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**WHEN THE SAINTS GO MARCHING IN:  
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF VOLUNTEER TOURISM  
IN POST-HURRICANE KATRINA NEW ORLEANS**

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor in Philosophy

in

The Department of Communication Studies

by  
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May 2011

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For  
The city of New Orleans and the volunteers who love it

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION.....	iii	
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iv	
ABBREVIATIONS.....	ix	
ABSTRACT .....	x	
CHAPTER		
ONE		
INTRODUCING VOLUNTEER TOURISM IN POST-HURRICANE KATRINA		
NEW ORLEANS.....	1	
Purpose.....	1	
Method.....	4	
Significance.....	8	
Chapter Outline.....	18	
TWO		
STORIES AS SOUVENIRS: EXPERIENCE, UNDERSTANDING,		
AND CONTRIBUTION.....	20	
What Is a Story?.....	20	
What Do Stories Do?.....	22	
What Do Stories Have to Do with New Orleans?.....	24	
Residents Storying, Storying Residents.....	26	
Storying Death and Disaster.....	36	
Connecting through Stories.....	51	
Storying Contribution.....	58	
Storying the Future.....	66	
Conclusion.....	73	
THREE		
SAINTS IN THE CITY OF SIN: PERFORMING RELIGION THROUGH ALTRUISM.....		76
The Service Mission.....	80	
Structure/Coordination.....	86	
Evening Services/Reflections.....	94	
Faith and Duty.....	99	
Conclusion.....	106	



FOUR	
A WORKING VACATION: AN OXYMORON OR THE PERFORMANCE OF	
AGENCY IN TOURISM?	109
Responsibility	113
What Is Helping?	115
Volunteer Tourists' Skill Level	119
Productivity	124
Drop in the Bucket	129
Level of Satisfaction	131
Level of Exhaustion	135
Conclusion	137
 FIVE	
LAYERS OF PLACE: UNDERSTANDING NEW ORLEANS THROUGH THE	
PERSPECTIVES OF VOLUNTEERS	139
"I Couldn't Get The Images Out of My Head": The News Media's Story	146
A Place Like Any Other?	155
From "The City That Care Forgot" to The City That Government Forgot	162
A Landscape Suitable for Habitation?	169
Conditions of New Orleans	176
Race and The South	181
Conclusion	184
 SIX	
STORIES OF THE FUTURE	187
Interpretation of Findings	189
Future Research	191
 BIBLIOGRAPHY	194
 VITA	198

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

UCC	United Church of Christ
ACORN	Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now
UU	Unitarian Universalist

## **ABSTRACT**

This original study examines a new phenomenon in New Orleans tourism. Since Hurricane Katrina hit in late August 2005, droves of individuals and groups have come to New Orleans to help rebuild the city. Through conducting fifty interviews with these individuals from 2008-2009, the author traces the steps of volunteer tourists in post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans. This study investigates the experiences of volunteer tourists. Additionally, the author immersed herself with volunteer tourism groups to experience volunteering and the groups herself. Through careful inspection of original interviews with volunteer tourists, the author discovers how the volunteer tourists contribute to the city of New Orleans.

Particularly, the author looks how stories explicate the experiences of volunteer tourists in New Orleans and how stories serve as souvenirs for the tourists. Additionally, the author shows how volunteer tourists are motivated through their altruism and how religion facilitates volunteer tourists' altruistic motives. The next chapter discusses volunteer tourists decisions to work on vacation and how they understand their work in New Orleans as contributions to the city. In "Layers of Place: Understanding New Orleans through the Perspectives of Volunteers," the author uncovers how volunteer tourists form a relationship with the city and its residents. Finally, the author looks at future possibilities for research.

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCING VOLUNTEER TOURISM IN POST-HURRICANE KATRINA NEW ORLEANS

New Orleans' unique architecture, lively nightlife, and jazz music attract tourists. However, Hurricane Katrina hit on August 29, 2005. The levees broke, and more than 200,000 homes flooded.<sup>1</sup> The city became the center of international media coverage for months as residents were stranded on rooftops to avoid the deadly water and wait for help. Help arrived immediately following the storm when new groups of tourists started coming to New Orleans. These tourists came to help the city's residents restore their homes. Even though they spend time experiencing the nightlife, architecture, and listening to music while in New Orleans, these tourists serve the additional function of helping others. Because helping others is an important function of the tourists' trip, we cannot use the common New Orleans tourist lens to understand them. Although we do not know much about this population of tourists, we do know they impact New Orleans as a city, as a community, as a tourist destination, and as a growing volunteer tourism destination. Their contribution is significant to the restoration of the city post-Hurricane Katrina.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this dissertation is to look at volunteer tourists and their construction of experiences through stories. Stories tell us how to understand events from volunteer tourists' perspective. As Edensor states, "Telling stories is an essential way of making sense of the world and transmitting identity."<sup>2</sup> Edensor addresses stories' function in processing information about

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<sup>1</sup> Louisiana Recovery Authority, "Louisiana Recovery Authority Strategic Plan, 2008-2009," The State of Louisiana, <http://lra.louisiana.gov/assets/docs/searchable/StrategicPlan0809.pdf> (accessed May 27, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Tim Edensor, *Tourists at the Taj: Performance and Meaning at a Symbolic Site* (London: Routledge, 1998), 69.

our surroundings. We learn information crucial to volunteer tourists' experiences through examining their stories.

In constructing experiences through stories, volunteer tourists demonstrate their contributions to the community. Volunteer tourists demonstrate their contributions through their decision to come to New Orleans, relationships with community members, altruism, and their connection to New Orleans as a place.

The first way volunteer tourists demonstrate their contribution is through their decision-making. Volunteer tourists actively make the decision to come to New Orleans, spend their money, use vacation time, and participate in manual labor. Bowman discusses performance in the role of tourists' choices in "Looking for Stonewall's Arm: Tourist Performance as Research Method." "Performance has become important to restore a sense of agency to tourists; to counter the emphasis on tourism as a product, package, or production by foregrounding its processual elements. . . ."<sup>3</sup> Bowman confirms tourists' decision-making. This dissertation explicates how volunteer tourists make decisions in every step in choosing to come to New Orleans and help others. This decision-making process is apparent through their relaying stories to me about what they're doing, why they're doing it, and what impact it is or isn't having.

The second way volunteer tourists demonstrate their contribution to New Orleans is through understanding New Orleans as a place. Volunteer tourists ask questions about the city, the levees designed to protect it, and the various racial and class dynamics at work in it. Franklin and Crang highlight tourists' desires to engage with a place: "tourists are seeking to be doing

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<sup>3</sup> Michael S. Bowman, "Looking for Stonewall's Arm: Tourist Performance as Research Method," in *Opening Acts: Performance in/as Communication and Cultural Studies*, ed. Judith Hamera (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006), 116.

something in the places they visit rather than being endlessly spectatorially passive.”<sup>4</sup> As Franklin and Crang assert, tourists want to form a connection with a location. Volunteer tourists tell stories about their attachment to New Orleans.

The third way volunteer tourists demonstrate their contribution to New Orleans is through their altruism. Although volunteer tourists come to New Orleans with religious organizations, their motives are non-denominational. Often quoting the Bible verse, “I am my brother’s keeper,” these individuals reflect on benefiting from helping others. Stephen Wearing mentions the importance of altruism in volunteer tourism, stating, “[helping others] was based on past community service experience, media images of the development and/or a wish to be involved in community work for the first time in an effort to ‘give something back.’”<sup>5</sup> This dissertation explicates how volunteer tourists’ reflect on their role in helping others.

The fourth way volunteer tourists demonstrate their contribution to New Orleans is by building relationships with the community. Volunteer tourists collect stories from residents they meet. They tell and retell the stories of locals accepting some burden for the tragedy. Walter Benjamin discusses the story becoming the listener’s experience, stating, “The storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale.”<sup>6</sup> Benjamin articulates how information is transferred between individuals and how what one smelled, felt, heard, and saw is integrated as information received. As the receiver of countless volunteer tourists’ stories, it becomes my

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<sup>4</sup> Adrian Franklin and Mike Crang, “The Trouble with Tourism and Travel Theory?” *Tourist Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001): 13.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Wearing, *Volunteer Tourism: Experiences that Make a Difference* (Oxon, UK: CABI, 2001), 66.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Vohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 87.

burden to relay this information to you so that we can better understand who both the volunteer tourists are and more tangentially, who New Orleanians are.

## **Method**

To understand the culture of volunteer tourism, I participated with volunteer tourists and conducted this study as an ethnography. From February to May 2008, I did preliminary research. My concentrated research period stretched seven months, from November 2008 to June 2009 where I gathered data through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and spontaneous conversations. I spent Thursday through Saturday weekly with volunteer groups shadowing and participating in volunteer activities. In January and February 2010, I resided with a volunteer tourism group for four days.

Since Hurricane Katrina, a plethora of grass roots organizations have been working in New Orleans. Brad Pitt's Make it Right project has been working in New Orleans since 2007 when he began building environmentally friendly and hurricane-proof homes in the Lower Ninth Ward.<sup>7</sup> Pitt's goal is to build 150 of these homes.<sup>8</sup> Applicants have to have lived in the Lower Ninth Ward before Hurricane Katrina, have an approved credit score, and income to qualify for one of the homes.<sup>9</sup> Volunteers are not involved in Make it Right but are invited to donate money to help rebuild a home.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Make it Right: Helping to Rebuild New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward, "Our Work and Progress: Brad Pitt Promises to Make it Right," Make it Right, [http://www.makeitrightnola.org/index.php/work\\_progress/timeline/](http://www.makeitrightnola.org/index.php/work_progress/timeline/) (accessed April 17, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Make it Right: Helping to Rebuild New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward, "Our Work and Progress: Make it Right is Committed to Making a Difference," Make it Right, [http://www.makeitrightnola.org/index.php/work\\_progress/](http://www.makeitrightnola.org/index.php/work_progress/) (accessed April 17, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Make it Right: Helping to Rebuild New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward, "Coming Home: The Homeowner Process," Make it Right, [http://www.makeitrightnola.org/index.php/coming\\_home/homeowner\\_process/](http://www.makeitrightnola.org/index.php/coming_home/homeowner_process/) (accessed April 17, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Make it Right: Helping to Rebuild New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward, "Donate: Support Make it Right," Make it Right, <http://www.makeitrightnola.org/index.php/donate/> (accessed April 17, 2011).

Habitat for Humanity is another organization helping to rebuild New Orleans. With opportunities for individuals or groups, Habitat offers volunteers a minimum one-day commitment.<sup>11</sup> Habitat allows volunteers to work in the warehouse where materials are stored and distributed or on site to assist with building a house.<sup>12</sup> Habitat does not provide housing, transportation, or food, but does recommend volunteers stay in the French Quarter at a discounted rate.<sup>13</sup>

The now defunct ACORN, Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, coordinated efforts to rebuild New Orleans by gutting houses, remediating houses with lead paint, and rebuilding houses across the city.<sup>14</sup> ACORN filed Chapter 7 bankruptcy on November 2, 2010, and is no longer a presence in New Orleans.<sup>15</sup> The bankruptcy filing followed James O’Keefe’s, a right-wing political advocate, coordination of actors to pose as a pimp and prostitute who were instructed by an ACORN employee to lie about the woman’s profession to get housing assistance on September 14, 2009.<sup>16</sup> A five million dollar embezzlement scandal exposed in October 2009 also tarnished the image of ACORN.<sup>17</sup> Despite all of this, I saw numerous examples of ACORN’s assistance benefiting the residents of New Orleans.

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<sup>11</sup> Habitat for Humanity: New Orleans Area, “Frequently Asked Questions,” Habitat for Humanity, <http://www.habitat-nola.org/volunteer/faq.php?POP=YES#num2> (accessed April 17, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Habitat for Humanity: New Orleans Area, “Frequently Asked Questions,” Habitat for Humanity, <http://www.habitat-nola.org/volunteer/faq.php?POP=YES#num2> (accessed April 17, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Habitat for Humanity: New Orleans Area, “Frequently Asked Questions,” Habitat for Humanity, <http://www.habitat-nola.org/volunteer/faq.php?POP=YES#num2> (accessed April 17, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> ACORN’s website has very limited information since it filed for bankruptcy. This information is based on my experiences with ACORN volunteers.

<sup>15</sup> Bertha Lewis, “The End of an Era: ACORN Files Chapter 7 Bankruptcy,” ACORN, entry posted November 2, 2010, <http://www.acorn.org/node/712> (accessed April 17, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Paula Devlin, “ACORN Plans Internal Investigation of Prostitute, Pimp Scandal,” *The Times-Picayune*, September 16, 2009, [http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2009/09/acorn\\_plans\\_internal\\_investiga.html](http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2009/09/acorn_plans_internal_investiga.html) (accessed April 17, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Robert Travis Scott, “ACORN Embezzlement Was \$5 Million, Louisiana Attorney General Says,” *The Times-Picayune*, October 6, 2009, [http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2009/10/acorn\\_embezzlement\\_was\\_5\\_milli.html](http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2009/10/acorn_embezzlement_was_5_milli.html) (accessed April 17, 2011).



Common Ground Relief is another grass roots organization that has been in New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina hit.<sup>18</sup> This group provides legal advice, job training, volunteer rebuilders, wetlands restoration, and a community garden for the Lower Ninth Ward.<sup>19</sup>

In addition, numerous church organizations have a volunteer presence in New Orleans. The Presbyterian Church offers short-term volunteer trips to the city to restore homes.<sup>20</sup> Mennonite Disaster Service reports that over 2,500 volunteers have come to New Orleans since November 2006 through their program.<sup>21</sup> Catholic Charities' volunteer organization is Operation Helping Hands, which also provides volunteers to help residents with construction projects.<sup>22</sup> They report over 27,000 volunteers have come through Project Helping Hands.<sup>23</sup> Further, the Christian Reformed Church<sup>24</sup> and Lutheran Disaster Response<sup>25</sup> have volunteers in the city.

Two other church organizations that have volunteers in New Orleans are the Unitarian Universalist and United Church of Christ. I spent significant amounts of time with these groups. The Unitarian Church coordinates volunteers through the Center for Ethical Living and Social

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<sup>18</sup> Common Ground Relief, "About Us," Common Ground Relief, <http://www.commongroundrelief.org/node/8> (accessed April 17, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Common Ground Relief, "Our Projects," Common Ground Relief, <http://www.commongroundrelief.org/node/2> (accessed April 17, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, "Volunteer Opportunities: United States Disaster Recovery Volunteer Sites," Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., <http://gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/pda/volunteer-opportunities/> (accessed April 17, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Mennonite Disaster Service, "New Orleans, Louisiana," Mennonite Disaster Service, <http://mds.mennonite.net/projects/new-orleans-la/> (accessed April 17, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Catholic Charities: Archdiocese of New Orleans, "Hurricane Recovery Volunteering: Volunteer Opportunities," Catholic Charities: Archdiocese of New Orleans, <http://www.ccano.org/volunteers/hurricane-recovery-volunteering/> (accessed April 17, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Catholic Charities: Archdiocese of New Orleans, "Operation Helping Hands Weekly Progress Update: Week of April 8, 2011s," Catholic Charities: Archdiocese of New Orleans, <http://www.ccano.org/programs/operation-helping-hands/weekly-progress-update/> (accessed April 17, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> CRWRC: Community Development, "United States," CRWRC: A Ministry of the Christian Reformed Church, [http://www.crwrc.org/pages/development\\_namt\\_us.cfm](http://www.crwrc.org/pages/development_namt_us.cfm) (accessed April 17, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Lutheran Disaster Response, "Volunteer Stories," Lutheran Disaster Response, <http://www.ldr.org/volunteer/volunteer-stories.html> (accessed April 17, 2011).

Justice Renewal.<sup>26</sup> The program provides work, housing, and programs throughout the week to inform volunteers about the history of the city, the storm, and the work they are doing.<sup>27</sup> The United Church of Christ partnered with Church World Service to rebuild Little Woods, a neighborhood in New Orleans East, in four weeks.<sup>28</sup> The group brought over 500 volunteers to repair 12 homes for families.<sup>29</sup>

I located research participants through contacts with community centers and local churches. Contacts gave me work locations each week, and I met with the volunteer tourists at the sites. The contacts let the volunteer tourists know I was interested in interviewing them for my dissertation research and would meet them at the worksite. I spent some time at the site working, and then would ask if a few of them would be willing to be interviewed about their experience as a volunteer in New Orleans. In addition to rebuilding activities, sometimes we spent time together at lunch, dinner, or making trips to Home Depot.

I videotaped fifty interviews with volunteer tourists. The interviews lasted between fifteen and ninety minutes depending on how much the volunteer tourists wanted to share. Some interviews were conducted solo, in duos, or in groups of up to five people. To record, I held palm-sized video camera in the direction of the volunteers' faces. Keeping eye contact with my interviewees, I was consistent about giving nonverbal feedback to their answers. I rarely looked at the camera or the viewfinder. I shot this way to minimize the camera's presence and the

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<sup>26</sup> Center for Ethical Living and Social Justice Renewal, "New Orleans Rebirth Volunteer Program," Center for Ethical Living and Social Justice Renewal, [http://www.celsjr.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=6&Itemid=57](http://www.celsjr.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6&Itemid=57) (accessed April 17, 2011).

<sup>27</sup> Center for Ethical Living and Social Justice Renewal, "New Orleans Rebirth Volunteer Program," Center for Ethical Living and Social Justice Renewal, [http://www.celsjr.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=6&Itemid=57](http://www.celsjr.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6&Itemid=57) (accessed April 17, 2011).

<sup>28</sup> Disaster Response, "Neighborhood: New Orleans—Church World Service Ecumenical Rebuild," May 1, 2009 United Church of Christ <http://www.ucc.org/disaster/cws-ecumenical-rebuild.html> (accessed April 16, 2011).

<sup>29</sup> Disaster Response, "Neighborhood: New Orleans—Church World Service Ecumenical Rebuild," May 1, 2009 United Church of Christ <http://www.ucc.org/disaster/cws-ecumenical-rebuild.html> (accessed April 16, 2011).

subject's self-consciousness. In addition to videotaped interviews, I also include notes from conversations and events when the video camera was not present such as interactions at dinner, lunch, and Home Depot. I did not want the volunteer tourists to feel self-conscious about any of the information they provided and wanted them to be brutally honest in their answers; therefore, I assured them that their real names or images would not be used in the final project.

Since I have never traveled to volunteer, I interviewed with a genuine curiosity about why people travelled to help others. Interviews centered on the various organizations they were working with, their volunteer experience, and what they did in New Orleans when they were not volunteering. After transcribing the interviews, I wrote themes in the margins. Themes apparent in interviews from January to April 2009 became the subject of the interviews in May and June of 2009. These interviews focused on volunteer tourists' religious beliefs, feelings about the work they were doing, the role of stories in their trip, and the government's response to Hurricane Katrina.

Additionally, I chose to use the term "volunteer tourism" rather than the shorthand term "voluntourism" for this project. Because this dissertation will be useful for researchers investigating volunteer issues as well as tourism issues, searching for these terms individually will produce more results than if this dissertation used the term voluntourism. Additionally, in the body of work surveyed for this project, most scholarly articles refer to volunteer tourism. I use the separated term.

## **Significance**

This dissertation demonstrates how volunteer tourism is experiential through the interviews with volunteer tourists who share their experiences with me. Volunteer tourism research largely focused on what tourists saw or how data could be quantified. Volunteer

tourism research is now moving towards understanding experiential knowledge gained through travel. Wickens, Benson, Broad, and Wearing recognize touring is a multi-faceted event. Crouch talks about the dynamicism of tourism confirming, “Once we acknowledge the subject as embodied and tourism as practice it is evident that our body does encounter space in its materiality; concrete components that effectively surround the body are literally ‘felt.’”<sup>30</sup> Crouch calls for an understanding of tourism as an experience.

This dissertation allows volunteer tourists to talk about how their experiences in New Orleans are “felt.” Through volunteer tourists’ discussions about their experiences, they add detailed understandings to current volunteer tourism research. Volunteer tourists do more than simply answer my questions. These individuals contextualize their statements within the volunteer program, the city, poverty, and race. These experiences contribute to existing research about volunteer tourism because we understand the circumstances behind their statements. I also have included large portions of their statements to demonstrate how volunteer tourists arrive at their ideas.

The first type of volunteer tourism research details the demographics of volunteer tourists. Callanan and Thomas and Tomazos and Butler quantify various qualities of volunteer tourists. Details include: volunteer tourists’ ages and what activities they participate in while volunteering. Callanan and Thomas and Tomazos and Butler also list the countries volunteer tourists visit. These researchers determine that volunteer tourists are usually from Great Britain or Australia and are in between their high school and college educations. Volunteers participate

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<sup>30</sup> David Crouch, “Surrounded by Place: Embodied Encounters,” in *Tourism: Between Place and Performance*, ed. Simon Coleman and Mike Crang (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), 208.

in community welfare, teaching, environmental, and building projects.<sup>31</sup> In addition to detailing who participates as a volunteer tourist and what they do, these researchers find most projects occur in developing nations of Central and South America, Southeast Asia, and Africa.<sup>32</sup> This research is beneficial to get a general idea of trends in volunteer tourism and to discover whether there are general characteristics or types of volunteer tourists. However, conducting research at volunteer tourism sites in New Orleans provides a different set of data. Based on my interviews with volunteer tourists, New Orleans' volunteer tourists stay a week or two weeks. The volunteer tourists visit New Orleans during vacations from their full time jobs or college. My study allows the volunteer tourists to express their thoughts and feelings about volunteer tourism in New Orleans and adds additional information to the findings of previous research.

The second trend in volunteer tourism research focuses on volunteer tourists' relationships with locals. In "‘Pettin’ the Critters’: Exploring the Complex Relationship Between Volunteers and the Voluntoured in McDowell County, West Virginia, USA and Tijuana, Mexico," Nancy McGehee and Kathleen Andereck compare the relationship between residents and volunteer tourists.<sup>33</sup> In Mexico volunteers are responsible for building homes and schools.<sup>34</sup> The volunteers in West Virginia help at the local food bank and assist with building

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<sup>31</sup> Michelle Callanan and Sarah Thomas, "Volunteer Tourism: Deconstructing Volunteer Activities within a Dynamic Environment," in *Niche Tourism: Contemporary Issues, Trends, and Cases*, ed. Marina Novelli (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2005), 188; Tomazos, Kostas and Richard Butler, "Volunteer Tourism: The New Ecotourism?" *Anatolia: An International Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Research* 20, no. 1 (2009): 196-211.

<sup>32</sup> Callanan and Thomas, 188; Tomazos and Butler, 196-211.

<sup>33</sup> Nancy Gard McGehee and Kathleen Andereck, "‘Pettin’ the Critters’: Exploring the Complex Relationship Between Volunteers and the Voluntoured in McDowell County, West Virginia, USA and Tijuana, Mexico," in *Journeys of Discovery in Volunteer Tourism: International Case Study Perspectives*, ed. Kevin D. Lyons and Stephen Wearing (Oxfordshire, UK: CABI, 2008), 12-24.

<sup>34</sup> McGehee and Andereck, 16-17.

projects.<sup>35</sup> McGehee and Andereck discuss the “othering” of residents by volunteer tourists through the recitation of a “God talk” in exchange for work.<sup>36</sup>

In another article listing volunteer tourists’ motivations. “Volunteer Tourism: Involve Me and I Will Learn,” Harnng Sin joins Action Africa, a group from the National University of Singapore.<sup>37</sup> Sin’s research cites the desire to travel, to help others, as a personal challenge, and a convenient way to travel as reasons volunteer tourists travel to South Africa to learn about the local culture.<sup>38</sup> Sin also found volunteer tourists often compared locals’ financial situation with their own in Singapore noting the vast disparity.<sup>39</sup> Though Sin features motivations in the research, the focus of the findings is that volunteer tourism reinforces stereotypes of locals and simply provides accommodations for travelers.<sup>40</sup> Although these studies help us understand how volunteer tourists interact with the community, they also invite a more in depth study of the relationship between volunteers and residents and volunteers and place. Because New Orleans residents are tied to the city despite its struggles, my study seeks to understand how volunteers interpret the ties between residents and New Orleans and also to show how volunteer tourists develop ties to the city.

The third category of volunteer tourism literature discusses the motivations of volunteer tourists. Volunteer tourism scholars discuss motivations of volunteer tourists broadly. Most studies find that altruism is a motivation for the volunteer tourists surveyed. Research is just beginning to examine the role of altruism in volunteer tourism efforts. My study is interested in

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<sup>35</sup> McGehee and Andereck, 17.

<sup>36</sup> McGehee and Andereck, 21.

<sup>37</sup> Harnng Luh Sin, “Volunteer Tourism: Involve Me and I Will Learn,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 36, no. 3 (2009): 480–501.

<sup>38</sup> Sin, 485.

<sup>39</sup> Sin, 480–501.

<sup>40</sup> Sin, 480–501.

understanding altruism. Therefore, I will discuss the paths of previous scholars' work, and how my research complements their work.

Current volunteer tourism studies investigate motivations through projects to help the environment or learn about different cultures allowing opportunities to discuss motivations in humanitarian/construction projects. In "What Makes Them Pay? Values of Volunteer Tourists Working for Sea Turtle Conservation," Campbell and Smith classify volunteer tourists' interest in travelling to volunteer.<sup>41</sup> Looking at sea turtle conservation in Costa Rica, the researchers determined volunteers' values fell into seven categories with most ranking conservation and scientific values as their primary motivation to travel and volunteer.<sup>42</sup> Although this study provides important information regarding volunteer tourists' motivations for an environmental conservation project, the study does not address humanitarian projects. My study investigates altruism as it relates to New Orleans volunteer tourism, a humanitarian and construction project carried out by religious organizations.

In "Gibbons in Their Midst? Conservation Volunteers' Motivations at the Gibbon Rehabilitation Project Phuket, Thailand," Sue Broad and John Jenkins discuss the motivations of volunteer tourists working in a center to nurse Gibbons back to health.<sup>43</sup> Broad and Jenkins conclude volunteer tourists' motivations are one or more of the following: altruism, travel, career development, personal interest/personal development, or aspects of gibbon rehabilitation.<sup>44</sup>

In Daldeniz and Hampton's "VOLUNtourists versus volunTOURISTS: A True Dichotomy or Merely a Differing Perception?" the authors compare motivations for two

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<sup>41</sup> Lisa M. Campbell and Christy Smith, "What Makes Them Pay? Values of Volunteer Tourists Working for Sea Turtle Conservation," *Environmental Management* 38, no. 1 (2006): 84–98.

<sup>42</sup> Campbell and Smith, 84–98.

<sup>43</sup> Sue Broad and John Jenkins, "Gibbons in Their Midst? Conservation Volunteers' Motivations at the Gibbon Rehabilitation Project Phuket, Thailand," in *Journeys of Discovery in Volunteer Tourism: International Case Study Perspectives*, ed. Kevin D. Lyons and Stephen Wearing (Oxfordshire, UK: CABI, 2008), 72–85.

<sup>44</sup> Broad and Jenkins, 72–85.

volunteer tourism projects.<sup>45</sup> By investigating a dive school in Malaysia where volunteers teach dive classes for free and rural development projects in Nicaragua, the authors found the only motivation the two groups of volunteer tourists did not share was to “do something useful.”<sup>46</sup> “Do[ing] something useful,” or altruism, was only mentioned by the volunteers in Nicaragua and ranked fourth after self-enhancement, travel, and not knowing what else to do with their lives.<sup>47</sup> The volunteer tourists in Broad and Jenkin’s and Daldeniz and Hampton’s studies list altruism as a low-priority motivation. However, the volunteer tourists in my study address altruism specifically stating that they came to New Orleans to help others. Even though Broad and Jenkin’s and Daldeniz and Hampton’s studies list altruism as low priority, my study demonstrates how altruism is a primary motivation for the volunteer tourists in New Orleans.

My study takes place in the United States, which is a unique location for a study on volunteer tourism research. As of 2008, researchers are just beginning to look at the U.S. as a site where volunteer tourism occurs. Particularly, McGehee and Anderek compare volunteer tourism sites in West Virginia and Mexico to determine resident’s reactions to the volunteers.<sup>48</sup> Although in many studies the volunteers include Americans, few studies look at sites in the United States. Because my study takes place in the United States, it provides unique insight into the presence of volunteer tourism in the country and forces us to question previous research that cites tourists’ motivations to volunteer as the ability to travel abroad.

Through my research I found that volunteer tourists contribute to the community of New Orleans. However, previous research questions the benefits of volunteer tourism finding that

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<sup>45</sup> Bilge Daldeniz and Mark P. Hampton, “VOLUNtourists versus volunTOURISTS: A True Dichotomy or Merely a Differing Perception?” in *Volunteer Tourism: Theoretical Frameworks and Practical Applications*, ed. Angela M. Benson (London: Routledge, 2011), 30-41.

<sup>46</sup> Daldeniz and Hampton, 35.

<sup>47</sup> Daldeniz and Hampton, 35.

<sup>48</sup> McGehee and Andereck, 12-24.



volunteer tourists are self-interested. In “Volunteer Tourism: How Do We Know it is ‘Making a Difference’?” Joanne Ingram cites recent trips of Princes Harry and William to South Africa as encouraging the trend to go on volunteer tourism trips.<sup>49</sup> She sees the combination of working and vacation as problematic because the intention is not necessarily to help, but more importantly to vacation.<sup>50</sup> She then asks, “Do volunteers and the organizations offering volunteer tourism experiences truly seek to ‘make a difference’? In seeking to ‘make a difference’ do the volunteers and the organizations offering volunteer tourism do so without really understanding the needs of the communities they seek to assist?”<sup>51</sup> My study shows that volunteer tourists really do want to help people and shows little conflict between volunteers’ desires to work versus tour. This study also seeks to answer the questions posed by Ingram by showing that volunteer tourists coming to New Orleans seek to understand the community through the landscape and listening to residents’ stories and struggles.

Graham also discusses the self-interest of volunteer tourists in “Volunteering as Heritage/Volunteering in Heritage.”<sup>52</sup> Graham’s study focuses on the Moffat Centre for Travel and Tourism Business Development in Scotland and the research projects volunteers develop and focus on. Graham finds that the volunteers who participate are also interested in the history; however, she also mentions that the organization seeks volunteers with certain qualities and that self-interest and interest in history are crucial to keeping the program running.<sup>53</sup> Throughout my study, volunteers admit their self-interest in terms of their level of satisfaction. As volunteers

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<sup>49</sup> Joanne Ingram, “Volunteer tourism: How Do We Know it is ‘Making a Difference’?” in *Volunteer Tourism: Theoretical Frameworks and Practical Applications*, ed. Angela M. Benson (London: Routledge, 2011), 213.

<sup>50</sup> Ingram, 214.

<sup>51</sup> Ingram, 216.

<sup>52</sup> Margaret Graham, “Volunteering as Heritage/Volunteering in Heritage,” in *Volunteering As Leisure/Leisure As Volunteering: An International Assessment*, ed. Robert A. Stebbins and Margaret Graham (Oxon, UK: CABI, 2004), 13-32.

<sup>53</sup> Graham, “Volunteering as Heritage/Volunteering in Heritage.”

feel satisfied, they return to New Orleans to volunteer again and get more satisfaction. These return visits are also what connect the volunteers to the city. This connection is ultimately what benefits the city. New Orleans volunteer tourists' self-interest, or desire for satisfaction, can get in the way of their work. For example, sometimes volunteer tourists are more concerned with their level of satisfaction than they are concerned with how their activities benefit the city. However, the volunteers' occasional distraction to be satisfied is no more distracting than being a non-skilled volunteer.

Volunteer tourists in New Orleans embrace many of the differences in culture as my research focuses on the volunteer tourists' relationship with the place. New Orleanians are different from many urban Americans because of their strong sense of family, attachment to place, eating of alligator, frogs, and crawfish, and laissez faire attitude. Exposed to aspects of the culture by residents, volunteer tourists get to explore New Orleans culture from the view of insiders. By viewing the culture through the stories of residents, volunteer tourists can identify with aspects of the community rather than treating locals like they are ignorant. However, Wearing and Grabowski argue that volunteer tourists "other" locals by not engaging with locals during their travels. "Social valuing recognizes that local communities hold extensive knowledge about areas and an exposure to this knowledge can play a key role in the tourist experience provided of course that the locals are in control of interpretation and transmission of this knowledge. The successful communication of social valuing can enable the tourist to transcend the Otherness implied and represented in many tourism marketing images."<sup>54</sup> As volunteer tourists rebuild the homes of New Orleanians, the residents are often present.

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<sup>54</sup> Stephen Wearing and Simone Grabowski, "Volunteer Tourism and Intercultural Exchange: Exploring the 'Other' in the Experience," in *Volunteer Tourism: Theoretical Frameworks and Practical Applications*, ed. Angela M. Benson (London: Routledge, 2011), 197.

Residents share their experiences about the city before and after Hurricane Katrina with volunteer tourists. Through the sharing of stories, volunteer tourists and residents develop friendships.

Additionally, Wearing's *Volunteer Tourism: Experiences that Make a Difference*, research discusses volunteer tourists' experiences. His study takes place in Australia with Youth Challenge International where volunteers learn about and help to improve the environment.<sup>55</sup> Wearing found volunteer tourists' were most concerned with building relationships with the groups they traveled with and the environment.<sup>56</sup> Although developing friendships within the groups were important to volunteer tourists in New Orleans, they also learned from residents. The focus of my study is to demonstrate the knowledge volunteer tourists learn from residents. The residents are able to convey parts of the New Orleans' culture and lifestyle and how it affects them personally so as to connect to the volunteer. My study finds volunteer tourists value the relationships they build with residents and their increased understanding of New Orleans.

The restoration of the community is a key factor in volunteer tourists' decision to come to New Orleans. Another type of volunteer tourism research focuses on volunteer tourists' self-improvement through these endeavors. In "Journeys of the Self: Volunteer Tourists in Nepal," Eugenia Wickens interviews volunteer tourists who work in hostels and Nepali schools teaching English.<sup>57</sup> Wickens' interviews result in learning that the volunteer tourists' motivations are in the destination, and learning about cultures, and to help with development work.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, volunteers mention the rewards of volunteering, experiencing the cultural differences, and how

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<sup>55</sup> Stephen Wearing, *Volunteer Tourism: Experiences that Make a Difference* (Oxon, UK: CABI, 2001), 52.

<sup>56</sup> Wearing, 88-101.

<sup>57</sup> Eugenia Wickens, "Journeys of the Self: Volunteer Tourists in Nepal," in *Volunteer Tourism: Theoretical Frameworks and Practical Applications*, ed. Angela M. Benson (London: Routledge, 2011), 42-51.

<sup>58</sup> Wickens, 46-7.

they learned about themselves through volunteering abroad.<sup>59</sup> Even though the rewards of volunteering are important to both the volunteers in Nepal and New Orleans, my study finds the motivations of volunteer tourists in New Orleans are different from those in Wickens' study.

Sue Broad discusses the changes that volunteer tourists undergo. In "Living the Thai Life: A Case Study of Volunteer Tourism at the Gibbon Rehabilitation Project, Thailand," Broad finds that some volunteer tourists made major life changes because of their volunteer tourism experience such as: deciding on a career, moving to a different location, or meeting a significant other.<sup>60</sup> Broad interviewed other volunteer tourists who stated they developed confidence and changed how they saw the world's financially impoverished through volunteering.<sup>61</sup> Broad discusses the role of volunteers and their motivations to become better people through volunteering. Some of the volunteer tourists interviewed in New Orleans discussed how their volunteer work would help alleviate residents' financial strain. However, most volunteer tourists focused on the aesthetic changes to the neighborhoods and the hope they were conveying to residents.

Although helpful, the previous research does not recount the stories of the volunteers. My study contributes to the research on volunteer tourists' motivations; however, my study provides experiential, contextualized knowledge of how the tourists feel and the nuanced reasons they engage in volunteer tourism. My study further advances arguments that tourists are decision-makers, altruistic, build relationships within the community, and are interested in the place they are volunteering.

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<sup>59</sup> Wickens, 48-50.

<sup>60</sup> Sue Broad, "Living the Thai Life: A Case Study of Volunteer Tourism at the Gibbon Rehabilitation Project, Thailand," *Tourism Recreation Research* 28, no.3 (2003): 68.

<sup>61</sup> Broad, 68.

## Chapter Outline

### Stories as Souvenirs: Experience, Understanding, and Contribution

The purpose of chapter two is to relate examples of the stories volunteer tourists tell. Through volunteer tourists' interactions with non-tourism industry residents of New Orleans including homeowners, business owners, plant workers, ship builders, and the disabled, volunteer tourists collect stories about the residents' Hurricane Katrina experiences. These stories become part of the volunteer tourists' experience in New Orleans. Volunteer tourists then become the messengers of these stories when they get home, telling and retelling the experiences of New Orleanians.

### Saints In the City of Sin: Performing Religion through Altruism

Although volunteer tourism's roots have been traced to missionary efforts in the 1800s, no research has discussed possible religious motivations behind volunteer tourism.<sup>62</sup> New Orleans, famous for a single street lined with gay bars, strip joints, and balconies ripe for exposing oneself, seems like an odd place to attract religious groups. However, volunteer groups with religious affiliations come in droves. Methodists, Presbyterians, Catholics, Unitarian Universalists, Lutherans, and many other religions organize trips for congregations from North America to come to New Orleans.<sup>63</sup> Volunteer tourists debate issues of the faith of residents, their duty to work, and the ironic cultures of religion and gluttonous behavior present in the city.

### A Working Vacation: An Oxymoron or the Performance of Agency in Tourism?

In chapter four, I trace the labor practices of volunteer tourists in New Orleans. Through a detailed account of a customary day for volunteer tourists, I explicate volunteers' stories about

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<sup>62</sup> Callanan and Thomas, 185.

<sup>63</sup> Most volunteers identify as Christians but others indicated they are Buddhist or agnostic.

their work and why they decided to participate in volunteering in New Orleans. Volunteer tourists debate the sacrifice they are making with feeling rewarded in their work.

#### Layers of Place: Understanding New Orleans through the Perspectives of Volunteers

Chapter five utilizes literature about understanding place. Volunteer tourists cite the news coverage immediately following Hurricane Katrina as the impetus for them to come to New Orleans to volunteer. As volunteer tourists relay their experiences in New Orleans, the media's portrayal is either reified or disproven. New Orleans has a unique character and volunteer tourists get to see this character through talking to residents, and by spending time in homes and neighborhoods. This chapter integrates how volunteer tourists understand and become linked to the landscape.

## CHAPTER TWO

### STORIES AS SOUVENIRS: EXPERIENCE, UNDERSTANDING, AND CONTRIBUTION

Gathering souvenirs is a favorite pastime of tourists. However, volunteer tourists cannot take destroyed houses, levees, or residents home with them from New Orleans, so they gather stories to commemorate their experience in New Orleans. Volunteer tourists' stories explain how they construct and understand their experiences in New Orleans. Volunteer tourists' stories also communicate their contributions to the community, both now and in the future. Volunteer tourists gather stories as souvenirs, but stories are also how volunteer tourists understand elements of the city. Stories are a contribution to the community through the relationship stories build between individuals. In this chapter, volunteer tourists tell stories about residents, their connection with the city, disaster, their contributions, and they tell stories about the future.

#### What Is a Story?

Volunteer tourists make sense of their experiences in New Orleans through stories. Stories become a way for volunteer tourists to process and reflect on what is happening around them and what effect they are having on the environment around them. Stories help volunteer tourists understand their experiences. Löfgren describes the formation of experiences stating, "We *make* [experiences] in a highly personal way of taking in impressions, but in this process we use a great deal of established and shared cultural knowledge and frames. And yet we share experience only through representations and expressions."<sup>64</sup> He talks about how we draw on previously acquired knowledge and familiar frames to interpret experiences. When we travel,

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<sup>64</sup> Orvar Löfgren, "Narrating the Tourist Experience," in *Tourists and Tourism: A Reader*, ed. Sharon Bohn Gmelch (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2004), 103.

we are constantly calling on frames of reference to make sense of what is going on around us in the new environment. Travel experiences are substantive because of all the work our minds have had to do putting referents together to understand the location. This work is much greater than the work we do in our everyday lives to understand our surroundings. Inevitably, participating in this work makes the touristic event rich.

Volunteer tourists come to New Orleans and listen to the residents as they work on the houses and spend time around town. Because Hurricane Katrina was heavily documented by the news media in the days following the storm, the volunteer tourists' stories give us individual's experiences. The media told stories in short sound bites, but volunteer tourists seek to learn more. The sound bites from the news media are then replaced with relationships, experiences, and stories. The resident and the volunteer tourists develop a relationship and the appreciation volunteer tourists feel becomes a story in itself.

The volunteer tourists' stories reflect the difficulty for volunteer tourists to be in New Orleans. Often disjointed, the stories do not flow linearly with a beginning, middle, or end. Additionally, the stories are excerpts and highlight pieces and parts of the volunteer tourists' experiences. The volunteer tourists try to understand the city through telling their volunteer experience. The stories are fragmented, incomplete, and may not be considered stories by some. Notwithstanding their pieces, they deserve to be investigated and the stories hold valuable insights into the volunteer tourists' experiences. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett urges us to look at the "ethnographic fragments."<sup>65</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett refers to objects in museums as these "ethnographic fragments," talking about how the fragments were taken by ethnographers. The pieces of volunteer tourists' experiences, as told to me, and what I'm referring to as stories,

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<sup>65</sup> Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 18.



deserve to be heard and held in the same regard as the “ethnographic fragments” to which Kirshenblatt-Gimblett refers. These excerpts testify to the volunteer tourists’ experience in New Orleans as also disjointed, incomplete, changing, and something they’re still trying to understand. The volunteer tourists’ disjointed stories testify to the complicated nature of New Orleans and the volunteer tourism experience. In looking at a variety of narratives volunteer tourists tell, I attempt to understand how they understand New Orleans and their experience as a volunteer tourist. I also investigate what helps volunteer tourists make sense of the destruction and construction around them.

### **What Do Stories Do?**

Stories are how volunteer tourists understand Hurricane Katrina, the reverberations of disaster, and the traumatic effects it still has on residents. Telling the story requires that the tourists reflect on their experiences. These accounts often detail what they saw, whom they met, and what stories they heard that brought them to New Orleans. Stories help them make sense of the chaos.

Just as souvenirs symbolize memories of a location, stories become the memories of New Orleans volunteer tourists take home with them. Rather than stories being an integral part of the volunteer tourist experience, they *are* the experience. Stories are also the way volunteer tourists convey their experiences. Löfgren also clarifies how narrative functions within experience. In discussing the uniqueness of each experience, he states, “Experience structures expression and expression structures experience.”<sup>66</sup> Löfgren indicates that the telling is the experience and the telling also shapes the experience. To address the translation process between audience and storyteller, he asserts, “However much energy goes into the production of these narratives and

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<sup>66</sup> Löfgren, 103.

whatever their fate, producing them was an experience in its own right.”<sup>67</sup> Löfgren talks about both hearing and telling the narrative as an event in itself. Although Löfgren discusses the before and during the journey, the focus of this chapter is to look at the stories volunteer tourists tell during their trip and when they return home.

Volunteer tourists listen intently as residents tell their stories and then relay these stories. The performative nature of storytelling means that volunteer tourists are constantly making choices. Langellier and Peterson state, “A different system of exclusion operates in the ways that discourse divides and rejects what is meaningful from what is meaningless, what belongs to the narrative and what does not, what contributes to understanding and what does not.”<sup>68</sup> They confirm that performers make choices based on what they find essential to relay. Volunteer tourists talk about a variety of topics when talking about residents. Volunteer tourists relate information about residents’ health, their storm stories, how they got ripped off, and the culture in New Orleans. The volunteer tourists perform the residents’ stories adopting them and relating them as part of their experience.

Additionally, I interviewed many participants in pairs and they corroborated each others’ statements. Ochs and Capps discuss this as well, “Narrative activity becomes a tool for collaboratively reflecting upon specific situations and their place in the general scheme of life.”<sup>69</sup> Ochs and Capps describe narrative as collaborative. The collaborative nature of storytelling builds community. Because these volunteer tourists build stories together, community is built simultaneously.

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<sup>67</sup> Löfgren, 92.

<sup>68</sup> Kristin M. Langellier and Eric E. Peterson, *Storytelling in Daily Life: Performing Narrative* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 19.

<sup>69</sup> Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps, *Living Narrative: Creating Lives in Everyday Storytelling* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 2.

## What Do Stories Have to Do with New Orleans?

As they hammer nails, paint walls, and clean debris, volunteer tourists are collecting stories detailing their experience to take home. For volunteer tourists, the stories are proof they came to New Orleans, worked on houses, saw the destruction, and met residents.<sup>70</sup> Coleman and Crang mention that in addition to “seeing,” “Tourism is also about storytelling, chatting, swapping anecdotes, competitive tales (either of success or fortitude). . . .”<sup>71</sup> Coleman and Crang discuss storytelling as part of being a tourist. Because of volunteer tourists’ emphasis on altruism, working, and learning about the place, stories have an even more integral role in the volunteer tourism experience.

New Orleans is a place of stories and tales because of its location as a port city with people coming and going, and its colorful past during slavery and prohibition. With a strong oral tradition, stories of the mythical wolf, Loup Garou, and the Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveau, color the history of New Orleans. These stories continue today. Today, we have additional stories as part of our storytelling tradition.

Arguably, the largest disaster in American history, Hurricane Katrina adds to the culture of storytelling. Volunteer tourists gather stories in New Orleans of the terror from Hurricane Katrina to the kindness of the residents. New Orleans is a central character in the volunteer tourists stories. De Certeau states, “Every story is a travel story – a spatial practice. For this reason, spatial practices concern everyday tactics, are part of them, from the alphabet of spatial indication (‘It’s to the right,’ ‘Take a left’), the beginning of a story the rest of which is written by footsteps, to the daily ‘news’ (‘Guess who I met at the bakery?’), Television news reports,

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<sup>70</sup> Photos are another type of souvenir for volunteer tourists, but I will not be discussing that in this chapter.

<sup>71</sup> Simon Coleman and Mike Crang, “Grounded Tourists, Travelling Theory,” in *Tourism: Between Place and Performance*, ed. Simon Coleman and Mike Crang (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), 8-9.

legends, and stories are told.”<sup>72</sup> In this quote, de Certeau talks about the integral role of the space in the story. Volunteer tourists tell stories about their experience *in* and *through* New Orleans. Volunteer tourists describe their experiences in New Orleans through who they meet, their roles in the city as tourists, volunteers, and advocates. The space of New Orleans is integral in all parts of the story: the creation, the telling, and the hearing of the story.

Many of these stories are about stories volunteer tourists have heard and are relating to me as part of their experience in New Orleans. However, their stories function as a “semi-personal” narrative, passed from individual to individual. Hearing the story from a second-hand storyteller, this demonstrates how stories travel. Chaim Noy relays stories from the perspective of Israeli backpackers in his article, “Performing Identity: Touristic Narratives of Self-Change.” One participant of his study articulates to him what she “knows.” He then states, “By listening to her remarkable story, I, too, became a witness: a second-order witness, a witness of a witness.”<sup>73</sup> As Noy indicates, the bodies of the tellers are connected to us as the researcher, listener. Hurricane Katrina stories travel as well. Even though these narratives are often third-hand, the stories impact the volunteer tourists. Volunteer tourists repeat the stories to me and others when they get home. This does not lessen the validity of the story, and in fact, the story becomes powerful as it is told and retold, each time stirring emotions and action. Current volunteer tourists recruit others to join them on their next trip to continue the cycle of witnessing the devastation and the residents’ struggles.

The stories about the character of residents and how volunteer tourists feel rewarded demonstrate how storytelling builds connections between individuals and community. These

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<sup>72</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 116.

<sup>73</sup> Chaim Noy, “Performing Identity: Touristic Narratives of Self-Change,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (2004): 130.

volunteer tourists contribute to the community, and when they hear thank yous, their contribution to the community is recognized and reinforced. They then relay these to me. As Ochs and Capps state, “Informal conversation is the communicative glue that establishes and maintains close relationships in many communities.”<sup>74</sup> Volunteer tourists form associations with residents and other volunteer tourists while in New Orleans. Volunteer tourists maintain close relationships with fellow volunteers, often making repeat trips with the same individuals. Many of volunteers also retain close relationships with the residents of New Orleans. Former volunteer tourists send residents packages, fly them to their hometowns to visit, and correspond with them throughout the year.

Volunteer tourists collect and create stories while in New Orleans and then take them home with them. Not only are stories collector’s items, but they also help volunteer tourists understand New Orleans, New Orleanians, Hurricane Katrina, their role in the city, and how they will convey their role to future listeners. Volunteer tourists tell and retell stories about residents, their connection with the city, disaster, their contributions and they tell stories about the future.

### **Residents Storying, Storying Residents**

Volunteer tourists understand the storm through New Orleanians’ stories of Hurricane Katrina. Volunteer tourists learn stories from residents and then story the residents of New Orleans. Volunteer tourists tell about experiences they’ve had with residents or retell stories residents relayed to them, constructing their experiences through residents and their stories. In this section Brenda relates residents’ stories, Tammy and Haley talk about their experience with residents, Izzy and William tell about their unrealized expectations. Then Sonia, Kerri, and

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<sup>74</sup> Ochs and Capps, 8.

Sunny talk about residents' resiliency, Angie discusses residents' willingness to tell stories, and Marcus, Fred, and Wayne talk about the openness of residents.

A group of three volunteers from Wisconsin have taken over this modified shotgun house in the Hollygrove neighborhood. Best known as Lil'Wayne and the Marsalis family's neighborhood, this group, all over age sixty, are cleaning, finishing walls, and painting. The room has no furniture, but painting supplies and two boxes of records sit in the far corner. I introduce myself to a volunteer named Brenda who is in her sixties. Brenda is wearing paint-stained shorts, a white t-shirt, and a friendly smile. Brenda has a Ph.D. in sociology and works as a warden at a prison in Wisconsin. This is her second trip to New Orleans to work, and this is her second week of this year's trip. She, Garrett, and Garrett's wife worked together at the same house both weeks, but took the weekend off to enjoy New Orleans' French Quarter Festival. She's sitting in the half lotus position on the floor painting the baseboards off-white. I sit down next to her and ask, "What does it mean to have people tell their stories to you?"

Brenda exhales and then replies:

It's a gift. It's a gift. It's a gift when they are willing to share things from their heart. I love talking to Shirley, who lives across the street. Her whole face lights up. I like listening to the different stories. Miss Vera is a grandmother. She talks about her children, raising her children and raising her grandchildren. She talks about how the Marsalis boys: Branford and Wynton would walk along here carrying trumpets on their way to school, and she knows the whole family. It's really neat. She has been to Africa and belongs to two dance groups that do multicultural dancing and singing. She's a really neat person.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Interview with Brenda, April 17, 2009.

Brenda shares parts of Vera's story: her life and life experiences. Each is a part of Vera drawn from the different parts of who she is: African-American, a mother, and a grandmother. For Brenda it is important to hear who Vera is as a person. Also, for Brenda, getting to know these residents is a part of her volunteer experience. The stories give the volunteers a reason to work and become part of the cause. Vera and Shirley's stories are how Brenda understands the history and culture of New Orleans. These stories serve as souvenirs of Brenda's experience in New Orleans.

As Brenda talks about how learning about Shirley and Vera is a crucial part of her experience, Tammy and Haley also tell about how residents are a part of their trip. Tammy and Haley are in their forties and repeat volunteers from a Baltimore church group working in a Lower Ninth Ward home. Haley is an IT administrator who has been to New Orleans five or six times, but she has lost count. Her last trip was seven months ago. Haley is single, does not have any children, and is a breast cancer survivor. Her 18-year-old niece is on the trip with her and convinced Haley to come back this time. Tammy and her husband, who did not come down with her this trip, own a construction business in Baltimore. She is the organizer of the trip and says she was inspired to organize the trip through a leadership seminar she was involved in a few years ago.

When I ask Tammy and Haley where they would like to be interviewed, they choose a cold, damp, and dark room in the rear of Ms. Bourgeois' house. The sheetrock has been removed and bare studs segment the wall. However, the volunteers choose this room because it shows off their newly built stairs to the second floor. Ms. Bourgeois' house sat in water for months after the storm, rotting her original staircase to the second floor. Two eighteen year-old women from this group rebuilt the staircase. Tammy and Haley not only convey what they have

done in New Orleans, but they also communicate how they understand what happened in the city. I ask Tammy and Haley, two group leaders and volunteers, “What have you done and what will you do on your trip?”

Tammy begins:

We spent Sunday afternoon just walking around the French Quarter and French Market area. We had beignets; we did a little bit of the Moonwalk together that was fun. Some of them got to see the Mississippi River for the first time. Wednesday night we went to eat dinner at the Redfish Grill. That was very good. Some of us stretched and ate some things we hadn’t eaten before. [They laugh.] We ate a little gator and oysters and crawfish or whatever they had. And we did a little bit of Bourbon Street; we saw the nightlife. We had a half hour of that and that was enough of that. [They laugh.] We did a really cool thing. Our Pastor David, who came with us last time, has friends, Gary and Nancy, who live in the Garden District. They invited us to their home and provided dinner for us. Nancy took us on a little walking tour where we saw some historic homes and a historic cemetery. To have the opportunity to sit with someone who lives here and hear their stories that aren’t in the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward, but they’re in the Garden District. It’s very humbling to sit there and share that with them. You know they’re very grateful.

Haley states:

Yeah, the reason they had us back because Pastor David didn’t come with us even they were like, ‘It’s the least we can do because people are coming down to help rebuild our city.’ So even though they’re in an area that wasn’t very hard hit, and they were less affected certainly long term than most people, it’s their city. ‘You’ve come to help us,’ and it was really nice and it was very comfortable. They chose this city to move to in



retirement, and they told us how much they love it and what it means to them. That was really nice too.<sup>76</sup>

The conversation with Haley and Tammy continues when I ask, “What’s your favorite part about New Orleans?”

Haley responds, “It’s warm. [She laughs.] No, it’s really cold at home. That’s my favorite part this time. Last time it was June.”

Tammy reiterates, “We were just reflecting we have to go home tomorrow to 30-degree temperatures and we’re not looking forward to that. I would say the people. I’ve met very, very few unkind folks here wherever I go whether it’s the supermarket or the French Quarter or the Lower Ninth Ward. That’s what draws me back.”

Haley adds, “People have been very friendly and very grateful and very open, you know, willing to tell us their stories. You just know someone for a half hour and they’re willing to tell you this horrible experience that happened to them including what they felt and what they went through. That’s a lot for people to do.”

Tammy details the hospitality of Gary and Nancy and discusses eating dinner with residents of the city as part of her group’s activities. In describing Gary and Nancy’s stories as “humbling to sit there and share that with them,” she posits herself in the position as a receptacle of the story, collecting it, taking it in. An integral part of these volunteer tourists’ experience is hearing Gary and Nancy share stories. These experiences with residents are souvenirs of New Orleans.

Haley talks about these residents who made dinner to show appreciation for the sacrifices the volunteers make in coming here. During dinner, Tammy and Haley listened to Gary and

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<sup>76</sup> Interview with Haley and Tammy, January 22, 2009.

Nancy's stories about the storm. Haley states, "So even though they're in an area that wasn't very hard hit, and they were less affected certainly long term than most people, it's their city." As Haley demonstrates in this statement, hearing stories helps volunteer tourists gain understanding about the people and the culture of New Orleans. Gary and Nancy's stories create an understanding of these residents and how they dealt with the storm and serve as a something Tammy and Haley can take home with them.

Finally, as Tammy and Haley explain, residents' friendliness will bring these volunteer tourists back to New Orleans. Residents welcome volunteer tourists into their culture and their lives. As Haley points out, "You just know someone for a half hour and they're willing to tell you this horrible experience that happened to them including what they felt and what they went through." Getting to know the residents through their stories is understanding their experience in New Orleans. The experiences with residents create a shared understanding. Additionally, the stories serve as a way for volunteer tourists to remember the city.

Izzy and William are also from the Baltimore church group. Izzy, one of the women who built the stairs, is eighteen and William is in his fifties. Like Tammy and Haley, Izzy and William discuss the friendliness of New Orleanians and understand the city through experiences with the residents. Izzy is a student at Towson University, and works as a camp counselor during the summer. She is not a member of the Baltimore area Lutheran Church, but came here with her friend, who is Haley's niece. Despite the thirty-degree weather in New Orleans, she is wearing hiking boots to work with shorts. William works as an architect and is knowledgeable about construction principles but has no construction experience. His wife is battling cancer, and because of this he did not want to leave the country for a service mission. Izzy and William convey these experiences to me when I ask them, "What is the best part about New Orleans?"

William says, “Well, the weather is sure a plus.”

“I think the heart of the city. People are so nice and everyone says ‘hi’ to one another. At home it’s very busy and no one stops to say, ‘Hi.’ No one talks to you in the coffee shop; everyone is and getting to where they need to be,” Izzy states.

William gives specific examples:

When we’re out on the street doing surveys in this area or when we’re out front of the house I think the expectation was people coming by would look at us suspiciously. That hasn’t been the case at all. It was a little unexpected because they’d stop and talk to us. They’d wave to us as they went by. So, maybe they’ve come to understand why these strangers are in their neighborhood. That was really nice to see.<sup>77</sup>

Rather than remarking on the architecture, the partying, or the beignets, Izzy and William talk about the residents as the best part about New Orleans. Izzy and William describe residents’ regard for each other in New Orleans. William says, “It was a little unexpected because they’d stop and talk to us.” Noting a contrast in where they are from and their expectations in how they would be treated, Izzy and William highlight the residents as an important aspect of New Orleans. Izzy and William learn about the city through the residents and take the experiences with New Orleanians back to Baltimore as souvenirs.

Like Izzy and William, other volunteers also tell about their experiences with residents. I meet up with Sunny, Kerri, and Sonia who are students from New College at the Lower Ninth Ward Village. Sunny is gregarious. She comes into a room and her presence is known and her energy is infectious. She loves jazz music and she, Sonia, and Kerri are staying in the Lower Ninth Ward Village. They stay in sleeping bags in a shed behind the village. There are showers

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<sup>77</sup> Interview with Izzy and William, January 22, 2009.

at the Village, which they admittedly only sometimes use. Sunny, Sonia, and Kerri are here on their winter break. They're at New College in Florida and submitted a proposal to have a class in New Orleans focusing on the post Hurricane Katrina New Orleans issues. Sunny has her lip pierced and wears her thick dirty blond hair in a bob. She is wearing a tie-dyed t-shirt and jeans. Sonia is Hispanic and has stark black hair. Sonia has a caring demeanor which balances Sunny nicely. You can tell these two are close. Kerri is a photographer. Always with a camera around her neck, she is wearing a floral dress that hits about mid thigh.

Sonia, Kerri, Sunny, and I drive to the other side of the Lower Ninth Ward, directly behind the levee break, to participate in the Where's Your Neighbor? Program. This involves conducting surveys to determine how many people have come back to New Orleans and to ask residents who have returned, "Where's your neighbor?"<sup>78</sup> Through Sonia, Maria, and Kerri's experiences with residents, they understand the city and relay this understanding to me.

As we walk up and down the barren streets of the Lower Ninth Ward looking for houses or trailers with residents, I ask the volunteers to discuss what they feel is the best part about working as volunteers in New Orleans. Sunny begins, "Meeting people. They have a lot to say and it's interesting hearing what they have to say about coming back here."

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<sup>78</sup>“ The "Where's Your Neighbor?" program, seeks to develop a grassroots, community-led strategy for facilitating the return of residents still displaced from their Lower 9th Ward homes by Hurricane Katrina. The Lower 9th Ward Village is especially interested in reaching out to displaced elderly residents and residents with disabilities. Initial stages of the program will feature a public mural that combines new and existing data about displaced Lower 9th Ward residents into a comprehensive map of the Katrina diaspora. The map will be a shared resource that rebuilding organizations can use to target areas of greatest need.” Great New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center, “Lower Ninth Ward Community Center and Fair Housing Center Hold ‘Where’s Your Neighbor’ Resource Fair,” The Community Investment Network, posted May 13, 2009 [http://www.communityinvestmentnetwork.org/nc/single-news-item-states/article/lower-9th-ward-community-center-fair-housing-center-hold-where-s-your-neighbor-resource-fair/?tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=930&cHash=771f184f18](http://www.communityinvestmentnetwork.org/nc/single-news-item-states/article/lower-9th-ward-community-center-fair-housing-center-hold-where-s-your-neighbor-resource-fair/?tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=930&cHash=771f184f18) (accessed on March 5, 2010).

“Yeah, they’ve been through so much. They’re still optimistic. They’re still good people, and they’re not brought down by all the bureaucracy that’s going on,” Sonia states.

Kerri adds, “Yeah, you have to be pretty resilient to not get angry or upset and let that distract you from returning to what you had before.”<sup>79</sup> Each of these volunteers talks about what they’ve learned through talking to residents and hearing their stories. Specifically, Sonia, Sunny, and Kerri discuss the resiliency they’ve noticed in the residents they’ve talked to since being here. Sunny starts the discussion, but Sonia and Kerri add that residents look forward despite the setbacks they encountered as a result of Hurricane Katrina. These volunteer tourists relate what they’ve learned about the city’s resiliency through the residents’ stories.

Angie conveys how residents’ stories help her understand them and the city. Angie is one of six Providence College students who sit with me in a room in the Lower Ninth Ward Village. We try to stay warm as we wait for our volunteer assignment. Angie is tall and exudes confidence. Her long straight brown hair is pulled into a ponytail, and she is wearing a black polar fleece jacket, jeans, and tennis shoes. She connects volunteering with her desire to be a social worker, and so she says she gets a lot out of being a volunteer. I ask Angie what hearing residents’ stories mean to her, and she replies: “I think residents’ openness is a big part of it. If we didn’t know people’s stories, then we wouldn’t know what we’re doing without their openness and willingness to tell their stories many times. I’m sure some of us asked the same people their story and they were willing to tell us over and over.”<sup>80</sup> Even though Angie does not retell any of the stories she has heard, hearing stories helps her frame her experiences. Angie also understands the strong possibility the resident has told the story to every set of volunteers he or she has met. This retelling of stories has an effect on the resident and the volunteer tourist.

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<sup>79</sup> Interview with Sonia, Maria, and Kerri, January 18, 2009.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with Angie, January 19, 2009.

The resident relives the experience in every retelling, but the story also gives the volunteer tourists an understanding of the city, its struggles and the residents they are helping. The stories serve as reminders for the volunteer tourists of the work to take with them when they return home.

Like Angie, Marcus, Wayne, and Frederick relay how what residents tell them helps them understand the struggles of the city. They are wearing wind pants with matching Progressive Black Men, Inc. green sweatshirts. Students from Florida State University, the three of them are laughing. Even as they answer my questions, they're laughing. These guys are definitely having a good time. Marcus, Wayne, and Frederick were finishing up their volunteer assignment to set up a computer lab at the Lower Ninth Ward Village, I also ask them, "What is the best part of New Orleans?"

Marcus begins, "I'd have to say the way the people still have their heads up and not always down. They're just trying to move forward to continue to build and not abandon the place where they've been for so long."

Wayne adds:

I'd have to agree with him as well. I think New Orleanians are fighters and they fight for what they believe in. People here have been fighting for the last three years even though the media has not covered as much as it did when it first happened. There's still a lot here to be done and they're holding their heads up and working one day at a time, fighting against these fines, which is completely ridiculous.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Wayne discusses the city ordinance giving the city the right to take property that has unmowed grass, compiling daily fines, and finally taking the property in an area where few residents have been able to move back. City of New Orleans, "Code of Ordinances: Chapters 1, 26, and 28," [http://library3.municode.com/default-test/home.htm?infobase=10040&doc\\_action=whatsnew](http://library3.municode.com/default-test/home.htm?infobase=10040&doc_action=whatsnew) (accessed March 5, 2010).

Frederick states, “I agree with them also. People have just been opening up their arms just taking us in like we’re a part of their family. So it’s really been a great experience thus far.”<sup>82</sup> Marcus, Wayne, and Frederick are inspired by New Orleanians. Marcus begins by talking about how residents have a positive attitude despite their struggles. Frederick is amazed that during their short stay residents are so welcoming. These experiences help the FSU students understand the residents and the character of the city. The residents and their openness frame Wayne, Marcus, and Frederick’s experience in New Orleans.

In this section, Brenda related her experiences with residents in the Hollygrove neighborhood, and Tammy and Haley recounted their dinner with a couple in the Garden District. Izzy and William spoke about New Orleanians exceeding their expectations, and Sonia, Kerri, and Sunny related stories about residents’ resiliency.

Angie discussed residents’ willingness to tell their stories. Finally, Frederick, Wayne, and Marcus talked about how residents relate their positive attitudes, fight, and welcoming nature through stories the best aspects of New Orleans. In the next section, I look at how volunteer tourists retell residents’ stories of death and disaster.

### **Storying Death and Disaster**

Volunteers incorporate residents’ stories about death and disaster in New Orleans, retelling harrowing Hurricane Katrina stories. These stories recount the destruction of the city, residents’ homes, incredible rescues, and even death. Both hearing and telling stories of death and disaster are part of the volunteer tourism experience, and volunteer tourists take these stories home with them. In this section, Sonia discusses flooding, and Stacy and Shannon have a conversation about drowning and death. Brenda discusses residents’ experiences with death,

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<sup>82</sup> Interview with Marcus, Wayne, and Frederick, January 19, 2009.

Ethan will talk about the effects of the disaster on the children, a group from Providence College talk about the compounding effects of disaster, and Haley discusses the physical remnants of disaster.

Sonia, a volunteer from New College in Florida, relates her understanding of the flood through the eyes of a resident. Sonia describes going to a resident's home in the Lower Ninth Ward as part of "Project Green Light." She explains:

Some of us have been working with Project Green Light. We go and replace light bulbs. We go door to door, people make appointments, and we replace old light bulbs with more energy efficient ones. They're better for the environment, they save energy, they save money for people, and they last like five to seven times longer. So we went door to door and we met some cool people and we heard some of their stories. Mr. Cotton, he's an elderly man, he's retired, and he draws. He showed us some of his pictures that were on his wall and one of them was called "Katrina." It was the view from his front porch. He painted the swing that was just above the water, and he put crosses on the houses because it looked like the above ground cemeteries you have down here. We thought that was really powerful, interesting, and hit us hard.<sup>83</sup>

Sonia tells about participating in Project Green Light and how that opened the door for her to hear Mr. Cotton's story. Mr. Cotton interprets his storm stories with pencil and paper. Sonia relives the storm through his drawings. She sees the barely visible roofs of flooded houses as tombs of Mr. Cotton's friends and neighbors. Engaging with Mr. Cotton's artwork, Sonia is able to understand his experience during the storm.

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<sup>83</sup> Interview with Sonia, January 18, 2009.



Sonia experienced Hurricane Katrina stories through Mr. Cotton's drawings, and Stacy and Shannon experience the storm through residents' stories. Stacy, an eighteen year old from Connecticut, and Shannon, her group leader, also relay residents' stories. I meet up with Stacy and Shannon in the Barataria basin in Jean Lafitte National Park. It is beautiful and serene, and a stark contrast to the construction projects their fellow volunteers are doing today on the other side of town. Cypress trees and palm fronds surround us, and the volunteers are cleaning up the swamp. Cleaning up the swamp involves using pitchforks to remove grass and fallen branches from the bayou. Keeping branches out of the bayou is essential to prevent flooding, but the park ranger tells the fifteen volunteers ranging from fourteen to forty years old to "make the swamp pretty." Just as the volunteers get started, the park ranger warns of snakes and shortly thereafter Stacy and Shannon are from Connecticut. Stacy is wearing her blond hair in a side ponytail and wearing imitation Ray Ban sunglasses with pink arms. Even though we are in the shade, she doesn't take them off. Stacy is wearing a Class of 2008 t-shirt and cut off shorts. Shannon is a woman in her forties with long wavy blond hair. She is the group leader and is planning a trip to Kenya to do volunteer work next year. After chatting with Stacy and Shannon for a while, I ask, "What's the worst part about New Orleans?"

Shannon states, "I guess people have been telling us it's *really* dangerous. We just had that discussion with--"

--Andy was telling us," Stacy continues.

"Yeah," Shannon agrees.

Stacy adds, "I think the worst part is going down into the Lower Ninth Ward and there was just like *nothing* there. Like there were these beautiful tree lined streets, like huge trees, and that [pausing] was it. And there were these plots of land and there was just--"

--yeah, just gone,” Shannon states.

--blocks and blocks and blocks just completely demolished,” Stacy adds. “Also we were walking down one of the streets in the Lower Ninth Ward last year. You know how they have the X’s with zeros? I was kind of joking around and I said, ‘What are those numbers?’ And someone responded, ‘That’s the number of bodies they found in the house.’”

--Yeah, the bodies they found in the house,” Shannon repeats.

Yeah,” Stacy adds.

Shannon continues, “I agree with that and also that sadness that’s under the surface that makes me sad too.”

It’s tragically beautiful,” Stacy laughs nervously.

It’s just so raw still,” Shannon adds to Stacy’s observation, “You know that people here lost pets and relatives and homes. There’s a sadness that’s under the surface that makes me sad, too.”<sup>84</sup>

Stacy retells a story she heard the previous year when volunteering in New Orleans, “Last year a woman told us a story about one of her neighbors who stayed back to do something, but he sent his wife and daughter off. I guess he waited out the flood, and after a while someone told him that his wife and daughter had died so he killed himself. And his wife and daughter hadn’t died.”<sup>85</sup>

Yikes!” Shannon adds.

Stacy continues, “I remember it was at the baseball field and we sat down to take a break. This woman was just telling us. She wasn’t even working there, she just stopped by.”

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<sup>84</sup> Interview with volunteers, February 19, 2009.

<sup>85</sup> Interview with Stacy and Shannon, February 20, 2009.

“Everybody has a story, it’s amazing,” Shannon says. “Even [a homeowner’s] aunt and uncle were talking about their neighbor. They kept encouraging her to come to their house because they had a second floor. She didn’t get out in time, and she spent three days on a roof. [She pauses.] There’s just one story after another.”

“Yeah,” Stacy says.

I break the silence to ask, “Does it get exhausting for y’all?”

Shannon states, “I find it exhausting. I find it kind of emotionally exhausting.”

“Yeah, well, we just keep going and going and going and going and going doing work, and talking to people and doing all this stuff,” Stacy says. “You don’t really have the time to process it until after you get back. Then you’re kind of stuck in all this affluence and you’re like, ‘Oh my God, what did I just do?’”

Shannon adds, “Yeah, I don’t think I could do more than a week. I really don’t. I don’t think I could do it. It’s just too intense.”

“Yeah, it is pretty intense,” Stacy concludes.<sup>86</sup>

Stacy and Shannon discuss the stories they hear as volunteer tourists. These stories of death and disaster shape their experiences in New Orleans. Shannon and Stacy talk about how they, as volunteer tourists, experience disaster and how residents experienced death. These stories become how the volunteer tourists experience New Orleans. The stories have a ripple effect, touching multiple people in multiple ways. These stories get told and retold by residents and volunteer tourists alike. The stories of death and disaster remain with Stacy and Shannon as they recall stories from previous years’s volunteer trips. The sense of loss lingers despite the years separating the present from Hurricane Katrina.

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<sup>86</sup> Interview with Stacy and Shannon, February 20, 2009.

Hearing the stories affects the volunteer tourists. Shannon and Stacy agree that the stories take an emotional toll on the volunteer tourists, but they also serve as a way for volunteer tourists to understand the way residents experienced the storm. The stories touch the volunteer tourists and serve as souvenirs from their trips to New Orleans.

Like Shannon and Stacy, Tammy discusses the remnants of death in New Orleans and how talking to residents helps her understand the city:

We just talked to a lady who is connected to the school system. She said, ‘When these kids look out the window they probably see floodwaters and bodies floating.’ That realization, that statement really affected me today, but this is something. Even when [the city is] all cleaned up, these children are going to have this image for the rest of their lives. It’s kind of hard to go back. We’ve been on mission trips to the Dominican Republic, and it’s the same thing. You want to do so much. The first time I went to the Dominican Republic I had a hard time coming home and adjusting.<sup>87</sup>

In Tammy’s discussion with the school representative, she gains a new perspective on how Hurricane Katrina stays with New Orleanians, particularly young New Orleanians. Tammy retells part of a statement from a resident she met who said, “[The kids] probably see floodwaters and bodies floating.” The sense of death will always be in New Orleans, and this site will always be a site of death for residents of New Orleans. As Tammy shares similar stories of volunteering, she compares her experience in New Orleans to the Dominican Republic. Tammy is comparing one service mission to another, but she is also comparing a developing nation to a metropolitan city in the United States. In a sense, Tammy is assigning third-world characteristics

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<sup>87</sup> Interview with Tammy, January 22, 2009.

to New Orleans and its residents.<sup>88</sup> Through these shared stories, Tammy has an understanding of the experience of the storm for these children and the lasting effects on the community. The incidents shared serve as memories from Tammy's trip to New Orleans.

Like Tammy, Brenda from Wisconsin also talks about her understanding of death. She expounds on her first trip to New Orleans:

Some of the conditions that people knew about for so long would have been fixed so the devastation would not have been the devastation. The daughter of the house owner we worked for last year in the Lower Ninth Ward was a cardiotech. So she would monitor the heart patients in her hospital, and the generators of her hospital were in the basement. So she had to watch all of her patients die. And by the time they tried to evacuate, they were put on one of the busses that went across Lake Pontchartrain and they were one of the busses that were met by the Jefferson Parish Sheriffs with shotguns. So she spent three days on that bridge along with the inmates from the jails in the really awful conditions. When the busses finally did arrive, she just had to get on one not knowing where she was going to end up and had no idea where any of her family was. So, again, all those stories.<sup>89</sup>

Without taking a breath, Brenda continues with her collection of stories:

The son of the house owner had been working in a pumping station as an electrician when the levees broke. He rescued the life of one of his coworkers who couldn't swim, and then he was ordered to stay in the city and repair the fuse boxes and keep the pumps going because the debris was being sucked into the pumps. They had crews working twenty-four hours around the clock to keep the pumps going. At points he would be

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<sup>88</sup> My future research will discuss how volunteer tourists "third world" New Orleans further.

<sup>89</sup> Interview with Brenda, April 17, 2009.

wading through that horrible toxic water up to his neck just to get from one switch block to another switch block to repair the switches. People are dying from emotional reasons and physical reasons. They're continuing to die from Hurricane Katrina and Rita at much higher rates than other places. This homeowner, Vera, just stood on her front porch one day and said, 'That person died, that person died.' She just pointed to houses all over the place and said they died either during or after Hurricane Katrina.”<sup>90</sup>

Brenda's experience speaks to how volunteer tourists collect stories of death. These stories shape their experience as volunteers. Brenda relays the harrowing experience of a cardiotech and a pumping station repairman. For Brenda, these stories of death are evidence that provisions to protect people were not made. As she states, “Some of the conditions that people knew about for so long would have been fixed so the devastation would not have been the devastation,” and she proceeds to detail the devastating stories of these individuals. In Brenda's stories about death, she highlights that the deaths were unnecessary and could have been avoided. Brenda also demonstrates understanding of New Orleans when she says, “People are dying from emotional reasons and physical reasons. They're continuing to die from Hurricane Katrina and Rita at much higher rates than other places.” Part of Brenda's experience in New Orleans is learning about the prevalence of death and disaster. These stories not only detail these residents' dying days, but the stories also show an understanding of New Orleans' struggles. Further, for Brenda, the stories serve as a souvenir and a testament of the unnecessary deaths of New Orleans residents.

Like Brenda, Ethan discusses his understanding of the continued effects of Hurricane Katrina. Ethan is with a UCC group from California. I meet with his group in New Orleans

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<sup>90</sup> Interview with Brenda, April 17, 2009.

East, a suburb wiped out by the storm. The UCC, noticing the lack of rebuilding in “the East,” coordinated volunteer groups to work on four houses in the same neighborhood this week. Ethan is the only African-American in the group, and his wife and daughter are working at another house in the neighborhood. The three of them will fly back a day later than everyone else in the group to enjoy the city an extra day. Ethan is insightful, passionate, and reflexive. He is suspicious of my motives at first, but then he opens up and demonstrates his understanding of New Orleans. He explains:

I find that I’m very conscious of space when I’m here talking with people because you have to be before you start to understand a person’s personal story about their response to the storm. One young woman near the house we were working on last year said she woke up that morning and her bedroom was filled with water. And we were at St. Matthews last year and they had a theatre group that does some work there. They were talking about their young people’s program and how if it starts to rain and thunder, some of the kids just flip out. They have to go around and take care of the kids. You have some sense that those things are sort of below the surface and if you talk with someone and you start to draw that out then you really have to be prepared to deal with that level of emotion. But on the other hand I’m thinking that if it were me, and I was in these circumstances and week after week, if I was meeting people who didn’t go through that, I think I would be very guarded and try to not be vulnerable. And I know people are wanting to console but for me it would probably be very difficult, day after day and week after week to, one, deal with the pain of it. But, two, deal with the joy of people coming open arms, willing to work, willing to give their time. I mean, we could be in Hawaii, we could be in Cabo, we could be in many different places spending our week, but we

choose to come here. So it's been important to me when folks like the other night were talking about what a blessing it is to have us come. It's important for me to let them know what a blessing it is for me to be here and be able to give something, something meaningful and do this work. Something very tangible. To me that's an amazing blessing.<sup>91</sup>

Being in New Orleans helps Ethan understand what residents went through during and after the storm. Ethan talks about the role of volunteer tourists as listeners of stories saying, "You have some sense that those things are sort of below the surface and if you talk with someone and you start to draw that out then you really have to be prepared to deal with that level of emotion." Ethan mentions the potential disadvantage in serving as a listener to residents' stories. However, being in New Orleans allows Ethan to understand what lies below the stories of residents. He is able to sense the heartbreak, the pain, and the loss felt by the city, and he takes this with him when he leaves the city.

For other volunteers, the X's are a visible symbol of loss for the city. In the days following Hurricane Katrina, first responders went door to door throughout flooded neighborhoods to rescue survivors and locate the deceased. Each house was marked with an "X" with each quadrant used for pieces of information about the first responders' findings. The top number gives the date of the search. The left number gives the first responder unit who conducted the search. The right gives a code for the type of contamination found within. The bottom number gives the number of bodies found inside the structure. Some residents have painted over their "X," others haven't yet returned to their home, and others have renovated their home leaving the "X" as a tribute of what they have endured since the storm. Although these

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<sup>91</sup> Interview with Ethan, May 7, 2009.



“X’s” represent New Orleans’ past, volunteer tourists see them for the first time as they come into devastated neighborhoods to rebuild. Most volunteer tourists are disturbed by this symbol, and admittedly the first time I saw a “1” in the lower quadrant, indicating a body was found, my heart fell into my stomach.

The “X’s” make volunteer touring more than looking at destroyed homes. The X’s mark the house as a place where someone died. Bringing death to the forefront, they give volunteer tourists a deeper understanding of what New Orleanians went through – the emotional losses they suffer as a result of Hurricane Katrina. The X’s tell a story as well. They tell the story of residents who could not come back, some of whom are dead. The X’s re-perform death in the story they tell.

The X’s are the start of the conversation with the Providence College Group and convey the sense of understanding these volunteer tourists have about the city. Lucy, Madison, and Sam are all from Providence College. Sandra is one of their group leaders. The group invites me to join them to eat our bag lunches in their rented van. Today is one of the coldest days of the year and I happily take up their offer. Their passion about working is infectious. Staying at a modified church dorm, the Providence College group complains about the cold, one of their organizers, but when I ask them what their least favorite part of New Orleans is, Sam says, “The X’s on houses.”

Angie inserts, “And how it isn’t fixed and I noticed your city government isn’t stepping up to help. I don’t know--no one is except volunteers and the people who live here care it seems.”

“You have a perfectly normal neighborhood and people working hard and restoring houses. Right in the middle is a completely gutted or abandoned house with leaves everywhere. I just think that’s disheartening,” Sam states.

Angie adds, “Especially if you consider the people’s spirits and determination to keep it the way it was and--”

“--the fact that New Orleans was torn apart and not put back together in a logical order and it’s still kind of chaotic this long after Katrina,” Sandra interrupts.

“--just the way things have been prioritized as seen from an outsider’s perspective,” Madison states.

Lucy says:

One thing that really upsets me is Ms. Courtney, we’re painting her house, she paid someone \$4000 to put up a fence and it’s falling down. It’s all tilted and she’s called them back several times and they won’t return her calls. People are getting ripped off left and right because people take advantage of them because they know they need stuff done. I think that’s the worst thing - taking advantage of people who are so trusting and would do anything for you. They’re already in debt I’m sure, they’re already at a loss and they just take their money and they have a broken fence \$4000 later.

Angie continues:

And it seems that there are a lot of jobs that obviously have been lost and people need jobs. It’s hard to come here and live here because you don’t have a job to do. But there are so many things you could do; there’s an endless number of jobs you could do here. Someone just needs to organize people to do the jobs fairly and accurately. But who does that? How do you organize that many people?

“You can’t trust. It seems to me you can’t trust the government. I mean, I don’t know too much about it, but the way that schools are shut down,” Madison states.

Angie continues, “Someone who used to go to Providence College does Teach for America down here. He was telling us about many problems down here with schooling. He got four new students yesterday--”

Madison interjects, “--in a special education class that has like 40 students in it already--”

“--and he’s the only teacher,” Angie states.

“--and he’s a year out of college,” Madison adds.

Sandra states, “He teaches ninth through twelfth grades; he has four grades in his class. The children run between 14 and 20 years old.”

“--and he teaches five different subjects, doesn’t he?” Angie states.

Madison says, “--yeah, and he doesn’t even have a teaching degree; he has a political science degree. He’s a smart guy; that’s just like--”

“—ridiculous,” Angie says.

Madison says:

And he brings the kids, some of the kids home because he’s determined for them to learn. They’ll need to stay for afterschool tutoring but they can’t. The parents can’t get them so he volunteers his time to bring them home. He said that one of the kids, they drove around for two hours because this 15 year old kid didn’t remember where he lived because they had moved four times in one month from like shack to shack.

Angie adds, “Through each of the blocks in the ninth ward, but they just found out he’s getting a house, like one of the Brad Pitt homes.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Interview with Lucy, Madison, Angie, Sam, and Sandra, January 18, 2009.

Through the Providence College group's telling of this story, it becomes apparent that these volunteer tourists understand the storm through this conversation. Their engagement in the conversation indicates their passion about the city and the people affected by the storm. The conversation moves from the physical status of New Orleans to the status of children's education in the city. These volunteer tourists not only talk about the reminders of the loss of lives through the X's on house, but also discuss residents' loss of hope. Residents' hope suffers through being taken advantage of by crooked contractors and lack of jobs in the city. Finally, the volunteer tourists talk about the loss of New Orleans' educational system and the affect that has on children. These volunteer tourists use the words "disheartening," "chaotic," and "ridiculous," to characterize various aspects of loss in New Orleans. These volunteer tourists take residents' issues to heart, and these issues affect them. These conversations not only tell of the sense of loss, but the volunteer tourists' engagement with the community and desire to contribute to it. Unlike many of the stories, this one had a "happy ending" with the child getting a Brad Pitt home after living in a "shack." Sandra, Lucy, Angie, Madison, and Sam demonstrate an understanding of New Orleans' issues through this story. The group from Providence College takes these stories with them as they return home and they serve as souvenirs.

Like the Providence College Group talking about the homes not being restored, Haley and Tammy from Maryland talk about another part of the New Orleans landscape. Haley and Tammy understand the city through the disaster. At the beginning of the interview I ask them what they did throughout the week. Because I was with them throughout some of their week, I help sum up their week's activities, prompting, "And yesterday you did surveying?"

Tammy says, "Yes, we went around and did census [as part of the Where's Your Neighbor? Program], which I thought was a real good experience. Especially for the younger

kids, you know, they reflected on what's not here and the people that are here, what they're feeling. My daughter picked up on what's not here and how sad that was for her."

Haley states:

It was much different for me to stand on someone's vacant steps than just to drive by it.

When you're spending all day walking through a neighborhood where a lot of it's gone or the house has been gutted you can walk up and *see* that it's been gutted. I was here seven months ago you drove by you saw a lot of steps that led to no house. It didn't sink in as well as spending a whole day in a neighborhood. Also, we met a few people who have dared to come back and understand that the emptiness next door has an impact on those people, too.<sup>93</sup>

Haley and Tammy discuss loss, specifically, "what's here and what's not here." Haley then talks about being able to physically experience loss through visiting the neighborhoods that experienced it. Haley discusses how seeing loss through the landscape helps her to realize the impact of the storm on another level. She "understand[s] that the emptiness next door has an impact on [the people who decided to come back.]" She senses the bareness of the neighborhood as she walked the barren, pothole-ridden streets. She's able to understand, to some extent, what residents go through as Haley puts herself in the position of the resident, looking next door to where a row of houses once stood and now the only remnants are concrete steps. Tammy and Haley bring these experiences home with them.

In this section, we've seen how volunteer tourists retell disaster and how they understand the city through retelling.<sup>94</sup> Sonia described the flood through the eyes of Mr. Cotton. Then

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<sup>93</sup> Interview with Tammy and Haley, January 22, 2009.

<sup>94</sup> Additionally, this section connects with ideas of thanatourism and "dark tourism." In future research, I will present this data within and against that set of research.

Stacy and Shannon retold stories of death and drownings and Brenda added stories she heard about death. Ethan discussed how children deal with death, the group from Providence College discussed the compounding effects of disaster, and Tammy and Haley discussed how the landscape illustrates loss. The experience of retelling allows the volunteer tourists to understand New Orleans. These experiences serve as souvenirs of the city.

### **Connecting through Stories**

In addition to understanding the residents, volunteer tourists also talk about their connection to the city. Volunteer tourists connect to the city through the residents and their stories. The stories serve as not only information for the volunteer tourists, but as a continued connection between the volunteer tourists and the city. Because volunteer tourists develop a connection to the residents, they then develop a connection to the community. Volunteer tourists' connection becomes part of their experience in New Orleans. This connection between the residents and the volunteer tourists then reinforce volunteer tourists' contribution to the community. In this section, Sam talks about his connection to a resident, Paula discusses her ability to get people to open up to her, Ethan discusses how working builds connection, and Celeste talks about understanding and appreciating the city and its residents.

Sam from Providence College talks about how stories help him connect to residents as a volunteer tourist. As Sam states:

I've enjoyed meeting the people and understanding and listening to their stories. It makes them more real. I like being able to say, 'I've met a survivor and I've seen a house that this happened to. The levees broke because this, that, and the other happened.' I know all about it and they've met me. I have Miss Courtney's phone number, and I want to come back down because she wants to rent out the house in August. And there's

still a lot of work to be done. So a few of us maybe, possibly when school ends in May before we all start working or whatever, it'd be cool to come down. I feel like we've established a friendship with Miss Courtney. It's a connection we have.<sup>95</sup>

In meeting the homeowner, Miss Courtney, Sam describes the exchange of stories as a way to understand the storm. Hearing about the storm face-to-face makes the storm and its effects tangible for Sam. Through the stories, Sam is able to understand the storm's negative impact on this homeowner and the city. Understanding how it affects Miss Courtney strengthens the connection between Sam and the residents. The connection to Miss Courtney *becomes* the experience for Sam.

Like Sam, Paula talks about how connecting through stories enhances her experience.

I can spot the house in Gert Town from the top of the street because of the FEMA trailer in front of the house. The owner, Miss Claire, calls it the West Wing. The front door is wide open and a series of cords are running out the front door. I walk into the front door unnoticed where four people are looking at the wall in the kitchen and discussing the placement of cabinets. When no one notices me enter, I announce, "Hey, how are y'all?"

I see Miss Claire, who turns around and says, "Hi!"

I introduce myself to the volunteers, and then another lady from the volunteer group walks down the stairs.

One of the other volunteers calls out and points at the lady walking down the stairs, "There's one to interview!"

"Hi, I'm Paula," she continues, "I'm working upstairs, would you like to join me?"

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<sup>95</sup> Interview with Sam, January 18, 2009.

“Sure,” I respond and follow Paula to the second floor of the house and into a newly painted room. Paula starts scraping the paint off the windows, and I listen. Paula is a slim woman whose stark white hair is in a bob. She is wearing a Habitat for Humanity t-shirt from a build in Pennsylvania. This is Paula’s first time in New Orleans, and she tells me she looks forward to hearing some great music. She is a retired school counselor who also tells me, “I have almost a doctorate in school counseling.”

Paula describes her volunteer experience:

Anybody I came in contact with I tried to engage, I tried to talk about what it’s been like for them. I didn’t feel like I could do that in the health center because it’s a privacy issue. So, I was sitting there with people but I couldn’t really talk to them. But when I was in the paint store, people were just coming in buying paint. People were asking me where the white was and I’d say, “Oh I’m just a volunteer. I don’t know where it is.” But anyway I started talking to a number of them. That was great because I’m pretty good at getting people to talk. So, I got to hear stories and that was important because I wanted it to be personal. Well, I came down here understanding intellectually what it was like but not actually hearing their stories. I also believe I really believe that telling those stories is really important even though they tell them over and over again. I know it’s important for them to keep doing that. So, I feel like in some ways I may have given that opportunity to people.<sup>96</sup>

Getting people to tell their stories is part of Paula’s experience. For Paula, telling the story adds to her experience in multiple ways. First, she creates opportunities to hear the stories. She seeks them out, like one does when buying souvenirs. Additionally, she feels that allowing

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<sup>96</sup> Interview with Paula, February 6, 2009.



residents telling their stories is therapeutic. Thirdly, hearing the stories helps her understand the storm and makes the experience of volunteering personal to her. The personal stories connect Paula to the storm and the residents. For Paula, the connection to the storm is also two-fold in that her contribution to the community is listening to residents to tell their stories, and she becomes connected to the city and the resident through these stories.

Like Paula, Luke also talks about how connecting with residents as a volunteer tourist adds to his experience. I arrive in Jean Lafitte National Park, and run to catch up with the volunteer group I'm meeting. I follow the trail for a bit on a raised wooden boardwalk, the trail winds over the bayous until we get to "solid ground" and it turns into asphalt. I see a group is just ahead. The volunteer coordinator told me the group was from Connecticut, and I'm not sure it's them until I see one of the group members wearing a shirt with Connecticut silk-screened across the back. The group of fifteen is following a guide who is wearing green fatigues and has a beard.

The guide asks, "What kind of tree is this?" There's silence. The two boys in the back are poking the tree above us with their large rakes. I just know something is going to fall on me.

He answers his own question, "It's a Tupelo tree," and follows by asking, "Does anyone know what that tree across the bayou is?" Again responding to himself, "It's a bald cypress. See how it has leaves on it? It's because we've had some very warm weather down here."

"What's a bayou?" Silence again. He responds, "It's a Choctaw word, a suspected Choctaw word, meaning a natural body of water flowing from one elevation to a lower elevation. It's harder to see down here because it's not a steep elevation, but it does that." The guide

continues to explain other parts of the area. He defines a swamp, points out the dwarf palmettos, and explains the fluting of the cypress trunks.

One volunteer is videotaping every word, a couple volunteers are listening intently, and the others are holding side conversations. I'm introduced to Luke once everyone is assigned their duties to "clean up the swamp." Luke is a recent Ivy League college graduate who majored in Film Studies and is looking for a fulltime job. Because he could not find work in Connecticut, he decided to take this trip to New Orleans with his parents' UU congregation. He is also here to investigate the Teach for America program and possibly participate. Luke describes how he connects to the city through his work. He explains:

Well, the first day we were painting, and we were working with ACORN. They were really kind of disorganized. We got up bright and early and it was another two hours before they got all their stuff together so we could start painting. And we were done working at two o'clock, and I was kind of dissatisfied. I wanted to work hard and actually accomplish something. So the next day we actually went down to the Lower Ninth Ward. There's this guy, Nat Turner, I don't know if you've heard of his project. There was this grocery store that he bought that had flooded, obviously, and he's turning it into a school. It's a free school he's starting with his own money. So we were there the past three days just replacing rotting beams in the ceiling. We raised the roof up and supported it. I really like the opportunity to do something that is beneficial to the people in the area and actually get in a full day's work. Also just talking to everyone down here has been great. We met this one guy, also down in the Lower Ninth Ward, who thanked us all. He said he always makes a point to come down and thank the volunteers that stop

by. He had this whole folder that he whipped out. He showed us the situation, and how his house ended up four blocks down the street.”<sup>97</sup>

Luke discusses how part of his experience is connecting to the city through the work he’s been doing and the stories of residents. Contrasting his work experience with ACORN, Luke comments on working with Nat Turner. Luke’s volunteer experience is enhanced through learning about Turner’s personal investment in local children’s education. Luke’s link to the city comes through the work he completes and the meaning behind the work he learns through Nat Turner’s story. Luke’s contribution to the community is reinforced because the work he did on the school can help area residents.

Like Luke, a group from McMaster University also connects to the city through residents. I meet Celeste, Daniel, Joe, and Ashley at the house they’re painting with ACORN. We sit on the front steps to chat. Unaccustomed to the colorful houses in New Orleans, these volunteer tourists are enjoying painting this Mid-City house lavender. Being the end of their volunteer week, these volunteer tourists have not only painted this house, but have also worked in the Lower Ninth Ward, enjoyed the music, food, Mardi Gras parades New Orleans offers. This is Daniel’s second trip in New Orleans and the others’ first trip to the city. Celeste, Daniel, and Joe are studying to be medical doctors, and they’re required to have a number of community service hours. This group of volunteer tourists was talking about the “social implications” of the storm, so I asked, “Have you seen some of the social implications play out since you’ve been here?”

Joe responds, “Well, it being four years after the fact I don’t know if it’d be that apparent to see; however, we did visit what’s his name?”

“Ronald Lewis,” Ashley and Celeste answer.

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<sup>97</sup> Interview with Luke, February 20, 2009.

“We did talk to him for a bit,” Joe states, “It’s less obvious than we think, and I haven’t seen that much honestly this trip.”

Celeste states, “Talking to Ronald [a Lower Ninth Ward resident] gave me a better idea of the situation and how it affected him personally. It gave me a very different side of the story than what I’d heard in the media. I learned a lot about the impacts on him and the community that I hadn’t known before.”

“--a lot of insight,” Ashley says.

“Yeah, talking to the locals definitely,” Daniel states, “It’s one of the things that’s really hard to tell by volunteers/tourists. But talking to locals, the people who have lived here for a while, it kind of gives you an insight into what happened. The community center that we’re staying at, they have programs for the homeless, they provide lunch, food, for them. It’s organizations like that kind of help with these social issues that occurred after Hurricane Katrina.”<sup>98</sup>

Celeste and her fellow volunteers bring Ronald up several times throughout the hour-long interview. Through Ronald’s story, these volunteer tourists gain perspective on the storm, and they are able to connect the storm they heard about on the news with people they have met. The stories allow these volunteer tourists to understand the storm, the residents, and the city. Celeste clarifies about how putting a story with a face and a person she met gave her a different perspective on the storm. She states, “Talking to Ronald gave me a better idea of the situation and how it affected him personally.” In discussing how much she learned from Ronald, Celeste implies that understanding the consequences for him personally helped her understand the connection between the storm and how it affected New Orleans residents.

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<sup>98</sup> Interview with Celeste, Joe, Daniel, and Ashley, February 19, 2009.

Additionally, through their understanding of the storm, they develop an understanding of the community. The understanding of the community increases the connection with the community. Celeste, Joe, Daniel, and Ashley's contribution to the community is not only through the painting of the house, but also through their connection to the city through the stories of residents.

In this section, we looked at how volunteer tourists experience connection through residents' stories. Sam discusses his connections to the community through Miss Courtney, Paula talks about how she creates connections, Ethan discusses how volunteer tourism activities position them to have a connection to the community, and the group from McMaster University discusses how residents connect the storm to the media's stories. Through hearing the stories of residents and through telling the stories of their experiences in New Orleans, volunteer tourists demonstrate their connection with the city and how those connections are a contribution.

### **Storying Contribution**

As volunteer tourists story their connection to the community, they also tell stories about their contribution to the community. Other volunteers tell stories about how rewarding the experience of volunteering is. Not only are stories the experience, but volunteer tourists understand their contribution to the community through the stories they tell about it. In this section, the Unitarian Universalist volunteers from Philadelphia give a multifaceted view of contribution, Ethan talks about a musician's recognition of the volunteer tourists' contribution, and Daniel and Ashley discuss how residents and other volunteer tourists story their contribution. Then Helen talks about her contribution of keeping people in their family homes and Andrea discusses how her t-shirt invites recognition of her contribution and a way to encourage future contributions.

As I approach the Unitarian Universalist volunteers from Philadelphia in the parking lot of Jean Lafitte National Park, on their last day, I can tell they are not thrilled to see me. These women are tired and have been shoveling dog feces, raking a baseball field, and cleaning the swamp throughout the week. I assure them they do not have to speak with me, but they insist. Once I ask them the initial questions, they warm up to me. Leslie is a social worker and she came a couple of years ago with her family to gut houses. Donna is a writer who has previously come to New Orleans for conventions, and Shelly is a public librarian. This is Shelly's first trip to New Orleans. Leslie tells the story of her favorite day in New Orleans:

It was Tuesday, and we were working at a double shotgun in Broadmoor. It was a beautiful sunny day like this, but it was much cooler. The 80-year-old mother and her 60-year-old daughter were living in the FEMA trailer right beside the house for years. The inside of the house was almost finished, and it was all new and clean. We did the outside trim work, painted and washed the floor, and then painted the back porch. The daughter came by and talked to us a little bit in the afternoon. I think that was my best day here. I felt like I was really helping someone directly.

Donna states:

I was on the same jobsite and that was my best day. But I have to say the best experience has just been meeting everyone that survived and has stories to tell, it's been incredible and everyone is so grateful that we're here. The parks department, when we were doing the baseball field, the supervisor kept saying 'We'd still be under the water if it weren't for the volunteers.'

Shelly states:

And I think the AmeriCorps volunteers. I'll always remember the AmeriCorps volunteers we met. Young people who are 21, 22 years old that are just so dedicated. You know they have such a sense of mission about what they're doing. Their enthusiasm is just so infectious so that even if you were doing a task that wasn't particularly pleasant, their enthusiasm made it like you really wanted to do it.<sup>99</sup>

As Leslie and Donna talk about her favorite day, they story their contribution to the community. Leslie, Donna, and Shelly's experience contributing helps them understand New Orleans and the struggles of the city. Leslie explains the near completion of the house and the abilities of the volunteers who renovated this house so the residents will no longer have to live in the FEMA trailer. She describes the scene, like the opening of a novel, dictating her experience. Her telling of her experience guides us through the day with her. Donna adds her experience volunteering noting that the recognition of their contribution by the park director helped her feel better about what she was doing. Finally, Shelly talks about the involvement of others and how that motivated her to contribute. Shelly admires the AmeriCorps volunteers' drive, and it also inspired her to help the city. In sum, Donna, Shelly, and Leslie's experience listening to others stories and telling their own stories helped them understand why they were contributing.

Like Donna, Leslie, and Shelly mention, some volunteer tourists discuss the appreciation of residents. Ethan from Berkeley says:

There's sort of your fundamental reason for being here which is the amazing architecture, how the city is laid out, the incredible food, the hospitality, and people generally seem to have an interest in living for the day maybe a little more than what we're used to. But

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<sup>99</sup> Interview with Leslie, Donna, and Shelly, February 6, 2009.

you know, we find ourselves in a few different situations: talking with different people in the neighborhoods. We're not talking with people as much this year as we did last time. We talk with different people in the neighborhoods. Last year we were working on the exterior of a house, right on a corner. It was an open yard and we were watching everybody walking and driving by. If we go down to the French Quarter or we go out to eat and we so happen to say why we're here, people are so touched. Every time whomever we're talking with says, "Thank you. Thank you so much for coming," even if what we're doing had nothing to do with them. People just say, "Thank you." One guy said to us, we were sitting at an outdoor marketplace at this restaurant and he was actually a guitar player in a band. And when the band took a break, he was passing a hat for tips and he came by. When we told him we were here working volunteering he said, "Wow, you guys were able to find us and FEMA couldn't."<sup>100</sup>

Ethan's story about his contribution as a volunteer has multiple meanings. First, these "thank yous" show that Ethan's work is appreciated. The appreciation he receives as a volunteer validates his effort as a volunteer tourist helping him understand the city's needs and how he contributes. This story Ethan relates also validates that volunteer tourists' contribution is more significant than the federal government's. As Ethan quotes the band member, "Wow, you guys were able to find us and FEMA couldn't." These stories reinforce the volunteer tourists' contribution to the community. Ethan is then able to take this understanding of his contribution home with him.

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<sup>100</sup> Interview with Ethan, May 7, 2009.



Like Ethan, Ashley and Daniel from Canada relate stories about their contributions and how stories help them make sense of the experience. Describing the feeling of remuneration in hearing a resident's story, Ashley says:

One of the most rewarding experiences was when we went down to the Lower Ninth Ward to talk to Ronald Lewis, who has a museum called the House of Dance and Feathers. Just the way he talks about volunteers, and how happy he is that people are coming and making a difference. He told about a group of people who came from an American university and built his museum because he lost his last one. He is so grateful to those people. Just seeing he was happy that we were here and what we are doing is good. That is very rewarding.

Daniel adds:

I think that one of the most rewarding experiences was just talking to people, meeting new people, volunteers, or people who lived here a long time. Starting out with the hostel we're staying at. We talk to volunteers from all over the country, and that was very rewarding learning of their experiences, seeing that other volunteers, more volunteers, are coming back to the city and they're not forgetting about the city despite the media portrayal of the city in the past four years. They still want to help out. I feel that.<sup>101</sup>

Ashley relates how resident Ronald Lewis told her about the contribution of other volunteer tourists who rebuilt his museum after the storm. She focuses on the way he talks about volunteers, not what he says. Ronald's stories of gratitude for the other volunteer tourists serves

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<sup>101</sup> Interview with Ashley and Daniel, February 19, 2009.

as validation of the hard work Ashley is doing to help residents. Through talking about other volunteers, Ronald helps Ashley make sense of her experience contributing.

Daniel discusses the contributions of others as well. Looking at the overall interests of New Orleans, Daniel tells about other volunteer tourists who also contribute to the city. Daniel states, “that was very rewarding learning of [other volunteer tourists’] experiences, seeing that other volunteers, more volunteers, are coming back to the city and they’re not forgetting about the city.” Daniel is excited about the contributions of others and recognizes the impact large numbers of individuals helping can have on the city. Hearing the stories of other volunteers helps Daniel make sense of the combined effort of volunteers on the city.

Helen understands her contribution in a unique way. I’m at a house in New Orleans East when a group of volunteers comes in after their bathroom break at Home Depot. They are wearing matching orange Home Depot construction hats, which are baseball hats with two slits on each side: one for a carpenter pencil and the other for a pen.

“Here, we brought one for you,” Helen presents me with a Home Depot bag containing the hat, pen, and pencil. I thank her, and Helen and I sit down in the front room and talk. She has so much energy and is so excited about being in New Orleans. From New Hampshire, Helen is a retired schoolteacher and came here with her friend Mae. She shares her contributions, “The guy who told the story about his home was visiting some people across the street from the house we were working in. What it gave me is that, ‘I’m listening to somebody whose family for generations back has lived in that same place.’ It helped me understand why people live here, and why they stay in a place that is subject to hurricanes. It was very humbling actually.”

I ask, “How so?”

Helen says:

It's humbling because it's an appreciation that he has for handing things down for family. To have someone be able to say how far back did they go, how many hands did the house pass through. The first year when we were fixing up Barbara's house, there was a home next door where the father and mother cleaned up the front yard and put a flag on the yard. That was very moving and I walked over and I talked to them about it. That home had been in the mother's family back to her great-grandmother. It was her grandmother's, then it was her mother's, then it was hers, and now it was their daughter's. How many times does that happen where I'm living? It doesn't. It doesn't. That felt good, it felt good that parts of America that still happens.<sup>102</sup>

Helen describes the contribution of keeping families in their generational homes. Helen mentions being humbled by people who pass homes from generation to generation. Recognizing that the way of life is different than what she's familiar with, she appreciates this way of life. This story impacts Helen and how she understands her contribution. For her, it is not just putting people back in their homes, but putting residents in homes that have been theirs for generations. Helen is able to take this experience home with her.

Andrea from California makes sense of her contribution differently than Helen. Andrea is in her forties and begins by asking me a lot of questions. Particularly, she asks about the crime in New Orleans: where it is, what it stems from, when it began, the murder rate, and asking me to verify what other residents told her about crime in New Orleans. After answering her questions, I ask her about stories, she says:

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<sup>102</sup> Interview with Helen, May 1, 2009.

I was going to say it's different here because we're now interacting with this homeowner guy or the husband of the homeowner every few hours whenever we have to use the toilet. Most of the stories I've heard were not from homeowners. People talk to me because I'm walking around wearing a shirt like this. [She points to her light blue shirt with UCC VOLUNTEER printed on the back and "God is Still Speaking" on the front.] They ask me what's that about and I say, "I'm here doing volunteer work," and they say, "Oh, that's great," and they often tell me their Hurricane Katrina story. It was happening more last year, but it's been happening this year. It started in the airport. Some of us wear them every day. I saw a woman on the airplane and she said, 'I'm with the UCC but in Oklahoma, but we're not doing anything in New Orleans.'" And I said, "Well, there's always more work to be done."<sup>103</sup>

Andrea tells how she is noticed as a volunteer and how the t-shirt is an impetus for hearing and collecting stories of Hurricane Katrina survivors and a recognition of her contribution to the city. The t-shirt serves as a sort of conversation starter, an invitation, and makes others aware of her commitment to the city. Andrea indicates that the t-shirt is a clue that she, as a volunteer tourist, wants to hear residents' stories. Andrea stories her contribution to me, and talks about how the t-shirt serves as a way to be recognized for her contribution to the city.

Andrea also sees the shirt as recognition of her contribution and a way she can recruit future volunteers. When people recognize her shirt, she relates her contribution, and uses it as a way to inspire other potential volunteer tourists to come to New Orleans to volunteer. Andrea invites the woman she met on the airplane to organize her UCC group to also contribute as

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<sup>103</sup> Interview with Andrea, May 7, 2009.

volunteer tourists in New Orleans. For Andrea, the shirt is a symbol of her contribution and a way to get people to tell their stories. She then takes those stories home with her.

In this section, Leslie, Donna, and Shelly spoke about how others motivated their contribution, Ethan discussed the volunteer tourists' contribution in relation to the federal government, and Daniel and Ashley talked about how residents and other volunteer tourists story their contribution. Then Helen talked about her contribution of keeping people in their family homes and Andrea discussed how her clothing invites recognition of her contribution and a way to recruit future volunteer tourists. Volunteer tourists make sense of their contribution through their own stories and residents' stories. In the next section, I'll discuss more about the recruiting of volunteer tourists.

### **Storying the Future**

Volunteer tourists tell me the stories they will take home with them. These individuals integrate stories they've heard in New Orleans into their plans as they return home. Granted, they rehearse with me what they and others who have been here before will talk about when they return home. By sharing these stories, volunteer tourists will, in a sense, relive their New Orleans experiences into the future. In this section, Andrea continues her discussion of recruitment, the group from Providence College talks about what they'll take home with them, and Andrea talks about how she learned about the storm damage and the stories she returns with. Mae talks about how she shares stories when she goes home to New Hampshire and Pam from Berkeley discusses the teaching and learning that goes on once she gets back.

Andrea from Berkeley talks about how she communicates with people at home since she's been in New Orleans. While still in New Orleans, Andrea recruits people to become volunteer tourists and raise awareness that help is still needed. Despite her contribution, she

understands future contributions by volunteers are still needed. Andrea says, “I was responding to lots of emails yesterday and I said, ‘Hey I’m in New Orleans doing post Hurricane Katrina rebuilding. The work is really hard, but I really like it. I’ve been doing it for two years and I want to come back.’ So that’s another way I’m telling people about it all the time.” She communicates via email to relay information about her experience here and continues the conversation when she gets home.

Andrea also details a sample conversation about her plans to come to New Orleans, “Before I came, ‘I’m going to New Orleans for a week.’ ‘Oh, you’re going to play?’ ‘No, I’m going to help rebuild.’ ‘Oh, they still need rebuilding?’ ‘Yep. They still need rebuilding.’”<sup>104</sup> Andrea feels part of the responsibility is to raise awareness of the necessity for continued help. Her contribution is not only to understand the needs of New Orleans, but also to recruit future volunteer tourists.

The group from Providence College feels this same responsibility. As Angie states:

We definitely learned a lot about Hurricane Katrina. At least I learned more than I knew and now we can go home and tell. We’re all from the North, so we weren’t directly affected. So now we can go home and tell more of what happened down here. We’re the first group from campus ministry to come to New Orleans. Our goal going back is to do something to spread the word about what we learned. Hopefully, we’ll make people more aware of what an amazing city this is, how much help it still needs, and how amazing volunteering down here has been.

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<sup>104</sup> Interview with Andrea, May 7, 2009.

Lucy says:

It's kind of frustrating just to know that even though we did make progress that Miss Courtney's life is sweetened by helping. Volunteering is just relying on other people to come down here but I feel like the longer it goes on more people just think it's been fixed. I really had no idea it wasn't still almost the same way it was. I mean, I didn't think you hear about that anymore. It's old news, I mean, 2005. Who still talks about it on the news?

Madison adds, "It's still hard, we're only fifteen people if we go back to campus and try to spread our story. We heard stories when we were up north before coming here, and now we're going to tell our story. People really need to see it to understand and come here and immerse themselves." <sup>105</sup>

In this statement, Angie talks about "spreading the word" to their classmates about the rewards of volunteering in New Orleans, trying to recruit others to come down for future trips. She states, "So now we can go home and tell more of what happened down here." As Angie mentions, these students will retell the stories they've heard, what they saw, and the work they've done. Lucy adds that they, as a group, are responsible for keeping the conversation going about work needed in New Orleans. Madison also focuses on telling stories of their experiences when she gets back. She emphasizes gaining an understanding of the amount of damage done and how much is left to do.

In this case, stories are the vehicle to get people here to become volunteer tourists. Storytelling has a cyclical effect because volunteer tourists hear stories and then retell stories. Through this cycle, volunteer tourists hope to inspire future volunteer tourists to come to New

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<sup>105</sup> Interview with Angie, Madison, and Lucy, January 18, 2009.

Orleans. Madison talks about the struggles of being only fifteen people to tell stories of their experiences. Despite the media's attempts to spread word of the needs of New Orleans for help, she feels the responsibility to get more people to volunteer falls on them. The group from Providence College takes responsibility for telling others from their campus ministry about the work that still needs to be done in New Orleans and gives future plans for increased volunteer contribution from their school.

Andrea from Berkeley talks about the stories that got her to New Orleans to volunteer. She discusses how her church put together information for others encouraging people to come, what they learn when they get here, and what they take back with them. She states:

The first year they put together a really nice presentation with slides about Hurricane Katrina. They did a pretty comprehensive job about what happened and what the area is like. As a church, we watched Spike Lee's documentary. Even before we came, we were pretty knowledgeable. Once here, there's a tour. Last year's tour was also pretty comprehensive. The UCC representative drove all around the city. He explained tons of stuff. So we are able to go back with a lot of information to share. The first presentation we opened it up to people in and outside the congregation. People from the community came. That spawned a dinner for a fundraiser to bring people down for the second trip and that educated a lot more people.<sup>106</sup>

In this statement she talks about understanding the storm through the timeline of the stories she heard. Andrea then discusses the stories she told and how they are created during the volunteer experience. The stories are dynamic and effective in stirring people to come to New Orleans.

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<sup>106</sup> Interview with Andrea, May 7, 2009.



Andrea also discusses the learning and teaching qualities of stories. Specifically, she addresses how stories give people the ability to learn about a subject and then relay those stories to teach others. Andrea then talks about how volunteer tourists arm themselves with stories to take home with them and the role of stories in fundraising. Andrea hopes these efforts encourage others to contribute to New Orleans.

Pam's hair is short and spikey and she has grey around her ears. She is also from Berkeley and is married to Ethan. Their twenty-three year old daughter is also on the trip. Pam talks about how she stories New Orleans historically for people interested in volunteer trips. She states:

Well, the first year, which was in 2007, not quite two years since Hurricane Katrina. I was very impacted because watching it on TV; I couldn't get a sense at all about how expansive the destruction was. In California we're all condensed, so in the fire it took out a little section of the hill. But here, geographically it's so broad. So I was absolutely shocked when I came and saw how widespread the devastation was. We went to the Lower Ninth Ward in 2007, and there was basically nothing there at that point in time. I remember coming across the bridge and thinking, 'Oh look at that city park.' And then we got down closer and I thought, 'Maybe it's a cemetery,' because I could just see the steps. Then we of course realized that's where the whole neighborhood had been. It was all gone. So I think a lot of different kinds of emotions - a lot of anger about what occurred in terms of the response and what continues to not happen in terms of the response from the state and federal government, a lot of shame about how people were treated and how people were portrayed right after Hurricane Katrina, a lot of amazement

at the resilience of people as to what we can survive and the good grace that people have shown.

We've met a lot of people as we've worked, people walking by and stuff, and going to Home Depot to use the bathroom, we've met a lot of people and people have been very, very nice. And really appreciative which has been really, really nice and so willing to share their hospitality, which is very nice because people have lost everything and are still so willing to be hospitable. We made a really conscious decision to take the message back to California about what had happened with Hurricane Katrina and how extensive the devastation was, how slow the governmental response was, who's doing the work of the rebuilding, and doing fund raising to continue to send money. We give a lot of money to Common Ground; we give money to UCC disaster relief. So we've done two big major fundraisers to raise money to send money down. We're really determined to keep the word out and let people know there's still a lot of devastation and New Orleans still needs a lot of help. We spend a lot of time understanding the history of New Orleans, the geography of New Orleans, the cultures, and what brought New Orleans to what it was when Hurricane Katrina occurred. We talk about historically the racism that has gone on in the culture. So it's been a huge learning experience. When we go back, we talk to people and lay out why this group of people lives at a lower elevation. This is how it happened when things got settled back in 1700s. We really tease that apart and share that information. And people are astonished, but it's good because it helps people understand it wasn't just the hurricane. It was a whole lot of things coming together to create what happened. We have a huge responsibility to take a look at that in this

country and to try to change those dynamics and the institutions that perpetuate that kind of racism, poverty and so forth.<sup>107</sup>

Pam starts by discussing her experience in New Orleans and then uses the stories they tell potential volunteers and church members to change people's mindsets about New Orleans. Using stories to clear up misconceptions, people are encouraged to adopt a different perspective about New Orleans. She states, "We're really determined to keep the word out and let people know there's still a lot of devastation and New Orleans still needs a lot of help." In this statement, she expresses hope that by telling people stories, she can change their minds and hopefully encourage future volunteers to work in New Orleans.

Mae is also in her seventies and is on the planning committee for the United Church of Christ's congregation in Derry, New Hampshire. Her congregation completed service missions in the Midwest in the years prior to coming to New Orleans. She's here with her husband and her friend, Helen. Mae talks about how she's able to share stories of her experiences in New Orleans:

We show pictures, we show them in the sanctuary as well as have an evening of sharing. I show pictures at any opportunity that I have. Without saying, stop, I want to show you all my thousands of pictures. The invitation is always there and I pick up on the invitation. My husband and I are retired, but we work on the coast for the state port authority. We only work seasonally but we have an opportunity to share with the visitors who come. I work at a port where the boats come to pick up conference goers and go to this island, usually for Unitarian and UCC conferences. They're always eager to talk

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<sup>107</sup> Interview with Pam, May 7, 2009.

about, “What have you done in your life?” The minute I mention New Orleans, they just want to soak it all up.<sup>108</sup>

Mae talks about integrating her contribution in New Orleans as a volunteer tourist into her everyday life at her job. She comes to New Orleans when the weather is cold in New Hampshire and relates stories of her volunteering trips throughout the summer. She relates stories for tourists who in many cases are church conference goers, encouraging them to come to New Orleans.

In this section, we learned from Andrea about the role of her t-shirt in recruiting volunteer tourists. The group from Providence College talked about hopes to get future student groups in New Orleans. Next, Andrea spoke about what her group learned before and during their trip. Finally, Pam and Mae spoke about the various ways they hope to contribute in the future. As volunteer tourists tell stories about what they will say in the future, they demonstrate understanding of the issues in New Orleans. These volunteer tourists take this understanding home with hopes to attract future volunteer tourists.

## **Conclusion**

Volunteer tourists make sense of their experience in New Orleans through stories, and they take these stories home with them as they do souvenirs. Souvenirs are traditionally kitsch: plastic, cheap, and purchasable. By including stories, souvenirs are repurposed to be meaningful, original, and bestowed. Stories are not mass-produced. The stories are crafted in their telling and retelling, and each story a volunteer hears is different and tells of a different aspect of New Orleans. The irony in the volunteers’ t-shirts is that they have taken a traditional tourist item and made it a conversation starter, a way to create more stories. Rather than wearing the generic “I

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<sup>108</sup> Interview with Mae, May 1, 2009.

Got Drunk on Bourbon Street” t-shirt, the volunteer tourists wear their organizations’ t-shirts expecting to have interactions where stories are exchanged with residents and other tourists alike.

Souvenirs are mass-produced and often made from plastic molds. Tourists who go to that place have that same souvenir or some iteration of that souvenir because it’s easy to find and acquire. When a story is told a relationship is formed between the listener and the teller, unlike the transaction between a cashier and a tourist. The relationship takes work and effort. The volunteer tourist has to find a resident, and engage that resident in conversation. This takes work and effort, and is much like the “emotional exhaustion” talked about earlier in this chapter. Telling stories and hearing stories are not acquired based on how much money one has, but how much commitment the tourist shows toward the location and its people.

Stories are also bestowed. Throughout my travels, I’ve brought back many souvenirs to other people. I’ve taken great pains to find the right souvenir, at the right price, and the right size to bring back home. Very rarely do I feel these gifts are appreciated. However, as volunteer tourists work for the stories and make efforts to hear them and the emotional pain of gathering them, they are, as was mentioned earlier in the chapter, gifts. Each volunteer tourist I spoke to appreciated the hearing and the opportunity to tell the stories of residents and their own stories while volunteering.

Souvenirs are either displayed prominently or put away. When displayed for others, souvenirs are empty, meaningless. Souvenirs are meant to serve as happy memories from a place. However, stories from Hurricane Katrina are not always pleasant, but they are usually meaningful. Every retelling of a story is a way for volunteer tourists to revisit their experiences in New Orleans, much like we peruse a photo album from a previous trip. Stories are not

traditionally what one thinks of when imagining souvenirs. However, stories serve as the mementos of New Orleans for volunteer tourists.<sup>109</sup>

These volunteer tourists' contribution to the community has meaning because they are able to connect their efforts to a specific person in a specific location. This chapter demonstrates the context for stories some interpretations so we can better understand the volunteer tourism experience.

As mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, all tourists tell stories, but through the volunteer tourists' stories this chapter encourages us to look at tourists' stories as contributions. As tourists tell stories, they tell about the culture in which they visited. These stories help preserve and honor the culture. Stories do not detract from a culture or impose on a culture; they are souvenirs of the culture and experiences in the culture. Through stories, tourists contribute to the tourist location. The next chapter will feature stories about the role of altruism in the volunteer tourism experience.

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<sup>109</sup> I will address how stories are souvenirs further in future research.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### SAINTS IN THE CITY OF SIN: PERFORMING RELIGION THROUGH ALTRUISM

The beginnings of volunteer tourism can be traced to missionaries who traveled to remote, often developing countries to introduce Christianity to the natives.<sup>110</sup> We retrospectively look at these former missionaries as post-colonialists who are trying to impose Western culture on non-Westerners.<sup>111</sup> Because of the foundations of volunteer tourism in evangelizing, I hypothesized that religious groups were coming to New Orleans to convert residents. After conducting preliminary interviews and conversations with volunteer tourists and never once being asked to convert or about my beliefs, I began to question my hypothesis further. I realized that not only do we not understand what volunteer tourists are doing in New Orleans, but we also do not understand why they're doing it. Why are religious groups coming to New Orleans to volunteer? By understanding why religious groups are coming to New Orleans, we can have a better understanding of volunteer tourists' motivations. Understanding volunteer tourists' motivations will also allow us to understand volunteer tourists' role in the city and whether they contribute to the New Orleans community. Through interviews with volunteer tourists, I learned they come to New Orleans because they want to help others. But I still wanted to find out what role religion had in volunteer tourists' altruistic motives. Through my investigation, I discovered that religion facilitates volunteer tourists' altruism. Specifically, this chapter shows how altruistic motives emerge from the volunteer tourists' religious background. I first discuss how volunteer tourists decided to become volunteer tourists and what influenced them to come to New Orleans. Next, I detail how religious groups provide the resources to make these trips

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<sup>110</sup> Angela M. Benson, "Theory and Practice," in *Volunteer Tourism: Theoretical Frameworks and Practical Applications*, ed. Angela M. Benson (London: Routledge, 2011), 1.

<sup>111</sup> Benson, 1.

possible. Then, I discuss the evening reflections, a designated time where volunteers think about their day's activities and make connections with religion and service. Finally, I demonstrate the relationship between faith, duty, and altruism. I conclude by talking about how the relationship between religion and volunteer tourists' altruism affects the city.

Volunteer tourism scholars discuss motivations of volunteer tourists broadly. Most studies find that altruism is a motivation for the volunteer tourists surveyed. Research is just beginning to examine the role of altruism in volunteer tourism efforts. My study is interested in understanding altruism. Therefore, I will discuss the paths of previous scholars' work, and how my research complements their work.

Current volunteer tourism studies investigate motivations through projects to help the environment or learn about different cultures allowing opportunities to discuss motivations in humanitarian and construction projects. In "What Makes Them Pay? Values of Volunteer Tourists Working for Sea Turtle Conservation," Campbell and Smith classify volunteer tourists' interest in travelling to volunteer. Looking at sea turtle conservation in Costa Rica, the researchers determined volunteers' values fell into seven categories with most ranking conservation and scientific values as their primary motivation to travel and volunteer.<sup>112</sup> Although this study provides important information regarding volunteer tourists' motivations for an environmental conservation project, the study does not address humanitarian projects. My study investigates altruism as it relates to New Orleans volunteer tourism, a humanitarian and construction project carried out by religious organizations.

Altruism is just beginning to be mentioned as a category within volunteer tourists' motives. In "Gibbons in Their Midst? Conservation Volunteers' Motivations at the Gibbon

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<sup>112</sup> Lisa M. Campbell and Christy Smith, "What Makes Them Pay? Values of Volunteer Tourists Working for Sea Turtle Conservation," *Environmental Management* 38, no. 1 (2006): 84–98.



Rehabilitation Project Phuket, Thailand,” Sue Broad and John Jenkins discuss the motivations of volunteer tourists working in a center to nurse gibbons back to health.<sup>113</sup> Broad and Jenkins’s study mentions that most volunteer tourists want to work to help others. However, a more important goal for the volunteers is going to a new place and learning skills to help their careers. Likewise, in Daldeniz and Hampton’s “VOLUNtourists versus volunTOURISTS: A True Dichotomy or Merely a Differing Perception?” the authors compare motivations for two volunteer tourism projects.<sup>114</sup> By investigating a dive school in Malaysia where volunteers teach dive classes for free and rural development projects in Nicaragua, the authors discovered the volunteers’ motivations differed slightly. The only motivation the two groups of volunteer tourists did not share was to “do something useful.”<sup>115</sup> “Do[ing] something useful,” or altruism, was only mentioned by the volunteers in Nicaragua and ranked fourth after self-enhancement, travel, and not knowing what else to do.<sup>116</sup> Broad and Jenkins’ and Daldeniz and Hampton’s studies discuss altruism as a low-ranking type of motivation for volunteers. This paves the way for my research, which addresses altruism specifically. Broad and Jenkins’ and Daldeniz and Hampton’s studies also encourages investigation into volunteer tourism projects where the sole reason for traveling to volunteer mentioned was to help others.

Other studies invite further research explaining the role of altruism in volunteer tourism. Stephen Wearing in *Volunteer Tourism: Experiences that Make a Difference* describes altruism as including “differing levels of idealism relating specifically to concepts such as saving the

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<sup>113</sup> Sue Broad and John Jenkins, “Gibbons in Their Midst? Conservation Volunteers’ Motivations at the Gibbon Rehabilitation Project Phuket, Thailand,” in *Journeys of Discovery in Volunteer Tourism: International Case Study Perspectives*, ed. Kevin D. Lyons and Stephen Wearing (Oxfordshire, UK: CABI, 2008), 72-85.

<sup>114</sup> Bilge Daldeniz and Mark P. Hampton, “VOLUNtourists versus volunTOURISTS: A True Dichotomy or Merely a Differing Perception?” in *Volunteer Tourism: Theoretical Frameworks and Practical Applications*, ed. Angela M. Benson (London: Routledge, 2011), 30-41.

<sup>115</sup> Daldeniz and Hampton, 35.

<sup>116</sup> Daldeniz and Hampton, 35.

world and ‘doing good’, but generally related to helping others.”<sup>117</sup> Wearing defines altruism as a desire to assist people in need. My research allows an expansion on Wearing’s definition. Through including volunteer tourists’ own words about their motivations, we understand why volunteer tourists want to “help others.”

Other research calls for more investigation into the types of altruism. In ranking volunteer tourists’ motivations, Alexander and Bakir subdivide altruism into “wanting to serve others, improving other people’s lives, to give back, to help, to give time, to allow others to benefit from one’s skills, to support, and to positively impact.”<sup>118</sup> Although the authors do not give any context for the altruism, their research indicates altruism is multifaceted. My research provides new subcategories within altruism related to religion. This study contextualizes altruism by looking at its roots in religious organizations.

The altruistic motives of religious groups do not completely explain why strangers come to help residents of New Orleans. Another impetus for volunteer tourists’ altruism stems from the government’s movement away from assisting people in need, or neoliberalism. Harvey states, “The fundamental mission of the neo-liberal state is to create a ‘good business climate’.... This contrasts with the social democratic state that is committed to full employment and the optimization of the well being of all its citizens subject to the condition of maintaining adequate and stable rates of capital accumulation.”<sup>119</sup> Harvey asserts that the government’s primary goal is financial gain and social welfare falls behind that. Because of this move by Reagan’s administration, citizens continue to suffer almost thirty years later. This frame of thought helps explain why many New Orleanians never received housing assistance from the federal

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<sup>117</sup> Stephen Wearing, *Volunteer Tourism: Experiences that Make a Difference* (Oxon, UK: CABI, 2001), 66.

<sup>118</sup> Alexander and Bakir, 21.

<sup>119</sup> David Harvey, *Spaces of Neoliberalism: Towards a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development* (Stuttgart, Germany: Franz Steiner Verlag Publishing, 2005), 19.

government and volunteers came to help residents. The government providing assistance simply was not a priority. This paved the way for religious groups to pick up the slack of the government and help residents rebuild their homes.

Volunteer tourism and neoliberalism research provides support for increasing information about altruistic motives in volunteer tourists, which my study addresses through volunteer tourists' narratives.

### **The Service Mission**

As earlier mentioned, the beginnings of volunteer tourism can be traced to Christian missionaries in the 1800s.<sup>120</sup> Because of the foundations of volunteer tourism in evangelizing, I tried to understand the role of religion in volunteer tourism today. Throughout the interviewing process, I found reluctant volunteer tourists struggling to explain how religion affected their experiences in New Orleans or how coming to New Orleans related to their religious identity. Some participants found the subject of religion uncomfortable and avoided it altogether. Some changed the subject and answered a previous question. When I ask Judy, a volunteer from the Berkeley United Church of Christ, "What role does your faith have in you being in New Orleans?"

She responds, "I actually want to answer your previous question,"<sup>121</sup> and disregards the question about religion.

I altered the way I asked questions regarding religion, faith, and previous volunteer experiences. Volunteer tourists responded to my questions about religion by answering why they decided to come to New Orleans. In short, when asked about religion, volunteer tourists responses were about their motives.

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<sup>120</sup> Benson, 1.

<sup>121</sup> Interview with Judy, May 7, 2009.

The groups that I interviewed who spoke most explicitly about religion were the United Church of Christ (UCC) and the Unitarian Universalists (UU). These two organizations are accepting of individuals with wide ranges of viewpoints. The UCC's website touts, "Our faith is 2000 years old. Our thinking is not."<sup>122</sup> The UCC allows women to be pastors, homosexuals to be members, and allowed African-Americans to be named pastors in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>123</sup> The UU is more liberal in that it does not require its members to believe in any particular higher power.<sup>124</sup> Unitarian Universalists seek for members to find peace within their own souls and acceptance of others.<sup>125</sup> The landscape of the groups I worked with perhaps shaped their responses to me. Throughout this chapter, volunteer tourists express tolerance towards the residents of New Orleans and acceptance of the city's traditions. Perhaps the volunteer tourists' acceptance is connected to their religious tolerance.

As we sit on upside-down buckets in the ceramic tiled living room of a house in New Orleans East, I ask Pam from the Berkeley United Church of Christ, "Do you minister to people while you're here?"

Pam says, "I think ministering to people includes asking people what their stories are and then listening. In that sort of informal sense I think we're all ministering. But we're not evangelizing."<sup>126</sup> For Pam, part of the UCC mission is being available for residents if they need

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<sup>122</sup> United Church of Christ, "New to the UCC," United Church of Christ, <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/new-to-the-ucc.html> (accessed April 9, 2011).

<sup>123</sup> United Church of Christ, "New to the UCC," United Church of Christ, <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/new-to-the-ucc.html> (accessed April 9, 2011).

<sup>124</sup> Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, "Our Unitarian Universalist Principles," Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, <http://www.uua.org/visitors/6798.shtml> (accessed April 9, 2011).

<sup>125</sup> Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, "Our Unitarian Universalist Principles," Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, <http://www.uua.org/visitors/6798.shtml> (accessed April 9, 2011).

<sup>126</sup> Interview with Pam, May 7, 2009.

support. Pam ties religion to helping residents. This help involves providing physical labor and understanding New Orleans. As Pam explains, the focus for the organization is facilitating help, not converting others. She is clear that the contribution to the community is not increasing membership of her church, but offering support for those in need. Because volunteer tourists' principle purpose is to help, they do not want to be viewed as trying to convert. If the volunteers saw my asking about religion as asking them about conversion, this may explain why they sought to evade my questions about religion.

Although we now understand volunteer tourism today shares roots with these missions, a different kind of mission trip has developed. Some groups participate in "service missions" or "mission trips," which is when a religious group travels to help individuals. New Orleans attracts many "service missions" post-Hurricane Katrina. Volunteer tourists talk about their mission to New Orleans as a "service mission." Discussing their trips to New Orleans as "service missions," volunteer tourists frame the trip as an opportunity to help people.

Through my research, I learned these groups include Methodists, Presbyterians, Catholics, Unitarian Universalists, Lutherans, and many other religions. Service missionaries travelling to New Orleans typically come in groups with friends or acquaintances from the same congregation or from multiple congregations in the same geographic area. The groups range in size from five to sixty participants, and they often wear matching t-shirts identifying themselves as part of a religious organization. In this section, we understand how volunteer tourists communicate about their trips to New Orleans as "service missions" or "mission trips," and the role of churches in coordinating the trips. We also understand how these trips are related to volunteer tourists' altruistic motives. William, Izzy, Victoria, and Helen talk about their decisions to come to New Orleans.

William, a middle-aged man from Maryland, described becoming a volunteer tourist: Well, this is actually the third mission trip I've been on - the first one in New Orleans. I've been on two in the Dominican Republic, and Tammy talked to me about this one. Tammy was a teammate of mine on previous missions and said, 'We really need some more guys to come along.' And I thought, 'Well, I'm not going to the Dominican Republic this year for personal reasons, why not go to New Orleans where they need some help.' So that's really what got me down here.<sup>127</sup>

Tammy, as the Baltimore church's trip organizer, approached William about coming to New Orleans. New Orleans proved to be a logical choice for William as he explained participating in earlier trips to other locations. Tammy encouraged William to help. William's religious involvement influenced him to participate in the service mission to help New Orleanians. Tammy and William's relationship to the religious organization affords him the opportunity to join the mission trip. This permits him to be altruistic, giving him a place where he can offer his time to help others.

I also ask Izzy, an 18-year-old, also from the Lutheran group, how she decided to come to New Orleans. "Actually, a friend from high school who is working on this team was here last summer. She showed me all the pictures and told me what she had done. She said she was going again and asked if I wanted to come? 'Oh, yeah, I'll be there and do whatever I can!'"<sup>128</sup> Izzy was connected to the group through her friend and was inspired by her friend's pictures and stories. Through the other teen who had been on the mission trip, Izzy chose to join the trip the following year. Izzy's relationship with her friend, who is a member of the church, encouraged

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<sup>127</sup> Interview with William, January 22, 2009.

<sup>128</sup> Interview with Izzy, January 22, 2009.

Izzy's participation. Izzy's connection with the church facilitates her trip to New Orleans to help residents.

Like Izzy, Victoria, a freshman from Marquette University, a Jesuit school in Wisconsin, was also encouraged by friends to travel to volunteer. After teaching me how to cut and install sheetrock, I ask, "Why did you decide to work with the volunteer organization at Marquette, Victoria?"

She states, "My friend Tom was raving about this trip because we've done mission trips before. I said, 'Yeah, I'll go because I like mission trips. I like doing service, but it's a lot different than anything I've done. So I went in the winter time; this is round two.'"<sup>129</sup> Going on another mission trip was attractive for Victoria, and she was excited for the opportunity to help. Her involvement at the university made going on this mission trip feasible for Victoria. The mission trip to New Orleans allows Victoria to do service to assist New Orleanians.

Unlike Victoria, who had been on mission trips, other volunteers were excited by the opportunity to try something different. Helen, a woman in her seventies from New Hampshire, describes how she decided to volunteer:

A pastor involved with UCC started talking with us about coming down to volunteer. It was kind of like an adventure. We didn't know exactly what we were getting into. We knew that we were going to be staying in a UCC church, and we knew a lot of other faith groups were going to be there. A young friend of mine who was going to college at that time was very active in the Lutheran church. She went [to New Orleans] on her college break about two months before I went down. Kay came back and talked about her experience, and I knew then that I was going to go down. She talked about getting rid of

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<sup>129</sup> Interview with Victoria, February 26, 2009.

her clothes because it was awful and moldy. So, I think we knew what to expect in terms of what it might look like. Secondly, I was very concerned about what had happened with the environment in my own mind, but I was also concerned about why we were living in some of these areas. I heard about the Lower Ninth Ward flooding and that New Orleans is below sea level. Practically every part of New Orleans is, but I always loved the Mississippi River. I got all caught up in what we should do, what we didn't do, and how people are settling the area.<sup>130</sup>

Helen discusses other friends who told her stories about coming to New Orleans to volunteer. Helen knew that "other faith groups would be there." Despite the many unknown factors regarding working conditions and the culture in New Orleans, the "knowns" of the trip involved Helen's religious beliefs. Through the knowledge that others in her religious faith were coming and her desire for adventure, she commits to come on the trip. The religious aspects of the trip played a part in Helen's decision to volunteer in New Orleans.

As these volunteers discuss, each had a "conversion moment" where they made the decision to come to New Orleans on a mission trip. The way stories were relayed from previous volunteer tourists conveyed that New Orleanians needed help and the religious groups had mission trips to facilitate that help. For William talking to Tammy convinced him, Izzy was convinced by her friend's photos, Victoria was persuaded by her friend Tom, and Helen was swayed by her friend Kay. People give up their vacation time and money for a feeling that they're helping fellow citizens of the world. In the next section, we learn about how these mission trips come to fruition.

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<sup>130</sup> Interview with Helen, May 1, 2009.



## **Structure/Coordination**

Religious organizations arrange volunteer tourism trips to New Orleans. The groups arrange volunteer tourists' activities, work, travel, local transportation, food, and accommodation. The role of religious institutions to coordinate between community members and volunteers allows the volunteers to fulfill their altruistic motives. In this section, I relay information about the organization of these trips. Then, Amy and Liz discuss their religious organization's role in coordinating their trip. Finally, I include my fieldnotes as a volunteer tourist as a sample itinerary of a day as a volunteer tourist in New Orleans.

Through my interviews and experiences with volunteer tourists, I learned about how these trips are funded and organized. In one scenario, volunteers pay for their own flights, food, rental cars, and housing. Alternatively, the groups conduct fundraisers or ask for donations before leaving their hometown to off-set the costs involved with coming to New Orleans. These fundraisers include car washes, garage sales, or sporting event pools.

To accommodate volunteers, volunteers rarely stay in the expensive French Quarter hotels. In fact volunteer tourists stay in portions of New Orleans area churches where rooms were converted into dormitories with bunk beds, showers, and kitchens. Each volunteer can stay for \$10 per night. With up to sixteen men or women per room, sharing three showers, three toilets, and three sinks, these accommodations are affordable and cultivate a community environment.

To facilitate the work volunteer tourists do while in New Orleans the churches retain volunteer coordinators. Usually retired with construction experience, these individuals are long-term volunteers and live in the city for a year or two. Volunteer coordinators serve three functions. First, the volunteer coordinator makes contact with people in the community who

need help: either finding people through other church member or clergy recommendations.

Secondly, the coordinators ensure the proper tools and materials are at each house for the day's work. Finally, the coordinators ensure that the volunteers' skills fit the home they're working on.

The labor is donated, tools are borrowed from the church, and materials are purchased by the resident. Table saws, wet saws, hammers, screwdrivers, and ladders are borrowed from the organizing church for volunteers to use, and the homeowner purchases any materials staying in the home, e.g., painting supplies, sheetrock, lumber, flooring, cabinets. Understanding how the religious organizations coordinate activities and volunteers' lives while they are in New Orleans is integral to understanding how these volunteer groups function. Without the churches, volunteer trips would be more difficult to execute, less organized, and perhaps impossible for individuals to afford.

Volunteer tourists tell stories about how religious organizations facilitate their ability to help others. Amy and Liz discuss religion's role in furthering their desire to be altruistic. Sitting between a home and a FEMA trailer on Miss Claire's front steps, I ask Amy and Liz, "What role does your faith play in you being here?" Amy explains how the Unitarian congregation from New Jersey helped her:

Well, I'm kind of new to Unitarian Universalism. I joined about two years ago. And kind of what drew me to New Orleans were the things that drew me to the UU faith, which is that each one of us is on our own quest for answers. And the great thing about UU is that they don't say, 'This is what you should believe.' It's that we're all here to find our own answers and support each other in that quest. Part of this trip is me wanting to help but not having an organized way to do so. When this trip came up it was like,

‘Oh! It’s already organized, I want to help!’ I didn’t know how to do it by myself, so just like within a UU community you have everyone supporting you in your quest. Here, you have an organization, and not only that, helping is a big, big part of our organization. I don’t know if it’s ours in particular or if all UU congregations are helping others. It’s a huge, huge part of what we’re about, and bridging across communities, bridging across races, bridging across genders. So this trip is really kind of an extension of all of the various race and diversity things that, not that we’ve necessarily been studying about but we’ve been made aware of in a more conscious way than regular living without a religious community.<sup>131</sup>

Liz adds:

There’s so much I feel I can’t do anything about. There are so many things going on in the world that break my heart. I think you have to find a way to live with that heartbreak. And I think that’s part of the drive to be a part of a religious community is that we’re trying to make sense out of the suffering we see in the world in some way. We’re trying to find ways to live joyfully and meaningfully amidst these things that we see and do what we can. A religious community can facilitate people to do what they can. You don’t have to do everything, you don’t have to solve every problem, but you do have a responsibility to do what you’re able to do. We are able, we are able, we have the resources. We have the capacity physically, economically, racially, we’ve got power because of the color of our skin, and to be able to acknowledge that and use it.<sup>132</sup>

Amy and Liz discussed how the UU church has enhanced their altruistic experience. Amy explained that she wanted to help but did not know how. The UU’s connection to the

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<sup>131</sup> Interview with Amy, April 17, 2009.

<sup>132</sup> Interview with Liz, April 17, 2009.

community allows Amy and Liz to participate in the service trip. Amy would not have come to New Orleans to help without the church to organize. Amy and Liz were motivated to help, but didn't have the know-how or means to help without the church's assistance. Being a part of the UU church made it easier for Amy and fellow church members to fulfill their desire to be altruistic. Amy stated, "Part of this trip is me wanting to help but not having an organized way to do so." Coming here with a religious group gave Amy access to knowing who to help, where they live, and the necessary tools. In this case, the role of religion plays a functional part in her altruistic motivations. Amy's tie to the religious organization helps her to contribute to the community by expediting her trip.

Liz elaborated on the role of religious organizations in getting volunteer tourists to New Orleans. She said, "A religious community can facilitate people to do what they can. You don't have to do everything, you don't have to solve every problem, but you do have a responsibility to do what you're able to do." Liz sees the role of religious organizations as helping church members help New Orleans residents. Understanding that no *one* person can solve every issue, Liz states *each* person has a role in helping to solve the issues facing the community. Each volunteer tourist feels a sense of accomplishment because s/he is able to work as a collective group. The collaborative efforts of the group abet volunteer tourists' altruism. Religious groups organize individuals whose common goal is to help New Orleans. The quantity and combination of individuals helping creates an impact on the city.

Liz also highlights how being altruistic is a privilege and a responsibility. She sees privilege and responsibility in a cause and effect relationship. Because her congregation from New Jersey has enough money to travel and enough able-bodied individuals, Liz feels it is their obligation to help. She said, "We are able, we are able, we have the resources. We have the

capacity physically, economically, racially, we've got power because of the color of our skin, and to be able to acknowledge that and use it." She stresses the importance of working within one's means to help others is one's personal responsibility and talks about how various types of capital allow her religious group to be altruistic.

Religious organizations not only arrange the details of the trip, but also structure their days. The days of a volunteer tourist's week in New Orleans are structured similarly. As I volunteered with different groups, I chose to include my agenda for a day from my fieldnotes to provide an example of what a day as a volunteer tourist is like.

#### January 30<sup>th</sup> schedule

7 a.m. Climb down from the top bunk and stumble to the community showers.

7:30 a.m. I go downstairs to grab breakfast, which includes fruit, cereal, oatmeal, coffee, and milk.

7:42 a.m. I'm instructed to grab a sandwich from the table made and labeled the previous evening by a shift of volunteers. I pick up one that says "turkey," a bag of chips, a Ziploc bag containing two small brownies, and a bottle of water from a cooler. I take these out to the parking lot where four vans and an SUV rented by the church are parked. I inquire as to which rented van I'll be riding in.

7:45 a.m. I'm motioned to get into a black Ford Expedition. Seven other volunteers are in this car. The men sit in the front seats and the women in the back. I've been informed the work site is twelve miles away.

8:00 a.m. We arrive at another United Church of Christ church building where the "youths" are staying. We pick up two "youths" that will be working with us.

8:15 a.m. Stop at CVS at the request of two volunteers in the car. They purchase a memory card for their camera. We proceed to the work site.

9 a.m. We pull up to a house with two empty lots across from it. The two houses on the right are occupied, and the other two houses on the left look abandoned and are still marked with the infamous “X.” The house directly across is occupied followed by one empty lot and two more empty houses.

Everyone files out of the SUV. Mike unlocks the house and we begin pulling supplies out of the back of the SUV.

9:15 a.m. Jo, who serves as my guide this morning gives me a brief tour of the house and am instructed to use the toilet upstairs. A bucket of water sits next to the toilet, and I am instructed only to flush if “it’s” brown.

9:30 a.m. I ask Jo what I can do. She summons Frank, who works at the regional office for the United Church of Christ. He is a retired transporter from Iowa with construction experience, and he and his wife have been full time volunteers for the past year. They stay on the church grounds in the RV they purchased for retirement.

Frank is the orchestrator of the UCC volunteer efforts coordinating times, dates, and materials with the homeowners. Frank also determines which tools go to which house and which tasks will be completed by which volunteer groups. He asks me what skills I have and I reply, “None.” Frank gives me the choice to paint or to clean. I choose the former. Frank instructs me to remove the hinges before painting. He then shows me what finger-jointed trim looks like and instructs me to prime and paint only the finger-jointed trim.

9:40 a.m. I wander around the house looking for a brush and some primer. Because of the supply shortage, I share a can of primer with Melissa, another volunteer.

9:50 a.m. I start painting. Between 9:50 and noon I spend most of the day on my knees painting trim, and I'm constantly moving out of the way of others. The step stool is in persistent demand. The other volunteers are doing various tasks around the house. The male youth is cleaning the windows outside. Two older women are sweeping the floors. Diane is sawing trim and installing it in the downstairs bathroom. Maryann, Melissa, and I are priming and painting closets and trim. The two men are installing a light fixture upstairs.

12:00 p.m. The female youth yells, "Lunch!" and we drop everything and walk out of the front of the house. We pull two ice chests from the back of the Explorer and open them. One is for drinks, and the other is for sandwiches. I pick up my sandwich, my bag of chips, my brownies, and my bottle of water. We sit in the front yard on painting benches, step stools, the house's front stairs, and the grass to eat.

12:50 p.m. We put the sandwich cooler back in the truck, and we leave the drink cooler out.

1:00 p.m. I go back in the house and wonder if I can handle another four hours of this. I decide to start the conversation and Maryann, Melissa, and I talk about life, relationships, jobs, travels, and volunteering.

3:48 p.m. Maryann tells me to start cleaning up. Mike jokes that as volunteers we're unionized and don't work past four. I hurry and finish my last coat, wash the brushes, close the paint cans, and hop in the car. One more coat tomorrow and the trim will be painted.

4:15 p.m. We leave the worksite.

5:30 p.m. We get back to the church. I go upstairs and wash my face and change my paint stained pants to get ready for dinner.

6:00 p.m. Go downstairs for evening reflection.

7 p.m. We all gather in the parking lot and split up into cars. All twenty-four of us are going to dinner.

7:25 p.m. We arrive at Mulate's on the corner of Convention Center Boulevard and Julia Street. It's a tourist trap but serves traditional Cajun dishes like corn maque choux, gumbo, and jambalaya. A live Cajun band accompanies our dinner and patrons take turns on the large dance floor. We eat, dance, take pictures, and drink Abita beer.

9:30 p.m. We leave Mulate's and go back to the church.

10 p.m. I express my exhaustion and another volunteer gives me a pair of earplugs. I climb up to the top bunk to retire for the evening. Tomorrow, I'll wake up and do it all over again.

In this example, the UCC provided the structure for my day. The church coordinated which site I went to, how I got to the site, what I would be doing at those sites, and what supplies I would be using. My breakfast, lunch, and dinner plans were arranged by the church. Also, the church had a bed for me to sleep in with linens. I only had to pay for my dinner and sleeping in the church. As a volunteer, this religious group coordinated my activities. Frank played a crucial role in making sure that I knew what to do, how to do it, and had the right supplies to do it. I would not have been able to volunteer were it not for the religious organization's coordination of my efforts.



In this section, I provided information about how religious organizations coordinate volunteer tourism in New Orleans. Amy and Liz detailed how their desire to help others was facilitated by the church. Then, I included a sample of an itinerary of a day as a volunteer tourist. As I've demonstrated, religious organizations initiate and coordinate volunteer efforts in New Orleans. Religious organizations from around the country provide a way for individuals to assist residents of New Orleans. The role of religion contributes to the community through a coordination of labor and money facilitating the best possible combination of efforts to the community. By having a trip organized through a religious group, volunteer tourists are able to fulfill their altruistic desire to help New Orleans. In the next section, I provide more information about the church-organized evening services to demonstrate the ties between religion and altruism.

### **Evening Services/Reflections**

One specific way religious groups plan volunteer tourists' days allows time for reflection on the day's events. These periods are interchangeably referred to as "reflection time" or "evening services." This structured reflection time allows each volunteer tourist to ponder his or her service and its role in God's plan for him or her. The evening service becomes part of volunteer tourists' nightly routine. Each service occurs after everyone eats dinner together and the kitchen has been cleaned. On the evenings where volunteer tourists go out to dinner, the reflection time happens after the day's work and before going out to dinner. All the volunteers sit in a circle of chairs in a large hall or the sanctuary to think and talk about that day's experiences. Each day a different leader is chosen from the group. The leader chooses a Bible verse and reads it aloud to the group. They tie the Bible verse to the reflections shared by the other volunteer tourists. Reflection time explicitly connects the act of volunteering to religion.

The evening service allows volunteer tourists to contemplate their day-to-day experiences as each takes a turn sharing their reflections. The volunteer tourists then continue their evening activities including going out for drinks, listening to jazz music, or sleeping. In this section, I share experiences at two evening services and dissect how religion and altruism are connected at these reflections.

We finish cleaning up the kitchen following a traditional boiled shrimp dinner at the Mustard Seed Ministries House, Tammy invites me to join the group at the table for “highs and lows.”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“Oh, it’s where a designated person reads a Bible verse and tells about its significance, and then we go around and tell about a ‘high’ and ‘low’ of each of our day.”

We sit down at the table, and William begins by reading Philippians 4:1-7.

Therefore, my brethren dearly beloved and longed for, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, my dearly beloved. I beseech Euodias, and beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord. And I intreat thee also, true yokefellow, help those women which labored with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellow laborers, whose names are in the book of life. Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say, ‘Rejoice.’ Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand. Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

William continues:

I chose this verse because God promises he will help us if we help others. Also, God

understands better than anyone what she's going through and I'm thankful he's there to hear our prayers. We can pray for these people too. We may not understand completely what they're going through, but we know God will help them.

Tammy reminds William, "What was your 'high' and 'low' today?"

"Oh yeah," he adds, "my 'low' was seeing all the steps that used to lead to houses that now sit in empty lots. My 'high' was the conversation we had with the 85-year-old lady who thanked us for coming to New Orleans."

We continue around the table, the group's "highs" include excitement that everyone helped prepare dinner, having New Orleans residents join dinner, and the gratitude an 85-year-old woman expressed for "volunteers like us." "Lows" include one of the volunteers reinjuring her ankle and finding the computer at the volunteer center stolen.<sup>133</sup>

William encourages prayer for the residents and describes the good feelings he had when residents thank him. He ties the volunteer's service to the Bible verse. William ties the verse from Philippians to the "highs" and the "lows." In William's relating the Bible verse to the volunteer's service, he reinforces the connection between religion and service. The services not only allow a space for volunteer tourists to reflect on what it felt like to give of their time, they also make a direct tie to the religious aspects by organizing the volunteers' reflections into a religious frame.

At another evening service, I enter the room to join this volunteer group for the next few days. I find a seat between a woman and man who are in their seventies, and I'm immediately handed a sheet of paper as I sit down. It's a hymn. I turn it over. It's another hymn.

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<sup>133</sup> From the author's fieldnotes, January 22, 2009.

Nicole, the pastor, announces my entrance to the group and directs every volunteer to introduce themselves to me and tell me why they're in New Orleans.

A gentleman in his eighties with stark white hair begins, "Hi, I'm John, and I just want to admit when I first came here, I was so nervous about talking to African-Americans. I really never had any interactions with African-Americans in Maine, and I was excited and nervous to talk to them. Coming here helped me to confront my fear." John then looks at Maryann sitting next to him.

Maryann, a caterer says, "I was just so curious about the destruction, and it made me really mad at the government when I came here and saw how little was done. I felt it was my job to help."

A dark-haired, friendly-faced couple introduce themselves next. The man stated excitedly, "Hi, I'm Rick and this is my wife Dory. As many of you know our daughter has been on previous trips to New Orleans and just fell in love with the place. Jill, our daughter, came home and wouldn't stop talking about it. In fact, on the plane home, she and her friends were trying to figure out what kind of fundraisers they could hold to come back again. And Jill now teaches for Teach for America and is on the Westbank teaching fourth graders. She convinced us to come."

Louis, the former pastor says, "I guess I'm last. I'm Louis and this is my fourth trip to New Orleans. The first two times, I led youth groups. I guess the best way to express why I come here is because New Orleans got under my skin and into my heart." The other members make a collective "Ah" sound, signaling their agreement with his statement. Nicole then directs us to sing the hymn, "In Christ there is No East or West." Louis, the former pastor, reads a scripture, James 2:1-9.

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong? If you really keep the royal law found in scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

Louis summarizes the verse, "James tells us that we are instructed to help everyone regardless of their station and status in life." Louis continues, "God instructs us to love our neighbors. New Orleanians are our neighbors, too." Without transition we sing another hymn, "We Are One in the Spirit," and Louis closes the service with a prayer.

"Dear Father in Heaven, we are so thankful for the opportunity to be in New Orleans and to give our bodies in service. We ask that you continue to protect us from harm and we also pray for these wonderful people Lord. Please watch over them through their trials, their tribulations, and their heartache. Amen."<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> From the author's field notes, January 30, 2010.

These services serve as more than simply time for reflection. After Louis reads the Bible verse where God commands his followers to help one's neighbor no matter his or her circumstances, he connects our need to help with the trip. Louis makes the correlation that volunteers are fulfilling God's work by being in New Orleans. Through the linkage of the Bible verse to New Orleans, Louis associates volunteer tourists' altruism to religion.

Religious organizations' coordination and reflection time does not only facilitate volunteer tourism. As demonstrated through the examples provided from evening services, religion motivates and reinforces volunteer tourists' altruism. When volunteer tourists talk about helping they use religious terms, like duty and faith. The following section looks at the role of duty and faith in altruistic motives.

### **Faith and Duty**

Volunteer tourists tell stories about their faith and their sense of duty to volunteer. This section explores the role between faith, as a religious tenet, and altruism. Although religion and faith are often associated with each other, the volunteer tourists interviewed did not usually make the connection between religion and faith. In *Being in Christ and Putting Death in its Place*, Miles Richardson describes the role of faith; "It is faith, [one's] own particular faith, that establishes [one's] tie with God."<sup>135</sup> Richardson explains faith is contingent on a person's relationship with God. He connects faith to a religious belief in a specific higher power. Volunteer tourists correlate faith with their desire to do good and contribute to the community. Eric, Carol, Ethan, Tammy, and Haley, discuss the relationship between faith, duty, and altruism.

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<sup>135</sup> Miles Richardson, *Being in Christ and Putting Death in its Place: An Anthropologist's Account of Christian Performance in Spanish America and the American South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 310.

Eric, an architect from New Hampshire, told about how service accompanies his religious beliefs. After he finished cutting trim to fit around the bottom of the homeowner's cabinets, he speaks about how the idea to volunteer emerged in his congregation:

This is a congregational church up in the East Area of New Hampshire, UCC, that's who we're with but there are a lot of denominations within UCC and we're congregational. We've done [service missions] for many years. We've done it four years here, and they've done other trips for flood victims out in the Midwest prior to this. So, it's kind of a tradition. Actually, Mae and I are both on the planning committee, and we did a survey and one of the things that we found was that a strong faith value was giving and sharing. And volunteerism comes out of that. So that's something that within our church community is important to all of us. This is a trip that if we've got the time to do it, we love to participate. I've been fortunate to be able to do it because I haven't been working, but it's unfortunate that I haven't been working. We do a number of different volunteer things. We do a spaghetti dinner to feed, and we went around to different community leaders to find out what some of the needs of the community were. One of the people we talked to was the superintendent of the Derry school system, and she said a lot of kids are on the subsidized meal program and they really need a good meal. We've done that just about a year now. Like 150 people show up. The local paper wrote a story about it, and it was picked up by Fox News in New York. They wound up coming up and filming it, but it's not about publicity. That's not why we do it. It's not about publicity; it's about helping people out, you know? And that's the same reason we come down here.

I ask, "What role does your faith play in you coming here?"

Eric responds:

Well, I think we're all united in having a common faith background. It's this Christian giving and sharing and doing what you can for others. I think that's an important part of it. Obviously, it was an important part to a lot of people in the united congregations and we're just fortunate enough to be able to come down and do it.<sup>136</sup>

Eric talks about his church's regard for service. He associates the duty to help to his belief system, and coming to New Orleans to volunteer fulfills that duty. Eric stated, "Actually, Mae and I are both on the planning committee, and we did a survey and one of the things that we found was that a strong faith value was giving and sharing. And volunteerism comes out of that." Altruism fulfills the giving and sharing tenet Eric mentioned. Eric makes the direct link between religion and the desire to help others. Whoever needs help is entitled to it; therefore the volunteer tourists help whoever is in need throughout the New Orleans community. Through the information gained by surveying his fellow church members, Eric connects religion to altruism.

Carol, a forty year old woman from Montana, and I sit on front porch steps of the house in which she was working. We're on Orleans Avenue in Mid-City, an area where some houses were affected by the storm, and others were not. Carol describes New Orleanians' demonstration of faith and how this inspired her altruistic motives. She talks about how the Bible instills the sense of duty to individuals to help each other. Carol says:

In the Bible we're commanded to go out and serve the people and help them out. I think we can easily get caught up in our own little lifestyle. And [residents'] lives still have not been put back together. If we can be one little part of the puzzle the Lord uses, then that's my purpose in life to serve others as Christ would. I think we can easily get caught

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<sup>136</sup> Interview with Eric, May 7, 2009.



up in our own little lifestyle. I know nothing about this. I've heard about Hurricane Katrina, but I had no idea the magnitude and the lives affected. You know that they're suffering, and I pray for the suffering people. But there's a war going on at this time, elections, the economy, there's a lot of stressful things going on. And you have to realize these people, on top of all that's going on, they're still dealing with all this. And their lives still have not been put back together. If we can be one little part of the puzzle the Lord uses, then I guess that's my purpose in life to serve others as Christ would. And I think what's more so sad is there are some that just will never come back. And I can't imagine. I'm so secure where we are in [Montana] and [New Orleans residents] just have to up and go. And you either go to another state or you just go, you know what I mean? A lot of those people are believers and they're just walking by faith. Hopefully, the others of us who are being called by the Lord will hear that calling and come. I think people are so giving, they have so little but they're willing to share even what they have there. We have been blessed with so much and we can't even give that. It's such a selfish attitude. They teach us how to give and to *love* everybody-- just not to be judgmental. That's what I've learned from service projects. That the Lord cares just as much about you and me as he does about anybody.<sup>137</sup>

Carol attempts to understand how residents cope with leaving whenever a hurricane approaches. Carol shifts from talking about the faith of residents to talking about the receptivity of potential volunteers to come and help. The faith of residents becomes a recruiting tool for future volunteers. Carol's understanding of New Orleanians' faith to live with uncertainty encourages her altruistic motivates. By asserting her new found understanding and extending the

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<sup>137</sup> Interview with Carol, February 26, 2009.

invitation to others when she returns to Montana, she encourages others to help the community as she did. Through her altruism, Carol concludes that God love everyone equally. Her faith is reinforced through her service to residents of New Orleans.

Carol also expresses how the Bible encourages her to assist others who are struggling when she says, “In the Bible we’re commanded to go out and serve the people and help them out.” Carol’s understanding of the Bible gives her that sense of duty, and her desire to do good comes from her desire to emulate Christ. The Bible ties her belief in God to service. Through the Bible, Carol connects her service to her religious beliefs.

Like Carol, Ethan, a volunteer from Berkeley, talks about how altruistic motivations are not only tied to faith but are also infectious. He tells a resident’s story regarding faith:

Well, we’re an extension of the faith community back in the Bay Area. I’m more involved with the Presbyterian Church, and so we are able to talk with a lot of different people about community organizing ideas. This whole structure that UCC has put around to make sure that eleven months out of the year is covered with volunteers and that there’s consistency. You don’t have to come with a ton of skills, but you can come and work and be helpful. You can come and talk with people and be helpful, you can come and develop an understanding about what they’re going through and go home and tell people and that’s helpful. I was interested last year when we were at the UCC orientation and Alan Coe said it’s not just about coming here and doing some work. We’re not here to make sure you work hard and make sure everything’s done. We’re also asking you to talk to the people and hear their stories and then be able to go back and tell their stories. So that first core group of five, they set a tone when they came back. We also have a blog and you actually can go on the blog and get a real good sense of what happened the

first year and what happened the second year. It's pretty comprehensive with pictures and things, and people have been so warm and open and responsive to us being here.

One woman said her faith has been renewed because we're here. She said it encourages her to be more hopeful and to actually go out and do work as well.<sup>138</sup>

As Ethan mentions, the resident shifts the discouragement in her circumstances to faith, and she attributes this faith to the volunteers. The resident Ethan spoke to also asserted her desire to help after being helped by volunteer tourists. This story exemplifies how both residents and volunteer tourists associate religion and altruism. Not only is this community strengthened by the resident's restored faith, but also by her assertion to carry the help forward and help others. The contagion effect builds the resilience of the residents' faith, and then strengthens the community. As Ethan suggests, the community is strengthened by this resident's desire to help others in her own community.

Additionally, Ethan discusses the role of religion to coordinate volunteer efforts. He explained, "This whole structure that UCC has put around to make sure that eleven months out of the year is covered with volunteers and that there's consistency." Ethan connects the church to volunteering showing the church's facilitation of volunteer efforts. As churches coordinate help, volunteer tourists fulfill their humanitarian desires.

Ethan also implicitly makes the connection between storytelling, work, and the contributions of volunteer tourists while in the city. He talks about how storytelling is connected to the work that volunteer tourists do while in New Orleans. He states that storytelling is a different type of work volunteer tourists do while in New Orleans. He also says that they're church leader encouraged them to collect stories, much in the same way tourists collect souvenirs

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<sup>138</sup> Interview with Ethan, May 7, 2009.

while travelling. For Ethan not only is the church's facilitation of volunteer work important, but also the stories volunteers collect while working.

Tammy and Haley also articulate the relationship between faith and their altruistic motives. Two women in their forties, Tammy and Haley are full of life. When I ask, "What has been the biggest benefit about coming here?"

Tammy answers, "Personally? Just this. It's gratifying to me to help somebody else. Then that helps me to grow in my faith, what I believe in. Not only here but also at home I reach out to people all the time. It's just a sense of fulfillment."

Haley adds:

Yeah, I feel like it's part of my duty. It's something that I should do and I feel better when I do it. I mean, it takes some of your resources, it takes some of your vacation time but I really think it provides a balance in your life that you don't have if you stay in your own little community and see the world from your vantage point all the time. You don't see things clearly, you have to go somewhere else sometimes and look around and then you have the balance you need to see the world better.<sup>139</sup>

Tammy and Haley describe their experience talking about the cause and effect relationship of helping people and faith. Altruism causes their faith to increase. Though altruistic, there are personal rewards to altruistic behaviors. Tammy and Haley feel assisting others cultivates their core belief system, which is personally rewarding, while simultaneously helping the community.

Volunteer tourists also tell stories about the sense of duty to help others. In tying the duty to serve to religious values, duty is highlighted through the actions of congregations or

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<sup>139</sup> Interview with Tammy and Haley, January 22, 2009.

connections volunteer tourists make to the Bible. Tammy connects feeling obligated to help others to their religious beliefs.

Tammy and I were walking through the Lower Ninth Ward looking for occupied houses for the “Where’s your neighbor?” Program and talking about her decision to volunteer. Tammy says, “Being a Christian, I feel it’s our job to take care of one another.”<sup>140</sup> Tammy’s Christian identity requires her to help others. The religious principles of faith and duty encourage Tammy’s altruistic motivations. Tammy’s statement ties religion to altruism, and her Christianity encourages her to help others and the community as a whole.

Not only does Tammy’s service help the city in a physical way, but her sense of duty is part of her core belief system. Defining who she is, the core belief system makes the duty to help others tied to her salvation. This commandment to help others helps the entire community because she understands her life’s mission is to help others – and that includes the New Orleans community.

These volunteer tourists perform faith and duty through helping others. In this section, we learned how volunteer tourists connect faith, duty, and volunteering through the experiences Eric, Carol, Ethan, Tammy, and Haley described. The religious tenets give these volunteers the responsibility to help others and facilitating their altruism.

## **Conclusion**

Through the stories of volunteer tourists, this chapter details how religion and altruistic motivations are intertwined. This chapter demonstrates how volunteer tourists relay information about previous mission trips to New Orleans, inspiring new volunteer tourists to join.

Additionally, the chapter discusses how integral churches are in organizing volunteer tourists’

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<sup>140</sup> Interview with Tammy, January 22, 2009.

activities. Also, this chapter highlights how religious organizations build in reflection time during their evening services to further the bonds between religion and helping others. We learn volunteer tourists were inspired by the Bible to help residents, not convert them. Finally, the volunteers connect a sense of duty and faith as fundamental to these religious organizations. We now understand that volunteer tourists' desire to help others is made possible by their involvement with religious organizations and how integral religious organizations are in facilitating the rebuilding of New Orleans.

Volunteer tourists' desire to help is their central motivating factor for being in New Orleans. This altruism contributes to the community as residents see volunteer tourists' sincere desire to help them. More significantly, this interaction and exchange through altruism is what ultimately improves the community of New Orleans.

Volunteers' efforts are felt throughout the community through the collaborative effort of religious groups' altruism. Through these individuals' sense of responsibility and desire to help others, they join up with a group who also has that same desire. The ability of church groups to combine people's skills, materials, tools, and resources makes their work quicker and more effective than if they were singularly/individually trying to help residents. Essentially, through working as a team, the religious groups are able to get more done in a shorter amount of time. Each home rebuilt by a congregation is a step in contributing to the restoration of the community.

In addition to the contribution volunteers make to the community through the pooling of resources, volunteer tourists are also contributing by seeing the benefit of their work on the entire community. The work volunteer tourists do is tied to a higher power, beyond helping a family get back into their home. The work is simultaneously giving residents their community back

and allowing them to fulfill a part of their religious obligation. Through connecting Bible verses to the labor and making the explicit tie between their physical activities and their spiritual commitments, volunteer tourists find meaning in helping New Orleanians. This active connection between religion and service makes the work more meaningful for the volunteers. This meaning gives volunteer tourists a reason to come back and contribute further to the community. Through the multiple congregations engaging in rebuilding homes across the area, this impact is felt throughout the entire community.

This chapter complements the volunteer tourism literature presented earlier. By giving the volunteer tourists an opportunity to speak, we understand that the volunteering experience is more than a series of tasks volunteers complete. Volunteer tourists describe the work they do and they describe their thought process in completing that work. And through these interviews, volunteer tourists suggest that these tasks are fulfilled to help the larger community.

The next chapter also examines how volunteer tourists relate their stories to their volunteer experience in New Orleans. Further building on the principle of altruism, the next chapter recounts stories about the work volunteer tourists do on vacation to help the community of New Orleans.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **A WORKING VACATION: AN OXYMORON OR THE PERFORMANCE OF AGENCY IN TOURISM?**

Tourists come to New Orleans for the variety of events, activities, and scenery that makes this American city unique. When Hurricane Katrina hit, many of the same individuals who visited New Orleans for those reasons decided to come back and help fellow citizens who were struggling. However, researchers have only started to learn why people work on vacation. Additionally, researchers have just begun investigating why volunteers decide to travel to help a community of which they are not members. Understanding how volunteer tourists' decisions and evaluations about labor contribute to the community adds to arguments by Cohen, MacCannell, and Bowman (discussed below) who argue tourists are agents who they make decisions throughout their tourism experience. By understanding volunteer tourists' decisions and evaluations about labor strengthens the argument that tourists are agents. This study provides a site where individuals decide to come to help others as a response to a disaster.

Agency has long been researched as an important factor in tourism studies. Daniel J. Boorstin, a tourism scholar who wrote in the 1960s, paints tourists as automatons and categorizes individuals as "travelers" and "tourists." Boorstin typifies tourists as people who perceive they are getting an authentic experience, but are in fact blindly seeking a false sense of adventure.<sup>141</sup> Boorstin conveys that tourists are banal.

Each volunteer tourist has a unique experience while volunteering in New Orleans. The volunteers understand their experiences in New Orleans and the work they perform in a particular way. Moving towards a more progressive idea of the tourist, Erik Cohen looks at the

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<sup>141</sup> Daniel J. Boorstin, "From Traveler to Tourist: The Lost Art of Travel," in *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, (New York: Atheneum Press, 1962), 77-117.



tourist experience and introduces the idea that tourists have choice in his article, “A Phenomenology of Tourist Experiences.” He states, “Different kinds of people may desire different modes of touristic experiences; hence ‘*the tourist*’ does not exist as a type.”<sup>142</sup> He expresses that tourists cannot be typecast. My research builds on Cohen’s idea by demonstrating that volunteer tourists do not have the same experiences in New Orleans. Each volunteer tourist experiences work in a unique way and therefore understands their contribution to New Orleans uniquely.

Volunteer tourists think through their decisions to work, what type of work they will do, and whether their work has an impact on New Orleans. Simultaneous to Cohen’s assertion that tourists cannot be pigeonholed, John Urry talks about tourism as an activity in his seminal work, *The Tourist Gaze*. John Urry focuses on tourism as an act of looking. Dean MacCannell builds on Urry’s ideas in his article, “Tourist Agency.” MacCannell interprets Urry’s argument that tourism is an activity where the tourist decides which directions to look and what to absorb.<sup>143</sup> MacCannell adds, “Tourists are human beings. They must have free will.”<sup>144</sup> MacCannell states that tourists make choices. My study demonstrates that volunteer tourism is more than an act of looking, and builds on MacCannell’s assertion that tourists have “free will.” Through volunteer tourists’ discussions of their decisions and their work, they confirm that volunteer tourism is also a thought-filled endeavor.

We learn that volunteer tourists are less concerned about what they’re doing and more concerned about how they feel about the work they’re undertaking and its usefulness. In *Tourist Cultures*, Wearing invites research that shows “the idea of tourism as an experience is presented

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<sup>142</sup> Erik Cohen, “A Phenomenology of Tourist Experiences,” *Sociology* 13, no. 2 (May 1979), 180.

<sup>143</sup> Dean MacCannell, “Tourist Agency,” *Tourist Studies* 1, no.1 (2001): 25.

<sup>144</sup> MacCannell, 23.

in this chapter as the starting point for a broader understanding of tourism. Such an approach makes it possible to consider both the limitations and freedoms inherent in tourism and the interactive tourism space.”<sup>145</sup> Throughout the interviews, volunteer tourists in New Orleans evidence how they process their experiences discussing the many facets of their work.

In addition to being an important factor in tourism studies as a whole, agency is crucial to volunteer tourism studies. Previous studies addressing volunteer tourism discuss locations, volunteer tourism as a way to discover one’s self-identity, the othering of locals, the types of volunteer organizations, and give demographics about tourists. Other volunteer tourism literature discusses the types of work volunteer tourists do. However, the literature does not discuss the thought volunteer tourists undertake when deciding to travel to help another community. The thought processes involved with being a volunteer tourist are substantial and complicated. As this chapter confirms, volunteer tourists are considerate, calculated, and thoughtful.

One way volunteer tourists exercise their agency is by making the decision to take responsibility for rebuilding New Orleans. These individuals spend their money to come to New Orleans, wake up at 7:00 a.m., and participate in manual labor on their vacations. In evaluating what it means to help others, volunteer tourists also question whether helping residents actually reinforces the city’s dependence on volunteers. In sum, volunteer tourists not only decide to engage in these activities, they also think about the activities and their consequences as they do the activities.

Through my interviews with volunteer tourists, they reveal their resolution to take responsibility to help with rebuilding efforts and their evaluations of productivity. Volunteer

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<sup>145</sup> Stephen Wearing, Deborah Stevenson and Tamara Young, *Tourist Cultures: Identity, Place and the Traveller* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2010), 35.

tourists reflect on the work they've done as volunteer tourists and evaluate what activities help New Orleans and New Orleanians. Additionally, volunteer tourists critically examine their skill level to complete volunteer projects. Finally, volunteer tourists seek to measure their work's effectiveness. This chapter highlights volunteer tourists' stories to show the process of decision-making and evaluations of volunteer tourists make about their work. Volunteer tourists demonstrate agency by resolving to take responsibility to help rebuild New Orleans. These individuals then decide to help and interpret what "helping" means to them. Volunteer tourists evaluate their experience of volunteering in New Orleans throughout their trip. These individuals decide whether their work is helpful, productive, and if they have the skill level to complete the task each step of the way.

The labor volunteer tourists perform is free, with no payment requested in return. The work volunteer tourists do is also difficult and tiresome. This work includes painting, climbing ladders, using a saw, and working without air conditioning, water, or power. To voluntarily engage in the tiresome and difficult work attests to the agency scholars have been studying for years. Agency is essential to help us understand the decision-making process behind the labor volunteer tourists complete. Also, showing the decision-making process regarding labor, affirms volunteer tourists' agency. By using agency to understand labor, we can assess the resolve volunteer tourists have to work in New Orleans.

Volunteer tourists confront stereotypes that tourism is strictly leisure by working on vacation. As this chapter shows, volunteer tourists' agency contributes to the community as a whole. Volunteer tourists are not simply doing mindless labor, they are constantly thinking about what they're doing as potentially helpful or hurtful to the city.

## Responsibility

The first way volunteer tourists demonstrate agency is through making decisions to take responsibility. Volunteer tourists explain their decision to take responsibility by talking about helping fellow citizens. Volunteer tourists discuss taking responsibility because they feel an obligation to help those who cannot help themselves.

Tammy, from the Lutheran Church in Baltimore, relates her resolve to take responsibility for rebuilding and to come to New Orleans, “I knew I would come back many, many more times. I feel like this is our responsibility as Americans to get this city up again. I feel a responsibility to help these people and for those who choose to come back to have that availability to do so. If it was my hometown I certainly would want fellow Americans to come to my aid as well so: ‘Paying it forward.’”<sup>146</sup> Tammy feels that as an American she has an obligation to help other Americans. She resolves to help others and hopes others would have the same resolve in the event something would happen to her. In addition to Tammy’s decision to help, Tammy also believes residents should be able to decide whether they will come back to live in New Orleans. Tammy’s decision to take responsibility to help fellow citizens inspires her to come to New Orleans repeatedly. Each trip Tammy helps many individuals rebuild their homes. She also communicates to residents that they, as volunteers, care about their well-being. The rebuilding of homes and volunteer tourists’ showing that they care about New Orleanians contributes to the New Orleans community as a whole. Not only is Tammy helping one individual return to New Orleans, she helps many residents. By helping many residents return home, Tammy extends the help beyond one home and into the community.

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<sup>146</sup> Interview with Tammy, January 22, 2009.

While Tammy decides to help others because they are fellow Americans, some volunteer tourists take on the responsibility to help because residents do not have the ability to fix their homes themselves. In a conversation with Tommy, a scene builder from New Jersey and a member of the UU team, he states why he chose to come to New Orleans, “We’re helping because the owner is getting treated for health reasons up in Chicago because she’s got family there. She doesn’t have anyone down here to take care of her. She’s going through a rough time right now--in addition to her home being destroyed.”<sup>147</sup> Tommy takes responsibility because the owner cannot be present to do the work. Tommy adopts this homeowner’s responsibility to restore her home. His acceptance of the responsibility to the community demonstrates contribution in that he’s supporting a member of the community in its time of need.

While Tommy takes responsibility because the homeowner is taking care of her health issues, Sam decides to take responsibility to express a moral stance. Sam states, “I volunteered because it seemed like the right thing to do. Personally, one of my goals is just to help and aid people, which is why I was interested. This is an area that still needs help three years later. So it just struck me as a good idea.”<sup>148</sup> He takes responsibility because of his personal commitment to helping others. Sam’s resolve to take responsibility comes from his views of what is right and wrong. He views taking responsibility to help people rebuild their homes as his moral duty.

Tammy, Tommy, and Sam demonstrate their agency by making decisions. Specifically, these volunteer tourists decide to take responsibility to help struggling residents. Tammy, Tommy, and Sam’s decisions contribute to the community as they make the commitment to help. The decision to take responsibility leads to volunteer tourists to decide what activities are considered as helping residents. Volunteer tourists come to New Orleans not to change it, but to

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<sup>147</sup> Interview with Tommy, April 17, 2009.

<sup>148</sup> Interview with Sam, January 18, 2009.

cultivate what is already in the city. Seeking to preserve the sense of community and the architecture, volunteer tourists want to restore New Orleans, not rebuild it. For volunteer tourists to take responsibility means that people outside New Orleans have an investment in the city and care about it.

### **What Is Helping?**

After volunteer tourists take responsibility to help, they then attest to their agency by individually defining what will help residents of New Orleans. Volunteer tourists are not merely given an assignment to complete but make thoughtful decisions about what they consider to be helpful and how they can facilitate help for New Orleans residents. Brett, Tommy, Brenda, Ethan, and Mae relate stories demonstrating volunteer tourists' determination to help New Orleans.

Sitting on the front porch of a house next to a FEMA trailer, I ask Brett and Tommy from New Jersey, "What acts do y'all consider helping New Orleans folks?"

Brett answers, "Anything that goes toward making the house habitable or helping someone else make it habitable even if it's just staying out of the way." Brett is inclusive when considering what helps New Orleans residents. Recognizing that everyone has a different skill set, Brett includes the supporting roles volunteers play to other volunteers. The supporting roles of volunteer tourists include helping to facilitate volunteers' work on houses without working on the houses themselves. Brett discusses how members of their group specifically help in supporting roles, "One member stays at the volunteer center and makes lunches and dinners for us. Others work at the Amistad archives at Tulane University."

Tommy adds, “There’s so much to do down here. Everything got wrecked. People down here have to go to work, have to go to school, and have to shop.”<sup>149</sup> Tommy includes many facets of life in New Orleans as part of the rebuilding effort. Tommy realizes that New Orleans includes a combination of people and traditions. Tommy also recognizes that both the residents’ homes and the cultures were damaged during the storm and both need help to be restored. He integrates facilitating the daily lives of residents and volunteers as part of helping New Orleans, showing how intertwined these seemingly different groups are. Additionally, he considers restoring historical documents housed in New Orleans to be a part of helping.

Brett and Tommy are thoughtful about what they consider helping New Orleans’ residents, demonstrating their agency. Their thoughtfulness contributes to the community as a whole because volunteer tourists with this attitude acknowledge that New Orleans is more than thousands of destroyed homes. By including the volunteer tourists’ supporting roles, they recognize that New Orleans is a system of residents and cultures that were damaged during the storm and need help restoring. Through this understanding, volunteer tourists remark that the work they complete improves the lives of many New Orleanians, not just the one whose home they are working on.

Tommy discusses his role as a volunteer tourist further by stating, “I think really there’s a whole lot of different types of need here and all over the Gulf Coast. Labor includes pitching in whatever way for whatever need is there.”<sup>150</sup> Tommy expresses being flexible is essential to being a volunteer tourist. Tommy’s flexibility is part of his agency. He is thoughtful about the variety of tasks and states volunteer tourists can help in a number of ways. Tommy’s contribution to the community is his willingness to assist in a variety of tasks.

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<sup>149</sup> Interview with Brett, April 17, 2009.

<sup>150</sup> Interview with Tommy, April 17, 2009.

Brenda demonstrates her agency by comparing her perspective on helping to a fellow volunteer's. Sitting on a homeowner's warped hardwood floor in the Hollygrove neighborhood of New Orleans, Brenda discloses, "Garrett and I are different in that he says, 'Let's get right to the work,' and I spend a lot of time with the neighbors and the homeowners getting to know them personally. I kept in touch with an owner we worked with last year and sent her packages throughout the year."<sup>151</sup> Brenda compares her and Garrett's differing approaches to helping. Garrett decides the best way to help is to do whatever labor needs to be done as efficiently as possible. Brenda feels work includes developing friendships with residents and finds continuing these relationships after leaving New Orleans important. Additionally, by having these conversations with owners, Brenda begins to understand New Orleans' composition. Brenda finds understanding New Orleans essential to helping its citizens. Where Brenda entertains the emotional needs of residents, Garrett attends to the physical needs. Both Brenda and Garrett are agents in their decisions determining what helps New Orleans, and both contribute to the community despite having different approaches to work.

Mae, a volunteer in her late sixties from New Hampshire, asserts agency by continuing her volunteer work when she returns to New Hampshire. Like Brenda and unlike Garrett, Mae decides she can help New Orleans even after she leaves. As a ferry operator in New Hampshire in the summers, Mae states she's helping the most "by being a spokesman of the need to continue volunteerism."<sup>152</sup> She states:

My husband and I are retired but we work for the state port authority. So we share our experiences in New Orleans with our colleagues there. We work only seasonally but I work at a port where the boats come to pick up tourists and go to this island, usually for

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<sup>151</sup> Interview with Brenda, April 17, 2009.

<sup>152</sup> Interview with Mae, May 1, 2009.



Unitarian and United Church of Christ conferences. The conference goers are always eager to ask, “What have you done in your life?” The minute I mention New Orleans, they just want to soak it all up. So, I do have an opportunity to share the need for help with the visitors.<sup>153</sup>

Serving as a recruiter to potential volunteers is Mae’s way of making the biggest impact as a volunteer tourist in New Orleans. Mae decides what she does when she is away has more impact than what she does while in New Orleans. Like Brenda, Mae feels her work continues after she leaves. Mae helps when she gets home by recounting her experiences in New Orleans and the varied ways volunteer tourists can contribute to the city to visitors she meets in New Hampshire. Mae feels her resolution to become an advocate when she returns home is her best contribution. Mae contributes to the community by acknowledging the remaining needs of the city once she returns home.

Unlike Mae, who talks about continuing to contribute when she returns home, other volunteer tourists talk about contributing financially. Volunteer tourists make calculated decisions about where and how they spend their money in New Orleans, hoping their funds can have a positive impact on New Orleans as a whole. Victoria, a student from a Wisconsin university, asserts her agency by spending money in New Orleans. She makes choices about how to put money into New Orleans’ economy. Victoria states, “We’re supporting the city not only with helping build, but we’re also supporting the economy by going out to restaurants and purchasing souvenirs.”<sup>154</sup> Victoria’s contribution to the community can be felt throughout the community as the city receives tax revenues, the servers earn gratuities, the souvenir shops attract sales, and workers maintain jobs. The idea that volunteers can help the city by putting

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<sup>153</sup> Interview with Mae, May 1, 2009.

<sup>154</sup> Interview with Victoria, February 26, 2009.

their dollars to work by spending their money locally broadens the idea of help to include indirect means of help. Although spending money is not physical labor, it has the potential to help the whole community. Tourism dollars are ideally dispersed through commerce to members of the community, and politicians and city tourism officials alike lobbied for people to come to New Orleans and spend money.<sup>155</sup> These citizens who benefit from tourists visiting the city see improvements to their personal economic situations. The improvement of New Orleanians' economic standards allows more money to go back into the New Orleans economy, which affects the whole community.

The decision to take responsibility and determine what helps New Orleans leads volunteer tourists to then examine their productivity. Volunteer tourists assess their productivity by cogitating on their skill level and the amount of work they're able to complete in a week.

### **Volunteer Tourists' Skill Level**

Volunteer tourists also demonstrate their agency by reflecting on their skill level to complete manual labor tasks. By evaluating their skill level, volunteer tourists are simultaneously evaluating their contribution to the community. Skill levels among volunteer tourists vary. Most volunteer tourists have college degrees or are working towards one. Some volunteers have master's degrees, and I interviewed two volunteers with doctorates. However, in the scope of volunteer labor, individuals are classified as "skilled" or "non-skilled." "Skilled" is not attached to the volunteer's education but reflects his or her ability to perform certain manual

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<sup>155</sup> Jaquetta White, "If You Sell It, Will They Come?" *The Times-Picayune*, August 30, 2006, [http://www.nola.com/katrina/index.ssf/2006/08/if\\_you\\_sell\\_it\\_will\\_they\\_come.html](http://www.nola.com/katrina/index.ssf/2006/08/if_you_sell_it_will_they_come.html).

labors. “Skilled” also means the volunteer has previously participated and engaged in an activity. “Unskilled” means the volunteer has never participated in the manual labor before.<sup>156</sup>

Volunteers indicate that their previous volunteer activities may have included starting volunteer clubs at their high schools or serving food at soup kitchens. Other volunteers, who are highly valued as volunteers, make or made a living doing construction work. These “skilled” individuals often become the designated “site-supervisors” and spend their week in New Orleans instructing the “less-skilled” on how to perform certain tasks.

Some volunteer tourists scrutinize their unskilled labor’s contribution to the community. Gutting houses is a common type of labor performed by volunteer tourists in New Orleans. Gutting a house includes donning a HAZMAT suit with goggles and a surgical mask. Because homes sat in water for months after the storm, mold and mildew overtook the remaining contents, rugs, sheetrock, and studs of the home. Gutting is where individuals remove the molded contents of the home, including using a mallet to remove sheetrock to the studs. A mold remediation company later treats the studs and the rebuilding can begin. Gutting is considered unskilled labor.

I meet a volunteer tourist from Seattle named Steve while driving around the Lower Ninth Ward. His face lights up as he evaluates his skill level. The passion in his voice is evident as he discusses gutting houses:

I’ve learned dry-walling and other things in short spurts but you don’t get that feeling of accomplishment as fast. You have to do it right and there’s accuracy involved.

Somebody needs to make sure you’re doing it right. Gutting: ‘That wall needs to come

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<sup>156</sup> Michelle Callanan and Sarah Thomas, “Volunteer Tourism: Deconstructing Volunteer Activities within a Dynamic Environment,” in *Niche Tourism: Contemporary Issues, Trends, and Cases*, ed. Marina Novelli (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2005), 187-190.

down. Here's how you do it. Go!' You feel like you can get so much done. It's fun even though it's not supposed to be, but it's easy to do.<sup>157</sup>

Steve discusses that gutting is more about the feeling of accomplishment despite his lack of skill. Steve also highlights gutting gives the volunteers immediate satisfaction, as most volunteer groups gut multiple houses within a week. Little thought is involved in the process, as every wall needs to come down in a house that was submerged for months. Steve considers gutting the first step in rebuilding. He feels also gutting provides the most gratification relative to his skill level.

Steve further explains how some volunteers with little construction experience enjoy the physical aspects of the labor:

In a benign way, [gutting is] productive destruction. That's not to make light of the situation, but I have no construction skills. What I can do is be told this is what needs to be taken apart, and don't step on nails--basic common sense. It's sort of this primal, primitive idea. Everybody knows how to take things apart. I got to a house at 11 o'clock in the morning and these kids had already torn through the walls, and then they came back the next day. We got most of it done in two days. That means I could be down here a week and we could get two maybe three houses done at a time if I had 10-15 people.

That means three families are closer to moving back in.<sup>158</sup>

Steve explains what he likes about gutting houses. Demolition is quick, requires few construction skills, and is very physical. Steve also highlights the volume he completes in a short amount of time. Steve explains that he can do other work, but demonstrates his agency by explaining what he likes about gutting houses. Steve also connects his work to the community as

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<sup>157</sup> Interview with Steve, February 25, 2009.

<sup>158</sup> Interview with Steve, February 25, 2009.

a whole by talking about how gutting helps residents return home. Gutting houses enables Steve to feel he is having the greatest impact on the city.

Unlike Steve, Helen does not enjoy the physicality of the work in New Orleans. Helen, a volunteer in her early seventies, sees her lack of skill as a discouraging factor in deciding to come to New Orleans. Intimidated at the quantity and difficulty of labor projects, Helen says:

I wasn't going to come this year, I was thinking, 'I'm not that experienced, I don't have skills in carpentry.' I had sheetrock and painting [experience] and I could drill screws, but I thought there really should be people who are more skilled down here now. Many members of the same team I traveled with before were going down. When they said they were coming I said, 'Okay, I'm coming because I know some of the team.' Truthfully, that's why I'm here this year *because of the team*. When I go back I look at it as an opportunity to tell people why it's so important to still continue this because I think it has an impact on people here as well as inside yourself. The message for us when we go back is New Orleans still has a ways to go. It really does.<sup>159</sup>

Helen exercises agency in evaluating her own skill level. She almost didn't come to New Orleans this trip because she felt more people with carpentry skills should come. Helen admitted her colleagues were the deciding factor in making the trip stating, "I'm here this year *because of the team*."<sup>160</sup> Given her lack of skill, Helen's opinion of her level of contribution to the community is limited. However, Helen highlights that her role when she goes home is to notify people from her own community that workers are still needed in New Orleans. Although Helen feels her physical contribution to the community is limited, her contribution to promoting New Orleans as a cause is significant.

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<sup>159</sup> Interview with Helen, May 1, 2009. Italics are her emphasis.

<sup>160</sup> Interview with Helen, May 1, 2009.

Other volunteer tourists evaluate their limited skill level, but translate the limited skill into something that can benefit the house and eventually the community. Izzy exercises her agency by evaluating her own skill set. Izzy, a freshman in college, talks about how her limited skill matched a project where she felt useful. Izzy states, “In high school I worked in the theatre department. We built all our own sets. I went to an all-girls school, and our director taught us how to build everything using every tool there was. We were competent, and we built steps for different platforms. We had to make them safe for high schoolers.”<sup>161</sup> Izzy relates that she built steps for her high school theatre program, so when she got to New Orleans, she and another team member built steps for a homeowner whose steps rotted from sitting in water for months after the storm. She continues, “I mean, who would have known that coming down here we would have been asked to use a skill that we had learned in the past to do something for someone else? We’ve made the stairs to be safe before so we had prepared to make them safe again. The homeowner, Ms. Bougeois, cried when she saw them. She hadn’t been upstairs since the hurricane.”<sup>162</sup>

Izzy articulates how their “non-skill” can be considered a skill if applied to the appropriate situation. She concludes that her particular skill is beneficial to the community. Izzy utilizes her agency as a volunteer tourist not only to do whatever she’s told to do, but to evaluate her skill level and determine how that skill can help residents.

Steve, Helen, and Izzy relate their contribution to the community through evaluating their skill level. Steve feels he is helpful when gutting houses because he gets instant gratification. Helen does not feel like she contributes labor; however, she contributes to the team. Finally, Izzy contributes to the community through evaluating her skill and adapting it to the task for

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<sup>161</sup> Interview with Izzy, January 18, 2009.

<sup>162</sup> Interview with Izzy, January 18, 2009.

restoring the home. Each volunteer is thoughtful about what can be included as part of their skill set and then understanding how they can use that to benefit the community.

### **Productivity**

Volunteer tourists not only evaluate their skill level, but they also evaluate their productivity. One way volunteer tourists assess their productivity is by homeowners' reactions. An integral part of being a volunteer tourist is the desire to meet the homeowners and show them their progress. As I interview Brenda on her last work day in New Orleans, her anticipation in seeing Vera, the homeowner, mounts, "The volunteer coordinators are supposed to stop by and maybe Vera. We heard Vera is stopping by. I hope they get here before we have to leave." Brenda repeats similar sentiments throughout the conversation.<sup>163</sup>

Hours later, Vera arrives and enters her home with a gasp, "It looks lovely," she says, "Thank you." Garrett smiles. It's the first time he has smiled all morning. He excitedly shows her around her house. "I can entertain now!" Vera exclaims, and Garrett's smile widens.

Most groups are invested in showing the homeowner their progress at the end of the week, even though renovations of a house are rarely completed within a week. As with other homeowners, Vera's positive evaluation leads to a sense of satisfaction for the volunteer tourists. This fulfillment brings volunteer tourists back year after year. In fact, Brenda has been to New Orleans two consecutive years, and Garrett has been volunteering in New Orleans for three years. Volunteer tourists scrutinize their proficiency and feel satisfied with their work. These individuals then decide to come back to New Orleans to help another resident. Helping many different residents contributes to the community as volunteer tourists volunteer at different locations each year.

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<sup>163</sup> Interview with Brenda, April 17, 2009.

Volunteer tourists also scrutinize their level of productivity based on the progress of New Orleans' neighborhoods. Different parts of the city are in various states of progress post-Katrina. While some neighborhoods sport only a few empty lots, others are riddled with empty lots and high grass in between occupied homes. The Lower Ninth Ward gets lots of attention because of the extensive media coverage following the storm, and volunteers often flock there. Volunteer tourists want to work in the Lower Ninth Ward. Brenda tells a story about this dilemma, "Yesterday on the radio somebody said 'The Lower Ninth Ward has all these volunteers. When are they going to come to our neighborhood?' In a sense I saw that as positive because it was clear that the impact of volunteers in the Lower Ninth Ward was being recognized. Also, the residents want the same impact in their neighborhood--not that they were accurate in saying that the Lower Ninth Ward has enough help."<sup>164</sup> Brenda interprets the radio show's caller's comments as a measure of volunteer tourists' productivity and influence. The caller highlights the number of volunteer tourists drawn to a particular community. Brenda interprets these comments as the notable progress volunteer tourists have on community.

Some volunteer tourists relate productivity to the type of work volunteer tourists participate in from year to year. Eric says:

This time it's that the nature of the work has changed in a lot of ways. It's shifted since I was last down here. It was almost as if there was this rush, fever just to get things stripped when I was first out here. Now it's a harder process. It's a little more arduous. You see the progress happens more incrementally. Now it's about finishing. It's about doing cabinets and doing molding work, putting on the final details, laying down

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<sup>164</sup> Interview with Brenda, April 17, 2009.



subfloor. It's a little more time consuming, and a little more focused. The nature of the work has changed.<sup>165</sup>

Eric makes a judgment about the productivity through the pace and the nature of work he has seen through his annual volunteer trip. Eric states productivity has seemingly slowed, but it has become more detail-oriented. Eric evaluates the proficiency based on the type of work volunteer tourists did in previous years versus this year. Eric's comments attest to the significance of volunteer tourists to the community by showing the work becomes more complicated each visit. Eric views the change in work as evidence that his contributions impact the larger community.

Eric relates the progress of the city directly to volunteers. He states, "If the volunteers stopped coming to New Orleans, the necessary work would plateau. If volunteerism can continue for a minimum of the next five years then perhaps all those in need of reconstruction will receive it."<sup>166</sup> Eric discusses New Orleans' reliance on volunteer tourists, and the progress made through volunteer tourists' continual presence. Eric conjectures volunteer tourists will be needed in the area until 2014 to finish projects.

Other volunteers relate their feelings about the amount of work they accomplish in a week. Understanding that she, singularly, won't rebuild New Orleans overnight, Helen relates:

Does it bother me that we worked on this house and it's not finished? No, because I know there are hundreds of homes like that in this city. It's wonderful if a home can be lived in but I also know there's a process. You find homes that are all spiffed up, and then there's one next to it that's a complete mess, and then there's a home that's spiffed up and another one that's a mess. I read the *Times-Picayune* and I see what's happening with the

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<sup>165</sup> Interview with Eric, April 17, 2009.

<sup>166</sup> Interview with Eric, May 1, 2009.

FEMA money and the Road Home money or who is appointed to be the FEMA director in this area, and what Mayor Nagin is up to. I do. I love it. I like to see what's going to happen to make this city be home again and better than what it was before Hurricane Katrina. That's the hope. Because there's a high crime rate, a high drug rate, but hopefully New Orleans will be better in many ways.<sup>167</sup>

Helen examines the rebuilding process. She notes that rebuilding is incremental, which is frustrating for volunteers. Helen is also aware rebuilding is not the only activity that will restore New Orleans. She is thoughtful about issues needing rebuilding – not just homes. Helen's perspective relates that contribution to the community is also incremental and may not be felt city-wide.

Like Helen, Eric talks about the complexity of rebuilding:

I was profoundly touched last time I was here. Not just from the devastation, that's all around us, but by the fact that these people's lives were so changed. Even the people who were fortunate enough to rebuild are never going to know the life they had. Maybe they're rebuilding their house but the house next door is completely gone, the next house is a wreck, and it may be four houses down the road before someone else is rebuilding. The life they knew was coming home from work and sitting out on the porch and having the neighbors come by and the kids playing. That's never going to happen again for a lot of these people, and that's unfortunate. So we can rebuild houses, but we can't really rebuild the relationships or rebuild the families. It's going to be a different city when it's

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<sup>167</sup> Interview with Helen, May 1, 2009.

all done and there's no amount of effort you can put into that, volunteer effort that you can put into that that's going to change that.<sup>168</sup>

Eric gauges productivity by complicating the recovery efforts of volunteer tourists. By discussing the sporadic nature of the rebuilding, he relates the difficulties of being a volunteer tourist. The irregularity in rebuilding is part of the limit and challenge of being a volunteer tourist. Eric points out that even though volunteer tourists are able to rebuild some homes and those homes contribute to the community as a whole, volunteer tourists cannot carry the entire burden of rebuilding New Orleans. Eric is realistic about the role that volunteer tourists can have on a city with the scope of damage it suffered.

Haley, a return volunteer tourist, judges the productivity of the city. She states, "I thought I'd seen a lot of improvement in seven months. I was pleasantly surprised at how much had been cleaned up. There was a lot less debris around and a lot more building. I thought it looked really good. Also when we were here before people were talking about how thankful they were that people were still coming back three years later to help."<sup>169</sup> Haley explains the noticeable progress in the time since her last trip. Additionally, she highlights the thanks she gets from residents relating the volunteers' role in the progress. She makes a judgment on the progress of New Orleans based on what she sees and the appreciation residents show.

Tammy echoes Haley's observations, "We went down to the flood wall yesterday afternoon and Haley and I both said, 'Seven months ago there were three houses piled up on top of each other that had washed away. Now they're gone, and all around there's 'Make it Right'

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<sup>168</sup> Interview with Eric, May 1, 2009.

<sup>169</sup> Interview with Haley, January 22, 2009.

building. Brad Pitt's houses are down there, and several other houses are going up.<sup>170</sup> We were reflecting with each other, 'Wow, it's really cool to see this.'"<sup>171</sup> Tammy talks about the specific progress occurring in the Lower Ninth Ward. Tammy also mentions how increased celebrity attention has increased progress in New Orleans. Haley and Tammy express that in addition to working, volunteers also come to see the progress of the area. As Haley and Tammy mention, the progress is community-wide, and these volunteer tourists are able to see volunteer tourists' contributions throughout the community.

As Brenda, Eric, Helen, Haley, and Tammy demonstrate, volunteer tourists evaluate their productivity based on feedback from residents, the type of work they're doing, what they read in local publications, and the change they see when in New Orleans. Through these volunteer tourists evaluations, they measure their impact on the community as a whole.

### **Drop in the Bucket**

Volunteer tourists often evaluate their productivity metaphorically, comparing it to a "drop in the bucket." Volunteer tourists determine their contribution to the community by relativizing the "drop" and the "bucket." This phrase has become the motto, theme, and rallying cry to motivate volunteer tourists. The phrase originates from the King James Version of the Bible, Isaiah 40:15 and reads, "Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance: behold, he taketh up the isles as a very little thing." Volunteers utilize "a drop in the bucket" as a way to measure and encourage their continued work in New Orleans. The bucket is metaphoric, taking on many shapes and sizes to the volunteer tourists.

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<sup>170</sup> Brad Pitt and the Make it Right foundation began construction on 150 green homes in 2007. These homes are available for purchase by previous Lower Ninth Ward homeowners or their immediate family members. For more information go to: <http://www.makeitrightnola.org/>.

<sup>171</sup> Interview with Tammy, January 22, 2009.

Amy from New Jersey discusses how “a drop in the bucket” illustrates her contribution to the community. She says:

We do a debriefing every night of what were the good points and bad points of the day and what you have learned. One night we talked about “a drop in the bucket” based on a reading Liz did. Sometimes you feel like it’s just a drop in the bucket and you’re not making a difference. One of the things that was interesting to think about is how big the bucket is. In this resident’s life, we’re making a huge impact. Whereas on the whole state of Louisiana, on the city of New Orleans, we’re making a wee little impact. But this will make this resident’s old age comfortable.<sup>172</sup>

If the bucket is small, Amy’s contribution is substantial; however, if the bucket is larger, Amy’s contribution is minimal. Evaluating the size of the “bucket” helps Amy determine her contribution to the community. Despite the potential discouragement of comparing work to “a drop in a bucket,” Amy interprets the meaning to reinforce the meaningfulness of the work.

Brett uses “a drop in a bucket” differently to describe his contribution to the community. He relates, “There’s something for anyone to do down here. We were talking the other night about if what we’re doing is a drop in the bucket and if a drop in the bucket matters. I think we came to the conclusion that every drop counts.”<sup>173</sup> Brett reinforces the idea that each drop is productive and each drop contributes to the community, regardless of the size of the bucket.

Other volunteer tourists use “a drop in a bucket” to compare the work volunteer tourists are doing to what the government didn’t do. When I asked Luke from Connecticut about the disadvantages in coming to New Orleans he says:

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<sup>172</sup> Interview with Amy, April 17, 2009.

<sup>173</sup> Interview with Brett, April 17, 2009.

Some of what we've been doing could be considered volunteer tourism. I feel like you might need more of a longer term stay [to be considered volunteer tourism], but then again everybody's doing a little bit. To use a cliché, it's 'a drop in the bucket.' We've actually heard people say volunteers are doing more than the government to help out.<sup>174</sup>

In this statement, Luke compares the productivity of the government to the drops. Luke reiterates the small amount volunteer tourists are able to do in a week is greater than the government's contribution to the community. By comparing these symbolic drops, he criticizes the help the government provided post-Hurricane Katrina.

Volunteers make judgments about the work they are doing. Some of this labor is monotonous, tiring, and feels like a waste of time. However by referring to volunteer work as "a drop in the bucket," it becomes a meaningful endeavor. Volunteers consider this work as meaningful enough to take time off from work to do more work or come back the following year. Each visit volunteer tourists witness the changes that occur from year to year. Many volunteer tourists judge their level of satisfaction based on the amount of changes they see from year to year.

### **Level of Satisfaction**

Many volunteers make the decision to come to New Orleans because they feel satisfied by helping people. In this section, I discuss how volunteer tourists evaluate their satisfaction in working for residents of New Orleans. Amy, Tammy, Luke, and Paula discuss the level of fulfillment each of them feels.

The fact that Amy is *not* getting paid makes her work satisfying. Amy tells a story about a neighboring home stating, "There's a house across the street that's in the process of being

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<sup>174</sup> Interview with Luke, February 20, 2009.

rebuilt. You see professionals working over there. How could us doing this for free not be meaningful? There's not even a question."<sup>175</sup> Hearing the passion in her voice, Amy is fervent in what she is doing and what she gave up to be in New Orleans. She later says:

We could have taken however much money we've spent on airfare, et cetera, and could have spent that money and all gone on a vacation to Florida. We could have gone to a spa. I could have visited my parents in Florida and kind of hang out for a week and have my mom cook for me and be completely relaxed. But at the end of the week, what do I have to say for myself? I relaxed. At the end of *this* week it's like, I built stuff, I did things to make a difference in people's lives, and I went out and I had fun. And I slept with twenty snoring adults!<sup>176</sup>

Amy lists the expense and the time off work as a disadvantage to volunteer tourism, but notes the gratification she feels from doing the work cannot be replaced. For Amy, the opportunity cost in not being paid for her work increases the rewards. Amy scrutinizes her decision to come to New Orleans to work and determines the rewards outweigh the cost. By working to rebuild homes and by helping others, Amy is contributing to the larger community in ways she would not be if she went to Florida to relax.

Unlike Amy, Tammy decides to come to New Orleans because of the appreciation that comes from residents. Tammy, from a church group in Maryland, measures her level of fulfillment by residents' feedback. Tammy mentions a story about her and a New Orleans pastor stating, "Pastor Derek and other people have told us this trip and previous trips, 'You know it's great that you're here working but it's more your being here and bringing hope back. It's wonderful to know you haven't been forgotten and people care and want to help you get back in

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<sup>175</sup> Interview with Amy, April 17, 2009.

<sup>176</sup> Interview with Amy, April 17, 2009.

your home....”<sup>177</sup> Tammy recounts the emotional struggles of New Orleanians and volunteer tourists’ role in restoring hope. Her pastor’s acknowledgement serves as optimism for residents and reaffirms Tammy’s resolve to come to New Orleans. Not only is hearing this comment satisfying for Tammy, but it also conveys satisfaction from the community. Pastor Derek indicates that volunteer tourists bring hope, meaning that they bring more than the labor they complete in New Orleans. Tammy interprets Pastor Derek’s comment as a satisfying aspect of volunteerism.

Unlike Tammy, Luke, a college graduate from Connecticut, analyzes his level of gratification based on the amount of work he does. Luke judges his work based on how physically challenging it is. He says, “We were painting and working with ACORN, and they were really disorganized. We got up bright and early and it was another two hours before they got all their stuff together so we could start painting. We finished working at two o’clock, and I was kind of dissatisfied. I wanted to work hard and actually accomplish something.”<sup>178</sup> Luke does not feel he exerted enough energy to be useful. His judgment on his work as ineffective negates his impact on the city.

However, Luke contrasts the day with ACORN by talking about instances where he felt rewarded. “I really like the opportunity to do something that is beneficial to the people in the area and actually get in a full day’s work.”<sup>179</sup> Luke asserts he came here to work and a significant part of his day should be spent working. The volunteer tourists measure the rewards of volunteering in terms of the amount of energy they expend doing work. For many, just being in New Orleans is not enough and the more physically engaging the work is, the better the

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<sup>177</sup> Interview with Tammy, January 22, 2009.

<sup>178</sup> Interview with Luke, February 20, 2009.

<sup>179</sup> Interview with Luke, February 20, 2009.



experience. Luke feels his contribution to the community is greatest when he is participating in physical work.

Paula from Philadelphia evaluates her level of satisfaction and struggles to feel rewarded. She assesses her experience in relation to fellow volunteer tourists. She concludes that if she would have worked at one residence the entire week, she would have felt more fulfillment. She states:

The first two days were really bad. I ended up on Monday night crying my eyes out. I got really upset. Some of my group has been really good about finding out what I can do, so I get some reward out of this. I think there are other people that have felt very rewarded in my group. Some of us have been moved around a lot to different places. We thought we were going to come down and work on one project, and five days into it you really feel you made a difference and see the difference. But we were switched around to a lot of different projects here, there, and everywhere. So people who have been switched around haven't been feeling so good about it. But there was one group that for whatever reason was allowed to stay at the same place for five days. And they're feeling really good about what they're doing.<sup>180</sup>

Paula charts her thought process step by step. She talks about the process in which she appraises her work as rewarding or not rewarding. She later discusses finding the facet of volunteering that made her feel the most rewarded was hearing from the homeowner she was doing a good job. She states:

I feel like maybe I've helped Miss Claire to maybe get the house in order enough to go back and find out what she needs to do for her health. And she has given some sense of

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<sup>180</sup> Interview with Paula, February 6, 2009.

appreciation. Some of the things I've done I've sort of felt like there was a sense that I sort of owed it to them or something. I've been to places that people didn't even say, "Thank you." The health center was awful; they didn't even introduce themselves or ask us who we were. At some level I understand, but that Miss Claire is not doing that makes you feel like you're really making a difference. And the fact that she's got standards, and I like people that have standards for how they want things done. So that's felt good because I don't like to just throw things together. I painted this room and I felt like it's my room. I did it the way I would have done my own home and that felt good.<sup>181</sup>

For Paula feeling connected to a place makes the experience beneficial. Paula connects her contribution to New Orleans through the satisfaction she feels. Until the homeowner expresses her satisfaction with Paula's work, she does not feel like she is making a marked contribution. Volunteer tourists' level of fulfillment depends on a number of factors, and their contribution to the community depends on their level of satisfaction. If a volunteer tourist does not feel satisfied, s/he does not feel like s/he contributed to the community.

### **Level of Exhaustion**

In addition to volunteer tourists' physical contribution, volunteer tourists assert their agency by giving themselves emotionally to New Orleans. Many volunteer tourists point out the toll volunteering takes on their bodies, their minds, their wallets, and their psyches. Sunny, Shannon, and Stacy talk about how being in New Orleans is arduous.

Sunny discusses the emotional aspects of volunteering stating, "It's tiring just being here wondering, trying to figure out what we need to get done."<sup>182</sup> Sunny talks about the difficulty of being in New Orleans and how overwhelming it is to see the destruction. In discussing the

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<sup>181</sup> Interview with Paula, February 6, 2009.

<sup>182</sup> Interview with Sunny, January 19, 2009.

difficulties of volunteer tourists, Sunny highlights how volunteer tourists take it upon themselves to find a solution to repair the destruction.

Shannon and Stacy from New Hampshire explain how laborious being in New Orleans is. Shannon states, “I find it exhausting. I find it kind of emotionally exhausting.”<sup>183</sup>

Stacy adds, “Yeah, well, we just keep going and going and going and going and going. We’re doing work, talking to people, so we don’t really have the time to process it until you get back. And then you’re kind of stuck in all this affluence and you’re like, ‘Oh my God, like what did I just do?’”<sup>184</sup>

Shannon retorts, “Yeah, I don’t think I could do more than a week. I really don’t. I don’t think I could do it. It’s just too intense.”<sup>185</sup> Shannon and Stacy emphasize the emotional difficulty of working in New Orleans. Stacy talks about the pace of the work in New Orleans and then highlights the contrast between the lavish lifestyle where she lives and the poverty and destruction in New Orleans. Shannon agrees with Stacy’s assessment of the challenges of New Orleans, and also finds being in New Orleans mentally straining.

This conversation between Sunny and me and Shannon and Stacy tell of the emotional toll of working in New Orleans as volunteers.

As Sunny, Shannon, and Stacy highlight, constantly being in this devastated city wears on one emotionally, mentally, and physically. Recounting the emotions they feel while in New Orleans, these volunteer tourists demonstrate they are agents, willing to engage with the city more than strictly for their own enjoyment.

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<sup>183</sup> Interview with Shannon, February 20, 2009.

<sup>184</sup> Interview with Stacy, February 20, 2009.

<sup>185</sup> Interview with Shannon, February 20, 2009.

## **Conclusion**

Volunteer tourists contribute to New Orleans and exercising their agency through the work they perform as volunteers. Volunteer tourists demonstrate their agency through their decision to take responsibility for rebuilding New Orleans and their subsequent evaluations of what helps, their productivity, and skill level. Through assessing their level of contribution to the work, their level of satisfaction from the work, and the emotional ramifications from doing the work while in the city, volunteer tourists reveal their agency. As individuals with agency, volunteer tourists understand that their work is not perfect and scrutinize their role in the city. Volunteer tourists demonstrate agency and show the complicated and discursive process between going to New Orleans and what it means to play an active role in rebuilding the city.

Agency is not something simply observed by tourism scholars, but tourists discuss how they constantly evaluate their actions and make decisions regarding further actions. Volunteer tourists are self-reflexive about the work they do, which demonstrates agency. Through the work volunteer tourists do while in New Orleans, they self-reflexively process their role within the larger community. Because these volunteer tourists are engaged in work with their bodies, they are self-reflexive about what they are doing.

Engaging in a discussion about agency where tourists' voices are included shows how agency operates for tourists, specifically where the actions and thoughts of tourists are recognized and examined. As discussed in the beginning of the chapter, tourists as a whole can also be self-reflexive in how they understand their role within the communities where they travel. Certain bodily touristic activities invite self-reflexivity. By examining tourists' thoughts and behaviors through their own voices gives us further insight into tourism as a performance.

As volunteer tourists rebuild the city, they get to know and understand the city of New Orleans. The next chapter addresses how volunteer tourists seek to understand New Orleans as a place.

**CHAPTER FIVE**

**LAYERS OF PLACE:  
UNDERSTANDING NEW ORLEANS THROUGH  
THE PERSPECTIVES OF VOLUNTEERS**

New Orleans is and since its foundation has been a contested space. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries France and Spain battled over its ownership.<sup>186</sup> During the Civil War New Orleans wanted to join the South and secede from the United States. Before the Civil Rights Era, people of color were moved from one area of the city to another.<sup>187</sup> In the midst of these contestations, Hurricane Katrina highlighted issues New Orleans struggled with for years. New Orleans' continual struggles with poverty and racial tensions appeared through newscasts and photojournalistic accounts of the chaos that followed the storm. Viewers gained ideas and developed opinions about New Orleans based on what they saw unfold in the news media.

Volunteer tourists also watched the events in New Orleans unfold and they bring their ideas and opinions about the city with them when they come to work. Volunteer tourists then come to New Orleans to work and talk to residents. By listening to residents' struggles of finding and filling out the correct forms to get grants to rebuild and searching for the title to the family home to prove ownership, they hear stories that were not featured on the evening news on the days following the storm. Volunteer tourists then compile the information they get through the newscasts, discussions with residents, and their own experiences in New Orleans to form opinions about the city and its condition. Throughout the stories presented in this chapter, many volunteer tourists gain a holistic sense of New Orleans and become advocates for the community's continued rebuilding.

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<sup>186</sup> Ned Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans: From Spanish Silver to Congo Square* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2009), 4.

<sup>187</sup> Joyce Marie Jackson, "Declaration of Taking Twice: The Fazendeville Community of the Lower Ninth Ward," *American Anthropologist* 108, no. 4 (2006): 765-780.

Volunteer tourists, with an intimate look at New Orleans through the homes, lives, and situations of its residents notice aspects of New Orleans leisure tourists do not get to see.

Volunteer tourists understand New Orleans as a place and how it operates. This allows volunteer tourists to contribute to the city rather than take away from it. Volunteer tourists witness what cannot be physically seen through talking to residents, spending time in neighborhoods, and rebuilding homes. By becoming familiar with New Orleans in this way, they understand more than what they can see. Volunteer tourists try to understand New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina even though they can no longer see the images that were on TV immediately following the storm. They try to imagine New Orleans in that state. Volunteer tourists attempt to understand the city based on what they can no longer see, but understand about New Orleans. This allows the volunteer tourists to not only to understand the city but also its sense of place.

Because volunteer tourists cannot see what the devastated areas of New Orleans looked like before Hurricane Katrina, volunteer tourists advocate for the rebuilding of New Orleans because the impact the city has on them. Volunteer tourists try to understand the how of New Orleans. Volunteer tourists seek to understand how New Orleans came to be and what it takes for it to exist today.

In attempting to understand how New Orleans came to be, volunteer tourists seek to understand the sense of New Orleans through its cultural traditions. Volunteer tourists attempt to engage the cultural traditions of New Orleans to understand the city, its people, and its landscape on a deeper level. Volunteer tourists examine the cultural traditions of New Orleans such as what it means to be southern, multi-generational living, community, the role of levees, family, and land, to understand the city. All of these examples are part of the culture of New Orleans. Paul Ricoeur discusses the “interpretation” of human action from a variety of sources as a trait of

“text,” or the cultural traditions I’m referring to.<sup>188</sup> Ricoeur states we understand culture through seeing aspects of the culture as habitually inscribed. The many cultural traditions of New Orleans can serve as the “texts” Ricoeur mentions in “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as Text.”

The cultural traditions of New Orleans help to explain to volunteer tourists its formation and continual existence despite its struggles through wars and disasters. Friendship, family, the role of levees, and the financial state of New Orleans are significant aspects of New Orleans that play a role in residents’ everyday lives. Volunteer tourists can understand that these aspects of New Orleans communicate community and this helps them to understand why New Orleans should be rebuilt. Ricoeur talks about comprehending what people do and why they do it, suggesting, “human action is opened to anybody who *can read*. In the same way that the meaning of an event is the sense of its forthcoming interpretations, the interpretation by the contemporaries has no particular privilege in this process.”<sup>189</sup> One can deduce from this statement that regardless of background or status, anyone who examines cultural traditions can have an opinion about those traditions. In other words, anyone who notices a particular cultural tradition can offer an interpretation of it. The cultural traditions of New Orleans, particular post Hurricane Katrina New Orleans, offers volunteer tourists circumstances to evaluate to gain information on how residents live.

Where volunteer tourists examine cultural traditions of New Orleans to understand the city, the space in which they occur is the context and a reason for the cultural traditions. The place is both a mobilizer and a constraint for New Orleans’ cultural traditions. The heat is

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<sup>188</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text,” in *Interpretive Social Science*, ed. Paul Rabinow and William M Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California, 1979), 86.

<sup>189</sup> Ricoeur, 86.



oppressive as are the politics, but volunteer tourists would not be coming to New Orleans were it not for the oppressive politics and the susceptibility of hurricanes. Christopher Tilley also sees space and events as related, and he explains:

a humanized space forms both the medium and outcome of action, both constraining and enabling it...socially produced space combines the cognitive, the physical and the emotional into something that may be reproduced but is always open to transformation and change. A social space, rather than being uniform and forever the same, is constituted by differential densities of human experience, attachment and involvement.<sup>190</sup>

As Tilley states, all sites/spaces stem from the actions of people, or all spaces/sites are created by individuals. The existence of New Orleans is a demonstration of its relationships between the elements interacting with it. One element of New Orleans is the city's newest set of tourists, volunteer tourists. Interactions between volunteer tourists, residents, and the landscape affect the culture of New Orleans and the culture of volunteer tourism.

Additionally, aspects of New Orleans are conveyed through bodies of residents, bodies of the landscape to bodies of volunteer tourists. Volunteer tourists understand New Orleans through their bodies. Volunteer tourists interact with New Orleans through their bodies through spending their time, money, and working in the city. Tilley also discusses how meaning involves people and talks more specifically about bodies. He defines space stating, "an experience of space is grounded in the body itself; its capacities and potentialities for movement."<sup>191</sup> Tilley relays the body's limits and capacity are the medium through which aspects of the locations are

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<sup>190</sup> Christopher Y. Tilley, "Space, Place, Landscape and Perception: Phenomenological Perspectives," *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths and Monuments* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 1994), 10-11.

<sup>191</sup> Tilley, 16.

conveyed. The bodies of volunteer tourists demonstrate Tilley's idea of movement by changing their perspectives about the city as they interact with it.

Volunteer tourists understand New Orleans because of the stories told about it by other volunteer tourists, residents, workers, friends, etcetera. Through the stories told by others, New Orleans becomes a living thing, that is dynamic, engaging, and changing. Bird talks further about the process of understanding a place stating, "Through stories, people continue to make aesthetic and moral sense of places, at the same time endowing these places with a sense of their own cultural identities."<sup>192</sup> Bird asserts individuals understand locations on multiple levels through telling stories. She also discusses how telling stories helps people to understand who they are. Volunteer tourists not only make sense of how New Orleans looks, but how the politics of the city play out in its appearance and the spirit of the residents. The stories volunteer tourists tell also help them understand who they are and how they fit into the city in a dynamic phase of its existence.

Not only are the cultural traditions understood differently through the stories told about it, but volunteer tourists also learn about how they fit into the landscape. Volunteer tourists bask that their role in the city is not the same as residents or other tourists and learning about the place allows them a different role of the landscape. Also, by working on homes, volunteer tourists make their mark on the city, and they can physically point to places where they worked tirelessly to help homeowners rebuild. Keith Basso gives an in-depth look at finding self within a place in his work with the Apache, "'Stalking with Stories: Names, Places, and Moral Narratives Among the Western Apache,'" he states, "Such locations, charged as they are with personal and social significance, work in important ways to shape the images that Apaches have—or should have—

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<sup>192</sup> S. Elizabeth Bird, "It Makes Sense to Us: Cultural Identity in Local Legends of Place," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 31, no. 5 (2002): 544.

of themselves.”<sup>193</sup> Basso talks about the specificity of the land in constructing a sense of place and the individuals who interact with it. In this passage, he’s talking about the natives; however, tourists have been a part of New Orleans since the days when it opened as a port. But each volunteer tourists who comes to New Orleans, attempts to understand how New Orleans and their experiences in New Orleans has an effect on them. New Orleans is a politically tumultuous place particularly after the storm, and few aspects of New Orleans have been restored to their previous state. Applying Basso’s theory, the interactions volunteer tourists have with New Orleans shape who they are and how they think of themselves in relation to New Orleans and with its accompanying stories. Through the stories residents tell volunteer tourists and volunteer tourists then tell and retell, a connection to New Orleans’ unique landscape and residents form. Volunteer tourists’ relationship to the city not only forms a temporary connection New Orleans, but prompts many to come back annually.

In this chapter I discuss how volunteer tourists story their understanding of New Orleans. I first trace how the media’s portrayal of Hurricane Katrina contributed to volunteer tourists’ experiences of New Orleans. The understanding of New Orleans before the volunteer tourist visit is what Bruner calls the “pretour narrative.”<sup>194</sup> He defines this as “preconceptions [the tourists hold] about the destination.”<sup>195</sup> Although Bruner states tourists have ideas about a location before journeying there, these ideas are not always accurate.

Great tensions between the news media’s depictions of how New Orleanians live and how New Orleanians actually live exist. However, volunteer tourists *want* to learn about the

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<sup>193</sup> Keith H. Basso, “‘Stalking with Stories:’ Names, Places, and Moral Narratives Among the Western Apache,” in *Text, Play, and Story: The Construction and Reconstruction of Self and Society*, ed. Edward M. Bruner (Washington, DC: American Ethnological Society, 1984), 45.

<sup>194</sup> Edward M. Bruner, *Culture on Tour: Ethnographies of Travel* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005), 22.

<sup>195</sup> Bruner, 22.

living practices of New Orleans residents, something most tourists do not get to see. Volunteer tourists look at the senses of place ascribed on New Orleans through the news media and then attempt to make sense of the city through their own interactions with it, comparing it to other places, its residents, its landscape, and its reputation. Bruner describes this phenomenon stating, “The tourists then reshape and personalize the pretour narrative in terms of their lived experience on tour. Upon returning home, tourists further alter their stories about the journey into what is usually what is more a coherent narrative.”<sup>196</sup> Bruner asserts preconceptions are altered based on experiences with the location. Through volunteer tourists’ interactions with individuals and the landscape of New Orleans, their “pretour narrative” is revised and they have their own narratives of their experiences in New Orleans to tell.

Volunteer tourists not only want to discover what New Orleans is “really like” post Hurricane Katrina, but they want to experience the city. Volunteer tourists collect stories as they travel to New Orleans. Many of these stories serve the purpose to inform, confirm, justify, and advocate, as you will hear below. Bruner talks about the trip’s function for many tourists stating, “The work of the tour is to transform a preexisting tourist tale from an abstract text into an embodied narrative, a somatic experience.”<sup>197</sup> Bruner asserts beyond creating a new narrative, the tourist’s intention is to create a felt narrative on the body. In other words, the tourist strives to reinscribe the narrative with his or her own visceral perspective.

Volunteer tourists understand more than the news media’s representations of New Orleans immediately following the storm by acquainting themselves with New Orleans through talking to residents, spending time in neighborhoods, and rebuilding homes. Volunteer tourists try to understand New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina even though they can no longer see the

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<sup>196</sup> Bruner, 22.

<sup>197</sup> Bruner, 24.

images that were on TV immediately following the storm. Volunteer tourists attempt to imagine the city based on what they can no longer see, but understand the city from talking to individuals and exploring New Orleans. This allows the volunteer tourists to not only to understand the city but also its sense of place.

Because volunteer tourists cannot see what the devastated areas of New Orleans looked like before Hurricane Katrina, volunteer tourists advocate for the rebuilding of New Orleans because the impact the city has on them. Through the process of advocating for the city, volunteer tourists understand how New Orleans came to be and that work must be completed for it to exist post-Hurricane Katrina.

In this chapter, I first discuss how the news media affected volunteer tourists' ideas about the city. I then discuss how volunteer tourists confront the condition of New Orleans, the government's role in the largest "natural disaster" in the United States, New Orleans' landscape, regional, and racial issues. Specifically, I discuss the practice of volunteer tourists comparing New Orleans to other places, the struggles of volunteer tourists to understand why people live in a city below sea level, what living in New Orleans is like, and finally, race and culture in New Orleans.

### **'I Couldn't Get The Images Out of My Head': The News Media's Story**

Following Hurricane Katrina, the news media gave initial ideas of New Orleans as a place. With televisions and newspapers saturated for weeks following Hurricane Katrina, coverage of the storm was unavoidable. The coverage included heart-wrenching stories of residents of New Orleans who lost loved ones in the flood and others told of reunions of lost family members at Houston's Reliant Stadium. Images permeated our minds of people on

rooftops, interstate ramps, and the Morial Convention Center begging to be rescued and others swimming in water desperate to get to dry ground.

The news media told harrowing stories nightly of New Orleanians trapped on rooftops waiting for responders, hungry, thirsty, and heat exhausted people in front of the Morial Convention Center, people sitting in feces and babies being raped in the Superdome, and people who were swept away and drowned by flood waters. Watching the devastation on television, New Orleanians were portrayed as poor and helpless people abandoned by their government. Additionally, the media's narratives were filled with undertones about being in the south, living in a flood plain, and the conditions of living in the city. Watching the news was touching, heartbreaking, and angering, and volunteer tourists came in response to the emotions initial media coverage stirred in them. While in New Orleans, volunteer tourists seek to confirm or eradicate narratives they heard prior to coming. In the stories they tell, they struggle with coming to an understanding of what is happening in New Orleans versus what they heard was happening in New Orleans prior to coming.

News stories influenced how volunteer tourists perceived New Orleans. Volunteer tourists expect to see what they viewed on TV in the days immediately following Hurricane Katrina. However, when volunteer tourists get to New Orleans, the many nuances of New Orleans unfold as they spend time in the city. The news media initialized the world's perception of New Orleans giving ideas about the city before journeying there. Many of these stories serve a secondary purpose to inform, confirm, justify, and advocate, as you will hear below. Volunteer tourists not only want to discover what New Orleans is "really like" post Hurricane Katrina, but they want to spend their free time enjoying the city.

Volunteer tourists first explain how their experiences replicate the news media's stories about New Orleans. News reports portraying Hurricane Katrina influenced volunteer tourists' decision to come to New Orleans. The media's narratives serve as how volunteer tourists understand New Orleans until coming down themselves and creating their own narratives. Leslie, Joseph, Pam, Celeste and Izzy, Madison, Paula, Frederick, and Wayne discuss how the media inspired them to come or shaped their perceptions of New Orleans.

Leslie from New Jersey describes her previous experiences and preconceptions about New Orleans from the news media. "I came about 25 to 27 years ago and I didn't like it. I don't remember what time of year it was but you could barely walk down Bourbon Street there were so many people. People were jostling each other and spilling beer on you and you know, that's not my scene," she asserts.

"Why did you come back?" I ask.

Leslie responds, "I came back because of Katrina, I can't get the pictures of Katrina out of my head so you know to have this opportunity to come, and it's only one drop in the ocean to do a little bit to help the recovery."<sup>198</sup>

In this exchange, Leslie explains her distaste for New Orleans on her trip over twenty years ago. She also describes how the photos of Hurricane Katrina resonated within her. The photos provided the powerful images of New Orleans despite her previous experiences in the city. Leslie came back to New Orleans despite not liking her initial trip. This demonstrates both the power of the images and her desire to help fellow citizens. Volunteering provides an opportunity for Leslie to counteract the images and previous experiences in the city.

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<sup>198</sup> Interview with Leslie, February 6, 2009.

Joseph from Canada relays the media's opinions about New Orleans. He admits having an affinity for the news and states:

I'm kind of a news junkie so I do read the news everyday. [I] catch up on the news whenever I can, and I followed somewhat the social implications of Hurricane Katrina, especially the implications right after. It's interesting for me to actually come here and experience it first hand and it's a little offset for me because we're not volunteering in the Lower Ninth Ward or Algiers where a lot of the racial tensions and I'll just say, 'less savory things' happened. For the most part it was just nice to come and see where the news did happen and yeah, that's one of the main reasons why I came.<sup>199</sup>

Joseph discusses both the media's portrayal and his desire to experience New Orleans post-storm. He wants to be where the storm was. The media initiated Joseph's desire to experience the repercussions of the storm. Also wanting to experience the racial tensions that exist in New Orleans on a daily basis, volunteer tourists remember the news media portraying evacuees as "refugees" and highlighting black faces as the cameras panned large, hot, hungry, and thirsty crowds. Additionally, Joseph discusses these conditions as the "social implications" that intrigued him as a viewer. The "social implications" he saw on the news initiated his desire to come to New Orleans. He expects to see the racial tensions play out as he visits. However, once he's here Joseph integrates his experiences with the newscasts he remembers. The media's portrayal of New Orleans helped shape his experience and his understanding of New Orleans.

Like Joseph, Pam, a volunteer from Berkeley, California, sits on a formerly flooded car in between a house and a FEMA trailer. Pam talks about how the news gave her an initial understanding of New Orleans. She says:

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<sup>199</sup> Interview with a Joseph, February 19, 2009.



The way I first heard about [the volunteer trip] was my friend who is inside is the music director. She knew I wanted to come and help out. And I wanted to come immediately when everything was on the news, and it didn't happen. And then she said, 'We have this chance to go down.' So I said, 'Yes.' The first year five women came down. The church helps to pay our expenses, our flight, and then we stay at a UCC church. And you know it's something I just wanted to do because I was so distressed by Hurricane Katrina and what had happened.<sup>200</sup>

Pam states the news coverage formed her initial perception of the city. The news stories regarding the storm were poignant and compelled Pam to come down. Pam mentions her desire to visit when she saw the media coverage following Hurricane Katrina; however, she decided to come when others could make the trip with her. This brief story talks about how the news media gave her an initial understanding of the city as a place needing help and then jumpstarted her interest in volunteering in the city.

Unlike Pam, Celeste, a college student from Canada, has a different idea of how the city was doing based on the news coverage in her area. Celeste discusses the amount of news coverage in her area three and a half years after Hurricane Katrina. She explains:

You don't hear about New Orleans in the news anymore, maybe that's being in Canada but I think it's common being in the U.S. as well. You don't hear about it, so I kind of had the impression that things were a lot better now and everything is on track. I was really surprised that there was still a lot that needed to be done and a little disappointed in the fact that the living conditions weren't better for the people living there.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Interview with Pam, May 7, 2009.

<sup>201</sup> Interview with Celeste, February 19, 2009.

Celeste talks about the current news coverage of Hurricane Katrina faded where she lives. This gave her the impression New Orleans was “recovered.” Once she came to New Orleans she realized the lack of news coverage was not indicative of the city’s process of the news cycle. Seeing dilapidated buildings and abandoned houses dispelled the myth that New Orleans recovered.

Unlike in the conversation with Celeste, in other conversations the media came up in conversations when I didn’t ask volunteer tourists about its role. When I ask Izzy, a freshman in college and a volunteer from Maryland, “What have been the benefits of coming here and doing this work?”

She responds, “I really think just coming down here and getting to see a lot of the things you don’t see on TV, and don’t even know about. Just coming in and giving what you have and just sharing with others the things you can share. It’s *so* rewarding. I want to come back already.”<sup>202</sup> Izzy discusses that although the news media showed some of what happened post Hurricane Katrina, it left many things out. Izzy reveals differences in how the storm was portrayed on television versus the aftermath and impact on individual residents’ lives. Izzy expresses her enjoyment in being able to be involved in residents’ lives as a volunteer. As a volunteer, through working for and meeting residents, her experience fostered another dimension: meeting residents and in so doing begins to comprehend the landscape. Although the news media inspired many volunteer tourists to come to New Orleans, the coverage was incomplete. Izzy explains once she got here and was exposed to residents and the landscape on a personal level, her connection to and understanding of New Orleans grew with the expectation she will return, as she states later in the interview.

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<sup>202</sup> Interview with Izzy, January 22, 2009.

Other volunteer tourists sought out news coverage immediately following the storm to prepare for their trip to the city. These individuals reviewed and compiled information from the media's representation of New Orleans. Madison, a college student from Providence College in Rhode Island took a college class about Hurricane Katrina. The class included books and documentaries about the hurricane, the government's response, and residents' reactions. She states:

I took it last spring and we read a lot of books that had come out. It was hard to find information. The only source is the news because people working down here don't have websites so you can't really find information unless you come down here. That's one of the reasons I wanted to come down. The books are better than the news and websites. We read a book called *Voices from the Storm*, which was people's first hand experiences. But that was nothing like what we saw on the news, and we watched a lot of movies that had come out about Hurricane Katrina but you really need firsthand experience to really understand everything and be able to realize for yourself what people really need. I'm not a big fan of just donating blindly to charities so finding groups that you think are working to make a real difference and that you've met the people that you're helping is really important. So the class, we obviously didn't just learn about the storm and not do anything. We did a fundraiser and showed the campus part of Spike Lee's movie and then raised money to send to an organization that was building roofs on houses at the time. So we did do something to help, it was just hard not having a lot of firsthand experience. I know of three people in the class that had been down here so we relied on

them a lot. But you learn all this information and you need something to do with it so that's why I came down.<sup>203</sup>

Madison's desire to come here was in part because of the lack of information she felt she was getting from the various types of media she read for class. Distance, television screens, and memories no longer separate her from the storm, as coming to New Orleans gives her "first hand experiences" that she desired. Coming to New Orleans gives the storm personalities and faces through the residents she met and the stories she heard. Madison mentions the differences between what she heard and saw thousands of miles away and what she understands about the storm by being in New Orleans. Although she learned about the storm from the media, being in New Orleans and a volunteer allows her to see the needed help. Madison introduces the construction of how different media portrayed New Orleans after the storm and how that shapes her understanding as she works in the city.

In addition to giving initial impressions of the condition of the city, the media also gave impressions about race in New Orleans. Paula details misconceptions in the media's depiction of Hurricane Katrina and race in New Orleans.

She gives an example stating:

Well it was interesting; we didn't go to St. Bernard Parish. It's my understanding it's a white community that the news didn't talk about that was devastated. We didn't hear about St. Bernard Parish in the news, and there was some question about when the national news went out about who was being affected and who wasn't getting out and who was standing on top of rooftops, you always saw black people but evidently St.

Bernard parish was filled with white people, and the same thing was happening. They

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<sup>203</sup> Interview with Madison, January 18, 2009.

were on their roofs and they couldn't get out. It was like it's hard for me to believe the news didn't show that.<sup>204</sup>

Paula introduces the predominately white area, St. Bernard Parish, home to 64,951 people on July 1, 2005<sup>205</sup> and 97 percent of homes were destroyed.<sup>206</sup> Her biases about New Orleans were that only African Americans were affected by the floodwaters because the media showed (almost) only African Americans. The media chose not to show white residents in the same situation as the African American residents. Paula highlights how her preconceptions were shaped before she came to New Orleans and how they changed once she got to the city and was made aware of the media's disproportionate coverage. By coming to New Orleans, her perception of who was affected by Hurricane Katrina was disconfirmed.

Like Paula, Frederick, a volunteer from Bradenton, Florida, makes an observation about how the media shaped his perception of New Orleans. Frederick discusses the media portrayals of violence in New Orleans. He explains, "Yeah, it's been a great experience for me. Also I think, well, I thought there was going to be a lot of violence and stuff because that's what the media portrays."<sup>207</sup> With the highest murder rate per capita in the country, New Orleans has the designation of being a violent place.<sup>208</sup> However, most violence is gang and/or drug related, sharply reducing the potential for volunteer tourists to be victimized.<sup>209</sup> Additionally, just

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<sup>204</sup> Interview with Paula, February 6, 2009.

<sup>205</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "Population Estimates," U.S. Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/popest/counties/CO-EST2009-01.html> (accessed March 30, 2010).

<sup>206</sup> Congressional Research Service, "Hurricane Katrina: Social-Demographic Characteristics of Impacted Areas," Congressional Research Service, November 4, 2005, <http://gnocdc.s3.amazonaws.com/reports/crsrept.pdf> (accessed March 30, 2010).

<sup>207</sup> Interview with Frederick, January 19, 2009.

<sup>208</sup> Brendan McCarthy, "New Orleans Has Highest Crime Rate in Country, National Study Says," *The Times-Picayune*, November 24, 2008, [http://www.nola.com/news/index.ssf/2008/11/new\\_orleans\\_has\\_highest\\_crime.html#](http://www.nola.com/news/index.ssf/2008/11/new_orleans_has_highest_crime.html#) (accessed October 20, 2009).

<sup>209</sup> City of New Orleans, "NOPD CrimeMaps," <http://cno-gisweb02.cityofno.com/crimemaps/Default.aspx> (accessed December 6, 2009).

because the volunteer tourist doesn't see violence doesn't mean it doesn't exist. Armed robberies are frequent in the city; however, violence in New Orleans is pervasive when one is involved in illegal activities.<sup>210</sup> Frederick tries to understand New Orleans when he has heard it is violent but has not seen any of the violence. Because he has not seen the violence the media portrayed, his understanding of New Orleans changed.

The media's portrayal of New Orleans was volunteer tourists' perceptions of the city. What volunteer tourists saw on television was what inspired them to come to volunteer. The images on the news prompted Leslie from New Jersey to come back to New Orleans. Joseph from Canada said that he wanted to come to New Orleans to see where the news occurred. Izzy from Maryland wanted to see more than what was shown on TV. Madison from New Hampshire feels the media gave her information about the storm, but she lacked the personal experiences with the storm until she came to New Orleans. The news media gave Paula the impression that only African Americans were affected by the storm and gave Frederick the idea that the violence in New Orleans was pervasive. In each of these cases, the volunteer tourist's perception was confirmed, denied, or added to. In each case, the media was the initial understanding of New Orleans as a place post Hurricane Katrina. As the news media's myths are dispelled or confirmed, volunteer tourists gain their own understanding of the city. Some volunteer tourists try to understand New Orleans by comparing it to other places they have been to or heard about.

### **A Place Like Any Other?**

With the news media providing some volunteer tourists with initial perceptions of New Orleans as a place, other volunteer tourists also compare New Orleans to other locations. By comparing New Orleans to other places, the complicated issues of New Orleans are highlighted.

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<sup>210</sup> City of New Orleans, "NOPD CrimeMaps," <http://cno-gisweb02.cityofno.com/crimemaps/Default.aspx> (accessed December 6, 2009).

Volunteer tourists compare New Orleans' situation to locations that face or faced tragedies. Most commonly, volunteer tourists compare New Orleans to developing countries and New York, another American city that faced great tragedy on September 11, 2001. Also, volunteer tourists try to understand New Orleans through the way people live in the city: the attitudes of people, dealing with death on a daily basis, and the condition of the city. By comparing New Orleans to places that face tragedies, volunteer tourists demonstrate their understanding of the plethora of issues facing New Orleans post Hurricane Katrina. Also, volunteer tourists understand that the issues facing the city also face the entire New Orleans community. In this section, Brenda compares New Orleans to India, Wayne to his homeland of Jamaica, and Tommy, Brett, and Liz to New York City.

After speaking to Garrett, a man in his seventies from Wisconsin who was fixated on shining the wood-paneled walls in Ms. Vera's home, he sent me to Brenda. Brenda sits on the newly lacquered floor of Ms. Vera's home painting the baseboards. I timidly enter the room and tell her that her colleague, Garrett, suggested I talk to her.

She says, "Come on in."

I sit on the floor and Brenda starts talking. She talks about everything: her background, feral cats, and New Orleans, to name a few topics. At a break in the conversation, I interject, "Last night at the group reflection, you mentioned something about a puppy at your work site. I was wondering if you could tell me more about that."

She says:

In the morning, we had come in and the puppy was sleeping at this house and the people at the house had moved the day before and the puppy was on the doorstep. Later on we didn't see the puppy. So I asked the boys that we had seen playing with it, 'Where's the

puppy?’ And they said this one kid had him. So later on in the day Garrett noticed a *whole* crowd of people on the doorsteps of the house that the family had moved out of, and there was the puppy. Also they had three toddlers. The toddlers were throwing things at the puppy who was chained and so I went over and tried to just you know play with the puppy. Over the course of the two weeks, we’ve seen children act afraid of this puppy who would follow people all around; it wasn’t on a chain or anything. And you know he’s had a lot of people throw things at him so I went over and I was playing with him. He’s a puppy so he chews and he was chewing on my hand. I know the trick where you stick your hand in farther and they can’t bite down. But then when he was getting rougher I would say, “Now, don’t bite.” And I was trying to teach this whole family by modeling behavior. Well, they thought I wanted to buy it. So they said it would be \$75 and then they started bickering among themselves about how they would divide up the money.<sup>211</sup>

Brenda, fearing the puppy would become aggressive, attempted to model behavior to the children about how to treat a puppy. The adults, seeing her interact with the puppy, thought she wanted to purchase it. She unpacks the situation for me:

It reminded me of the stories I’ve been told about India. I’ve never been to India. Beggars will cut off a child’s limb in a family so that tourists will feel more sorry for them and give them money because they have a child without a limb. It’s not my concept at all, and it almost seemed like that’s what they were doing with the dog. [They were] saying, “Ok, here’s an opportunity or if you don’t want to do it our way which is to train

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<sup>211</sup> Interview with Brenda, April 17, 2009.



this dog to be an aggressive dog that we don't bond with but maybe will be a guard dog or something. Either buy it or leave us alone." I don't know. That's sort of how I felt.<sup>212</sup>

Brenda talks about the treatment of the puppy, comparing it to how some humans are treated in India. Relating the scenario to what she has heard about India, Brenda tries to understand why these residents are doing this.

Brenda better understands the situation in New Orleans by using the lens of India. For Brenda, the situation is about survival, not animal abuse. In this story, Brenda relates the complicated situation of people sacrificing a loved one's limbs in India for survival and the residents' attempt to sell her the dog. This story relates that New Orleans is a desperate place in a desperate situation and residents make decisions based on those situations. The residents see Brenda as an opportunity to make money. In complicating the situation in New Orleans by comparing it to situations in India, Brenda reveals the complexity of residents' struggles. By revealing her understanding of residents' struggles, Brenda relays her understanding of the community of New Orleans and her revised understanding of New Orleans through her experience in the city.

Like Brenda, Liz and Amy understand New Orleans through comparing it to another place. I listen as Liz and Amy attempt to understand New Orleans by comparing it to New York City as we sit on the front steps of Ms. Claire's house. With strawberry blond curls at the top of her head, Liz doesn't look thirty, much less all forty years she admits to. Liz works in a theatre in New York City and her tone is excited and passionate. Amy, a UU pastor intern and about the same age, is careful and articulate. Her black hair is straight, tied in a neat ponytail at the base of her neck. Careful about her words and her tone, Amy is serious and speaks slowly. The two

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<sup>212</sup> Interview with Brenda, April 17, 2009.

volunteer tourists discuss New York City, as it is close to where they reside in New Jersey. In trying to understand New Orleans, Liz and Amy debate why New Orleans was ignored by the government following the storm. Liz states, “New York City is so important it cannot be replicated, it cannot be moved, so we do what we can to protect it. For some reason the will to do that with New Orleans was absent--”

“--Because it’s not a financial city,” Amy retorts.

Liz agrees, “Right. It’s not Wall Street and also--”

“--It’s a very insulated, very particular culture. Which is not understandable by the rest of the world let alone the rest of the country,” Amy states.

Liz adds:

And I do think there’s this puritanical streak in our country that doesn’t understand people who make different choices, you know. Living in New Orleans there’s a lot less of keeping up with the Joneses. People don’t really care if they have the latest model whatever. You know your iPhone is really not going to impress many people. They put their energy into family and food and music and other places that the rest of the country sees as--

“—Frivolous.” Amy states.

Liz continues:

Frivolous, an expendable vacation, “It’s a good time but I couldn’t live in that space,” and of course there’s a downside to that, the streets don’t get fixed, all the things that the people who live here roll their eyes at. It’s a different way of life and I don’t think that a

lot of the rest of the country, at least where I've lived, understand those values, those choices.<sup>213</sup>

Liz and Amy speak to perceptions of the city that could have slowed the post Hurricane Katrina governmental response. Although this was Liz's fourth trip to New Orleans, this is Amy's first. Their perspectives are nuanced and speak to the place of New Orleans--its makeup including the people, the environment, and the aesthetic of New Orleans. Liz and Amy first attempt to determine why New Orleans received a slow response after the storm. The government's slow response tells about New Orleans as a place, an afterthought because it doesn't have financial benefit for the nation. Liz mentions, "And I do think there's this puritanical streak in our country that doesn't understand people who make different choices, you know." Liz feels New Orleanians are misunderstood because making money is not their top priority.

Liz and Amy's dialogue moves from the financial aspects of the city to the overall values and uniqueness of the culture. Liz expresses that many people don't see the value in the culture, and she asserts the infrastructure suffers because of the laissez-faire way of life. When Liz discusses visitor perceptions as "It's a good time but I couldn't live in that space," she brings up the opinion of some visitors that New Orleans is dispensable or only serves one purpose--a place to have fun. Discussing the conflict between New Orleans' reputation as a party town and how people live in New Orleans, Liz and Amy conclude that people live here because residents prioritize their lives differently than other places. These volunteers observe resident priorities as family, food, and music, and work around the infrastructural items that do not function. Liz conjectures that outsiders see New Orleanians as lazy because of this attitude. Liz describes the

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<sup>213</sup> Interview with Amy and Liz, April 17, 2009.

richness in New Orleans comes with a price--improvements don't happen efficiently. Outsiders do not understand how people live with this attitude coming from local government. Liz and Amy come to an understanding about New Orleans' and New Orleanians' way of life through comparing the city to New York City.

Amy and Liz understand the complexity of the response to New Orleans by highlighting the finances, race, and sense of community in the city. In comparing tragedies, they understand the repercussions of New Orleans' lack of financial stature. By understanding New Orleans' lack of financial stature, they then understand the struggles of the community to rebuild.

Like Amy and Liz, Wayne also compares New Orleans to a place with which he is familiar. In an unheated community center on a cold January morning in the Lower Ninth Ward, Wayne, a volunteer from the Caribbean, and I are talking. His presence is notable. He is tall and his dark skin is a sharp contrast to the majority of Caucasian volunteers in the city. A student at Florida State University, Wayne explains his understanding of New Orleans:

I'm originally from Jamaica, and the U.S. is supposed to be that place that everybody can come together. This is supposed to be a wealthy country and look at the houses. It really breaks my heart. These are Americans and they're living like they're less than Americans, like they're second class citizens. They don't have houses; people are still living in trailers. It's really ridiculous.<sup>214</sup>

Wayne understands New Orleans as a non-American. His expectations of how Americans are supposed to live are violated as he sees people living in substandard housing. A tension exists between how Americans are "supposed" to live and how New Orleanians live post Hurricane

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<sup>214</sup> Interview with Wayne, January 19, 2009.

Katrina. His perception of New Orleans and how New Orleanians live is not consistent with the way he has seen other Americans live.

Wayne's views show how complex his feelings are about New Orleans. His description of New Orleans and comparisons to his home nation of Jamaica demonstrate New Orleans has characteristics of a developing nation. By comparing New Orleans to a developing nation, Wayne highlights that the issues in New Orleans are greater than rebuilding flooded homes. Wayne's observation that New Orleanians are living like "less than Americans," reveals his understanding of the community's plethora of issues. Wayne understands the community through his experiences with the community and seeing the way members of the community live.

By understanding the city in comparison with other cultures, volunteer tourists better serve New Orleans. The contributions volunteer tourists make to the community of New Orleans are more significant because they have an understanding of New Orleans in context to other places throughout the world. The struggle to understand New Orleans manifests itself in how volunteer tourists talk about it in comparison to other places, the government, conditions in New Orleans, the landscape, race, and culture. Volunteer tourists also gain an understanding of New Orleans through the government's immediate response following Hurricane Katrina.

### **From "The City That Care Forgot" to The City That Government Forgot**

Volunteer tourists make sense of New Orleans by looking at the government's response to the city after Hurricane Katrina. Television news coverage provided initial perceptions of the city by revealing the mishaps in communication between local, state, and federal government agencies during the storm. Volunteer tourists notice the government's continued ambivalence since the storm. Throughout this section, volunteer tourists are upset that the government did little to help people in the days, weeks, and months following Hurricane Katrina. Additionally,

volunteer tourists express their desire to help fellow Americans and question whether Americans can rely on the government. The government's response is indicative of how authorities see the city. As volunteer tourists understand the government's response, volunteer tourists begin to understand New Orleans' complexity. Through understanding New Orleans' complexity, volunteer tourists understand the community. Volunteer tourists see the city in a different way, and sympathy for the residents overshadows their view of the government.

In this section, we will see how Haley understands and reacts to the government's aid. Additionally, we will hear Judy's harsh words for the government, and look at Liz and Amy's conclusions about the government's response. Finally, we'll see how Ashley's relationship with a resident affected her opinion of the government following Hurricane Katrina.

Haley from Maryland talks about her opinion of government saying:

I think one of the other disadvantages to coming to New Orleans is that you get a different view. I left here last time with a different view of my government because you do get angry. You know you have to do something with that anger, too. Being here is not just the feeling that you've helped; it's the feeling that the people that you expected to help didn't help. I had to deal with that, too, that I had a different view of my government. We are inbred with the view of we're all Americans and we all would help anyone if they needed it, no matter their economic status or their race. And from what I saw here, I don't believe that anymore. I left here last time with a different view of my government because you do get angry.<sup>215</sup>

As Haley explains, by watching what happened and is happening to New Orleans, she acquired a lack of confidence in the government to come through in times of need. As other volunteers do,

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<sup>215</sup> Interview with Haley, January 22, 2009.

she directly attributes the government's lack of help to New Orleans' large poor and black population. Haley states, "Being here is not just the feeling that you've helped; it's the feeling that the people that you expected to help didn't help." In this statement, Haley talks about the conflict between feeling good that one helped and feeling bad that the government did not. Haley tries to understand the role of the federal government and its relationship to New Orleans as she relates this story. She understands the community through the government's response to its residents in their time of need.

Like Haley, Judy from Berkeley discusses what she saw from the government. On a warm day in May, five volunteer tourists from Berkeley and I sit in a circle on the cold ceramic tile in a living room, turned paint storage area, of a New Orleans East home. The conversation moved from discussing the differences in family dynamics in New Orleans versus other places in the country. Pam states that New Orleans is not seen as important on a national scale because it is not a place where financial decisions are made. Judy interrupts Pam to ask me, "What was the first question you asked?"

I respond, "Why do you want to volunteer?"

Judy indicates, "Sorry, I'm not a fast processor, but seeing the devastation on TV and seeing what little government was doing and beyond what little, what damage government was doing. So understanding that they weren't going to do anything down here was the motivation to come down here. It just looked like nobody gave a shit."<sup>216</sup> Judy says witnessing the media's interpretation of the lack of government response incited her response to come to New Orleans to help. She explains the tension between what she witnessed on television from the government versus the treatment she felt New Orleanians deserved. Judy's understanding of how New

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<sup>216</sup> Interview with Judy, May 7, 2009.

Orleans was treated by the government inspired her to action, provoking her to volunteer in New Orleans. Not only did seeing the lack of government response encourage her to come and help residents, but it also gave Judy an understanding of New Orleans. As Judy expresses, her understanding of the community revolves around the government's inability to care about the state of New Orleans.

In contrast to Judy's bluntness, Liz and Amy explicate their understanding of the government's response to Hurricane Katrina. Still sitting on Ms. Vera's front steps, I ask Liz and Amy, "Do you think that Hurricane Katrina would have been different if it would have been anywhere else?"

Liz responds:

That is a question that I have struggled with a lot. You know I've talked to folks and I think that one of the lessons I take away from this whole thing is that it can happen anywhere. Something like this, the cavalry is not coming necessarily. The reasons why the cavalry in the case of New Orleans I think are very complex. I think there are a whole lot of issues. I think race is a clear part of it as far as what's valuable and what's not. We're willing to spend money on wars overseas or we're willing to spend money propping up Wall Street, you know, there's a lot of things we're willing to spend money on. Clearly, we were not willing to spend, not even money, but clearly we weren't even able to spend mental energy on even trying to figure out how to help the people out down here. Beyond it's just a question of cost, in the moment, when the disaster was unfolding on television, there seemed to be no concerted effort to address it for weeks! And that was the most baffling, baffling piece, just inexplicable!<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Interview with Liz, April 17, 2009.



Amy says:

Also, having never been down here before, I know from my perspective, and you know the same thing you've got an earthquake in China and you have all these various things happening around the world. And I thought, "I'm sure they have things set up to take care of it [in New Orleans], they're this kind of community, they should have been expecting something bad to happen." And then nationally it was like, well, New Orleanians didn't have what they needed. Things that they were told were enough were not enough. I mean we had the same thing at the Twin Towers, it was supposed to be able to take a jet hit, well, a jet at that time versus a jet at this time were different.<sup>218</sup>

Liz brings up the tensions for potential that tragedy can strike anywhere, but highlighting tragedy in New Orleans is particular. Specifically, Liz states, "The reasons why the cavalry [did not come] in the case of New Orleans I think are very complex." In this statement, she understands New Orleans as a unique place, a place with more than just a flooding problem. She later cites race as a potential determinant of the federal government's response. She, too, feels the government abandoned New Orleanians after the storm. Liz is frustrated as she asserts people of other races are not seen as valuable to the federal government. Liz attempts to understand the federal government's post-Hurricane Katrina reaction to New Orleans.

Amy echoes Liz's feelings about the complexity of government responses explaining that different levels of government felt local officials had the storm response under control. She compares the responses to China's earthquake in 2009 and New York City in 2001 to the Hurricane Katrina's response. Amy confronts a common belief by stating, "They should have been expecting something bad to happen." Amy's expression of this thought confronts what

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<sup>218</sup> Interview with Amy, April 17, 2009.

many people felt at the time but also the lack of government response because New Orleans should have been expecting it and thus should have been prepared. The government's lack of response gives Amy an understanding of New Orleans.

As Liz and Amy present many factors as reasons why the government was slow to help New Orleans post Hurricane Katrina. Liz and Amy specifically cite New Orleans residents' race and the perception that New Orleans residents should have been prepared as reasons why the government didn't help. Through this complicated understanding, Liz and Amy demonstrate an understanding of the complexity of the city and the community post Hurricane Katrina.

On a beautiful day during the week celebrating Mardi Gras, I sit on the stairs of an orange and purple raised double shotgun house in Mid-City with five Canadians. Like Liz and Amy, Ashley relates a story a resident told her about the government's response:

We went down to the Lower Ninth Ward and there's a man there we were talking about before, Ronald Lewis, and he has the museum called the House of Dance and Feathers. Just talking to him and the way that he talks about volunteers and how happy he is that people are coming and making a difference. He had a group of people come from an American university build his museum because he lost his last one. He is *so* grateful to those people, and that is really what it was all about. Just seeing that he was happy that we were here and what we were doing was good. That was very rewarding.

But also he was so disappointed with the government, and I'm assuming this was a general feeling because I heard this when I was still back in Canada that people felt abandoned by their own government, and they were given a refugee status. I don't know

it was a little disappointing that the government failed them, because that's what they're there for, particularly at that time. That's why we have them.<sup>219</sup>

Residents of New Orleans who were taken by busses to Houston, Dallas, and other cities in the days and weeks following the storm were given the designation of "refugees." This term implies New Orleans residents were not treated like American citizens. Perhaps the reliance on government isn't an attitude shared by all Americans, or the Americans serving in government positions on the days and weeks following August 29, 2005. Ashley highlights the tensions between the perceived role of government and what the government did. Instead of helping, Ashley reiterates the "refugee status" given to Katrina evacuees. In listening to Ashley's story, she understands New Orleans through the residents treatment after the storm. She also details the government's responsibility in the storm stating, "it was a little disappointing that the government failed them, because that's what they're there for, particularly at that time." The failure of the government gives Ashley a sense of New Orleans and the people who live in New Orleans. Mr. Lewis' sense of gratefulness for people out of their own big heartedness is imparted because of the failure of the government. Ashley understands New Orleans through Mr. Lewis' articulation of his distrust in the government because of their labels of Americans as refugees and because they didn't help. She then adopts Lewis' disappointment in the government. Through Ashley's grasp of the situation, she recognizes the continued struggles of the community to get the government's attention and respect.

Masquelier explains, "... many U.S.-born citizens have never experienced invasion by an alien power and to them 'refugeeness' essentially connotes 'otherness.' It refers to foreigners: people who, because they live in impoverished, war-torn, or un- democratic states, become the

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<sup>219</sup> Interview with Ashley, February 19, 2009.

victims of famine, violence, and persecution and are forced to seek asylum in other countries.”<sup>220</sup>

Masquelier further asserts, “When applied to former residents of the beleaguered city, the term was not to be read as an insult to the victims, but as a reprimand to those who, through neglect or incompetence, had done nothing to prevent the tragedy.”<sup>221</sup> Giving the title of refugee to evacuees confirmed the government’s ambivalence towards residents, their families, and their property. The resident’s telling of his story directly attributes to Ashley’s understanding of New Orleans.

The government’s lack of response reinforced New Orleans’ status as hopeless, needing charity, and confused the commonly held adage “The City That Care Forgot” to the city that the government forgot to care about.

### **A Landscape Suitable for Habitation?**

In addition to the government’s lack of response, many volunteer tourists look to the levees to understand New Orleans. Levee breakage visited extensive damage on New Orleans causing many Americans to ask the questions, “Why was New Orleans built in the first place?” Or “Why rebuild a city resting below sea level?” In the 1850s, the federal government began regulating the levees, which are earthen structures intended to hold back large bodies of water.<sup>222</sup> Building levees also increased the livable area around New Orleans, and insurance companies wrote policies taking the levees into account, classifying the land as outside the “flood zone.”<sup>223</sup> The levee system provided adequate protection from storm waters until Hurricane Katrina hit when the weaknesses of the almost century old system were revealed.

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<sup>220</sup> Adeline Masquelier, “Why Katrina Victims Aren’t *Refugees*: Musings on a ‘Dirty’ Word,” *American Anthropologist* 108, no. 4 (2006): 738.

<sup>221</sup> Masquelier, 738-9.

<sup>222</sup> Donald W. Davis, “Historical Perspective on Crevasses, Levees, and the Mississippi River,” in *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature*, ed. Craig E. Colton (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 96-7.

<sup>223</sup> Davis, 92.

Volunteer tourists attempt to understand New Orleans through its landscape, particularly the levees. Through understanding the system of protection New Orleanians rely on, volunteer tourists understand the community and the distress between feeling secure in a community and insecure with the government's system of protection. As demonstrated in this section, the levees serve as not only a measure of protection but also a reminder of the storm to both residents and volunteer tourists. Additionally, Haley discusses levee repairs, Brenda relates her discussions with her Wisconsin neighbors, Ethan discusses the connection to the land, Helen talks about New Orleanians' connections to family, and Brett relates information he communicates to younger volunteer tourists.

First, Haley talks about how it must feel to be a New Orleanian, with the constant confrontation of a possible levee breakage post Hurricane Katrina. Sitting on the newly built steps on a house in the Lower Ninth Ward, Haley discusses the conditions of the levees stating:

When I go up to the levee and see where they've patched the wall, and it's caulked. It's not caulked well enough that you would even want it in your bathroom. That's what makes me really angry. When I'm at the levee and I realize that the people that are rebuilding on the other side don't have any more protection than they did before and that we haven't solved any problems.<sup>224</sup>

Haley understands the city through her understanding of the government's treatment of the levees, and understands New Orleans through the level of risk residents endure. She comments on the condition of the levee and is disturbed that the city hasn't made the proper repairs to the levee and states her frustration as the dilemma many New Orleanians face in deciding whether to come back. Additionally, Haley expresses anger that the structures the government built to

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<sup>224</sup> Interview with Haley, January 22, 2009.

protect people in New Orleans haven't been properly repaired, pointing out the levees have been patched but not repaired. Her anger is not directed at the residents, but Haley attempts to understand how people live with these structures as their only protection if a storm comes. Haley understands the complexity of the community through the constant tensions between being part of a place and the government's faulty protection system. Through Haley's understanding she better sympathizes with the community's difficulties in deciding to stay in this area.

As Haley vents her frustrations, other volunteer tourists adopt the role of advocate for the rebuilding of New Orleans. I ask Brenda, "What do you take back from these trips?" Brenda relays some of these conversations acquaintances have had with her:

I think one is, living in Wisconsin, when I talk to other people in my social network from other places as well, they say, "It's in a flood plain. It should just be abandoned. Those people should move somewhere else." [They] have a really hard, crass attitude about it. I can see that point of view. The first time I came down here, last year, it hit me how wide the Mississippi flood plain is because it is such an old river. If you did that, you would have all the people from Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana move somewhere else. Where? And then you'd have to start with California, New York, and Delaware, and Florida. You know everyone's going to be lined up in a lump in tornado alley in some, I don't know where, Colorado maybe, and chase out the Native Americans again. So it's too simplistic to say, "Well, some of it's under water, get rid of it." That doesn't make any sense.<sup>225</sup>

Brenda deconstructs the argument that New Orleans should not be rebuilt and responds to critics who question living in New Orleans given its low elevation. Other volunteers relate they have to

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<sup>225</sup> Interview with Brenda, April 17, 2009.

justify coming to New Orleans to their friends and relatives because of these same reasons.

Brenda states, “It’s in a flood plain. It should just be abandoned. Those people should move somewhere else.” In discussing the low elevation of New Orleans, she also highlights many people’s belief that the city should have never been developed. Volunteer tourists have invested physically, mentally, and emotionally in the rebuilding of New Orleans and reject the focus on its vulnerabilities. Volunteer tourists confront the city’s perceived lack of worth and statements that efforts to rebuild are futile. Brenda relates her attempts to explain to others how she makes sense of residents’ decisions to live in New Orleans. In Brenda’s responses to questions as to why not abandon New Orleans, she confronts the complexity of New Orleanians’ situation with her friends. Brenda finds the notion to move approximately 500,000 people from their homes ridiculous. Brenda understands the community through her own investment in the city and advocates for its rebuilding despite its location.

Like Brenda, other volunteer tourists also struggle with tensions about whether New Orleans should have been built, and what should be done with the city now. Ethan, an African-American man living in California who is from Illinois, states:

I’ve heard some question why people live here. I grew up along the Mississippi River. Every year there’s a flood, and every year people say why don’t those people just move away? They know the flood’s coming again next year, and people have an attachment to the land in a very significant way. Your parents grew up here; your grandparents grew up here and your great grandparents and on and on and on and on. For some that is very significant. And I actually feel a little guilty that I moved so far away from my roots.

Who knows, maybe as I get older maybe I’ll feel more compelled to be closer to them.

But right now, I feel the movement from my roots has given me the ability to even do this

work and other work that I do because it exposes me to a much broader community and a community I have some currency in. I can navigate it, I can work in it, and bring something to it, you know?<sup>226</sup>

Ethan refutes discussions that New Orleanians should move. He attributes living near family to the development of a strong sense of family that exists in the city. Talking to tensions that people should relocate, he discusses how people are connected spatially stating, “people have an attachment to the land in a very significant way.” In this statement, Ethan highlights how the particular landscape affects who one is as a person. He concentrates on the bonds people have to land through the culture of family existing in these areas. Ethan attributes the connection to the landscape to part of New Orleans as a place. Through self-reflection and understanding residents’ relationship to the land, Ethan is able to understand the sense of the city that keeps people there. As Ethan understands the relationship between people, their land, and the landscape, he understands the community and the reasons members of the community live with the constant risk of hurricanes or floods.

Unlike Ethan who uses his own experience to understand how New Orleanians live, Helen uses residents’ experiences to understand the city. A volunteer in her seventies from New Hampshire, Helen, relays a story about the family-oriented culture in New Orleans over the whirring generator and table saw. She states:

The guy who told the story about his home was visiting some people across the street from the house we were working in. What it gave me is that I’m listening to somebody whose family for generations back has lived in that same place. It helped me feel why

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<sup>226</sup> Interview with Ethan, May 7, 2009.



people live here. Why would they stay in a place that is subject to hurricanes? That was very humbling actually.<sup>227</sup>

I pressed Helen, “How so?” I asked.

Helen continues:

It’s an appreciation that he has for handing things down--for family to have someone be able to say, how far back did they go, how many hands did the house pass through. The second year, no, the first year when we were fixing up Barbara’s house, there was a home next door where the father and mother cleaned up the front yard and put a flag in the yard. That was very moving. I walked over and I talked to them about it. That home had been in the mother’s family back to her great-grandmother. It was her grandmother’s, then it was her mother’s, then it was hers, and now it was their daughter’s. How many times does that happen where I’m living? It doesn’t. It doesn’t. And that felt good; it felt good that in parts of America that still happens.<sup>228</sup>

Helen processes how residents deal with the struggle of breaking family tradition to live in a less flood prone area. Homes pass from family member to family member with multiple generations living together in single-family homes. Helen understands family ties are often why residents live with the risks associated with hurricanes. Through understanding this resident’s experience, Helen is able to understand why people remain in this community. She understands New Orleans as a place through the resident’s experience living in the same home as her ancestors. The passing of homes demonstrates the sense of family in New Orleans, and Helen understands this through her interaction with this resident.

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<sup>227</sup> Interview with Helen, May 1, 2009.

<sup>228</sup> Interview with Helen, May 1, 2009.

Although Helen later tells me about relaying information when she gets home, Brett discusses how he relays information about New Orleans while he is volunteering in the city. Brett, a man in his mid-forties from New Jersey, is accompanying a group of 14-18 year olds who are also helping with rebuilding in New Orleans. Brett relates his understanding of New Orleans through a conversation he had with the adolescents accompanying them on the trip. He states:

Some of the youth were wondering why they were fixing up this enormous house. “Well, because there’s not just one family living there. And there are not ten kids in their family. The house has been around for generations.” So it’s not like they built this big house; there are a lot of people living in there. It is a different style of living.<sup>229</sup>

This volunteer informs the adolescents that owning a big house does not mean the resident is wealthy but that multigenerational living is part of New Orleans’ culture. Not only does Brett understand the community of New Orleans, but he also passes the information on to young Unitarians.

As volunteer tourists explain, New Orleans’ residents decide between living near their families and original communities and living in a less flood prone area. The volunteers notice that New Orleanians are constantly defending their decision to live in the city. Volunteer tourists listen to the stories, view the landscape, and gain an understanding of New Orleans as a place. When volunteer tourists are exposed to the way New Orleanians live, they are accepting of it. In fact, many volunteer tourists see the benefits in creating a strong family culture. However, when discussing the conditions of New Orleans, volunteer tourists feel the city suffers.

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<sup>229</sup> Interview with Brett and Tommy, April 17, 2009.

## **Conditions of New Orleans**

Volunteer tourists realize New Orleans is handicapped through the post Hurricane Katrina conditions of New Orleans. Not only were homes destroyed due to the storm, but so were businesses and infrastructure. Part of understanding New Orleans is coming to terms with its post Hurricane Katrina state. Previously semi-functional aspects of the city are now non-existent post Hurricane Katrina. Through volunteer tourists understanding of New Orleans' post Hurricane Katrina state, they understand New Orleans' issues are more pervasive than the damage to homes. Some volunteer tourists express frustration when the resident doesn't have enough money to buy all the supplies they need to finish a project, others are frustrated on behalf of the residents that their needs are not being met by the limited resources available. Still other volunteer tourists relate the conditions of New Orleans to their hometowns and either empathize or express disappointment. Through understanding the city, volunteer tourists understand that the issues facing New Orleans affect not only select homeowners, but the community as a whole.

In this section, I discuss the tensions between what New Orleans looks like and what people think it should look like this long after the storm. Donna from Philadelphia talks about the recreational facilities, and Barbara and Carol talk about money. Additionally, Haley and Tammy talk about the remnants of death, Rebecca, the remnants of disaster, Izzy talks about people making money off of the disaster, and Sunny talks about the limits on resources.

Donna from the Philadelphia UU discusses volunteering at one of the city's baseball fields:

You know it was funny, they had tractors and heavy equipment and all before the storm and now all they have is shovels and rakes. And they have to do it if they want the kids to play ball. And here we are doing this, you know, heavy physical labor. I almost

thought well maybe we should protest and not do it so then they have to get equipment, but it's not going to happen either. So that was a real low point for me. I thought, 'That ball field apparently is used by the high school team, so they haven't had a ball field for four years and they got people, volunteers and city workers, doing it with rakes and shovels.'<sup>230</sup>

Donna attempts to understand the complexity of the New Orleans Recreation Department and what they, as volunteer tourists, can do about it. She realizes that coming to New Orleans is not only rebuilding homes. Additionally, she expresses frustration by not having adequate supplies to repair the ball field. Disturbed with the lack of progress, Donna contemplates protesting to evoke change. Donna contemplates standing up for what she feels is right versus helping with what she can with the limited resources available. She evaluates whether protesting will be an effective mode of action. Given the city's condition four years after the storm, Donna realizes that not only are homes impacted, but children's lives are impacted as well. Because of the impact on the children, Donna understands the influence of the storm pervades to the entire community.

Like Donna, Barbara and Carol were also frustrated with their project. Although volunteers donate labor, the residents buy supplies for the projects. Some volunteer tourists express their disappointment that they can only do so much with the little amount of money residents have to buy supplies. Barbara from Montana explains their project in the Lower Ninth Ward, "[The resident] only had \$500 to spend so we purchased what we could."<sup>231</sup>

Carol adds, "With sheetrock, you can only go so far with that amount of money, and you're done unless there's extra money available."

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<sup>230</sup> Interview with Donna, February 6, 2009.

<sup>231</sup> Interview with Barbara and Carol, February 26, 2009.

I ask Barbara to name a disadvantage in coming to New Orleans. She responds, “Just the lack of money to complete a project. I think that’s been the most discouraging, that, you know, we’d love to walk away knowing we’ve made a home ready for someone to move into, and so the funds are the biggest thing.” Barbara and Carol wish the resident had more money so that *they* would feel better knowing they were able to provide a completed home for her to move into. However, that amount of sheetrock makes it easier for the resident to live in part of the home. Barbara talks about the limits of charity, or the tensions between helping and not feeling like one is helping enough. The feeling of not helping enough is contingent on the amount of money the resident has to spend on supplies. Barbara and Carol understand the complexity of New Orleanians’ issues through the supply shortage experienced at their current job. However, these volunteer tourists only understand the supply shortage to the degree that it affects them. Barbara and Carol do not discuss how the financial issues affect the homeowner who has lived in a house with just studs and concrete floors for the past four years. Barbara and Carol do not understand how financially taxing it must be to continue to work to support a home while trying to rebuild on, one panel of sheetrock at a time. Although these volunteer tourists have some understanding of the financial issues, they only understand them to the extent that they are not able to complete the project.

Like Barbara and Carol, many volunteer tourists want to see immediate change in New Orleans; however, as Tammy and Haley explain, change in New Orleans is incremental. Tammy and Haley put themselves in the place of residents to gain a better understanding. Tammy begins, “It makes me sad that tomorrow when we go home, Monday we’re back into our lives again and these people will wake up with the same thing. Not the same thing because there is growth and improvement but--”

“It’s a long road,” Haley says.

Tammy adds, “We just talked to a lady at the Village that is somehow connected to the school system, she said, when these kids look out the window they probably see floodwaters and bodies floating. That statement really affected me today. Even when it’s all cleaned up these children, for the rest of their lives, are going to have this image.”<sup>232</sup> Tammy and Haley relay that New Orleans will still represent death to many people regardless of how many years have passed. Also, the images of the storm will remain as representations of the city to many residents. The volunteers also adopt these images into how they understand New Orleans. As volunteers, Tammy and Haley come to New Orleans to help rebuild and change the images of New Orleans. Despite the efforts of the volunteers, the residents’ lasting impression from the storm is the fear accompanying water engulfing their home, their neighborhood, and their lives. Through understanding residents’ struggles to forget the horrific scenes immediately following the storm, Tammy and Haley understand the community’s continued difficulties to deal with the past.

Like Tammy and Haley, Sunny from New College in Florida highlights the everyday difficulties residents face. She points out the inaccessibility of resources in devastated areas of New Orleans: “I think it’s fifteen or twenty minutes to get to the nearest grocery store. And then it’s about a half hour to get to the nearest IHOP to have breakfast, and they’re complaining because they have to do the same thing every week. They have no pharmacy; they have no banks. They have no grocery stores in the immediate areas, but they have 25 million Dollar Generals, Family Dollars, and Dollar Stores, and you can’t get the stuff you need at the quality

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<sup>232</sup> Interview with Tammy and Haley, January 22, 2009.

you need at those stores. They're just taking over down here."<sup>233</sup> In this statement, Sunny identifies with the struggles of residents as she, too, has to drive far to get basic needs met. She understands the city through its limited resources throughout the rebuilding process. Through Sunny's comprehension of the everyday lives of New Orleanians, she understands the strain to have access to all the needed community resources.

Unlike the community's issue with a lack of resources, Izzy discusses the issue of becoming a tourist attraction. She talks about the busses and vans with organized tours that pay to view the devastated neighborhoods. These tours take three and a half hours and are conducted in anything from a fifteen-passenger van to a fifty-person charter bus.<sup>234</sup> Izzy, a college student from Maryland, relates a story a homeowner told her saying, "One of the home owners was telling us that there are tours through the Lower Ninth Ward as a tourist attraction and people pay money to come and see the disaster. None of the money comes back here; it doesn't help rebuild their homes or their community. They want their homes back; they don't want to be a tourist attraction."<sup>235</sup> Izzy discusses how residents don't like being a spectacle; they don't want their misery on display and other people making money off of their unfortunate circumstances. By listening to the stories of residents, she understands that the community is not only trying to rebuild, but is also struggling with their new role as an attraction. Izzy is appalled that people are paying to take a tour through a devastated neighborhood, yet, she is also a tourist in a devastated neighborhood. Even though Izzy understands New Orleans through the shift in tourist attractions in the post Hurricane Katrina environment, she does not understand that she also is a part of that shift. She realizes that the damage throughout the city becomes a tourist attraction, but she does

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<sup>233</sup> Interview with Sunny, January 18, 2009.

<sup>234</sup> Phaedra C. Pezzullo, "'This Is the Only Tour that Sells': Tourism, Disaster, and National Identity in New Orleans," *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 7 (2009): 99-114.

<sup>235</sup> Interview with Izzy, January 22, 2009.

not understand that she is similar to the tourist on the bus but is framing her touring as a volunteer.

## **Race and The South**

Finally, as volunteer tourists spend time in New Orleans, they begin to understand the complexities of race and being from the South. Many volunteer tourists highlight race, class, and cultural differences as aspects of New Orleans. Cultural differences cause many to think New Orleanians are “less than” and volunteer tourists weigh these aspects to learn about New Orleans. Additionally, New Orleans has a large black population, but racial tensions are still present and a part of New Orleans.<sup>236</sup> Additionally, Southerners are seen as mentally challenged and lazy. Because volunteer tourists understand the complexities of the cultures and their effects on the community, volunteer tourists understand the intricacies in rebuilding a community.

In this section, Brett and Tommy address the perception that New Orleanians are idle, Pam’s discussion of the role of race in the government’s response, and Brett’s discussion of race.

Brett and Tommy describe how New Orleanians are seen as lazy. Brett states, “Let’s look at New York City which is also well below water level. Say it got flooded. It would have been fixed in six months. There’s no doubt.”

Tommy adds:

I think it would have happened differently. I think because if New York City’s flood had been on the scale that this was it would have been just as difficult to rebuild. People would have done it because it’s the financial capital of the country so there’s weight to that. It also has the highest concentration of billionaires in the world, which also helps.

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<sup>236</sup> Perhaps one will not see overt signs of racism in New Orleans, but will likely see African-Americans working in lower paying jobs and living below the poverty line. A sense of distrust between blacks and white is probably the most overt sign of racism in New Orleans, like many other cities in the United States. Most people are friendly, but they will not trust someone who is not their same race.



So there's a money difference in the two locations. As far as racial tension, it would have been just as high and class differences certainly would have been just as high. Because just say it happened in New York City, they would have taken it as an excuse to level some of the massive housing projects because their real estate is so immensely valuable.

Brett retorts, "Maybe Manhattan isn't the best comparison, but what if some middle-class white community had been devastated? What about Galveston and the places in the Carolinas getting hit by hurricanes? Where did Hurricane Andrew hit?

I insert, "Homestead."

Brett continues, "That got rebuilt and those houses were substandard in places. That was rebuilt in a year or two."

Tommy adds,

I think that does play into it a lot. There's a perception that it's not New Orleans' fault. That somehow, they were the grasshoppers and the ants. That somehow, New Orleans is the grasshopper and they just fiddle all day, and that the people here don't work for a living, which is ridiculous. I think that part of country is ignorant to minorities in this town or even that the minority is the majority here.<sup>237</sup>

Tommy compares the progress in New Orleans with other places after hurricanes. He also discusses the uniqueness of New Orleans as a predominantly minority metropolitan area confronting the perception that people in the south don't work as hard as people in other parts of the country stating. Tommy talks about how New Orleans is perceived connecting the remark that New Orleanians are lazy to being black. Tommy and Brett understand New Orleans despite misconceptions about the South and Southerners. Through their understanding of others'

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<sup>237</sup> Interview with Brett and Tommy, April 17, 2009.

perception of New Orleanians, Tommy and Brett communicate an understanding of the struggles of community members to overcome misconceptions to be able to get help rebuilding.

Unlike Brett and Tommy, Pam highlights specific examples of New Orleanians being treated differently than other parts of the country. Pam describes New Orleans through the racial makeup and how that influenced the post-storm response. I ask, “Do you think the response would have been different had it happened somewhere else?” She explains:

Oh, absolutely, I know it would have been different. In Northern California in the Berkeley/San Francisco area we had fires and it was a primarily wealthy area. Money came in immediately, people got insurance really quickly. Stores would let people come in and buy on credit. It was a very, very different response and it’s a primarily well-to-do, white community. There’s no doubt in my mind that because New Orleans has a lot of people who are poor and a lot of people of color, the response was very, very different than it would be in more affluent, white areas. In my opinion, under Bush, the response to people in poverty was pretty awful. Statistically, more people of color are in poverty because of institutionalized racism and slavery. I definitely think if this had been a more affluent, predominantly white city, yeah, because people don’t allow it. But people think, “It’s a bunch of poor black people, oh well.” The way the media portrayed people as refugees and looters. It was pretty overt.<sup>238</sup>

As Pam mentions, she feels New Orleans received a delayed response after the storm because of the presidential administration’s treatment of people in lower income brackets. She also discusses the high percentage of New Orleanians who are poor and black. Pam links the post-

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<sup>238</sup> Interview with Pam, May 1, 2009.

Hurricane Katrina response to politics, specifically citing racism and classism as factors slowing help to residents.

Brett discusses the response and its ties to race stating:

I was having a conversation with my in-laws some time ago, who are arch-conservatives, and their position was that people in New Orleans haven't done enough to help themselves, particularly on the environment. This was three years after the storm. Three years after 9/11, there was still a hole in the ground, nobody had done anything but everyone thought that deserved national priority. Whereas here, after three years, people had done a lot more for themselves than my in-laws (and conservatives like them) gave the city credit. I think some of that is racial. A bunch of poor black folks in New Orleans don't deserve help like rich Malibu folks do when their houses burn down or bankers when the World Trade Center is destroyed.<sup>239</sup>

These volunteers work through the conversations they've heard from others about the state of New Orleans three years after the storm and come to their own conclusions about race and the South. Brett talks about the role of race as an influence in how people were treated post Hurricane Katrina. Brett compare the situation in New Orleans to other areas that suffered tragedy in the past decade, shedding light on how New Orleans was thought of differently through this. Through Brett's comprehension of the issues of being black in the United States, he understands the difficulties the community faces to rebuild.

## **Conclusion**

As volunteer tourists relate stories about what they've seen and experienced in New Orleans, they are simultaneously inscribing and creating a sense of place. Through their stories,

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<sup>239</sup> Interview with Brett and Tommy, April 17, 2009.

they come to an understanding of the government's response, the vulnerable landscape, by comparing New Orleans to other places, the post Hurricane Katrina conditions of the city, and the roles of race and culture. The news media's coverage of Hurricane Katrina exposed aspects that make New Orleans unlike any other place. These aspects, along with shock and horror, prompted volunteer tourists to come to New Orleans.

As volunteer tourists visit the city, they adopt an understanding of New Orleans and why events unfolded in the way they did. Volunteer tourists also become advocates for the rebuilding of New Orleans during their short stays and spread this knowledge when they go back to their hometowns. Through their experiences in the community they convert the media's stories into their own stories through their own experiences. These experiences then give the volunteer tourists a sense of New Orleans, its community, and its residents' struggles. Volunteer tourists' understanding of the stories residents tell and their experiences in New Orleans contribute to the community. Understanding these experiences not only gives volunteer tourists a way to understand the community, but also a way to explain their experiences and the experiences of residents when they return home to increase understanding of New Orleans.

Although this study looks at how volunteer tourists understand place, tourists in general seek to understand the places they visit beyond a superficial gaze. Like volunteer tourists in New Orleans, tourists want to understand how the local culture and landscape collaborate to form a community. Just as the volunteer tourists changed their opinion of New Orleans once they saw the destruction in person, tourists also often change their opinions of the places they visit. Once the tourists are at the epicenter and can sense the culture, people, and history of a place beyond what they heard about it previously, their opinions change and they understand a sense of the place.

Despite volunteer tourists' understanding of New Orleans, there are aspects of being a tourist in post Hurricane Katrina New Orleans they do not understand. Volunteer tourists are clear that the reason they come to New Orleans is to volunteer, but they do not state explicitly that they would not be in New Orleans were it not for Hurricane Katrina. Thus, Hurricane Katrina is the "attraction" that brings these individuals to New Orleans. With volunteer tourists being in New Orleans because of the disaster and to help with the disaster problematizes their role in the city. However, if volunteer tourists were not in New Orleans because of the disaster and learning about the city through locals, their understanding of New Orleans would not be as complex as they have expressed. Therefore, volunteer tourists still contribute to the city and have a multifaceted understanding of New Orleans despite being here because of the disaster.

Tourists contribute to the places they visit by seeking to understand the culture and people of the place. Rather than taking the information by understanding the place, they also help the location by advocating for it when they return home. Just as the volunteer tourists in New Orleans advocate for the city and have a clearer understanding of why people live below sea level, tourists also advocate for the places they visit once they return home. Tourists contribute to the places they visit through vocalizing this support once they have left the place.

In the next chapter, I will conclude this dissertation by revisiting the previous chapters and discuss implications for future research.

## CHAPTER SIX

### STORIES OF THE FUTURE

Given the abrupt change in the landscape of New Orleans post Hurricane Katrina, I grew fascinated with new tourists coming to the city. By spending time with volunteer tourists, I explored how their experiences in New Orleans were shaped their interactions with residents.<sup>240</sup> Therefore, my specific purpose within this study was to understand volunteer tourists' experiences as they dictated their stories to me. In this chapter, I will trace the arguments made in the previous chapters, interpret the study's findings, and discuss future research.

I started my project by first constructing tourism as a performance. Performance methods allow a conversation to take place incorporating the body into volunteer tourism. Then I focused specifically on how volunteer tourism can benefit from this comprehensive, qualitative case study in New Orleans. I used ethnographic methods to answer my research question as it provides interviewees the opportunity to express their feelings in narrative format, without being cut short or limited by time or writing. Ethnography allowed me to look at "portraits of diversity in an increasingly homogenous world. They display the intricate ways individuals and groups understand, accommodate, and resist a presumably shared order."<sup>241</sup> As VanMaanen describes, I investigated the multivalent experiences of volunteer tourists, who resist norms of leisure tourism as they come to New Orleans with the primary goal to help others.

As part of my ethnographic practices, I conducted interviews, participated in volunteer activities, and made behavioral observations. I extracted themes from the collected data and four categories emerged. These categories include: storytelling, religion, labor, and sense of place.

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<sup>240</sup> In future research, I will discuss the complexities of leisure and volunteer tourists.

<sup>241</sup> John VanMaanen, *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), xiii-xiv.

In analyzing these themes, storytelling became the performative framework through which volunteer tourists conveyed their experiences.

In chapter two I discussed how volunteer tourists construct their experiences as stories. Explaining the messy, processual nature of relating to each other, volunteer tourists use stories to talk about residents, Hurricane Katrina, and New Orleans. The stories serve as ways for volunteer tourists to advocate for the restoration of the city.

In chapter three, I incorporated my encounters with volunteer tourists to discuss religion. Religious organizations framed the experiences of volunteer tourists in New Orleans. Additionally, religion served as a way to facilitate volunteer tourists' altruism. Many volunteer tourists explained their decision to come to New Orleans as part of their duty as one of God's children and how the church gave them the means to be able to do that.

Chapter four discussed labor practices of volunteer tourists in post Hurricane Katrina New Orleans. Volunteer tourists make choices and evaluate the work they do. Through labor, volunteer tourists learn that they enjoy certain types of labor more than others. Also, they learn about aspects of themselves as they loan their bodies to help New Orleans.

In chapter five, I related how volunteer tourists construct a sense of place. With their first impressions of post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans being the media coverage immediately following the storm, they construct and process present-day New Orleans. Sometimes these constructions complement the media's version of New Orleans and often these opinions are contradicted. Volunteer tourists gather personal stories to relay to friends and family when returning home.

## **Interpretation of Findings**

Throughout this dissertation, I determined how volunteer tourists contribute to the community and culture of New Orleans through their desire to help, working in neighborhoods, understanding the city, and through the stories they tell about others and incorporate into their own lives. These findings have practical and theoretical applications beyond this dissertation.

The practical applications of the findings can be used by volunteer tourism organizations. Because the grass roots organizations that help were birthed immediately following Hurricane Katrina, they have issues related to growth and sustainability. The collection of volunteer tourists' stories will help volunteer tourism organizations balance the desire for volunteers to feel fulfilled in their work while doing meaningful work years after the disaster. Volunteer tourism organizations can create a dialogue between the organization and the volunteers to give the volunteers a better understanding of the array of the city's needs. Also, volunteer tourism practitioners who are developing post-disaster programs will use my study to forecast issues with the needed infrastructure, supplies, and cultural sensitivity training in disaster areas.

Through writing this analysis and spending time with volunteer tourists, I changed the way I feel about *all* tourists. I realized that tourists have always been a part of my New Orleans experience, even as a resident. My interactions with tourists were generally positive. I suggest a more sympathetic view of tourists. Tourists do not always take away from the places they visit, but each tourist contributes to the culture of the place. By traveling to that place, tourists show that the location has value and has interesting characteristics worth their time, money, and attention. As a result of this study, I think that reframing the way we look at tourists, as contributors, will lead to productive research about tourists, their experiences, and their behaviors.



Just as volunteer tourists contribute to New Orleans, non-volunteer tourists also contribute to New Orleans. The city has a rich history that includes the first tourists who came to New Orleans because of its location as a port.<sup>242</sup> Tourists are one facet of this multi-faceted city, but New Orleans would not be what it is today without tourists. Tourists leave behind money and donate their experiences to New Orleans. Therefore, in multiple ways tourists contribute to New Orleans.

Using performance studies as a framework, we know that bodily engagement invites knowledge and connection. Diane Taylor explains, “Embodied practice, along with and bound up with other cultural practices, offers a way of knowing.”<sup>243</sup> Taylor asserts performance is a bodily experience and suggests we learn through our body’s doing of performances. Through this knowledge and connection, tourists contribute to cultures they visit as they simultaneously gain from it. Through tourists’ engagement with a location, they develop stories about the location. The stories about the location last longer than the visit to the location. The story becomes part of the tourist and part of the tourist’s relationship with the place. Those stories become a part of the landscape. As the story gets told and retold, the relationship serves as a contribution to the place. As was visible through my study, volunteer tourists contribute to the culture of New Orleans and New Orleans welcomes that contribution. I assert that tourists also contribute to other societies, cultures, and landscapes, and that one does not necessarily have to do volunteer work to contribute to a society.

This observation also complements assertions in Phaedra Pezzullo’s work, *Toxic Tourism*. The author states, “While it is important to acknowledge that tourism is capable of

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<sup>242</sup> Kevin Fox Gotham, *Authentic New Orleans: Tourism, Culture, and Race in the Big Easy* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

<sup>243</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 3.

unpleasant, offensive, and harmful effects, I contend that it is equally significant to recognize how and when practices of tourism may be motivated by our more admirable desires for fun, connection, difference, civic spirit, social and environmental change, and education.”<sup>244</sup> In this quote, Pezzullo encourages us to find the finer points of tourists. Although Pezzullo highlights noncommercial tourism as beneficial in her book, I argue that most tourism *can* contribute to communities in some way. Additionally, all tourism is in some way commercial. Whether tourists are flying, driving, taking a bus, or a train, they are supporting a commercial enterprise.

In my interpretation, to contextualize my findings in the larger field of tourism studies, I found tourists are not necessarily imposers, but can also contribute to the locations in which they visit. Stories frame the experiences of tourists and these stories contribute to the culture and touristic location as a whole.

### **Future Research**

By laying the groundwork of how volunteer tourists’ story their experiences in New Orleans, future research can add to existing research in tourism and visual culture. The results of this study have many implications for future research.

The first avenue for future research relates to my suggestion that we reframe tourists as contributors to culture and society. This theory needs to be developed further, refined, and tested through the application to other tourist groups. The implications of these findings will encourage tourism scholars to view tourists with more tolerance. Additionally, the research emerging from these studies have the potential to reveal a more holistic view of the tourist experience. Further, scholars will see tourism as a process – not only with a chronological beginning, middle, and

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<sup>244</sup> Phaedra C. Pezzullo, *Toxic Tourism: Rhetorics of Pollution, Travel, and Environmental Justice* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 3.

end, but also including an individual development process where tourists reflect on their impact on the culture, landscape, and people.

I noticed while listening to volunteer tourists' stories is that they use different mediums to tell the stories. Even though volunteer tourists dictated stories to me via face-to-face contact, they also communicate while in New Orleans to friends and donors back home using blogs. These blogs include narratives about the work volunteer tourists are completing, aspects of the city, and a call for more help. Investigating use and stories of blogs will serve as a mirror of this study and can demonstrate the differences in mediums of communication.

Additionally, tourists use photographs to assist with their stories. Like many tourists, tourists use the photographs to help annotate their experiences while traveling. Tourists also use photographs to drive the stories: narrating the trip as a series of images. The photos also communicate about the tourists' relationship with the location. A reading of tourists' photos can provide interesting information about how tourists understand places through their photos.

In understanding how New Orleans came to be, volunteer tourists seek to understand the sense of New Orleans through its cultural traditions. Volunteer tourists engage the cultural traditions of New Orleans to understand the city, its people, and its landscape on a deeper level. Volunteer tourists experiment by eating the food, experiencing Mardi Gras, and spending time in the community and with families to understand the city. The cultural traditions of New Orleans help to explain to volunteer tourists its formation and continual existence despite its struggles through disasters. The presence of a sense of community helps volunteer tourists to understand why New Orleans should be rebuilt. The cultural traditions of New Orleans and the welcoming nature of residents offer volunteer tourists circumstances to evaluate and gain information on how residents live.

Volunteer tourists understand New Orleans because of the stories told about it by other volunteer tourists, residents, workers, and friends. Through the stories told by others, New Orleans becomes a living thing that is dynamic, engaging, and changing. Volunteer tourists not only make sense of how New Orleans looks, but how the politics of the city play out in its appearance and the spirit of the residents. The stories volunteer tourists tell also help them understand who they are and how they fit into the city in a dynamic phase of its existence.

Volunteer tourists also learn about how they fit into the landscape of New Orleans through the stories. Volunteer tourists bask that their role in the city is not the same as residents or other tourists and learning about the place allows them a different role of the landscape. Also, by working on homes, volunteer tourists make their mark on the city; they can physically point to places where they worked tirelessly to help homeowners rebuild. But each volunteer tourists who comes to New Orleans, attempts to understand how New Orleans and their experiences in New Orleans affects them. Through the stories residents tell volunteer tourists and volunteer tourists then tell and retell, a connection to New Orleans' unique landscape and residents forms prompting many to come back annually.

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## VITA

Jennifer Lea Erdely was born in November 1978, in Charleston, West Virginia. She moved with her parents to Louisiana the day after her first birthday and grew up close enough to New Orleans to enjoy its culture, mystique, and history. She graduated from Hahnville High School in Boutte, Louisiana. In 2001, she graduated from Louisiana State University with a Bachelor of Arts in communication studies with minors in French and sociology. She traveled abroad for the first time after graduating with her bachelor's degree, and it changed her life's course. In 2005, she graduated from University of South Florida in Tampa, Florida, with a Master of Arts in communication. She took a year off to travel abroad. Four months later, her life changed course again. Hurricane Katrina's arrival inspired Jennifer to get her doctorate in hopes of advocating for New Orleans' revival. Her career as a graduate assistant included teaching classes in public speaking, interpersonal communication, nonlinear video editing software, camera operation, and virtual tourism. She will graduate in May 2011 from Louisiana State University with her Doctor of Philosophy in communication studies. She looks forward to continuing her travels and reading novels.