the same conversation and appear to be largely grouped into a single relational process within

such discourse: that of claiming money from a body external to the Parish, due to the experience of a catastrophe.

One of the parallels local people in Plaquemines Parish shared with many residents of New Orleans during the aftermath of the Storm was a negative experience with insurance companies. Although there were many exceptions, the accounts of local people suggested a huge number of people in the Parish found themselves with a destroyed home or business and little or no compensation with which to rebuild. The circumstances as to how this came about are varied, but the two principle groups negatively affected by this were on the one hand those who had not purchased insurance prior to the Storm, or had only purchased partial coverage (whether because they believed full coverage unnecessary, or an inability to meet the high cost of coverage), and on the other hand those who had purchased full coverage from a private insurance company which refused to pay to the claimant when they applied.

Discourse surrounding the various private insurance companies, government-backed flood insurance, government assistance programs set up in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the BP backed compensation fund distributed after the oil spill, and (to a lesser extent) various faith-based charity support programs utilised in the aftermath of these catastrophes tended to be condensed into two meta-categories of either 'insurance' or 'compensation' rather than as the sub-groupings that make each one up. This offered further insight into the previously discussed perception of normative moral life of many local people, and their relationship with their understanding of 'what they are owed'. Usually this flow of money from donors to local people was seen as extremely unsatisfactory (often with the exception of certain faith-based initiatives). These regular discussions of insurance and compensation appeared to form an important aspect of the collective healing process.

Discussions relating to insurance and compensation acted as a socially appropriate forum for men to discuss the loss of their personal possessions and community. As was mentioned above it was often not socially acceptable for men to discuss the emotional implications of the Storm or Spill directly (particularly so many years after the catastrophe had 'hit'). While discussing the 'things' the insurance company's failure prevented them from replacing, they were in fact also discussing the 'things' themselves. Thus an account ostensibly of the failure of the insurance company to provide sufficient funds to rebuild a family home, was in fact – at one level – a discussion of the loss of the home itself. In this way, men could share their experience of loss and seek support and guidance from their peers, without breaking the established gender norms of the region. These discussions often blended and mingled with stories connected to planned or progressing improvements being made to a man's home, land, or business. Usually, such stories of a new addition to the house or the planting of a tree in the garden would be prefixed or suffixed with a discussion or mention of what was (or was not) there prior to the Storm making landfall, and if there was a connection to insurance paying for it (or not paying as the case may be) it will almost certainly be stated.

Insurance and compensation processes were also administered by human agents, and thus offer a more appropriate target for critique and anger than an uncontrollable meteorological phenomenon such as Hurricane Katrina. Discussion of insurance agents and appraisers, and those administering claims processes were often described as actively seeking to impede local people in their re-building process. On one occasion Buck supported such an assertion by describing how his insurance company had sent several appraisers to assess the damage to his property after the Storm, but it was only after he cleared his land of debris did a report on the damage get filed, a report which asserted the impossibility of adequately assessing the damage to the property, because the rubble had been removed.

The BP claims process was often described as being actively antagonistic to local people and local fishermen and fishing guides reported a huge diversity of what they considered unnecessary hurdles being erected in the claims procedure. One local fishing

guide explained that during his claims process the compensation body required him to resubmit his tax returns (the basis by which his allotted compensation would be calculated) several times, each in a slightly different format. He acknowledged that his personal wealth allowed him to sustain himself over the several months this back-and-forth went on, but others he knew struggled to maintain financial stability when faced with similar barriers in the compensation procedure. Unlike discussions of the Storm, the BP oil spill was unambiguously caused by man-made negligence, and thus BP, and its then chief executive Tony Hayward came under a great deal of direct criticism in addition to discussions of the claims procedure. As has been discussed in the previous chapter the relationship local people have with large oil companies can be complex, and those who worked within the oil business were less likely to criticise the oil companies responsible for the disaster directly.

Beyond this, the idea that insurance and compensation companies were at fault for not helping them to return, or the declaration that insurance was too expensive to afford, might perhaps be interpreted as removing something of the responsibility of the local person in terms of their desire to live in this particular landscape. Indeed, despite their vocalised acknowledgement that further hurricanes would definitely destroy the Parish at some point in the future, it was the government and insurance companies who should change their practices to better suit the local community, and provide for their residence, rather than the local community which should relocate.

Recovery Outwith The Parish

Although it is beyond the scope of this research to give any more than a very limited discussion of the experience of overcoming the effects of Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill amongst those who chose not to return to the southern end of the Parish, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge that such processes of recovery are doubtless occurring, and further, to note how the experience of those who *did* return was in turn impacted. What was clear is that a portion of those people who did not move back to the Parish retain a deep emotional connection to the place, and are disconnected from on-going

processes of locally emergent normality to disaster-processes, thus their personal process of recovery is complicated by their new geographical surroundings.

As was mentioned above, the Knights of Columbus saw extensive changes to their local chapter membership in the years following the storm, but a portion of those who did not return continued to send membership dues to the south Plaquemines Parish chapter. This meant that they have foregone membership of a closer chapter in favour of continuing a connection to the Parish, despite being too geographically distant to actively participate in the operations of the chapter.

More acute than this, is the relevance of the Buras Volunteer Fire Department Crawfish Boil Off. A great many of the attendees who joined in the festivities are those who no longer lived in the southern end of the Parish (or even the Parish itself) but who wished to retain a personal connection with the people and community this landscape maintains. While discussing the event with one of the firemen he described it as “one big reunion”.

One final example of this continuing connection is in terms of the recent vote with regard to the Parish seat and courthouse which occurred during 2011. As has been described, the discussion centred around the proposal to move the seat from its historic home of the east bank of the Mississippi River in Pointe à la Hache, which had been largely destroyed by the Storm and in recent years had suffered major economic decline, which was magnified by the effects of Katrina and the oil spill. It was proposed to move the seat to the much more populous and prosperous Belle Chase in the north, which was where the government had been in temporary residence since its return after Katrina. Despite around 60% of the Parish’s population at that time being resident in Belle Chase¹⁰, the vote failed, meaning that the Parish seat and associated courthouse would remain in Pointe à la Hache. This vote was pitched by many of those opposing the move as a struggle

¹⁰ The Parish has seen internal migration north of around 30% since the Storm.

of ‘David and Goliath’ or ‘Rural vs Local’ but more deeply as a battle of the ‘haves’ in Belle Chase who suffered little or no damage from Katrina against the ‘have-nots’ in the southern end.

While political rhetoric of this nature was clearly designed to be provocative and carries with it a bias based on their own perception, it clearly struck a chord with many people, both within Belle Chase and outside of it. Although they had chosen not to return to the southern end, many people clearly chose to “vote as southerners” as one local politician put it and ultimately the vote did not pass and the seat did not move. This is not to suggest that this was the sole motivation for people voting on this issue, nor was it the case that all those resident in the southern end of the Parish voted against moving the seat – indeed, many would have preferred to have seen it moved. But it is doubtless that this deeply felt sense of loyalty and connection to the southern end felt by many in the Parish who relocated played a part in swaying some who voted that day.

What these deeply held emotional and psychological ties to a location which was technically no longer a person’s geographical home show is a more complex picture of overcoming and recovery than is experienced by those who are recovering while living in the southern end of Plaquemines Parish. Many people who chose not to return should perhaps be considered to have remained in a state of evacuation despite (or perhaps because) of their new homes and jobs in other parts of the US. These people’s emotional selves were still deeply tied to the on-going processes of ‘becoming’ in southern Plaquemines Parish and it is likely that a second major hurricane making landfall on the Parish would be almost as emotionally damaging to these individuals as it would be to those physically resident there.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the process whereby individuals within Plaquemines Parish overcame and normalised large scale catastrophe, and embed it within on-going processes of the everyday. By employing Mattingly's (2010) notions of willing the first section of this chapter explored how individuals reorient their internal narratives from one of overwhelmed victim, to a position of recovery, and normality. As has been stated, the extensive scale of Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill was beyond the experience of most within the Parish, and in order to engage with such disasters within the pre-established structures of the everyday, normalised disaster there first had to be an internal reorientation of an individual's relationship with said catastrophes.

While it is important to note that this on-going process of recovery from Hurricane Katrina was dealt a severe blow when the BP oil spill occurred, it was not sufficient to derail processes of re-orientation and normalisation already in progress. Even amongst those who work within the fishing industry (and were thus the hardest hit by the spill) the very action of returning to the Parish and committing to its recovery was such a significant formative process that the spill – while certainly an unwelcome challenge – did not stop the healing process.

Beyond internal re-orientation, and the narrative concepts of action discussed by Mattingly, engagement in communal events with fellow social actors was an equally significant part of the healing and normalising process. By engaging in public discussion and storytelling events (largely consisting of a mixture of banter and moaning) local men tapped into communal support networks. These networks assisted in the mutual development of recovery, and the re-establishment of a normative lifestyle within this post-disaster landscape. It also allowed the public discussion of troubling subjects, such as the loss of material possessions, in a socially positive manner.

Finally, this chapter has offered a brief discussion of the recovery processes of those who did not return to the Parish in the aftermath of the storm. Although this is not the methodological focus of this study, it is important to note that processes of overcoming must be enacted by all who experienced these catastrophes, and even though many of these former residents are now geographically distant to the Parish, their on-going healing processes still impact and are entwined with local social processes.

Chapter 7 – Evacuation and the Aftermath

Introduction

Evacuation or “voluntary displacement” (Esnard and Sapat 2014: 2), and the experience of returning ‘home’ after a catastrophe has abated were common points of reflection in the narratives of those experiencing disaster-processes. Ueda and Torigoe’s short essay ‘Why do Victims of the Tsunami Return to the Coast?’ (2012) for example, charts the decision making process of a small Japanese fishing community as they evacuate from the major tsunami of 2011, then return to the area upon which their houses had previously stood. Following Hoffman and Oliver-Smith (2002) they offer insight into this process both as actions based upon rationality, but also as part of a community where tsunamis are embedded into societal processes. This essay foregrounds the agency of their participants and sheds light onto the pragmatic (economic) and spiritual processes at play within this community’s direct experience of this period of instability, and why they eventually choose to return to a region where (like the Parish of Plaquemines) they know another large disaster will eventually hit.

The evacuation from Hurricane Katrina has similarly featured in both academic and media discourse, and writers such as Brinkley (2007), Dewan (2007), Longman (2008), Adeola (2009) and many others have all discussed the evacuation process from Hurricane Katrina to a greater or lesser degree. This chapter however, seeks to foreground the lived experience of evacuation and return specifically in the context of Plaquemines Parish, a location where – as this thesis argues – hurricanes had become a constituent and formative part of the landscape, and experience of everyday. By foregrounding the agency and lived experience of those living through this catastrophe, insight into the wider cultural norms

present within this local society can be offered, and a more developed window into the cultural norms of life on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico can be offered. In short, one cannot understand life in Plaquemines Parish without studying what it means to evacuate from (and return after) large-scale hurricanes.

This chapter shall firstly explore the process through which local people plan for the arrival of the next major hurricane, and engage in discussion regarding whether or not to evacuate from a potential disaster. As shall be noted, such a process began long before a given storm was considered an unambiguous threat to the local landscape, but nonetheless acted as a catalyst for this particular form of social interaction. Once the decision to leave has been made, evacuation follows, and this section shall go on to chart the experience of this.

Experiencing one's home from afar is a central element of the evacuation process, and it will be shown that for many individuals in the Parish of Plaquemines, leaving the physical location of one's home did not mean one left behind the emotional landscape in which it was embedded. Alternatively in this area, there are those who have experienced 'riding out' a large storm within the Parish, and an examination of such accounts will form the final part of this section.

The second section of this chapter shall explore the lived experience of the immediate return to one's home in the aftermath of such a large catastrophe. Charting the experience through the impact such a catastrophe has upon one's home and community offers insight into both the magnitude of this extremely large disaster-process, but also how the pre-existing experience of everyday life in a context where the threat of disasters is common folds the experience of such a disaster into on-going processes of becoming. Furthermore, the lived experience of Katrina and hurricanes more generally have had a formative and constructive impetus to a community at both the cultural and material level. The return to such a context and the reaction to that return provides clear evidence for this.

Planning, Leaving, and Staying, for Disaster

Evacuating from one's home was a process which began long before one actually left. In Plaquemines Parish, an area where evacuation from disasters (or the potential of disaster) was relatively common, there was not a 'beginning' to the planning of one's evacuation as such. Instead, evacuation existed as part of an on-going relationship with the everyday which included the threat of disaster. With this said however, as the threat of a hurricane became more acute (when one was being tracked by metrological experts and there was a threat of local landfall) the discussions of, and preparation for the event of evacuation became significantly more urgent and deliberate. This section shall examine the process through which individuals decide when and if they would evacuate, as well as charting the experience of evacuation once this decision had been reached. Additionally, it will explore occasions when individuals did not evacuate, and instead 'rode out' storms in their homes or other structures. This section shall therefore detail the preparation, exodus, and lived immediacy of the landfall of a major hurricane, with particular emphasis on the experience of Hurricane Katrina.

Deciding to Evacuate and Planning for Storms

Deciding whether or not to evacuate when a major hurricane system approaches the Louisiana Gulf Coast was a yearly event for most of the residents who call this part of the world home. During some hurricane seasons this decision would have to be made multiple times, depending on the number, strength and projected direction of the storms tracked on the Gulf of Mexico. Gillian, a local EMT, remembers a year when they had to evacuate the Parish medical centre on four occasions in the same month. The primary locus for these discussions was often found within the homes of these residents, but can also be found in bars, churches, the local newspaper, and indeed any forum where local residents met. If the decision was made to leave, one's home and one's community must be physically

abandoned, but as shall become clear, the emotional attachment to one's home – if anything – becomes increasingly acute as it is threatened by an on-coming storm.

Perhaps the principle forum whereby the interpretation of the level of threat offered by a given storm was within a familial household. Families track storms as they move across the Gulf of Mexico, and they listen to and interpret information offered to them by climatologists, politicians, and friends. The final decision as to whether to leave or not however, was made in the home. Sally and her husband, who had lost their house during Hurricane Betsy would always evacuate for any 'Mandatory' evacuation but never for a 'Voluntary' one. That changed with Hurricane Katrina, and Sally now evacuates for 'Voluntary' evacuations too. This change in the established pattern is fairly reflective of many within the region. A local insurance broker informed me that many within Port Sulphur lacked an appropriate level of insurance coverage for their homes prior to Katrina because there was no historical precedent for major damage in Port Sulphur due to recent hurricanes: the flooding and destruction from Hurricanes Camille and Betsy being somewhat less widespread than that of Katrina. This was remarked upon more than once, and during discussion on this topic in a local bar a local women related that her house had never taken any water by flooding before Katrina utterly destroyed it.

The different levels of flooding was also noted by Callum with relation to his citrus farm. While the impact of Betsy and Camille was relatively mild – in that his family was able to return to pre-storm levels of citrus production quickly – Katrina had caused the near total destruction of his citrus crop, along with significant damage to local soil. Paul reflected on how different Hurricane Katrina was compared to past experience when conversation turned to criticism of FEMA and the Federal Government with regard to their level of preparedness regarding hurricanes. His perspective was very much that he, personally, was totally unprepared for the level of destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina, so – in his view – why should the government's level of preparedness be significantly better? This suggests that individuals and families do not make their decisions on the relative threat of a hurricane in a vacuum, or entirely on a case-by-case basis, but

instead by interpreting it within the wider history of the storms of the region. Katrina however, went beyond the pre-existing levels of their experience of disaster.

The decision to protect and to leave one's home was based on the intersection of information available in the specific context at hand, past personal experience, and larger historical narratives. The magnitude of Hurricane Katrina took many people by surprise, but by the same token it was because the storm was unusually devastating that local people recognised the danger and decided to evacuate en masse as they did. This contrasts markedly with Adeola's (2009) research in the city of New Orleans, where most residents completely under-estimated the threat the storm posed for them, and many lost their lives, or were left stranded as a result. Morgan remembers several conversations with his wife over the days preceding the landfall of Katrina. As the storm approached they were initially unworried about possible landfall near them, and assumed the storm would turn away from them or dissipate as every catastrophic-level storm had done in recent memory. As the storm drew nearer however they recognised that this would not be as before, and made the decision to leave.

When I questioned several residents who had recounted similar stories – people recognising the danger of Katrina – as to what suggested this storm would be different, most either shrugged their shoulders, and responded with “I just knew” or a similar reply. Or, like Morgan, they had a particular criteria which – if a given storm reached it – would signify to them that there was a danger. Such innate, almost instinctive knowledge of when a storm might threaten, and when a storm would “turn”¹¹ could only come from the long standing participation of major disasters in the on-going development of local landscape. Hurricanes were part of mundane social life of the residents of the Gulf of Mexico, and knowing when to evacuate and when it is safe to remain is part of the everyday experience of life in this region. The experience of Katrina was therefore embedded within this on-going process.

¹¹ i.e. change direction and threaten a different stretch of coastline.

A major part of this everyday knowledge came from the process of planning and preparing residents of Plaquemines Parish did in readiness for potential hurricanes. Many of these households had long-standing routines which could be acted upon if the need to evacuate was felt. Morgan laid expensive electrical possessions flat on the floor, and packed important documents in his truck, Bob packed his truck with his tools while Becca did the same with photographs, while Miguel and Emily moved everything valuable (sentimental or otherwise) to the upper floor of their house. These rituals were an important part of preparing a home which must soon be left behind, in the hope that doing so will minimise the damage any storm might bring, but it also offered psychological reassurance that everything that could be done to protect their home, *had* been done.

This preparation carried into the local experience of evacuation itself. When Arland reached his brother's house (a place geographically quite distant from the threat of regular disasters) during his evacuation from Katrina his brother was surprised that Arland's car was packed with paperwork and photographs. He asked Arland where his clothes were to which Arland sallied the reply, "you got a Walmart? My clothes are in there". Like Arland, many residents had a clear idea of where their destination would be long before they set out, and clear priorities as to which of their possessions to take with them. Indeed, many had long-standing routines where they headed for a particular family member or hotel, a refuge to which they constantly fled, year after year, for the duration of their evacuation. Morgan joked that initially he assumed Katrina would be "just another hurricane" where he, his wife, and their children would spend a long weekend in a motel – the kids could swim in the pool, he and his wife would have a nice meal out – which thus would allow a mini-holiday once it was clear the major danger and threat to their home had passed. Hurricane Katrina of course spoilt their plan of a mini-break and swift return.

Many headed for the security family brings in such times, and during Katrina – as with every other evacuation – Bob and Becca made for relatives of hers in northern Louisiana. Following this practice not only gave them the security of being close to their extended family – whom Becca referred to as 'clan-like' – but also helped keep the cost of

evacuating down, as spending several nights a year in a hotel due to evacuation could be expensive for a low-income family. Likewise Sally preferred to either evacuate to her daughter's house, or evacuate to the same place her daughter had relocated to. She found it comforting to know her daughter was safe at all times when hurricanes threatened. When this system of family-support broke down it was considered a very serious betrayal of trust, and Victor and Caroline spoke with real bitterness about their experience of being turned away from the house of a relative of Victor's during their evacuation from Hurricane Katrina. When he told this story it was generally remarked by the whole company present how entirely unacceptable such a refusal to help was, given the circumstances at hand. Victor was in the process of building a hunting 'hide' on some land he owned in Mississippi, in which he and Caroline could "bunker down" should they be faced with a similar situation in the future.

Friends also formed a critical part of this evacuation process, and neighbours would often discuss with each other both their evacuation plans, and time-frames as to when one should begin the process of evacuation. A participant at St. Patrick's weekly bingo night at which I volunteered explained to me that as Katrina drew nearer and looked increasingly likely to hit, every house on her street agreed to evacuate at the same time, in order to ensure no one was left behind. On another occasions the owner of a local hotel and fishing lodge described how he interrupted his own evacuation and returned to the Parish to collect two of his employees who had no other means of evacuating. These employees were later featured in a local newspaper cutting the ribbon on a home built by volunteers – their original house having been destroyed utterly during the Storm (Dilella 2011b). Maintaining these networks of family and friendship were important safety nets during times of disaster. They have been shown to be invaluable in saving lives during other disasters (Ueda and Torigoe 2012), and, equally, to cost lives if such networks are not present (Klinenberg 2002).

It is important to also note that it was not only individuals who prepare for the possibilities of hurricanes. During my time in the Parish I participated in a hurricane evacuation drill to allow government employees and emergency services an opportunity to

practice evacuating those unable to facilitate their own exit from the Parish. This ensured that even those who lack private transportation could be assured of safe passage out of the Parish in the event of catastrophe. Government preparation of this kind can only help to normalise the feeling of constant readiness and risk management felt within the Parish.

Experiencing Home from Afar

Emotional attachment to one's home and community does not necessarily require one to be physically present at the site of that home. When removed from that home and when that home is threatened with destruction, deliberate and direct reflection on that home and the state it is in can come to the front of an individual's mind, and becomes a topic of major concern. It has been mentioned elsewhere how 'veteran' evacuees held in centres across the country (those who had undergone Katrina) helped the new influx of those escaping Hurricane Rita (in September 2005) deal with this separation (Medina 2005). The experience of residents of the Parish of Plaquemines during their extended evacuation from their homes during Hurricane Katrina presents an interesting insight into how ideas of everyday life in this context continued when one was physically removed from one's community during times of catastrophe.

Morrice (2013) has expanded on our understanding of experiencing home by specifically considering it in the post-disaster context. Here we see 'home' being framed as a process which can continue irrespective of where the evacuee is. In this sense, home is that which is stationary, while the evacuee is in flux. Morrice goes on to describe how for many evacuees from New Orleans home had shifted in their imaginations to an idealised place of safety and stability which – if only they could return to – would dramatically resolve many of their current problems. It was discovered that more often than not, this return was a crushing disappointment for the individual in question. Although the first part of Morrice's assessment was certainly applicable to residents of Plaquemines Parish, the second was less so. This was once again a demonstration of the disparity between the rural hurricane-experienced population of Plaquemines and the urban population of New

Orleans, many of whom had never evacuated from a storm pre-Katrina, and were likely to be far less prepared for the extended period of rebuilding needed upon one's return. Local residents of Plaquemines Parish however, had not only evacuated from major storms of varying strength, but were well aware of the devastation caused in the 1960s by Hurricane Betsy and Hurricane Camille, as stories of these catastrophes were periodically shared by older members of the community.

Concern and planning for the re-building of one's home remained a constant feature of the exodus from the Parish, and this – along with the reconstruction itself – formed an uninterrupted process mentioned in the previous chapter. The underlying experience of evacuating from a storm was perhaps best surmised by Becca when she described to me the reasons she returned to Plaquemines Parish after the Storm, when she stated that in her view she had “never left”. For her, and for many within the Parish, no matter how long their separation from their properties, and no matter how bad the destruction of their communities was the position of ‘home’ both in the physical sense and political-emotional sense (Blunt and Dowling 2006), never wavered, or if it did, it did not waver for long.

One of the major causes of distress for those who evacuated from the storm was the complete lack on meaningful information offered on the television news regarding the state of the Parish of Plaquemines either at the storm's height or in the aftermath of it. People could obviously follow the computer generated representations of the storm's path (once they gained access to a television or computer), and could thus be sure that Katrina had certainly passed over the Parish, but they had no real information regarding the specifics of the impact Katrina was having on their Parish. Sally's daughter had evacuated with her laptop computer and together they trawled news sites for any information. Morgan and his wife sat in their motel room and watched the news channels, and Bob and Becca did the same once they had reached their relations. All of them however were disappointed in their hunt for information about what was happening to their homes. Abe remarked how stressful being outside the Parish during such evacuations was, and how the lack of information was a major element to this stress.

The uncertainties of evacuation were of major concern locally, in particular with relation to the whereabouts of friends and family, and the condition one's home would be in when one returned. Paul mentioned the adrenaline he felt when his evacuation plan (inevitably) did not play out exactly as he had intended and as he dealt with the uncertainties of an approaching disaster threat, but one consistent uncertainty was always the state of the home he left behind. This proved a significant issue for Parish employees evacuating those unable to facilitate their own escape – a function of the Parish government mentioned in the previous section. Gillian, a senior EMT employed by the Parish recounted the difficulties she and her colleagues faced convincing many of their charges to leave their homes in the run-up to Katrina. Many of these (often elderly) individuals had serious concerns about the safety of their homes, and were uncomfortable about leaving them. Part of this issue stemmed from the time-frame surrounding when this phase of evacuation occurs: Gillian and her colleagues – because of the complications which can occur in the evacuation of the often vulnerable individuals in their care – usually must begin this evacuation several days before a hurricane hits, often at a time when the final direction and strength of a storm is still in doubt, and sometimes when there was a clear blue sky overhead. While Morgan was able to wait until his personal criteria for evacuation were met (and the outer bands of the hurricane's weather system were already lashing the Parish with wind and rain), Gillian and her colleague have to act as soon as there was an officially designated credible threat. As such, there was (prior to Katrina) considered to be a high chance that the given storm would miss the Parish, and that as a result the threat of burglary was a more pressing concern than any storm. She mentioned that anxiety attacks during evacuation were common and often serious.

Staying During Storms

There are some however who described the experience of remaining either in or close to their homes during major hurricanes. These individuals did not have to negotiate the uncertainties with regard to the conditions of the Parish described in the section above,

instead they knew first-hand what effect the storm in question had caused. This section shall finally explore this experience of choosing *not* to evacuate from a major storm system, and how that formed part of the on-going experience of the everyday with relation to one's experience of disaster in this context.

At the time this study was conducted, after his house had been utterly destroyed by Katrina – a storm he survived by sheltering within a large now-abandoned government office building – John was adamant he would always much rather stay in the Parish and ride future storms out. He was quick to add that he would carefully pick his building to do it in however. John, an EMT working for the Parish was one of those tasked to remain on the east bank of the river to assist with the immediate aftermath of the Storm (assisting those who had similarly remained and were therefore in continuing danger). There was something of an almost embarrassed casualness in his description of how he and a handful of other similarly tasked government employees sought refuge from the storm, then emerged to survey the damage before them. He remembers driving along the levee south to where his house had stood, realising that the rooftops of houses above the water were attached to buildings floating in the floodwaters. His own house had floated a considerable distance from his land. He had brought his camera with him on this trip, and the photographs he sent to friends and family allowed them – to a certain extent – to prepare themselves for their eventual return. John however, was in the midst of all this.

At the same time John could not hear the man huddling beside him even when he shouted at the top of his voice due to the volume of the wind in the midst of Katrina's landfall, Jamie was similarly hiding on the other side of the river in the firehouse in Belle Chasse. He remembered watching an entire house slide from one side of the street to the other, a sight which – he laughs as he remembered – made him certain he would not survive the storm. Clearly he did, and he remained a member of the Buras Fire Department, and a likely candidate to remain in the Parish during future evacuations. As does Gillian, who in her capacity as an EMT came into contact with the few dead bodies recovered in the Parish, some of whom she knew. Her description of the difficulties in upholding her responsibilities to the Parish in the immediate aftermath of the storm is

astonishing, as she and other EMTs struggled to find adequate resources to do their job while at the same time suffering from extreme exhaustion and near emotional breakdown. She did not receive a federal medical team to support her and her colleagues until eleven days after the hurricane hit. Despite this however, the high levels of training centred around responding to disaster, and the multiple small-scale hurricanes that had struck the Parish in the preceding decades did provide critical preparation for these individuals once this catastrophic disaster-process made landfall.

These three individuals, like other government employees who remained in the Parish during Katrina and in the immediate aftermath were initially housed in temporary ‘bunkhouses’ of several dozen similarly employed personnel. When FEMA trailers became available they were placed in parks reserved for those working for the Parish, John remembered his was locally referred to as ‘Copland’. Eventually, it became safe enough for him, and the other Parish employees to return to the sites upon which their homes had stood and they began to re-build them.

Individuals who were not mandated by their profession also choose at times to ride out a hurricane. Abe casually recounted one such incident to me while we were having an unrelated conversation about his fishing habits:

Abe “den about midnight dat night we was here. Power had went off, stars are shining, wind quit blowin’, quit rainin’, I mean the stars were OUT! And ye could hear that [air force] plane out, flyin’ around. That was high over us. Then after, the wind picked up, rain again. Next morning I went back out there and checked ma’ boat and it’d sunk. So next day I thought I’d better work on the boat get it up, pumped out, and cleaned up. Den when Danny¹² hit and sunk it I thought [laughs] quit spending money on it [laughs]”

Me “So that’s when you stopped trawling?”

Abe “Dat’s when I stopped trawlin’”

¹² It is unclear which of the five major weather systems named ‘Danny’ Abe is here referring to. It is most likely to have been the first Hurricane Danny, a category 1 hurricane, which struck in 1985, killing 3 people and causing \$12 million in damages.

During one of our conversations Mike likewise remembered staying in Plaquemines Parish during a hurricane, in this case, Hurricane Betsy:

“I got trapped [in the southern end of the Parish], cos we was waiting for my brother in law to come home and he had three children here and he was driving a truck somewhere and we didn’t have enough transportation to get everybody out. So we kept waiting, kept waiting for him to come back or call, before you know it the lines went down, the storm hit and we was right here in Port Sulphur. And we survived it in a big store that had two stories. And the store was coming apart, was opening up. It was in bad condition the water was coming in. We drill holes in the floor at first to let the water out. The water went over the levee, the water started coming out through the holes [laughs]!”

There was also no indication that individuals would stop electing to ride out hurricanes in their homes or communities even after the local experience of Hurricane Katrina. Bob and Becca did not evacuate for Category 1 hurricanes, as they did not consider such a storm to be of a significant enough threat to themselves to warrant evacuation. Furthermore, while visiting Paul’s house in Belle Chasse he demonstrated to me how he affixed large hardened plastic screens across the outside of his windows so that he and his home had increased protection during a storm.

The casual attitude and humour that accompanied these stories is of great interest. When John described the emotional anguish of the loss of his home, it was while sitting in the home he re-built to replace it. When Jamie described his fear for his life, he is able to do so knowing he survived the experience. These experiences along with the others mentioned have been built into the continued experience of the everyday, and reinforce the relative stability and security of the present. Despite the teller of these stories being in such danger during their narrative, they were no longer, and thus their long-term (and future) survival and prosperity is reinforced and continually constructed alongside an on-going relationship with the threat of disaster. It also links to the previously discussed value of humour in this post-disaster context as both a means for (especially) men to discuss grief in a socially appropriate way, as well as reinforcing social networks to help them recover.

During her interview Gillian at one point described those individuals from the Parish who evacuate from Katrina as “refugees”, then immediately corrected herself, finding that word unsuitable to describe them. I agree, as the word ‘refugee’ implies that the individual in question cannot (for whatever reason) return home. I am inclined to agree with Becca that for many residents of Plaquemines Parish they did not leave. Further than this, as has been previously mentioned, others have reported how many evacuees actively rejected the title of ‘refugee’ arguing that they were not ‘refugees’, but ‘Americans’, and therefore equally as deserving of the privileges and protections that title should imply regardless of the fact that they had left their homes (Esnard and Sapat 2014, Jenkins 2006, Masqulier 2006). In this sense they were rejecting what has been noted by Diken as being a central feature of being a refugee: that of being subject to the law but not included within its domain (Diken, 2004). In short, their experience of everyday life was shaped, but did not cease during the experience of evacuation.

Returning to the Aftermath of Katrina

The section above discussed the lived experience of evacuation. This section shall examine the lived experience of returning from this evacuation, and how local people experienced rebuilding their homes and communities in a post-disaster landscape. By examining how disasters formed a part of the emotional (and physical) experience of everyday life in the Parish of Plaquemines, further insight can be offered into both our understanding of large-scale catastrophe, recovery from disasters, and notions of everyday life in this region. While Jansen and Löfving (2011) were writing primarily about displaced persons and refugees fleeing human-created violence, their discussion surrounding the contested nature of ‘emplacement’ and the power relations central to the construction of home are of value throughout this section. It shall be demonstrated that for many within the Parish the (re)construction of home might be described as a struggle for control of this ‘emplacement’, not against human-created hazards, but from the impact (residual, on-going, or otherwise) of past and future disasters.

Katrina and Everyday Life

Despite the local region having had a long tradition of hurricanes as a normalised element to everyday life, the effect a hurricane of the sheer magnitude of Katrina would have upon the local community should not be underestimated. This hurricane will likely have as great, or perhaps a greater impact on the future of the Parish as the great flood of 1927 (Barry 1998), and certainly a greater impact than either Betsy or Camille. This is particularly when combined with the impact of the BP oil spill, occurring as it did such a short time after the impact of Katrina. Disasters are a major constructive factor within the on-going process of the everyday in the Parish, and Katrina was a force unique in its magnitude.

The first and most obvious impact Hurricane Katrina, and other large-scale hurricanes have had upon the homes of those living in the Parish, is of destroying them. Bob mentioned to me that he was on house number two, whereas his grandmother was living in her sixth house. Although this study does not utilise a housing careers methodology (as used by Murdie 2002, Özüekren and van Kempen 2002), one could be of great interest in this particular context. Much of Buras and other parts of the southern end of the Parish were newly built, due to the removal of many structures as a result of Katrina. This means towns in the southern Parish lacked the gradual and diffuse construction that other settlements might see over generations. Matthew noted to me that the majority of people in the Parish could not afford to do anything more than replace the home they lost in the storm with a mobile home, or 'trailer'. For some this is simply a like-for-like replacement of that which stood on their land prior to the storm, for most local people however it was the transition from what Becca referred to as a 'real' house (i.e. one made of bricks or wood and anchored to foundations within the ground – a permanent dwelling, not one intended for mobility). In either case it is rare that the new home offered a greater level of security from future hurricanes than their previous home had offered. A wider

discussion of what the perceived impact on the local community might be due to this shift can be found in chapter 3.

While some were taking steps to upgrade their level of hurricane protection it was remarked to me that many of those who could have afforded to do this left the area after Katrina. This means that individuals like Abe, who bulldozed the ruins of his old house and bought a new one, or John, who brought his parents' old house to his land to replace the one Katrina destroyed, know that the next Katrina-sized hurricane which sweeps into the region will likely cause an equally large amount of destruction to these properties. For most residents of the Parish therefore, they not only dwell in a home which was purchased to replace one which was destroyed, but also know this new house will in turn be potentially destroyed at some point in the future.

Image 10: House being raised on stilts.



The impact of Katrina manifested across many facets of everyday life. In particular Abe lamented how many businesses did not return to the southern Parish after the storm. Oliver-Smith (2005) has already discussed how important a resource-base is for a community to begin to rebuild itself after disaster, as when this disappears recovery can become problematic. The local insurance agent in Port Sulphur at time of study, Chloe, originally was the employee of an agent who relocated to Belle Chasse after Katrina. Once Chloe had achieved stability within her own home and had resettled to the region, she left this firm and opened her own business in Port Sulphur, taking advantage of the newly created gap in the market. Chloe is far from the only person in the Parish who had to change her employment situation to maintain her home in the southern end. Martin worked in the trucking industry, due to the closure of his previous employer, and a local dock-owner David lamented that he could not employ as many local people as he used to, due to Katrina making him “start from scratch”. Even some of those who remained in the same business as before the storm had seen life become more difficult for their industry, and local farmers lamented the cocktail of salt water, oil, and other industrial chemicals which stood stagnant over their land, sometimes for months before the waters finally receded. While the soil had not been entirely destroyed, it had certainly required extensive care to rejuvenate it to anything close to pre-Katrina levels of fertility. However, the local economy was already highly precarious before the Storm made landfall, and in some cases Katrina simply exacerbated pre-existing economic trends. This wider topic has been discussed further in chapter 4.

There had of course however been a great deal of government-backed investment in the southern Parish. After having to rely on donated equipment in the immediate aftermath of the storm, Buras Volunteer Fire Department had a full range of extremely modern equipment and facilities. The four primary response engines in particular were especially well regarded. Alongside the fire department there were also newly built community centres, libraries and schools. This investment however was described by one local politician as too much money being dumped on the Parish in too little time. Katrina had resulted in a glut of new facilities, but this had also apparently opened the door to corruption and poor planning decisions. The latter might best be underlined by the newly

open Buras Library, which had state-of-the-art facilities, and very few books on the shelves.

The many changes of personal situation, the massive decrease in industry and private business, and the influx of new public works had been experienced as part of the on-going embeddedness of hurricanes – and their effects – in the social life of the Parish. Buras was described more than once as having been a “hub” of cultural and commercial activity in the Parish prior to Hurricane Katrina. During my time in the Parish it was never referred to as this in the present tense. There was a deeply felt opinion that while the Parish of Plaquemines remains incontestably ‘home’ it was not exactly the home that once was. Often the lack of a high school in Buras was highlighted as a significant issue in this area, as there were widespread reports that younger people and their families were prevented from returning to the area because of this. Abe in particular felt there had been an outpouring of youth from the community since the Storm. Others also commented on related topics to this, in particular with relation to the Hallowe’ en activities at Citrus City (a sub-division of Buras) which once saw hundreds of children moving from house to house and a carnival atmosphere. Since Katrina the number of such children ‘trick or treating’ had apparently dropped into single digits.

While it was widely recognised that loss of children to the community was deeply problematic to the southern Parish’s future, there were also problems with others leaving the southern end beyond the loss of youth. Many experienced fire fighter volunteers did not return to any of the southern departments, leaving these communities vulnerable. Such losses became highly visible during the yearly formal dinner the Buras Department held, where the Buras Auditorium (which prior to the Storm would have been packed to the rafters for such an occasion) was approximately a quarter full. It was also reported to me that there had been a migration of many of the richer, and upper middle class members of the community north to Belle Chasse. These individuals were often those with higher levels of education (doctors, lawyers, engineers etc.) and this caused an unbalancing of a well-established political system. These losses had also changed many of the social spaces, and organisations such as the Fire Department and the Knights of Columbus had become

far more focused on social activities, as their members had fewer outlets for recreation. Of course, they also provided a social support network, a phenomenon as previously mentioned also observed in the 9th ward social clubs by Breunlin and Regis (2006). Grant, a local oysterman, felt all of these changes had significantly affected his quality of life in the Parish.

At the personal level, Katrina had also had a significant impact, and has often impacted local personal emotional development. Arland for example, decided that after his experience of the Storm he would fulfil a life-time ambition of becoming a Carnival King for one of the Krews in New Orleans during Mardi Gras. He believed that if Katrina had not modified his view on life, the financial investment required to do this would have always been reason enough to talk himself out of fulfilling this dream. On another occasion while writing up notes in a bar a local women sat down beside me and struck up a conversation. It emerged that during her work as a volunteer in the aftermath of Katrina in New Orleans she had decided to make personal changes to her attitude to life, linking closely with ‘willing’ discussed in the previous chapter. Specifically, she had worked identifying the bodies of the deceased and identifying the next of kin for each. With one particular case however, she was unable to trace any relation or friend at all, and ended up contacting the regiment he had served with during World War 2 who arranged a funeral for him. This experience broke down much of the shyness she had once felt, and she now went out of her way to meet new people.

Changes in attitude with regard to hurricanes specifically were also reported by several people. John was much more careful about what he packed to accompany his evacuation and Morgan – who had assumed Katrina was “just another hurricane” – now admitted to taking storms much more seriously. Agnes, an elderly veteran of many hurricanes believed that while younger members of the Parish were very aware of the effects catastrophic-level hurricanes could bring, having never actually lived through one of Katrina’s scale meant their emotional preparedness was somewhat limited compared to her own. She feels that now everyone in the Parish has lived through a major hurricane there was wider consensus of the harsh reality of the risk of such storms.

This shift in attitude was also felt at the official level, and every government body had learned a great deal from their experience of Katrina. Gillian admitted that within the Parish government there was something of an “island mentality” prior to the storm, but that this was no longer the case. The agreement made with Red River Parish in the north of Louisiana to be Plaquemines Parish’s point of refuge was mentioned more than once as a significant improvement in their hurricane provision. On another occasion, a senior employee responsible for public health in the Parish noted that pre-Katrina those evacuated by the Parish were not allowed to bring their pets with them while evacuating. Due to the emotional damage this caused to many when these pets were subsequently killed in the Storm, this policy has now changed. Finally, perhaps most importantly reflecting on the construction of homes, a local Buras politician stated that pre-Katrina there was a general consensus of an immediate return to the Parish being viable after a major hurricane, this mind-set had been significantly changed.

Perhaps the most significant shift in the personal on-going experience of hurricanes caused by Katrina however was that of doubt expressed by many as to whether they would return if another Katrina sized storm were to hit the Parish. It has already been noted in this thesis that most people within the Parish had already decided whether or not they would return to the Parish before they began to evacuate pre-Katrina. It seems that many who did return had decided not to, should another storm strike. Bob and Becca, Abe, Sally, David, and Verity, a local farmer, all said they would not return should another major hurricane strike. While others, such as Morgan, Dan, and Paul believed there would be no community or home to return to should another major catastrophe occur, and they would thus not be able to return, even if they wished to. It seems that for many people who did return another storm would simply be too much to bear, and they would finally share the opinion of Andrew, a post-storm migrant north to Belle Chasse, that the on-going relationship with the landscape of the southern end had ceased. This is an interesting development in an understanding of disaster as part of normalised everyday life, as it was the sense of the normality of disaster which prepared and structured the rapid return from Katrina. The fact that this had shifted towards a pre-evacuation decision not to return in

future underlines the significance of a catastrophic-level disaster-process compared to the smaller disasters these residents were more used to.

The Lived Experience of Returning to an Unknown Home

Returning home to a landscape visually unrecognisable was an experience many in the Parish found deeply challenging, and the experience of being unable to find the spot upon which one's house once stood was one shared by many within the Parish. Even once the remains of one's house had been identified, there was still a deeply held lack of certainty regarding the successful reconstruction of one's home and community. This section seeks to explore this experience of uncertainty and the unknown in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and how this was folding within the on-going experience of everyday life in this disaster-rich landscape.

When they were finally able to return to the Parish after their evacuation neither Mike nor Morgan were able initially to find where their houses had stood. Both remembered walking or driving past them, such was the completeness of the destruction in the Parish. John was also unable to find his home at first, but in this case it was because it had floated away from his land. Even those who were able to find their property were stunned by the destruction: Kirk, a local pastor described his first return as "surreal", and Sally, a housewife from Buras spoke of the whole landscape seeming to be covered in nothing but death and vermin, a sentiment also expressed by the owner of a local Marina, David. Henry, a local politician carried an assault rifle with him at all times during the first period of his return to the Parish, as he did not feel the familiarity and security he would normally have felt on his land, and Abe remembers finding caskets in his front yard, which had floated from the nearby cemetery.

These accounts all share an experience of certain dissonance from the memories and on-going experience of this landscape from before the storm, compared to what they experienced at that moment. These individuals were experiencing a breakdown between the culturally constructed separation, so important in Western Modernity, between the home being a bounded locus of culture which separated the individual dwelling there from the equally constructed external 'nature' (Kaika 2004). Such an idea links to the established normality of life so threatened by the imposition of trailer parks mentioned in chapter 3, but also demonstrates that the continuity of the everyday in the context of regular exposure to hurricanes can be temporarily challenged (though not destroyed) should the experience of catastrophe be significant enough. Most residents of the Gulf of Mexico would likely have similar accounts of their first return to those from Plaquemines Parish, and New Orleans journalist Rose (2007) wrote about sitting on the front porch of his house in the city with a group of other new returnees and simply being overwhelmed by what surrounded him. This disconnection continued for some even into the period of my research six years after the hurricane, with a local political activist describing parts of the southern end of the Parish as "looking like Katrina was yesterday", while a local government employee admitted that she still got lost in the southern end when she visited friends. Neither of these individuals however, were residents in the southern end of the Parish.

This period of intense uncertainty and otherness also caused members of the community to work together in ways they had not expected (a phenomenon also described in other disaster contexts by writers such as Hoffman (1999)). David remembered his joy when he and some friends managed to repair his JCB and certain other large pieces of equipment. Doing so allowed him to begin clearing his dock of debris. David also allowed other local people access to this equipment, sharing resources within the community. He believed that only by working together and sharing this type of equipment was it possible for his neighbours to return at all, and for his dock to be re-opened as quickly as it was. He was certainly not the only person who remembers sharing resources with his neighbours. Henry, Sally, Miguel, and Emily all gave accounts where they both helped their neighbours to rebuild and were helped in turn. Such collaboration was also noted by Chamless-Wright and Storr (2011) in nearby St. Bernard Parish.

Likewise, the local Catholic priest remembered that in the aftermath of the storm the remaining churches worked together in a way they had never previously, so as to better co-ordinate their relief effort. Arland also spoke on this topic, and despite being a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints he worked along with others to repair St. Patrick's Catholic Church to a state whereby it could be used as a hub for the community to come together, share, and support one another. It was remarked by all of the above that such community-based collaboration is no longer as common in the Parish, and it was mainly experienced during the initial phase of the aftermath, as individuals came to terms with the initial shock of return, and began the process of re-building their homes both physically and emotionally.

Stability in the Mundane: Ordinary Objects After Katrina

As has been stated throughout this thesis many of the residents of Plaquemines Parish returned to their homes to find them utterly destroyed, with their possessions scattered over the surrounding area. Others returned to find their home and possessions still waterlogged and infested with mould. Some chose to deliberately create memorials to their experience of Katrina, and after he and his wife had cleaned out the bottom half of their house and replaced the damage this flooding had caused, Miguel decided to install a small brass plaque on the wall denoting exactly where the water of Katrina had reached. However, during times of catastrophe *ordinary* objects and actions can take on significance far beyond their simple utilitarian value (Samuels 2013, Simpson 2014). This section shall examine the significance such objects and actions within this post-disaster landscape, with particular reference to how such items can become central to the on-going experience of the everyday for those residents who returned to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in the Parish of Plaquemines.

While visiting Mike for a glass of iced tea and a chat he insisted I went with him to inspect a collection of objects he had mounted on the wall in his bedroom. These objects were two ornamental plates, both showing religious scenes and a Roman Catholic crucifix. They had a certain weathered look about them and stood in stark contrast to almost everything else in the house which had a distinct lack of wear and tear. He explained that these objects were some of the few he and his wife had managed to recover from the ruins of their house after Katrina. Crucifixes and items displaying Catholic iconography are already considered significant objects to those who follow the Catholic faith, but the objects Mike was showing me had gone beyond even this in the estimation of this family due to the circumstances under which they were recovered. Both Mike and his wife felt there was no coincidence in the fact that of the few objects they were able to recover after the storm a large proportion of them were religious in nature.

The recovery of the crucifix in particular was a central moment in their personal process of re-building their home after the storm, as it signified to them that God had not abandoned them, and that He would continue to protect and bless the family. Most importantly, that He wished them to remain anchored to the landscape of the Parish. When visiting the local Catholic rectory the priest likewise pointed out to me several religious objects he had recovered from the local churches, and St. Patrick's contained the various holy objects recovered from the two Catholic churches which were destroyed by Katrina. These objects of religious significance formed important parts of the experience of faith for those who recovered them, and had become fundamental in maintaining the spiritual consistency of home in the on-going experience of the everyday, in a landscape that was visually unrecognisable.

Non-religious objects can also take on significant additional properties beyond their utilitarian purpose. The recovery of photographs or family heirlooms is of course deeply desirable in any similar context, and as has been discussed, in the aftermath of the 2011 Japanese tsunami volunteers were organised into *Omoide sagashi-tai* (or 'memory search' teams) to comb the rubble for any such items (Nakamura 2012). Here however, I wish to

discuss items which would likely have been overlooked by such a search, and yet have proved to be of great personal value to those who recovered them.

Caroline, when recounting the damage to her house during the storm also mentioned those objects she was able to save from the ruins. In particular, she was especially happy to have recovered a whistling kettle she was particularly fond of. Now, every time she heard that kettle whistling it served as a reminder that both she and her husband survived the storm, and managed to successfully re-build their home. I rather suspect that the next time Caroline evacuates for a major storm that kettle might come with her along with her photographs and important documents. Not every object mentioned in this sense were small, household items however. When David found his JCB digger half submerged near his dock he knew that if it could be salvaged it would prove invaluable for local re-building efforts. When he did manage to get it working he certainly celebrated, as it meant he could expedite the re-building of his dock and community in a way that would not have been previously possible. On one occasion when I visited him on his dock I found him in work overalls lying beneath one of the hydraulic mechanisms “once again” repairing the tics the machine had picked up since Katrina. Even with its newly acquired temperamental nature there was still a great deal of pride in him for the successful recovery of that vehicle and the subsequent re-building it allowed.

Some of the objects discussed (particularly by men) in relation to the storm served quite a different purpose than those mentioned above. As has been discussed, humour and ‘banter’ were important outlets for men to approach the topics of loss and vulnerability which are so prevalent in the aftermath of destruction of this magnitude. While discussing such losses in public, approaching them as things which were emotionally scarring was generally not the done thing, especially not so many years after the storm itself. While in private moments, or during one-on-one interviews men might allow emotions to overcome them, and cry (or in the immediate aftermath, where David remembered “crying down the phone together” with one of his hired hands), such topics were usually publicly discussed as comedic activities. ‘Matter out of place’ is a common comedic tool and the discussions of the immediate aftermath of Katrina are no exception. John laughed with me when he

remembered driving past a Parish truck perched and precisely balanced atop a large air-conditioning unit, joking that he was glad at the time it wasn't his job to move it. Across the river in Buras there was great local delight in a domestic refrigerator lodged at several feet in the air in the bows of a large tree.

Image 11: Fridge stuck in a tree.



The owner of the tree – an elderly citrus farmer – maintains a mild annoyance at having someone else's fridge lodged in his tree, but other local people found a great deal of humour in seeing it as they drove past. Humour was in fact one of many uses this fridge had served in the Parish, as in the initial aftermath of the storm the local emergency services – robbed of their usual landmarks and street signs to navigate the Parish – used it as a point of reference to co-ordinate their actions. Insurance appraisers, scientists, and journalists also used it as a point of reference, as a storm capable of lodging a refrigerator into a large tree must surely have been note-worthy. Once the immediate aftermath of the catastrophe had past, disaster tourists then would often photograph the tree, presumably to

take back as evidence to show their friends of their holidays. As I write this I realise this fridge has now additionally become evidence in an anthropology thesis.

Another domestic object co-opted by local men was toilet paper. Once men began to return to the Parish, the lack of local sanitation necessitated a certain amount of improvisation in this area, sometimes with public embarrassment as a result. Once these stories have been suitably embellished they became hilarious anecdotes that men might share while enjoying a case of beer in the evening. Such stories allowed men to publicly discuss the destruction of their house or business (which often appeared as context in these stories) while also placing themselves in a narrative of recovery, as one's home – and the sanitation that came with it – had been successfully rebuilt.

Not all the objects imbued with significance by the effects of Hurricane Katrina remained an active part of an individual's recovery, but instead were transitory elements of this on-going process: at the time very significant, but now simply a part of their personal memory of recovery during the aftermath. While many people criticized the trailers FEMA offered those made homeless by the storm, Sally was enormously positive. This trailer, parked where her driveway had been, allowed her and her husband to finally return to their property and begin re-building. She "loved that trailer" as it encompassed both the symbolic and physical movement towards rebuilding, and allowed her and her husband to become far more active in recovery, rather than existing as passive victims of the disaster. Although it was only a temporary, tiny FEMA trailer, Sally was once again mistress of her own home, and thus offered her continuity with pre-storm normality.

Sally, Verity, John and others also gave a great deal of praise to the Red Cross who delivered hot lunches to the Parish during this period. Highly valued both by those who were bunking in the Parish around their ruined properties, and by those who would commute during the hours of daylight, these lunches became something to look forward to after a morning of hard labour. They were also humanising, particularly to those with

limited access to fresh food, running water or electricity. While they had to rely on canned or dried food at other times, being guaranteed one hot, fresh meal a day was a major morale boost to those re-building their homes.

Finally, while having dinner with Miguel and some of his friends, one lady described to me the 'X' the army drew on her wall. These were common sights in Louisiana after Katrina and within the gaps between the arms and legs of the X one could read information such as who had searched the property, how many dead bodies were inside, and any environmental hazards present on the property. When she returned to her home to find such a mark on her wall. A neighbour offered to help her clean it off, but she refused, as for her, seeing that X denoting that there were no dead bodies to be found inside was a constant reminder that she and her family were still alive and had survived the storm.

While the objects mentioned above were only present during the immediate aftermath of the storm itself, others have only become significantly important in the years following the catastrophe. While at the firehouse after training one night I became part of a discussion amongst some of the volunteers about the relative merits of buying a second hand truck (what in Britain might be called a 'flatbed') to be used as a mobile tool store. The thinking behind this was that if another large hurricane were to threaten, the man could drive his truck to Belle Chasse before evacuating with his family further north in his primary vehicle. If Buras were to receive another direct hit therefore, the man would have his entire collection of tools available to him sitting in a vehicle ready to be driven back to the southern end. Discussions of this nature, where men discussed possible means of better protecting their property, or better strategies for evacuation or return were not uncommon. Of course, it was often useful to share ideas amongst friends in this way to receive constructive feedback and counsel, but beyond this they also served to increase the *feeling* of being prepared amongst those participating.

It was impossible to predict in which year another Katrina-sized hurricane would hit the Parish of Plaquemines and once this happens it will be impossible to guarantee the survival of one's home, no matter how many protective steps one takes regarding one's house. What individuals could do however was – as above – maximise the chances of their property surviving further storms, and ensure that although they could not control how disasters would affect their community, one's home could be left in the best possible state in order to weather the next catastrophe. These on-going discussions reflect how Katrina, and the lessons learned from this catastrophe have been woven into the continuing experience of everyday life in this region, where the threat of hurricanes is a normalised part of social life.

Other actions and objects have also gained new significance since Hurricane Katrina though they are less directly connected to resisting future hurricanes. The loss of trees during Katrina, either during the initial impact of the storm, or due to their saturation in polluted floodwaters was deeply felt by many in the Parish. Live Oaks in particular were often particularly beloved across the entire American South, and are amongst the most recognisable cultural symbols of the region. Replanting such trees therefore was considered a significant positive step in recovery, not least because of the huge amount of time it would take for these trees to mature. Josh planted of several new trees on his property as has been discussed above, and he proudly announced that those trees wouldn't be "grown" until "he was long in the ground". The implication here of course is that there would still be a Parish which had survived that long to enjoy these trees when they have matured. By planting these trees, Josh was participating in creating the future legacy of the Parish, one which – with regard to these trees – would not be properly fulfilled for several hundred years. His interest in maintain his property and (in particular) cutting his grass has an interesting parallel with Gray's (2011) work amongst shepherds who likewise engage in the active construction of place by their movement and work across that landscape, in a deeply embodied way.

Finally on this topic, it was remarked to me by Chuck that he felt that the Parish flag was significantly more visible in the area since the storm. While, before Katrina, it

was barely flown, since the storm every public building flew the flag outside of it. It had become a much more significant symbol of the Parish as a whole since the Storm. Hearing this reminded me very much of Miguel's aforementioned story where he turned on lights on his property as a statement that he was still there, despite the destruction.

Personal emotional attachment to certain mundane elements of one's home can unfortunately also have a potential negative impact to one's experience of recovery from such large-scale disasters however. Matthew lamented that he feels there is no great desire in the Parish to make things better than they were before the storm. Instead he feels that the overwhelming preference of local people is for a simple return to exactly as the Parish was before – something which he feels was impossible. Both the local high school principals spoke against a desire to return the Parish to as it was pre-Katrina as being unattainable, whereas they prefer to 'improve' the Parish as it is re-built, and thus create something new and better. It is possible the attitude described by Matthew is a significant element to the emotional trauma of seeing some of the government buildings in Buras – such as the school – be demolished after Katrina.

Every government official I spoke to, along with every FEMA official was adamant that such buildings could not have been saved, and that the damage was too severe. For locals however, their attachment to the idea of a return to pre-Katrina life was dealt a serious blow when these institutions were demolished. Linking to the argument set out by James and Mills (2005) regarding how local understandings of time can be understood within wider cultural process in chapter 3, this discussion clearly links to the idealised 'golden age' perceived to have existed in the Parish during the 1950s, and the widespread ideal of 'before the Storm' often actually refers to this. This view of the future therefore is deeply embedded in the wish to return a particular nostalgically mythologised historical period.

This attitude was also underlined by much of the activity of the local Plaquemines Historical Society. Although this society ostensibly sought to preserve and celebrate the large-scale historical legacy of the Parish, my experience of attending meetings of this group was that in fact it was largely an opportunity for members to reminisce together about their personal memories of the Parish from their younger years (sometimes from before Betsy or Camille given that many of the members of this society are elderly). I have no way of knowing whether such reminiscence has comparatively increased since the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina, though I suspect it has. Such nostalgia was not limited to this society however, as one of the vendors who rented a stall at the annual Buras Volunteer Fire Department Crawfish Boil-Off was a photographer who sold prints of the Parish from both before the storm and more recently. He claimed that there was a huge market for such mementoes amongst those who had not returned to re-build their homes after the storm, but who would be attending a large event such as the Boil-Off.

Conclusion

This chapter began by first discussing the culturally embedded normality of the planning for, the evacuation from, and staying during, a large-scale hurricane. This process is one which every member of the Parish was well aware of and what is crucial to underline in such a discussion is the normality of this process within the local context. Social actors in the Parish of Plaquemines were well practiced in the procedure of evacuation and preparation long before Hurricane Katrina made landfall in the Parish.

Discussions between local people surrounding the necessity (or not) for evacuation, and strategies surrounding how best to secure one's property should the need to evacuate arise were not uncommon in the Parish, particularly during the height of the hurricane season. Hurricanes were so deeply embedded within the everyday mundane life that it was at times difficult for local people to fully explain where their knowledge of how to re-act to the threat of storms came from, it existed at such an intuitive level. Understanding this

normative relationship with disaster-process is central to any critique of on-going 'recovery' from a catastrophic disaster event.

When evacuation was undertaken, one's relationship and connection to one's home and community did not diminish, but instead became regulated through second hand sources: primarily the news media, and word-of-mouth informal networks. These sources do little to alleviate the concerns of local people, yet these concerns do not challenge the on-going relationship of dwelling in this landscape, at least for those who eventually return. Much of this word-of-mouth information stemmed from those local people who had remained in the Parish to 'ride out' the given storm. Many people have some direct experience of remaining to contend with a large storm at some point in their lives, and their accounts of doing this become woven into the on-going communal history of the Parish, forming part of the central dynamic integral to the local relationship with hurricanes.

The second section of this chapter dealt with the direct experience of return to one's home to view the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina. While the usual experience of such a return was to conduct some light maintenance to one's property, Katrina caused an unprecedented level of destruction for many people. While the magnitude of this disaster had undoubtedly shaped certain elements of the cultural experience of the everyday, such changes were encompassed within larger structures which already included social processes deeply influenced by hurricanes and wider precariousness. These pre-existing structures allowed a re-connection to the normality of daily life, a normality which as has been discussed already featured an on-going relationship with disaster. This section finished with a discussion of how certain aspects of the material culture recovered or experienced in the direct aftermath of the Storm assisted in this process of normalisation. Having said this, it is important to qualify this with a reiteration of the differing scale of this catastrophe for local people, and that although there was an on-going process of normalised disaster, Katrina stands as a singularly significant outlier in this experience.

Chapter 8 – Concluding

Remarks, and Suggestions for

Further Study

This thesis has centred around a period of ethnographic research conducted primarily in southern Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana in 2011, and has sought to foreground the lived experience of the everyday in a context where large scale disasters are to a certain extent normalised, during the ‘recovery’ from two large catastrophic disaster-processes. The two principle catastrophes which this research sought to explore were the 2005 Hurricane Katrina and the 2010 BP oil spill, but while these are the specific catastrophes which predicated the research, this study has opened a deeper understanding of a community which has a long-term cultural relationship with disasters – or the threat thereof. This concluding chapter shall first outline the overarching argument presented throughout this thesis by summarising its critical arguments and discussions, not as they appear above in individual chapters, but as a single interwoven discussion of major themes. This discussion shall refer back to the review of literature presented earlier in this thesis to better outline the key substantive contribution it makes to the disaster studies corpus of scholarship. This chapter shall finish with a brief discussion acknowledging areas where further research might expand our understanding of this context still further.

While it was true that the magnitude of the destruction of both Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill was unusual, and the impact these two catastrophes will likely have on local life will be proportionately greater than similar events in recent history, this research has demonstrated that it is incorrect to analyse them as unprecedented events impacting upon an unprepared population. Rather, and in contrast to much of the analysis offered by the main corpus of scholarly writing published in connection to Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill, large-scale disasters intrinsically formed an integral part of the on-going

process of dwelling within this landscape and inter-weave with wider forces of cultural and economic precariousness. Undoubtedly, moving the research field site away from urban New Orleans and into a landscape of normalised disaster-process, and engaging with local people from an intersubjective anthropological perspective have been instrumental in expanding the scholarship so-far created in the aftermath of these catastrophes. Most of this research has been conducted in New Orleans, with the only significant study out-with the city (Cutter et al. 2014) choosing not to use an ethnographic method for conducting their research. As such, this thesis argues that any analysis of ‘recovery’ from these catastrophes should – rather than attempt to model a linear progression to a return to pre-disaster normality – seek to understand how disaster-processes have become woven into local on-going cultural life.

Many previous studies and overviews of disaster recovery have been underpinned by assumptions regarding the equation of recovery from a disaster-process with the return of a community to a pre-disaster state as measured by certain variables, such as domestic material re-construction (Bates and Peacock 2008 [1993], Cutter et al. 2014, Phillips 2009), or a return to previous levels of economic activity (Dyer 2002). Others have focussed on how a disaster might cause dramatic change within local social structures (Hoffman 2005) or economic structures (Chang 2010).

Instead, this thesis understands ‘recovery’ to centre around local communities folding their experience of these unusually significant catastrophes into their on-going lived experience of the local cultural normality of disaster. As such, their experience of catastrophe was part of an embedded continuity of pre-catastrophe processes of ‘becoming’ (Ingold 2011), which then continued in a post-catastrophe landscape. A post-catastrophe landscape which had always featured disaster-processes as a normalised part of mundane daily life.

Throughout each chapter, this thesis has sought to demonstrate how the experience of disaster was woven into the mundane, everyday, lived reality of this community's social world during their recovery from catastrophe. By foregrounding the perspective of local people a broad picture of the cultural normality of disaster emerges. An embodied investigation of local life-worlds has been of great value to this study (Knibbe and Versteeg 2008) as it has allowed the potential anthology offers for the holistic study of disaster to be capitalised upon (Oliver-Smith 1996) and thus offer a deeper understanding of local vulnerability (Cardona 2004).

As such, a full understanding of the lived experience of dwelling in Plaquemine Parish certainly included the direct impact of Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill, but it also included – for example – Hurricanes Betsy and Camille in the 1960s, thus linking to Bankoff's (2007) historical situation of disaster, and the particular understanding of a 'golden age' of 1950s normative American values which these historic hurricanes, along with the civil rights and feminist movements, threatened. The latter, proved an unexpected emergent avenue of study that has allowed this thesis to also contribute to discussions of race and normative American values (Darling 2005).

This construction of a romanticised and valorised past which had been made ever more remote by the impact of Katrina is one of the core themes which runs through much of the thesis. The impact and lived experience of Hurricane Katrina was understood within an on-going perception of a 'decline' of contemporary America, and Plaquemines Parish specifically. Comparisons were drawn with a nostalgically tinted 'golden age' of Parish life centring around the expansion of the oil and gas industry in the 1950s, the wealth such an expansion brought becoming central to economic life, and is discussed further below. This idea of an idealised past era underscored several key dynamics within local cultural relations and boundary maintenance, particularly with relation to racial politics and ideals of financial independence through labour (discussed below). The de-segregation and liberalisation in US society had challenged the cultural hegemony of local hierarchies and therefore altered the power dynamics within local Parish life. Compounding this was a

growth in so-called 'trailer trash' lifestyle which threatened to undermine any notion of a universal, morally superior White racial unity.

Such a challenge had been further complicated since Hurricane Katrina where many individuals who previously lived in fixed houses made of bricks or wood found that they could not afford to rebuild these and purchased trailers instead. All of this had threatened the hegemonic position of (especially) White, middle class men in this context as the locally established social hierarchies weakened, and their privileged position was threatened. By exploring their experience of this change, insight can be offered regarding both local cultural relationships, and how these relationships are influenced by the on-going relationship with disasters in the Parish. In particular, any understanding of 'recovery' in this context must therefore be mindful of the impossibility of re-establishing normative hierarchies and lifestyle patterns which – while they have been influenced by recent catastrophes – had been challenged long before the impact of the Storm or Spill was felt. Instead, on-going processes of disaster-recovery must be understood within a broader discussion of what it means to be a 'real' American. This thesis therefore joins the emerging body of literature explicitly concerned with the central importance local culture has to the effective study of disaster (Smits 2011) and considers how local cultural processes are deeply meaningful in analysing a given disaster process (Merli 2012).

Processes of disaster recovery had happened at a time when, due to catastrophe-induced population decline and the re-location of many of the more wealthy and educated individuals from the southern part of the Parish, the ability of the south to politically mobilise was seen as being threatened. This equated to a White population uneasy with the national political mainstream, where liberal politics appeared to be the norm; disquieted with local racial hierarchies, which since the civil rights movement have been threatened by emergent Black political activism; by an ingress of 'trailer trash' whose moral values were seen as incompatible with normative Parish life, and having to now live in trailers themselves due to the high cost of rebuilding a fixed house made of brick or wood; and furthermore being unhappy with the apparent weakening of their political capital within local (and national) politics. Such a discussion greatly expands on our understanding of

'recovery' as a process, as it challenges a perspective on recovery which only considers the direct impact of a given hazard, and the physical re-building in its aftermath (Cutter et al. 2014).

Inter-weaving with many of these bounded ideals of 'normal' American life was a central dynamic of the negotiation of ideas of 'insider' and 'outsider' framed locally as the designators 'local, stranger, and stranger you know'. This tripartite system of classification had deeply felt implications with regard to local notions of place, and in particular, in the locality of the oil and fishing industries within the Parish's post-catastrophe landscape, as it relates to Katrina and (especially) the BP oil spill.

Within the mainstream media narrative of the BP oil spill there was a clear dualism presented between an external, reckless oil industry which threatened a local, 'noble', fishing industry, a message which saw only limited critique if at all. Locally generated categorisations however were much more complex and nuanced, as the importance of oil expansion in the 1950s discussed above demonstrates. Although the relatively recent emergence of the oil and gas industry in the Parish did leave it viewed as something of an 'other', particularly amongst fishermen, such placement did not originate in the local experience of the oil spill. Rather, this framing originated in the relative historical and cultural significance of these industries to the local community. The fishing industry was deeply immersed in a discursively significant historical-cultural lineage which stretches back to the formation of the Parish, while the oil industry was perceived as a relative newcomer, only gaining significant relevance to Parish life in the middle decades of the 20th century, and only as a source of wealth creation, rather than the somewhat idealised placement independent commercial fishing occupied within the local mythos. Conceptualising the 'impact' of the BP oil spill disaster therefore, is not straightforward and demonstrates how important it is that a 'catastrophization' narrative (Ophir 2010) must be understood in relation to locally meaningful labels and social structure.

Furthermore, the complex reality of the local negotiation of 'insiderness' in this post-catastrophe landscape was far more complex than any straightforward dualism, as the embodied ethnography used by this thesis (and championed by Rigg et al. 2008 amongst others) has revealed. While it was true that BP received a great deal of blame for their conduct leading up to and during the Spill, the oil industry as a whole has largely avoided this treatment within the Parish. Part of this must stem from the sheer number of people within the Parish who worked within the oil industry. Combined, the number of economic migrants who moved to the Parish while the oil industry expanded, and the number of locally born people who now also worked within the industry form a significant proportion of those participating in Parish life. While it might be viable at times to view the oil industry as rooted elsewhere than in the Parish, long friendships with the employees of the oil industry make any boundary imagined between the two highly malleable, and adds nuance to an understanding of any hierarchy of 'legitimacy' between these industries. Indeed, the valorisation of a particular normative 'American' cultural ideal (discussed above) did not occur in any one industry but across a wide spectrum of local people.

While it was reported by local people that during the height of the Spill there was significant tension between some social actors from different industries, such divisions had significantly decreased at the time of data collection, as the oil spill became woven into the shared disaster-rich history of this precarious community. What's more, the on-going reconstruction efforts from Hurricane Katrina have been expedited by donations from oil companies, which facilitated the construction of new large community centres for various towns in the Parish offering a material incentive to maintain a strong presence of the oil industry in the region.

Further than this however, these two supposedly opposed industries in fact existed in a shared geography that is 'beyond the levees'. Fishermen had colonised many of the spaces left by the oil industry, such as dredged, artificial waterways, and therefore directly benefit from the proximate nature of these industries as they mutually construct this landscape. In addition, it was not uncommon for people to move between the two industries based on the relative availability of employment in each, and even before the oil

spill or hurricane, being able to access the economic safety value this flexibility offered was crucial for mitigating much of the economic instability discussed below.

The tripartite construction of ‘local, stranger, and stranger you know’ weaves through all these interactions but also had much wider connotations within life in the Parish. Certainly, there were many people who have moved from the ‘stranger’ or ‘outsider’ category through long residence and friendship, but since the hurricane there were others who had also made such a transition through embodied action in the rebuilding process. Several former charity workers who chose to return to make their life in the Parish had been quickly assimilated into community life, partly, I would argue, through their participation in actively (re-)constructing the material-culture of the Parish’s future, linking to the process of individual ‘willing’ local people undertook in order to fold the experience of catastrophe into their experience of normalised disaster discussed below. This further links to discussion of post-disaster recovery, and underlines how changes which apparently emanate from the impact of hazard (as seen in Hoffman’s 1999) are actually embedded in long standing cultural processes.

The rapid social movement of migrated disaster-volunteers blends with the analysis of ‘local’ identity, which still drew part of its moral legitimacy from rootedness to this local landscape, despite this landscape having been radically shaped by Hurricane Katrina (and to a lesser extent the BP oil spill). This demonstrates that local rootedness went beyond a simplistic understanding of material and geographical familiarity and gives insight into the on-going process of the shared, constructed landscape they dwell within, which disasters have helped create. The traversal of which was significantly shaped by the widely held normative understanding of ‘proper’ American social and economic relations discussed above. Although it was not a central goal of this thesis, an interesting theme which emerged from the openness of the research modus operandi was this discussion of ‘normal’ American life and a related set of conceptions of ‘White’ and ‘Black’ identity. As such this expands of the body of literature considering these topics by considering not only how they impact upon disaster, but how disaster processes are impactful upon hierarchies of power (Merli 2012) and ideals of ‘real’ America (Hurley (2001)).

This particular conception of normative American values, and the tripartite relationship with the 'other', fed into the experience of economic instability in the Parish as mentioned above. Instability that transcended a simplistic before/after relationship with any one disaster-process, even ones as significant as the Storm or the Spill. The role of financial aid, insurance, and compensation in local economic structures for example, existed as an essential support mechanism for those unable to support themselves financially during times of crises, but also somewhat threatened the identity of individual self-sufficiency and the critique of government welfare programs so important to many local personal narratives.

Indeed, even if the Parish of Plaquemines did not have to recover from Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill, it would still have been a poor Parish. Employment was largely unreliable, and often poorly paid, and while there were opportunities to find unskilled or semi-skilled jobs in the oil or fishing industries, such work was often temporary. The experience of major catastrophes brought this precariousness into sharp focus, as many families struggled to return and rebuild their homes after Katrina, and during the BP oil spill many struggled to pay bills without financial aid.

Problems of insurance, healthcare, and illiteracy magnified this poverty, as many within the Parish continued to lack adequate insurance coverage for either their properties or medical care, and rates of illiteracy were high. This combined to make it difficult for the community to break out of precarious poverty, a situation made all the more acute by the possibility that another major hurricane or oil spill might undermine any progress at any time. Furthermore, this lack of property insurance meant that for many within the Parish an exact material replacement for their homes would be impossible to afford, further threatening – for example – the stable idealised White identity threatened by the ingress of so-called 'trailer trash' discussed above.

Many locals had been obliged to maintain relationships with charitable agencies and compensation bodies, as without such assistance many families would not have been able to reside in the Parish. However, there are some within the Parish who felt that the time for charity was over, and that if the Parish was indeed to build a prosperous future for itself then investment and action must come from the local people themselves. This thus returns to the resilience of a particular understanding of normative American life, demonstrating that despite the notable impact of these catastrophes, there was a clear continuity of certain local cultural norms surrounding ideas of hard work leading to independence and financial reward. As such this research would join in Manyena's (2006) critique that any conception of 'vulnerability' or 'resistance' which failed to acknowledge the diversity and complexity of local people when impacted by a hazard would artificially limit analysis and undermine the agency of local people.

Over-arching these key dynamics however, was at core an understanding of the cultural centrality of normalised disaster in this region to the on-going lived experience of local people. Though in turn, the lived experience of overcoming such large catastrophes, within a cultural context where disasters were, to a certain extent, normalised cannot be understood outside of the on-going cultural 'becoming' manifest in – for example – the normative racial values, boundaries and 'othering', and economic instability, mentioned above.

Beginning an understanding of this process of normalisation by considering the internal process of willing is very helpful. Exploring how an individual moves from an identity of victim to active rebuilders is central to this, and to do so it is valuable to deploy a theoretical model which recognises the centrality of a narrative construction of self in the aftermath of crisis (Mattingly 2010). Such an exploration is necessary within an ethnographic text highlighting the *normality* of disaster, as it is crucial to understand the public and private processes whereby the pre-catastrophe processes of 'becoming' within

the community incorporates the lived-experience of this post-catastrophe landscape. As previously stated, all organisms are in a constant state of construction and the influence of this experience of catastrophe should be recognised.

The simple act of returning to the Parish began a long-term process of renewal, where an individual increasingly reconnected with the local pre-existing frameworks of cultural life, the stability of which has been discussed above. This of course intersects with the material reconstruction of homes or businesses, but this rebuilding cannot be simply used to represent the far more complex social and cultural processes local people were participating in at that time. Part of the reason why the oil spill was so damaging for many within the Parish was not only that it magnified economic instability, forced a reliance on government or charitable support, and threatened community cohesion, but that it interrupted the embodied normality generated by fishing in the bayous surrounding the Parish. Focusing on the experience of fishermen, the simple act of returning to their preferred trade of shrimping or oystering (an act which in the context of this post-Katrina landscape was far from simple) was an enormously important step in their emotional recovery. The BP oil spill interrupted this.

Beyond personal reconstruction of the self, there was also the crucial participation in social networks to aid this process of overcoming. Participating in sharing anecdotes with friends connected to humorous events related to the Storm or Spill was enormously important in re-affirming the community aspect of ones social embeddedness, as well as maintaining the normative values and boundaries of 'being local' discussed above. Communal banter (and moaning) in this way was part of a performative process of establishing these disasters as part of normalised everyday life. The reduction of experiences of trauma to amusing anecdotes by (in particular) local men allowed the discussion of the acute loss of homes or businesses in a socially appropriate manner, one which did not threaten a locally understood and valorised vision of 1950s masculinity. These anecdotes also placed oneself within a positive narrative, whereby one had progressed towards re-establishing a pre-Storm normality; the complexity and

impossibility of the ‘normality’ these men wished to return to however has been discussed above.

These friendships were often promoted within certain voluntary institutions such as the local volunteer fire departments or the Knights of Columbus, and it was interesting that both of these institutions had seen an increasing number of new members who felt a desire to more directly help in the (re-)construction of their communities, a process which was of particular relevance to the previously mentioned rapid social movement of former disaster-volunteers in the Parish, some of whom also participated with these institutions.

Furthermore, critically examining the lived experience of evacuation and return as experienced by local people in the Parish of Plaquemines sheds light onto what made the everyday experience of disaster so mundane, as it has been described above. What is most critical here was that evacuation from the threat of major storms was a relatively regular occurrence prior to the landfall of Hurricane Katrina, meaning that most members of the Parish were well practiced for the eventuality of a large storm. Planning for the eventuality of evacuation was not something with a clear start or end point, but instead was something that long-term residents of the Parish were constantly engaged in, and capable of acting out with extreme rapidity, as well as being an implicit and on-going feature of normal, everyday life, this outlines the extreme value in recognising local resilience strategies to the threat of large-scale disaster (Bankoff 2006).

Serious planning for such an eventuality however began whenever a large storm system appeared to be drawing near the community, but long before the final destination of such a storm was confirmed. Many local people had long-standing routines when it becomes necessary to evacuate, often heading for a specific – and well known – motel in the northern part of the state, or for particular family members. Their experience of ‘home’ however, was often one based on continuity rather than separation, and many residents conceptualised evacuation as not actually leaving their homes behind in an emotional

sense, no matter where they were physically residing. Thus their 'local' identity remained unchallenged when they return.

There are also those who had stayed during hurricanes of various sizes, including some who remained during Hurricane Katrina. The stories these individuals recounted to their friends become woven into the local cultural memory of hurricanes, adding their direct experience to what it meant to be 'local' in this landscape. As such, the relevance of historic catastrophes such as Hurricanes Betsy and Camille were deeply significant, and the role narratives of these catastrophes in the normalisation of disaster-processes became apparent. Such an analysis is of great value in deepening our understanding of how 'catastrophe' should be defined and conceptualised (Ophir 2010). Those who remained during the Storm also provided first-hand knowledge to their friends and families in the immediate aftermath as to the state of the Parish, and due to the neglect by most media sources this was the only reliable source of information evacuees received regarding the state of their properties.

A discussion of returning to the Parish after Katrina is also critical to analysis, as for many, this was a return to a landscape which they did not initially visually recognise, such was the devastation. Over time however, people have begun to rebuild, as has the local government, and new structures have replaced many of those which were destroyed by the Storm, and the temporary 'otherness' of such a return becomes woven into on-going cultural life. During this process, certain mundane objects, often recovered from the rubble of one's home, took on significance far beyond any utilitarian value they might have. Connecting with the material-cultural world in this way formed part of the re-negotiation and re-anchoring into social norms that many had to go through when they return to a somewhat unrecognisable landscape, and this understanding links to similar conclusions drawn from research in Japan (Nakamura 2012). Furthermore by understanding the decision making process connected to returning itself, it should be noted that for most people the decision whether or not to return to the area had – in effect – been made long before a person evacuated the Parish. It is worth noting, however, that despite a locally experienced normality to disaster-processes the scale of a catastrophic disaster-process

such as Katrina was something of an outlier to local experience, and had a significantly larger impact on local social and cultural processes than previous, smaller disaster-processes.

This thesis therefore using its ethnographic basis to raise questions regarding the categorising of hazards as ‘disasters’ or ‘catastrophes’. Although it does distinguish between disasters and catastrophes, it does not apply an externally created list of features in order to differentiate them as seen with Quarantelli (1996) or Tierney (2008) but instead basis the distinction in a way that recognises locally meaningful differences in embodied experience. Studying disasters as part of *normality* has had only limit study (Kearnes, Klauser, and Lane 2012) but in doing so notions of what should or should not be considered a disaster can be critiqued. What’s more, this thesis has especially challenged the idea of a disaster process ‘ending’. While others such as Hastrup (2010) have framed such a discussion in terms of the constant fear felt by local people, the experience of life in the Parish of Plaquemines could more accurately be represented by the abundance of the mundane. This, perhaps more than anything raises questions about the term ‘recovery’.

In final summation, while Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill were notable in their vast scale, they struck a locale in which disaster was a fundamental part of the local landscape, and indeed one where ‘recovery’ from historically significant catastrophes such as Hurricanes Betsy and Camille were still – to a certain extent – on-going. Furthermore, the recovery from these catastrophic disaster-processes intersected with wider on-going contexts of cultural and economic precariousness, many of which in their own way might be characterised as ‘everyday’ disasters. As Ingold (2011) has shown, landscape is in a constant state of construction or ‘becoming’ and a post-catastrophe landscape is no exception. By not understanding recovery from catastrophe in terms of material ‘milestones’ on a linear path towards a return to pre-disaster ‘normality’, nor by viewing these catastrophes as being totalising forces causing major social change, this thesis instead explores how cultural recovery exists as part of on-going (never ceasing) processes, and frames the experience of catastrophe as part of the direct lived experience of the social actors dwelling in this distinct and ever-emerging landscape. In short, the plenum of

culture weaves disaster into normality, and mundane daily life continues its never ending process of 'becoming' within a post-catastrophe landscape. The cultural 'recovery' from disaster thus never truly ends.

Limitations, and Avenues for Future Study

As with any piece of research, there are always opportunities presented for further study. This final section shall acknowledge this, and offer suggestions as to where the most fruitful avenue for future research might be found.

Perhaps the principle area where future research might focus is the experience of women in the Parish. A methodology which sought to foreground women's experience of this post-disaster landscape, and which was centred around the gendered spaces associated with them might lead to new and exciting avenues of inquiry. As I have mentioned, the majority of my participants were male, and the places and institutions which I primarily interacted within were often extremely male-dominated (indeed the Knights of Columbus is male exclusive). While women do feature a various points throughout my analysis providing data which does not appear to diverge significantly from the accounts of male participants, it is impossible without further study to determine if this holds true across a wider sample of the population, and – perhaps most importantly – if the researcher conducting the study was not a White male as I am.

Similar to this, a study which more explicitly focused on the experience of African-Americans, South-East Asian, or Hispanic communities in the Parish would be essential for a more complete understanding of the racial hierarchies present within this community. A major (unanticipated) challenge I faced which prevented me from engaging with the

South-East Asian and Hispanic communities was that of language barriers, and extensive research amongst these minority groups would require either fluency on the part of the researcher in Vietnamese (as well as Khmer and Lao) and Spanish, or the use of interpreters. A more deliberate study of the racial boundaries within the Parish would doubtless prove of value when discussing the on-going racial political processes still deeply relevant to the culture of the entire American Deep South.

Finally, it will be of great value to periodically return to the southern part over the Parish over the coming years to compare the cultural trajectory of this region with the aftermath of the major hurricanes of the 1960s. Assessing the long-term cultural and economic impact of Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill was obviously beyond the scope of this research, however it is likely that the impact and ramifications of these two catastrophes occurring so close together, and affecting a landscape so complexly woven with an on-going relationship with disasters more generally, will offer major insight for the wider development of the anthropology of disaster, and literature pertaining to 'recovery' specifically.

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