

Re-visioning Katrina: Exploring Gender in pre- and post-Katrina New Orleans

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ABSTRACT

I argue that to understand the gender dynamics of New Orleans, Hurricane Katrina, and the storm's aftermath, one must interrogate the cultural conflation of the black female body and the city's legacy to explore what it means and how it situates real black women in social, cultural, and physical landscapes. Using a hybrid theoretical framework informed by Black feminist theory, ecocriticism, critical race feminism, and post-positivist realism, I explore the connections between New Orleans' cultural and historical discourses that gender the city as feminine, more specifically as a black woman or Jezebel, with narratives of real black females to illustrate the impact that dominant discourses have on people's lives. I ground this work in Black feminism, specifically Hortense Spillers's and Patricia Hill Collins's works that center the black female body to garner a fuller understanding of social systems, Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, and Evelyn Hammonds's call for a reclamation of the body to interrogate the ideologies that inscribe black women. In addition, I argue that black women should reclaim New Orleans' metaphorical black body and interrogate this history to move forward in rebuilding the city. As an ecocritic and feminist, I understand the tension involved with reading a city as feminine and arguing for this reclamation, as this echoes colonial and imperialist discourses of conquering land and bodies, but I negotiate these tensions by specifically examining the discourse itself to expose the sexist and racist ideologies at work.

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CHAPTER 1: A GOTHIC ENCODING OF THE CITY, A LEGACY, AN EVENT

New Orleans has historically teemed with a gothic sensibility. In simply examining the iconography of this unique American urban landscape, the city's Gothicism is evidence. New Orleans is the home of Mardi Gras, carnivalesque parades, excess, vice, sexuality, and imbibitions. Every tour guide company offers a series of tours that present the paradoxical beauty and mystique of the city. Bayou tours carry the willing tourist into the unstable swamplands, holding the promise of an encounter with Cajuns living in the "wilderness" as well as the threat of an encounter with prehistoric monster, the "gator." Plantation tours showcase the city's antebellum past, these historical landmarks testifying to the luxury and majesty of the past, while the slave quarters testify to the horrors and degradation of the "Old days." On the "cities of the dead" tours, one can weave their way through the networks of above ground tombs, communing with the dead who coexist with the living. Ghost, vampire, and haunted history tours offer the promise of a literal gothic encounter with a spirit or a blood-sucking monster. In the heart of a city boasting a longstanding Catholic presence, the tourist can also take a voodoo tour to learn about the good and evils of this blended West African/Catholic-influenced ritual practice, complete with a visit to a "real" altar and the grave of the legendary voodoo Queen Marie Laveau. Just outside of America's oldest Catholic cathedral still in use, "gypsies," fortune tellers, and voodoo practitioners set up in Jackson Square luring passerbys into the mystique of New Orleans' underworld. No matter the time of year the sultry air, the Spanish moss clinging relentlessly to the live oaks, the looming architecture, the multi-colored beads, the teeming sexuality and history

of the Quarter, the hybridity of French, Spanish, African, and American influences, all entice one into a uniquely Gothic American urban landscape.

It comes as no surprise then that in describing Hurricane Katrina and its tragic aftermath, many writers implement the gothic as a trope when piecing together the events, documenting and theorizing the storm, the flooding, and the conditions of those left behind. Historian Douglass Brinkley, for example, describes Katrina as a “a palpable monster, an alien beast” (xx) who struck the Gulf Coast region on August 29, 2005, leaving “a gothic shroud” over the city of New Orleans “as if something ominous still lingered” (xx). Katrina survivor Phyllis Lee LeMontana LeBlanc deems Katrina, “*The 50 Foot Woman... That's what Katrina was*”, a monstrous aberration “pulling our shit apart” (qtd. in Lee).

Brinkley’s “something ominous” proved real as subsequent levee failures caused widespread flooding leaving 80% of the city underwater (Moller). As the waters rose, a gothic spectacle ensued as bloated and decaying bodies of New Orleanians floated in the water for days, littering streets and buildings in the days after the storm. Michael Dyson describes a scene at the Superdome where “outside, a man lay dead, his body covered with a blanket, a stream of blood running from his body onto the pavement,” (Dyson, *Come Hell* 110). David Dante Troutt recounts another scene of horror at the Cloverleaf, the I-10 and Causeway Boulevard interchange, where “the bloated body of a black women shrouded in white lies facedown and adrift in the water. The humiliation of her death is added to only slightly by an embarrassing stain near her anus. Several feet to the right of the corpse is a full black plastic garbage bag. To the right of that, life continues again in the form of a large black woman” (4).

As the city's residents made their way through foul, turgid waters to the Convention Center and Superdome to await evacuation, the media proliferated visceral images of the aftermath. Among the footage were images of the city swallowed by water; women and children airlifted from rooftops; people scrawling pleas for help on rooftops, waving flags and sheets from balconies; crowds of mostly African Americans waiting outside the convention center and Superdome with dwindling food, water, and medical care; women holding up their children to the news cameras; and still other shots of people covering their faces denying the gaze of the on-looking nation via a camera lens, refusing to participate in this surreal exchange of racial voyeurism. Media and official broadcast reports, most of which were later retracted, relayed animalistic, violent behavior such as killing over food, rampant assault and rape of the vulnerable, and people desecrating bodies. Black men in particular were cast as lawless "thugs," as ruthless savage beasts looting and killing at will (Lee).

Tension and desperation continued to build as the city waited for the dreadfully slow federal response. After days of dragging their feet in a bureaucratic nightmare, the federal government completed the evacuation, dispersing the "Katrina diaspora" across the United States (Rather xi). The disaster left this legendary gothic city drowning in death, destruction, and decay, a literal gothic event that haunts the city and the nation. Chris Rose's epitaph to his book sums up this haunting,

This book is dedicated to Thomas Coleman, a retired longshoreman, who died in his attic at 2214 St. Roch Avenue in New Orleans' 8th Ward on or about August 29, 2005. He had a can of juice and a bedspread at his side when the waters rose....

There were more than a thousand like him. (Rose)

During the days following Hurricane Katrina, the nation watched with horror as these images haunted television screens and national politics. Journalist Dan Rather called Katrina a “national tragedy” (Rather xi), which “challenged directly some of our country’s most cherished notions about itself: about our readiness and ingenuity in the face of trouble, about the quality of our leaders, and about the equality of our society” (Rather xi). Billy Sothern calls the events of Katrina “a compulsory Rorschach test for a country that has long been troubled by the dynamics of inequality” (57). Anyone who watched or read news media gazed at this Rorschach test and clearly saw the normally invisible, seemingly “natural” social systems and their economic, social and historical disparities.

And here, at this Rorschach test, gothic discourse becomes useful. American gothic narratives, whether fiction or non-fiction, remain intricately bound to American history. Rather than offering a supernatural tale of romance or “gateways to other, distant worlds,” these narratives remain grounded in the realities of American society (Goddu 2). Teresa Goddu argues that “the gothic disrupts the dream world of national myth with the nightmares of history...its highly wrought form exposes the artificial foundations of national identity” (Goddu 10). Clearly, Dan Rather alludes to this national myth in his categorization of the storm as a tragedy that raised questions about American equality. America’s gothic history, specifically “the specter of slavery” and its latter-day manifestations, arises in numerous Katrina narratives that evoke gothic discourse (Goddu 20). These haunted stories register the instabilities and contradictions of American society so evident in the media’s coverage of Katrina.

Each of the writers above interrogates the historically informed socio-economic and racial systems at work in New Orleans, evoking the gothic in their descriptions of Katrina and the storm's destruction. Their gothic evocations are apropos considering that undergirding gothic narratives lays a sense of unease, "marked by an anxious encounter with otherness, with the dark and mysterious unknown" (Anolik 1). Traditionally this encounter takes place in the form of "the inhuman Other: the supernatural or monstrous manifestation...that symbolizes all that is irrational, uncontrollable and incomprehensible," like the ghost, vampire, or monster (Anolik 1). But in American gothic narratives, especially those describing Katrina, these spectral figures are relocated "to new dark spaces" (Anolik 2) of social, racial, and gender landscapes of American society. The gothic monster, then, is mapped

onto the figure of the racial and social Other, the Other who replaces the supernatural ghost or grotesque monster as the code for mystery and danger, becoming, ultimately, as horrifying, threatening and unknowable as the typical Gothic manifestation. (Anolik 2)

Historically, America's system of slavery encoded this Other as the African slave; the black body becomes mapped as abject, "the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite," which disrupts "identity, system, order" (Kristeva 4).

In their implementation of gothic discourse in discussions of New Orleans, its history, the storm, and the socio-political issues at work, this abject Other is clear. Michael Dyson argues that the ruthless depictions of black men in particular harkened back to the grotesque, racist categorizations of African Americans as savage beasts who need controlling, raising "the *specter*...of blacks out of control" [emphasis added]

(Dyson, *Come Hell* 114). With his diction, he emphasizes how slavery and its racist, oppressive narratives have historically inscribed and continues to circumscribe black bodies.

In his work, Billy Sothern discusses the fierce control of the black population left behind in New Orleans as they tried to walk out of the city rather than await rescue. Turned back by gunfire from neighboring parish authorities, New Orleans citizens were told by an officer, “This is not New Orleans. [...] We’re not going to have any Superdomes over here” (Sothern 62). Sothern observations parallel days of slavery and Jim Crow, which systematically restricted African American movement.

In her description of the evacuation, Gina Montana evokes America’s gothic past through her comparison to the slave trade. She recalls, “with the evacuation scattering my family all over the United States I felt like it was an ancient memory as if we had been up on an auction block” (qtd. in Lee). This categorization is not far off as sick residents, as well as children, found themselves separated from their families. Jesse Jackson further testifies to this “haunting echo,”

I saw people where their family was separated—men from women, children from the old and the sick from the well. And with no communication. They didn’t know where others had gone, and they just began to panic in desperation...It looked like the hull of a slave ship. (qtd. in Dyson, “Great Migrations?” 81)

In theorizing the storm and its aftermath, the writers’ gothic discourse invokes the American paradox, “the darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation,” the foundation of freedom built on the historical enslavement and oppression of black

bodies (Fiedler 29). The disaster and flooding, the failures of the government, and the devastation wrought a complete denial of human rights that echoes the horrors of history as African-American life was again seen as expendable and insignificant. The abject Other, a usually “invisible” population, took center stage in a national spectacle as the media shined its spotlights on the faces of urban black poverty, poverty rooted in systemic racial and social oppression stemming from slavery. This dramatic gothic naming the “specters” of race and slavery offers up history and the present for interrogation. And New Orleans history has deep roots in the American slave trade with its famed slave markets and the plaçage system’s notorious “fancy girls.”

A diverse city, New Orleans society formed a fluid labyrinth of racial and social relationships and stratifications due to the influx and influence of French, Spanish, and American colonial cultures along with West African, Caribbean and Indian cultures that created a diverse population of Cajuns, Creoles, enslaved and freed black populations, and Anglo-Europeans. The color hierarchies and transgression of the color line in many aspects of New Orleans life played a part in its mythos. But this is not to say that racial divisions did not exist in New Orleans.

In fact the city’s Otherness, its historical connections to the slave trade and its encoding of black bodies undergirds many New Orleans narratives. Historically, writers telling stories about New Orleans construct the city as an unstable space of paradoxical anxiety, attraction and repulsion that is racially encoded. Tracing New Orleans “place-tone,” the complex spatial and ideological construction of a city, Barbara Eckstein’s analysis of stories from New Orleans residents, writers, and tourists includes an early excerpt from a travel narrative published in 1860, entitled *Scenes of the South*. She quotes

a poem that notes New Orleans' lack of "remorse despite normal sins against nineteenth-century US mores: miscegenation; corruption of Church, business, law and the whole territory of the Middle South by proximity to gambling and prostitution; and failure to clearly define the place of Negroes in its society" (Eckstein 12). Other works deem New Orleans a place embedded with "sin and gaiety," "a voodoo heartland" (Eckstein 13). Following Eckstein's reading, in another narrative James Davidson, a 19th century Virginia lawyer, called New Orleans, a "great Southern Babylon—the mighty receptacle of wealth, depravity and misery" (qtd. in Long 2). Davidson specifically focuses his attention on three specific attributes of the city "the beautiful quadroon women he saw 'at almost every step'; the 'fashionable prostitute[s]' who flaunted their 'gaudy trappings'; and, finally, the slave auction he observed at Hewlett's Exchange" (Long 2). Such narratives illustrate how New Orleans was experienced and interpreted as having "a reputation as a hotbed of vice and corruption, where godlessness seemed to flourish in a carnival atmosphere" embedded with a racially encoded anxiety (Wilkie 97).

Similar characteristics still undergird New Orleans' presentation to consumers. Tourism sells the city as a contradictory space of rich histories and ecologies, lavish beauty, sensuality, and cultural diversity, but also sin, sexuality, indulgence, danger, corruption, and vice—a categorization "not unrelated to its status as a majority-black city... [a] supposedly 'exotic' space of ethnic tourism" (Hartnell 723). In fact, many historians "argue that it is black heritage that is most visibly on display" as "French Quarter tourism has thus long simulated the experience of a supposedly black New Orleans" commodified and presented to the public (Hartnell 723).

Return for a moment to the tours offered to arriving tourists, tours that hinge on the New Orleans' complex racial and ethnic history and rely on official and "unofficial" historical narratives. The plantation tour, "combines the promise of natural beauty, landscaped gardens, grandiose buildings, and what is for many the tour's highlight: slave quarters" (Hartnell 727). The popular cemetery tours offer a glimpse into New Orleans haunted past, but come with ample warnings about the cemeteries' dangers and threats of violence, "especially those situated in low-income African-American neighborhoods" (Hartnell 728). Group tours present a "safe" means to see New Orleans' gothic, haunted spaces, but illustrate a "persistent legacy—one that continues to stalk the white imagination in the form of the phantom figures of usually male black predators (Hartnell 728). Again, black bodies become specters, feared yet desired, but only in safe spaces that shelter the tourist from impending threats. Voodoo tours collapse "New Orleans' extensive network of Spiritual churches, which often combine Roman Catholicism, Pentecostalism, and voodoo...into one-dimensional images of the latter, and degradingly represented as exotic instances of 'local color'"(Hartnell 728).

In the French Quarter, commodified blackness

becomes synonymous with a *mélange* of associations combining the sensory pleasures of sex, music, and intoxication, associations that reinforce the deeply racist hierarchy that equates blackness with the body—the 'sins' of the flesh—and whiteness with the mind. (Hartnell 732-3)

The Quarter presents the simultaneously appealing and repelling gothic abject black body, "tarted up and trotted out for visitors to see, experience, and enjoy," but contained

within a “safe” tourist space (Long 6). All of these cultural narratives and constructions compel the visitor to embrace “the city’s appalling appeal” as visitors are repelled by the city’s immoral ways, “yet ... fascinated by it, simultaneously charmed and scandalized by its aura of disorder and its cultural of sexual permissiveness and sensual excess” (Long 2).

This commodified blackness that “arguably formed the centerpiece of the city’s tourist industry before the storm” retains a certain cultural tension because it divorces black culture from the important cultural and racial histories of oppression of the black communities of New Orleans (Hartnell 724). This history remains part of, what Sothern deems, “the hidden city,” invisible despite the fact that its residents, the predominantly black and/or poor play a vital part in crafting and shaping the city’s cultural identity.

Katrina and its aftermath ultimately serves as a gothic event where *this* New Orleans, the previously invisible community whose contributions are commodified then contained by tourism but whose people remain marginalized by social and environmental injustice, “floated to the surface in Hurricane Katrina’s wake” disrupting the popular national narrative of New Orleans (Souther 804). The invisible systems of stratification became apparent, the gothic specter of racist past now unearthed in the destruction of the physical landscape. The black communities double role of “representing both the riches and the ills” of New Orleans emerged, as systemic racial and economic oppression was put on display (Hartnell 728). The specter now appeared in harsh light. The desired and feared black body, whose cultural and social contributions stake a claim in New Orleans’ exceptionalism, was no longer contained as black bodies spilled on the sidewalks and

streets during and after the storm, permeating television screens, prompting national debates about race and poverty.

So, it is no surprising that the gothic discourse proves useful in framing discussions of New Orleans and Katrina's impact on the city as the American gothic's encoding of slavery undergirds these narratives and interrogate systems of race and class. New Orleans, a gothic city was struck by a gothic event, an event that brought an underlying racist legacy of systemic oppression long ignored but now brought to light in a spectacle of death and destruction, particularly of black bodies. The American gothic evokes the ghost of slavery, hence, the fitting use of its conventions and discourse in describing Katrina. Slavery informs these texts and informs the early narratives of the city, illuminating travelers' anxieties about a rich, fluid, complex labyrinth of racial and cultural histories.

However, there is another register to this gothic legacy to consider in greater detail, particularly in terms of New Orleans history and Katrina: gender. Race and class were clearly evident to anyone as soon as the footage came to light via television and computer screens. But historical systems of gender and their fluid dynamics certainly factor into the pre- and post-Katrina's larger context. Numerous writers and thinkers like those mentioned above including historian Douglass Brinkley, Spike Lee, Professor Michael Eric Dyson to name but a few¹ have and continue to craft fuller views of Katrina's larger historical narratives. Numerous sociological, historical, and feminist scholars have undertaken the task of understanding the storm and subsequent floods. Many highlight issues of race, class, and the social dynamics of these systems during

¹ There are larger numbers of works surrounding Katrina and its aftermath, and this project is by no means exhaustive. For more information on these works see the ever-growing Katrina bibliography available via the Social Science Research Council at <http://understandingkatrina.ssrc.org>.

disasters, grounding their work on the long histories of socio-historical, political and cultural narratives. Some work to provide voice to the unheard, sharing the individual experiences of the storm. These profoundly worthwhile texts illustrate that race and class were undeniably factors in the experience of the storm. Those left behind, as Wolf Blitzer could not help but bluntly notice, are “So poor. So Black.”

Almost all of this research involves women at one level or another; however, few early works focus on centrally on gender. While images of women and children survivors at the Superdome and convention center proliferated globally, few discussed the large number of “poor Black women who waded through chest-high water with sick and elderly parents, with young children on their hips and meager belongings in tow” (Ransby 216). Women were ubiquitous onscreen, but not in the larger discussion.

In Chapter Three, I will outline and theorize gendered narratives of New Orleans, Katrina, and black women to illustrate gender’s importance in the discussion. Given the gothic nature of city and the implementation of gothic discourse in a number of Katrina narratives, I explore the racially gendered discourse of slavery and how its “controlling images” get mapped and encoded onto the city historically, during Katrina, and onto black women after the storm (Collins, *Black Feminist* 27). During slavery, the intersection of race and gender systems of oppression played a dominant role in constructing black women’s bodies. And if the American gothic distinguishes itself by its “chary treatment of women and sex,” as Leslie Fiedler asserts, then a historically informed understanding of black female bodies during and after slavery in conjunction with black female bodies in New Orleans as well as the city’s construction as a metaphorical black body is merited (31).

However, before charting out my reading in Chapter Three, the following chapter outlines my hybrid theoretical, methodological and epistemological frameworks. In a complex, sophisticated, multidisciplinary, fluid approach, I hope to construct a dynamic gendered reading of pre- and post-Katrina New Orleans in terms of the larger historical trajectories in order to more fully understand the intricate connections of New Orleans' people, places, narratives, and physical and social geographies

CHAPTER 2: *METHODOLOGICAL, THEORETICAL, AND CRITICAL
GROUNDINGS*

By implementing an multi-disciplinary methodology pulling together a series of diverse texts for my analysis, I work to elucidate historically grounded racial and gendered discourses at work that continue to frame discussions of Katrina and the New Orleans' recovery. The texts that I bring together cover a number of disciplines grounded by various theoretical frameworks. In this analysis I work to craft a richer, more complex view of the systems of domination at work including discourses of race, class, gender, sexuality, and place. By examining such a multitude of scholarship on New Orleans and Katrina, each with discipline-specific goals, I find that a more in-depth, multifaceted understanding arises when theorizing the city, the disaster, and the recovery than if doing analysis in one discipline alone.

For example, numerous sociological studies of the storm offer incredibly valuable data-driven information that quantifies the effects of the storm on the city and its residents, but such work, unless specifically taking a feminist or Black feminist standpoint, can often overlook the experiences of African American women who survived and continue to struggle in the recovery. Ecologically driven environmental and social justice studies can illuminate the connections between race, class, and how cities physically evolve and locate communities, but they can minimize the impact of gender and cultural narratives in their focus on environmental justice and sustainability. Critical literary analyses of historical and contemporary fictional and non-fictional texts offer a wealth of insight into the perpetuation of racist and sexist discourses, but can often be charged with being too abstract by science driven fields. Often each type of text, each

genre, discipline, theoretical framework and goals highlight one or even a few specific aspects of the disaster, but taken together holistically, one can begin to understand a fluid, complex interconnecting web of discourses all useful for theorizing this gothic event.

My hybrid multidisciplinary perspective is informed by literary theory, specifically the American gothic tradition, new historicism, ecocritical theory, critical race feminism, Black feminist theory, and even post-positivist realism. In reading and analyzing a series of fictional and non-fictional narratives about New Orleans and Katrina and connecting them to America's gothic legacy of slavery, my grounding in literary theory and history is clear. Reading these American artifacts of cultural and academic production, I tease out how the language functions within the city's cultural discourse and how it inscribes actual people into not only socio-historical and cultural landscapes, but in physical landscapes as well.

By positing this connection, I rely on some basic principles of ecocritical theory. Ecocritical theory, a burgeoning field of theoretical scholarship, holds that humans are connected to the physical world in which they are situated, "affecting it and affected by it" (Glotfelty and Fromm xix). Ecocritical literary studies typically explore the connections between humans and physical spaces by analyzing how literary texts represent the environment and how characters engage with it (Glotfelty and Fromm). However, early ecocritical scholarship has since been charged by ecocritics like Michael Bennett and Ann-Catherine Nabholz with having too limited a scope as these theorists and early works privilege white, western relationships with the natural world as well as the wilderness over urban spaces. Ecocritic Scott Hicks, for example, calls for an Afro-centric ecocriticism which not only analyzes African American ecocritical writers and

texts to get a more complex, diverse understanding of human and environmental interactions, and but also addresses issues of race and environmental injustice, uncovering how the social landscape shapes and influences how cities and communities are structured and how communities interact with and within that geographic space.

Like Hicks, cultural critic bell hooks argues for a more complex understanding of the dynamics and relationships between black people and nature. She acknowledges the often tenuous and violent relationship that African Americans historically have with nature, yet she insists that by “[l]iving close to nature, black folks were able to cultivate a spirit ... to make a connection with the earth that was ongoing and life-affirming” (hooks, *Belonging* 36). This closeness with the natural world is restorative and a part of “communal practice[s]” that link African Americans to their ancestry. hooks states that African Americans were uprooted from this connection during the Great Migration, disrupting the potential solace found in agrarian life and a through connection to an ancestral history rooted in rural, southern landscapes. She calls for a reexamination and reconnection of African Americans and the natural world as a means of restoration and a link to the ancestry (hooks, *Belonging*).

Another ecocritic Christine Gerhardt argues for a “greening” of African American literature, involving a more nuanced analysis of the relationships between African Americans and their environments using a postcolonial framework wherein the black body acts as simultaneous colonizer and colonized. She uses Alice Walker to demonstrate that African Americans’ writings and analyses of the environment serve as emancipatory in reflecting on racism and environmental ethicism. She argues that Walker, as a marginalized Other but human colonizer of specific geographic space, draws historic

parallels between the degradation of the black body and the degradation of nature pointing out the detrimental “exploitative attitude” toward both in American society (Gerhardt).

Gerhardt’s proposed ecocriticism draws on tenets of ecofeminism as well, a radical branch concerned with the “recognition of connections between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women across patriarchal societies,” often conflating one with the other (Gaard and Murphy 3). Clearly, as a model this framework has its problems. First, this alignment can be seen as too anthropocentric due to the direct correlation of human body to the natural world. Second, and more importantly, the connection specifically of black women to nature can be troublesome in that it can recall the racist discourse that deems black people uncivilized, closer to nature and presumably more distant from God. It also can be read as essentialist, implying that all women have one thing in common, a connection to “Mother Earth.”

However, all of these shifting, complicated trajectories of ecocriticism inform how I theorize New Orleans’ interconnected physical, social and cultural geographies and formulate an ecocritical lens for studying Katrina as a “natural” disaster. But none informs my work as much as Barbara Eckstein’s ecocritically grounded cultural studies work *Sustaining New Orleans: Literature, Local Memory, and the Fate of a City*. She reads a series of historical literature to uncover the city’s cultural identity constructed through these narratives. Eckstein posits a direct, intricate interrelational connection between urban spaces and cultural, historical, and social narratives, arguing that the stories communities and/or individuals tell about a city directly influence the social and physical geographies of that city. Specifically, she outlines New Orleans as an

exceptional African feminine city whose hybrid, fluid “folkways” structure the city and its inhabitants, problematizing ecological, social and cultural sustainability (Eckstein). Her gendering of the city in literary and travel narratives proves as a particularly fruitful starting point for my reading, but more importantly, I build from her ideas to establish an epistemological and methodological framework. Eckstein look specifically at literary and filmic narratives to better understand New Orleans’ cultural and physical geographies. My methodology broadens the range of texts explore to include multiple genres and disciplinary texts to more fully understand the implications of a historically informed gendered encoding in the larger pre- and post-Katrina contexts, connecting these diverse narratives to real people’s experiences in order to theorize the “Queen City of the South,” the storm, and the recovery (*NOMCVB.com*).

Along with ecocritical theory, ideological frameworks of critical race feminism and Black feminist theory also undergird my theoretical and epistemological perspectives. Critical race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality serves as another foundational element in this project. Initially addressing inequalities in legal discourses, Crenshaw posits that antiracist or feminist theories focus on one locus of dominance, i.e. race or gender, privileging that central category and denigrating the importance of other socio-cultural stratifications. Rather she argues for an intersectional approach to theorizing power and oppression and to enact social change (Crenshaw “The First Decade”; “Demarginalizing”).

Black feminist scholarship also seeks to highlight a more diverse understanding of black women’s experiences that often get overlooked. Working to fill that gap, black feminists center the experiences of black women through cultural, historical, and

politically driven interviews and ethnographic studies, which create spaces of resistance for the marginalized to speak back to the larger narratives, discourses, and systems of oppression that inscribe them.

These “safe spaces,” as Patricia Hill Collins designates them, are “social spaces where Black women speak freely” (*Black Feminist* 100). In these spaces black women can express themselves outside of the hegemonic ideologies by enacting the practice of self-definition, of re-visioning the racist and sexist dominant discourses that circumscribe their bodies and social positions. This re-visioning offers a starting for black female empowerment and agency while resisting “objectification as the Other” (Collins, *Black Feminist* 101). Safe spaces, such as the denial of the camera’s gaze mentioned in Chapter 1, necessarily exclude in order to be “safe.” In their exclusion they offer a more diverse view of black women and the “resulting reality is much more complex than one of an all-powerful White majority objectifying Black women” (Collins, *Black Feminist* 101). Even though these spaces are, by definition, exclusionary, the act of redefining aims to produce “a more inclusionary, just society” by bringing new narratives to light which undercut the historically informed oppressive discourses about black women (Collins, *Black Feminist* 110).

Like Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins also argues for an intersectional approach for understanding the positioning of black women within dominant social systems and discourse. Placing the experiences of black women at the center of analysis elucidates how a “matrix of domination” positions them in within a historically specific power dynamic and how they can operate in such systems (*Black Feminist* 203). Collins and other black feminists scholars also explicate “controlling images,” culturally inscribed

narratives that circumscribe and situate black female bodies in society (Collins, *Black Feminist* 72).

Hortense Spillers, for example, describes how, historically, white women were defined by the principles of “true womanhood” while black female slaves were inscribed by the body, via their supposed hypersexuality and ability to reproduce. She argues that this racially gendered legacy informs the government’s the Moynihan report, which categorizes white familial structures as the norm and black matriarchal households as a “pathology” (Spillers 250). Other narratives like the Mammy, the Jezebel, the Bad Black Mother, and the welfare mother illustrate the historical objectification of the black female body based on stereotypical tropes about black female sexuality grounded in earlier discourse of slavery, evoking the gothic past (*White Arn’t I*; Collins *Black Feminist*; “Get Your Freak”; Crenshaw “Demarginalizing”). Analyzing and working against these controlling narratives is an underlying goal of black feminist scholarship. I undertake a similar type of analysis in reading the historical mappings of the city itself and black women within it as Jezebel, a historically gothic abject female.

In addition to these theoretical frameworks, post-positivist realism also informs this project. Post-positivist realism, a theoretical approach initially outlined by Satya Mohanty, serves as a key frame of reference behind my overall purpose. Outlined by Mohanty and furthered by scholars like Linda Alcoff, Sandra Harding, Laura Gillman among others understands identities as “theoretically mediated” and that “knowledge is never posited free from theoretical bias” (Gillman 21). Post-positivist realists recognize that discourses and even scientific observations are fallible because they are mediated by human subjects informed by their own cultural and theoretical grounding. In addition,

post-positivist realists see identities and “subjectivities as not only constructed but also ‘real’ social categories” (Gillman 21). Patricia Hill Collins states that “Oppression is not a game, nor is it solely about language—for many of us, it still remains profoundly real” (“Comment”, 253). Collins powerful words illustrate this main tenet of post-positivist realism. While post-positivist realism acknowledges the cultural and social constructions of discourses and identities, such discourses have tangible effects on the lives of real women, in the case of this research project, on the bodies of poor black women in New Orleans displaced by the storm. In New Orleans, the historically grounded discourses of the city, the storm, and black women affect real women and require intervention for a better, fuller view of what actually happened during and after the storm. Therefore, post-positivists stress the importance of understanding one’s position with the “real” social and physical geographies as well as gathering multiple sources of knowledge to get a better bead on what is happening in reality. Only by interpreting and interrogating a multitude of positions can one develop this fuller understanding.

Using this hybrid methodology grounded in post-positivist realism’s basic tenets about subjectivities, discourses, and multiple sources of knowledge, I explore a series of diverse Katrina narratives, piecing together a multilayered view from these multidisciplinary texts to get a fuller picture of how the Jezebel trope culturally performs. Michael Bibler’s film and cultural analysis of the Bette Davis film *Jezebel* and Hurricane Katrina parallels the film’s protagonist and post-disaster New Orleans, reading them both as Jezebel; this work offers a gendered mapping of the city during the gothic spectacle so vividly outlined in Chapter One. Bibler’s work evokes a racially encoded gender stereotype that socially and physically inscribed the female body during slavery. Deborah

Gray White's (*Arn't I*) and Patricia Hill Collins's (*Black Feminist*; "Get Your Freak") writings about the Mammy and the Jezebel prove integral in elucidating the implications of the stereotype on the lives of female slaves, picking up where Bibler ends his discussion.

Bibler's analysis, like Eckstein's, proves a useful starting point but does not theorize the implications and problems of the nation's cultural mapping of the city as a Jezebel, specifically in relation to its historically loaded ideologies of race and gender. To make a larger connection to the physical lives of real black women in New Orleans, those historically encoded by the stereotype and clearly present in the viscera of media footage discussed, I turn to Barbara Ransby's black feminist sociological analysis, which explores how national and conservative political discourses of race, class, and gender minimized the experiences of poor black women severely affected by Katrina. Ransby counters this marginalization with experiential narratives of black women survivors, relaying their struggles and resistance while crafting a revisionist narrative of Katrina's poor black women.

With my methodology, I take Eckstein's, Bibler's, and Ransby's very different texts and, rather than read them separately, I read them in conjunction with feminist sociological research focused on women. This exercise allows me to illuminate the complex set of social structures of power and discourse and how these systems socially and geographically position poor black women in New Orleans before and after the storm. A multilayered understanding of these different Katrina narratives, the experiences of black women, of historical, social, and environmental vulnerabilities, opens up the possibility for reshaping public policy debates on rebuilding the city by providing a

framework for socially and environmentally responsible, sustainable, and equitable public policies.

In the last section of my analysis, I engage Ransby's Black feminist analysis with excerpts from series of interviews conducted with long-time city residents who survived the storm, native and/or current New Orleanians—some living outside of the city, and a selection of city residents actively participating in various ways in the city's reconstruction and restoration. I also engage a creative work in the discussion: *Swimming Upstream* written by real women of New Orleans who survived the storm and work to rebuild their lives and their city. Using these various viewpoints alongside Ransby's garners a powerful picture of New Orleans, its people and its future as the city works to rebuild the infamous Queen. One can see how these narratives all work to revise and reclaim the ideologies and discourses that structure the city and black women in very specific ways. Evelyn Hammonds argues for such a reclamation for black women. Reclaiming “the maimed, immoral, black female body” means to reclaim a space of agency and reassert black women's subjectivities as sources of knowledge.

Despite the complexity of this proposed framework, such a view becomes necessary to understand the larger context of New Orleans, its people, history, and future. I posit an epistemological framework that sees multiplicity, hybridity, and the ability to revise and reshape how we see spaces, people, and discourses as sources of knowledge. Why this framework?

Returning briefly to the media coverage of the storm, the camera's gaze presented a view of post-Katrina New Orleans complete with gothic spectacles, the visible effects of rampant poverty and racism, and queries about what New Orleans really means in the

national landscape. Imagine that same camera lens zooming out, further and further, to see the city's larger context and its historical, social, political, cultural, and national roots. In this way, the viewer can see the complex interconnections and interplays between these narratives, the people who inhabit the space, and the space itself, while it can simultaneously pivot the camera to highlight the viewer's position within that context. This type of polycyclic, polyphonic view encompasses the larger story of the place.

Walter Benjamin eloquently writes about a similar type of vision to the one I propose. In his essay, "On the Concept of History," Walter Benjamin ruminates on a painting by Paul Klee and the nature of history. He writes,

There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm.

(392)

Benjamin's angel does not see history as linear "chain of events" but rather as "one single catastrophe." In theorizing New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina, a *literal* storm and its aftermath, this type of vision can help to fully encapsulate and understand

those interconnected webs of history, discourses, narratives, people, and the dynamics between them.

CHAPTER 3: THE GOTHIC FEMALE “JEZEBEL”

Before beginning with Barbara Eckstein’s characterization of the city as exceptional, as an African female, it is first key to understand exactly what she means by “Sustaining New Orleans.” For her purposes she argues for sustainability via “balancing competing claims for environmental health, social justice, and economic viability” (Eckstein 5). But tied within these competing claims are the stories people tell. Eckstein also hopes to sustain these narratives, “the perpetuation of images and ideas and tales of New Orleans sustained in public—local and not—through a range of activities and media, widely read literature notable among them” (Eckstein xi). In this way, she includes the “folkways” as key aspects to preserving, yet simultaneously interrogating, that which makes the city unique (Eckstein xii). These folkways have the ability “to develop public memory, which percolates the circulating discourse, beliefs, institutions, rituals, social relations, and power structures shaping the past and envisioning the future” (Eckstein 6).

Geographically speaking she also argues for New Orleans’ claims to exceptionalism as the city sits in an extremely dynamic landscape surrounded by waters and swamps. The city’s establishment through systems of canals, drainage channels, levees, and pumps mark the city’s physical body (Eckstein xii). Petrochemical development and subsequent environmental degradation further New Orleans’ vulnerability as an ecological space. The physical body of New Orleans remains unstable as the surrounding waters and the effects of urban development “continued to lap at the *ankles* of the city and region, threatening to poison it, inundate it, or desert it all together” [emphasis added] (Eckstein 8). She encodes the city as a physical body, an unstable one

informed by both its own physicality as well as how its inhabitants interpret and intervene in this space.

Intricately connected “technic-ways,” meaning the manmade interventions of the landscape, the geographic environment itself, and the cultural folkways intersect and merge to create the *je ne sais quoi* of New Orleans. Eckstein writes, “the interaction of geography and histories, formal and informal, is visible in the decisions made about the city’s transportation, social practices, land use, and governance in the stories and other public discourse about the city” (Eckstein 2). This “labyrinthine, feminine fluidity” (Salvaggio) constitutes the city’s bioregion and also mirrors the hybridity of the city’s complex cultural and social fabric, as well as the “interracialism and other boundary violations that emerge in mongrel tales and informal histories” which craft another layer to “city’s folkways” (Eckstein 3).

But more importantly is Eckstein’s tracing of the city as a woman in numerous historical narratives. This feminization of urban spaces is not a rare occurrence. For example in *New Orleans: The Place and the People*, Grace King states,

We personify cities by ascribing to them the feminine gender, yet this is a poor rule for general use; there are so many cities, which we can call women only by a dislocation of the imagination. But there are also many women whom we call women only by grammatical courtesy...New Orleans is, among cities, the most feminine of women, always using the old standard of feminine distinction.... [she] is not a Puritan mother, nor a hardy Western pioneeress, if the term be permitted. She is, on the contrary, simply a Parisian, who came two centuries ago to

the banks of the Mississippi, — partly out of curiosity for New World,
partly out of ennui for the Old.... (King xv-xvii)

King's New Orleans is an "old standard" woman, namely a white European, not an uptight European, but a Parisian expatriate.

Further, examining 1960s Progressive southerner Hodding Carter's words, Eckstein argues that his vision of New Orleans as a female city stems from a "the dreamland of white men with African, American Indian, and Caribbean women or French prostitutes on their mind...a distracting sexual presence" (20). David Estes specifically calls New Orleans, "essentially female and essentially black" (qtd. in Eckstein 22).

Whether the classic vision of the southern belle, an aloof Parisian, a mixed race Creole, a voodoo queen or "mongrel" woman, these characterizations clearly map a distinct, often hybrid femininity onto the geographic body of New Orleans. As a feminist, this can be troubling as these "characterizations of the city...associate it with romanticized class and race dominance, prostitution, sentimentalized multiracialism, and exoticized superstition" (Eckstein 19). However, the persistence of these narratives that gender the city as feminine illustrates gender's importance in reading and interpreting the city; therefore, understanding this historical conflation of the female body, specifically the black female body, becomes crucial in unpacking the multitude of meanings in these various folkways.

In terms of human interaction with the physical environment, such as the dredging of canals, carving out of pipelines, and other forms of ecological manipulation, designating the city as a woman can be even more problematic as colonizers reshaped and worked to contain an unruly, fluid female body. Christine Boyer makes a similar connection arguing that planters "disavowed its physical form, treating the space of the

city like a body of a woman... a site of excess, of hysterias, of illnesses, and exclusions” (qtd. in Eckstein 18). Eckstein acknowledges this tension, specifically concerning the racialized female body that has been historically marginalized. But again, this metaphorical conflation becomes key in unraveling historical and contemporary attitudes towards not only the environment, but also women as well.

Eckstein’s analysis well-establishes the historical timeline of New Orleans’ feminization by numerous folkways, which metaphorically embody New Orleans as a black woman. She specifically uses the iconic female image of Marie Laveau as the city’s metaphorical body. Arguing that the tales told about Laveau encapsulate the hybrid, paradoxical feminine qualities that have long been discussed in the city’s folkways. Laveau is often described in a classic gothic manner as the female that is simultaneously feared and desired. Her legacy teems with a paradoxical “evil criminality and spiritual generosity that lies at the center of claims for New Orleans exceptionalism” (Eckstein 28); she, like the city, rejuvenates but threatens. In some narratives this “wicked woman” (Eckstein 28) “owned most of the French Quarter” (Eckstein 28), but in others she was poor. Deemed by some a “madam who procured quadroon beauties for wealthy white men,” as she trafficked in the sale of rampant sexuality, “but, to others, she is the beauty who rejected or controlled all men who pursued her” (Eckstein 28). An aberrant, racially mixed female, some cast her as an ultimate evil “abortionist who killed unwanted babies and kept their skeletons in her house; for others, she was an herbal healer” (28). In this metaphorical reading of New Orleans as Marie Laveau, Eckstein establishes an ideal gothic female, a simultaneous temptress whose unpredictability and instability in

narratives mirror the city itself. This mixed-race female woman is the city, a literal female body mapped onto the cultural and psychic landscape.

Eckstein's reading of Laveau as a paradoxically powerful women and metaphorical presence is accurate. In New Orleans, whole subcultures exist devoted to her historical legacy. And Laveau is not alone. Historically women have played a large role in the development of the city, a fact that cannot be denied.² But admittedly the gendering of the city in these narratives is tricky and uncomfortable as the conflation of the black or mixed race female body echoes some of the racist narratives of American history, specifically those rooted in slavery. This tension is legitimate and gets repeated in other narratives such as in Michael Bibler's work "Always the Tragic Jezebel New Orleans, Katrina, and the Layered Discourse of a Doomed Southern City," which further complicates matters by paralleling New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina with the film narrative *Jezebel*.

Correlating the film and the realities of the disaster, Bibler ultimately argues that the film and, more importantly for this analysis, "the media coverage of 2005 construed these tragic events as the inevitable results of the actions (and inactions) of the city and the people of New Orleans," effectively laying the blame at the residents' collective feet (Bibler 7). He sees New Orleans as a metonym for the larger narrative of the South and reads it as "perpetually doomed southern city [that] evokes a myth that suggests a pattern in which New Orleans will succumb to tragedy over and over again" (Bibler 7). The city, therefore, serves as a Jezebel, a tragic, sensual, enticing woman destined to fail.

Bibler argues that post-Katrina New Orleans is informed by the old Southern ideological discourses that establish a specific narrative about the failures of the South,

² For more information see Mary Gehman and Nancy Ries' *Women and New Orleans*.

and hence New Orleans. In a detailed discussion Bibler outlines the characteristics of this discourse that shapes contemporary views of the post-disaster city. “The myth of the Lost Cause” establishes the South as nobly fighting to preserve their “idyllic, organic,” more importantly *natural*, slaveholding way of life (Bibler 10). This narrative perpetuated in the plantation tradition, reifies the notions of happy slaves, benevolent patriarchal slave masters, and the pristine, pious southern belles. Also, this myth extols southern masculinity via the “martyrdom of the Confederate heroes” (Bibler 11) that fought with vigor and honor but were bested by the “greater military and industrial might of the North” (Bibler 11). The modern industrial economy’s needs undermined “God’s plan” to “rescue...the Negro from savagery” through enslavement and indoctrination (Bibler 11). So, at its core, this myth establishes the old Southern slaveholding society and its obvious subjugation of black bodies as a natural, time-honored tradition undercut by modern progress.

Furthering the argument Bibler points to Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s characterization of “the South’s backwardness” and status as “the Nation’s No. 1 economic problem” in his New Deal speech (Bibler 15). By designating the South’s agricultural economy as “backwards,” Roosevelt replays the Lost Cause myth by arguing that the south was deficient and “destined to suffer” more hardship in times of economic depression (Bibler 15). Roosevelt’s discourse effectively categorized the South and its ways as national ailment.

This pathologizing of the South is echoed in other discourse Bibler specifically points to, namely Booker T. Washington’s warning to newly freed slaves at the Atlanta Exposition Address of 1895. Washington argued that if freed slaves did not use their

newfound freedom to integrate themselves into American society through education, hard work, and self-betterment, they would become “a veritable body of death, stagnating, depressing, retarding every effort to advance the body politic” (qtd in Bibler 15). The gothically encoded words “body of death,” however, offered white supremacists an ideal platform to socially, politically, and physically lash out at newly freed black bodies they saw as aberrations. Blacks were a “dead carcass” that needed excision in order to preserve the national ethos (Bibler 16).

Ultimately, Bibler sees these racist cultural narratives intersecting and intertwining in post-Katrina New Orleans. The mostly black groups, supposedly obstreperous, engaged in so-called “looting” and supposed acts of violence like assault, rape, and body desecration aligns them with gothic narratives of slavery that outline the out of control black body and its presumed need for containment or elimination. Bibler argues that the looters were rhetorically and distinctly structured as “Other” particularly in the looting, claiming “these weren’t Americans struggling to survive, like we saw in New York on September 11, but rather people who fell victim to their own collective negligence and lawlessness” (16).

Further, as the crowds waited days for local, state, and federal intervention and assistance, questions about the crowds arose on a national scale. Many asked: why would they stay? Why did they not simply leave? Why would anyone want to live in such a place? Why were “these people” not prepared? Should the city be rebuilt? Bibler argues the underneath such queries lies the assumption that “the people of New Orleans were somehow complicit in their suffering” after the storm (22). He elaborates, “The city once again became the tragic Jezebel, this time a distinctly black one, who had a hand in her

own demise” (Bibler 16). The politicized discussions taking place in the media certainly back up this point. Dennis Hastert argues that New Orleans should be “bulldozed” rather than rebuilt (qtd. in Bibler 20) and Republican representative Richard H. Baker blatantly states, “We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did” (qtd. in Walden). Again this echoes the ideas that New Orleans, like the black “body of death” should be cut off, removed from the national body. It is a vestigial holdover of the old South that should not remain if the Jezebel rhetoric holds true. The city will prove an economic national burden and will perpetually fall, so why bother?

Bibler’s reading and characterization of post-Katrina New Orleans via a specific film narrative and its connections to larger historical discourses of the South cast the city as the Jezebel, destined to fall. He argues that the post-Katrina landscape “might be better understood as a tragic realization of the long-standing fiction that has been told about New Orleans” (Bibler 9). While applying the jezebel trope to New Orleans, Bibler explicates, “Jezebel is the biblical queen who slaughters the prophets and compels the Israelites to worship false idols. Derived in part from this, the common understanding of a ‘jezebel’ is of a wanton woman who defies the traditional, patriarchal codes of morality and female sexuality” (Bibler 8-9). This second, cultural connotation proves especially telling in regards to New Orleans as a city. Bibler maps the collective body of the city’s left behind mostly poor population, which clearly includes both male and female bodies, as one overarching “wanton” female, out of control, and headed inevitably towards disaster and demise.

However, his analysis stops short of a fuller understanding of the gender dynamics of the trope and how it historically casts the black female body since slavery.

The work of numerous black feminist critics prove integral in elucidating the larger implications of Bibler's casting in relation to the corporeal black female body. In the first chapter, "Jezebel and Mammy: The Mythology of Female Slavery" from her work on southern female slaves, Deborah Gray White details the historically complex function of the Jezebel. She states "In antebellum America, the female slave's chattel status, sex, and race combined to create a complicated set of myths about black womanhood" including that of the Jezebel (White 28). The black Jezebel serves as the "counterimage" of ideal white southern womanhood (White 29). She was not pious and matters of "domesticity paled in important before matters of the flesh" (White 29). Hortense Spillers notes that in this dynamic, the black female body is abject, "a scene of negation" in opposition to the white body (259). White women's sexuality and, therefore, their bodies, are suppressed in the cultural narrative of "true womanhood." Black women, however, are "linked instead to a knowable corporeality" as they are perpetually defined by their supposed hypersexuality, promiscuity, and ability to reproduce (Dickerson 196). Their position in the social fabric of slavery was directly mapped onto the body. Vanessa Dickerson continues this line of thinking, calling the black female body "a hot thing," desired, feared, abused, bought and sold (195). She is "the cultural linchpin" in American society via her connections to this historically racist and sexist discourse stemming from the gothic legacy of American slavery (Dickerson 195).

White points out that perceptions of black women's uncontrolled sexuality have their grounding in Europeans narratives where European travelers describe their first encounters with African women wherein the men misinterpreted "seminudity for lewdness," "polygamy [...] to the Africans' uncontrolled lust," and "tribal dances [...] to

the level of orgy” (29). Through these superficial encounters, black women were categorized as inferior, sexually lascivious creatures with a “‘strong robust constitution’ who were ‘not easily jaded out,’ but able to serve there lovers ‘by Night as well as Day’” (White 30).

Such categorizations were furthered by other philosophical and scientific discourse that postulated about the physicality of the black female body. Religious doctrine cast black women as the evil, illegitimate descendants of the biblical Jezebel, as evidenced by Josiah Priest who calls them her “sexually perverse daughters” (qtd in Simms 885). This discourse added another layer to the ideology mentioned earlier by Bibler that stipulates a white Christian duty to save the savage African from damnation. Past scientific studies theorized the elongated labia and uterus “to marshal anthropological and anatomical evidence to prove that African women are oversexed and dangerously alluring” (Simms 887). Farah Jasmine Griffin points to texts like William H. Flowers’s 1867 article of the *Journal of Anatomy and Physiology* that outlined black female “otherness” via their “hair, their facial features, their buttocks and ‘overdeveloped’” sexual organs (Griffin 521).

And once these ideological discourses mediated the colonial American interactions with African female slaves, the racist and sexist discourse fueled the folkways of American slavery, creating a “peculiarly American mythology” (White 27). The black female slave’s “sexual aggression, fertility, and libidinous self-expression were considered limitless” (Simms 883). Thomas Jefferson even wrote that African women’s animal sexuality was so strong that they were the preferred sexual partners of the orangutans, clearly casting them as uncivilized bestial beings. Rupe Simms writes that

“[t]he Jezebel image effectively concretized Black female subordination, justifying the rape of African women by white men. According to this portrayal, the African woman truly enjoyed being ravaged by her master and his sons, so that abusing her was simply satisfying her natural desires” (883). Indeed, many believed that black female slaves had “such insatiable sexual appetites that they had to go beyond the boundaries of their race to get satisfaction” arguing that the Jezebel sought out sexual relationships with white masters (White 38). Even the abolitionist James Redpath wrote that mulatto women were “gratified by the criminal advances of Saxons” and any resistance showed was merely “feigning,” effectively justifying forcible rape (qtd. in White 30).

In some cases, in particular within New Orleans’ famed “fancy trade,” there were instances of black female slaves prospecting potential masters in the hopes of survival and a better quality of life. These often mulatta or light-skinned women, given the options before them chose, not naively, to engage in sexual relations with white masters. White explains,

Many expected and often got something in return for their sexual favors. There was no reason for them to believe that even freedom could not be bought for the price of their bodies. Some women, therefore, took the risk involved and offered themselves. When they did so, they breathed life into the image of Jezebel. (34)

For some women, these tactics worked; for others it did not, as evidenced by the numbers of “‘fallen women’ [who] demonstrate how risky it was to expect liberation from one’s enslavers” (White 35). These women chose concubinage only to be sold or find

themselves a “rival of a jealous wife” (White 35). Whether successful or not, these women’s actions “helped imprint the Jezebel image on the white mind” (White 34);

And such dynamics explicitly based on sexual relations led to complicated, overtly oppressive relationships between black women and white men. Gender dynamics that structured and mediated the interactions between slave master and slave were sexually specific; whether in terms of reproduction of chattel property or in actual sexual relationships between master and slave, sex mitigated these relationships in paradoxical ways. White cites a Louisiana planter who said that there was not “a likely-looking black girl in this state that is not the paramour of a white man” (30). So, despite the supposed inferiority and supposed animalistic nature of the black female body, many white men found themselves still compulsively drawn to this aberrant female body. The sexual tensions even present themselves in the erotic overtones of the whipping of female slaves, as “[t]he very sight of semiclad black women nurtured white male notions of their promiscuity” (White 33). White illustrates with a slave narrative about a white master, who took obscene pleasure in seeing his female slave’s “naked quivering flesh” (33), “tied up and exposed to the public gaze of all” (33); in fact, this slave argues that “Nothing satisfied him [Master Epps] more than having a few drinks and whipping Patsy” (White 33). The explicit sexual gratification garnered through various sexualized encounters with black female enslaved bodies illustrates the complex dynamics at play in the horrific gothic discourse, as it circumscribes, both physically and ideologically, the bodies of black women and mediates narratives told about them.

These “controlling images” continue to have abstract and concrete consequences on the lives of real women, and much Black feminist and critical race scholarship

“unfailingly examine[s]” the lives of black women by deconstructing such racist and sexist ideologies. Given the long embedded historical narrative at play, Bibler’s categorization of the city as a Jezebel registers at a newer, deeper level when viewed from a gendered standpoint. White argues that these historical categorizations still resonate in contemporary society as the “black woman’s position at the nexus of America’s sex and race mythology has made it most difficult for her to escape the mythology” as such ideologies grounded in the gothic discourses of slavery continue to infiltrate contemporary discourses (28).

REVISIONING THE JEZEBEL

Revisiting Bibler’s metaphorical use of the jezebel can further explore the specific gendered dynamics of New Orleans if expanded and re-implemented to a specific set of the New Orleans’ poor population, black single mothers. Using empirical data and observations of the city’s population in conjunction with Bibler’s mapping as well as Black feminists’ elucidation of the historical implications of the Jezebel, new light is shed on the reality on the ground in post-Katrina New Orleans.

Research studies carried out by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research examine U.S. Census and American Community Survey data, and these studies found a few telling demographic shifts in New Orleans’ post-Katrina population. The overall total of women in New Orleans only saw a small decline, from 54% to 52.1%, which would indicate that the dislocation after the storm did not affect that many women. However, when adding race, marital status, and familial structure as factors, the data illuminates some disparate trends. The number of African American females dropped substantially

from 47.2% to 37.3%. Clearly, this illustrates a racial disparity in the rate of return to the city (Helmuth, Henrici, and Braun 1).

Poverty rates have also dropped significantly as well, from 23% prior to Katrina to 15.1% after the storm. More specifically, poverty rates of African American females in the city dropped from 36.6% to 23% (Helmuth, Henrici, and Braun 1). This does not mean, however, that the long-standing issues of women's poverty have been repaired in the post-Katrina recovery effort. Rather, the IWPR finds that more poor women have *not* returned. Geographically speaking, many of low-lying, yet economically affordable, areas of the city that housed large numbers of poor and working class black communities were devastated by the floods presenting an obvious obstacle to returning to New Orleans.

Also, data from the U.S. Department of Housing illustrates that many women-led households displaced by the disaster, specifically 77%, lived in New Orleans public housing, which needed obvious improvements but were structurally sound after the storm. However, rather than rebuilding the "Big Four" that housed so many women-led families, plans were set to demolish and/or redevelop the Lafitte, St. Bernard, C.J. Peete and B.W. Cooper into mixed-income housing, further inhibiting the return of many residents as they mixed income housing will not include a large percentage of the previous occupants. One particularly marginalized group, the black single mothers, especially those caring for dependent family members, registers a striking demographic shift, dropping 55.1% as of data reported in August 2010 (Helmuth and Henrici 2-3). Compounding the data by economic status reveals even larger disparities as New Orleans holds "57.3% fewer single mothers in poverty, and 66.5 percent fewer African American

single mothers in poverty” (Helmuth and Henrici 2-3). Prior to the storm women and children living in poverty were already more vulnerable, both economically and some even geographically, to disaster threats. Many have not returned due to a number of reasons including the lack of financial and social capital and resources. Other factors include lack of infrastructure like low-cost housing, access to schools, and available healthcare in affordable, viable communities.³

This gendered demographic shift calls for a reexamination of the cultural and historical tendencies to map post-Katrina New Orleans with a trope like the jezebel. The highly sexualized historical legacy of black women’s bodies as Jezebels has morphed and changed over time but still bears cultural and material relevance for black women. Returning for a moment to the characterization of the whole city, Bibler argues that national attitudes and historical narratives cast the black body as a “pathology,” including the discourse from Booker T. Washington, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and public commentary after the storm. Bibler sees that these discourses define the city as a metaphorical Jezebel body that should be excised, lopped off from the national narrative. Hortense Spillers’ analysis of the Moynihan report shows how dominant social narratives

³ For more information on access to medical care, school system reform, and other issues of recovery there are a variety of texts available including, but not limited to: Evangeline Franklin’s chapter “A New Kind of Medical Disaster in the United States” and Michael Casserly’s “Double Jeopardy: Public Education in New Orleans Before and After the Storm” both in Hartman and Squires’s *There’s No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster: Race, Class, and Hurricane Katrina*; Catherine Michna’s “Stories at the Center: Story Circles, Educational Organizing, and Fate of Neighborhood Public Schools in New Orleans” in Clyde Wood’s work *In the Wake of Hurricane Katrina: New Paradigms and Social Visions*; M. Christopher Brown II, T. Elon Dancy II, and James Earl Davis’s “Drowning Beneath the Rising Tide: The Common Plight of Public Schools, Disadvantaged Students, and African American Males.” *The Children Hurricane Katrina Left Behind: Schooling Context, Professional Preparation, and Community Politics*; Ashraf M. Esmail, Lisa A. Eargle, and Shyamal K. Das’s “Hurricane Katrina and Its Impact on Education” in *The Sociology of Katrina: Perspectives on a Modern Catastrophe*; Vivian L. Gadsen and Susan Fuhrman’s “Reflections on Educational Equity in Post- Katrina New Orleans” and Jacqueline Jordan Irvine’s “What Hurricane Katrina Uncovered About Schooling in America” in *The Children Hurricane Katrina Left Behind: Schooling Context, Professional Preparation, and Community Politics*; Ruth E. Berggren and Tyler J. Curiel’s “After the Storm – Health Care Infrastructure in Post-Katrina New Orleans” in *New England Journal of Medicine* 354(15); and A. L. Coker et. al’s “Social and Mental Health Needs Assessment of Katrina Evacuees” in *Disaster Management and Response* 4(3) among numerous other texts.

continue to pathologize female-led households, deeming them aberrant familial structures. Such familial structures of black women-led households are “a distinct disadvantage” because the normal, i.e. white, familial structure, is patriarchal (Spillers 259). Moynihan designates the female-led matriarchal structure as a root cause for the failure of black men and a key element in a “tangle of pathology” (Spillers 259). The word pathology designates the black female households as a disease to be cured similar to Bibler’s assertions.

Linking back to the Moynihan report, Kimberlé Crenshaw points out contemporary evolutions of Moynihan’s ideas via her discussion of “a televised special, *The Vanishing Black Family*” (“Mapping” 227). The show addresses the “problems” of female-led household and characterizes the black single mother as sexually “irresponsible” (Crenshaw, “Mapping” 227). Again, this example illustrates the way that black women are inscribed as a problem, an aberrant, unnatural, sexualized phenomenon. Crenshaw argues that the show ultimately labels black women as the cause of the “deteriorization of the Black family by rendering the Black male’s role obsolete” and designates welfare as a “dysfunctional” policy because it disrupts patriarchal family configurations (Crenshaw, “Mapping” 227).

Black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins illustrates another cultural narrative rooted in the gothic Jezebel trope, the Bad Black Mother (*Black Feminist* 131). Like the Jezebel, traditional domesticity is not a priority for the Bad Black Mother, typically poor, black single mothers that “reject the gender ideology associated with the family ideal” (Collins, *Black Feminist* 131). Drug use and/or dependency on public assistance are typical characteristics of the Bad Black Mother. The “welfare mother” is “lazy” and

undeserving of public assistance, and these women pose a societal threat as they “allegedly pass on their bad values to their children who in turn are more likely to become criminals and unwed teenaged mothers” (Collins, *Black Feminist* 131). This narrative systemically denigrates and pathologizes black single mothers as a national threat. These characterizations foster “punitive” policies that criminalize and penalize black motherhood, especially mothering outside the patriarchal family structure (Collins, *Black Feminist* 133).

Barbara Ransby argues that welfare reform policies, specifically President Bill Clinton’s Personal Responsibility Act changed the discourse concerning rights to public assistance and characterizations of welfare recipients. This legislation “dehumanized and denigrated the Black poor, charging them as the main culprits in their own misfortune” since they were unable to pull themselves out of poverty and build a better life (Ransby 218). The categorical “dismantling” of public welfare programs effectively reigned in available funding and eligibilities in the hopes of pushing “lazy, promiscuous, and irresponsible” black women “into the labor force and into more responsible sexual behavior” (Ransby 218). The problem for black single mothers is not one of lack of employment opportunities, fewer specialized jobs skills from working in largely service industries, or lesser access to education. Rather, it was “women having babies out of the confines of heterosexual marriages, rather than the low pay and lack of jobs and affordable housing that marked their condition and compromised the future of their children” (Ransby 218).

Ransby provides additional evidence of the marginalization of single black mothers in New Orleans by examining some of the media footage of the storm and post-

Katrina political discussions. She specifically draws from the voices of conservative politicians to illustrate the legacy and evolutions of the Jezebel trope in its many manifestations. These extreme political voices echo the tropes of pathology, social ill, fated to failure—all negative depictions of black single mothers rooted in the Jezebel trope. She cites former Reagan staffer Mona Charen who calls single black mothers a “*dysfunctional*” part of New Orleans as well as American society (qtd. Ransby 218). In another example, Ransby highlights black conservative organizer Reverend Jesse Lee Peterson’s words regarding black people and public assistance. He argues “it was the lack of moral character and dependence on government that cost Blacks when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, not President Bush or racism” (qtd in Ransby 219).

Downplaying any socio-political or historical frameworks, Peterson directly places the blame on the low “moral character” of black people, echoing historical and cultural narratives rooted in colonial and slavery ideologies that denigrate the intellectual and moral capacities of black people, deeming them inferior or often, subhuman.

Black conservative George Will specifically addresses black women, outlining three rules to avoid poverty, “Graduate from high school, don’t have a baby until you are married, don’t marry while you are a teenager” (qtd in Ransby 219). Breaking these rules and having black babies out of wedlock will surely lead to “a large and constantly renewed cohort of lightly parented adolescent males, and that translates into chaos in neighborhoods and schools” (qtd. in Ransby 219). This damning statement performs three acts of socialization and criminalization of black female mothers. First, it designates premarital sex and unwed pregnancy of black single mothers as aberrant, unacceptable, sexually irresponsible behavior. Second, Will’s words illustrate his assumption that black

single women are unfit mothers. And lastly he deems the black female's sexuality and reproduction as harmful, as threatening unless contained within the rigid system of male dominance. Such characterizations clearly echo the racist and sexist discourse that defined the Jezebel.

Reinterpreting Bibler's characterization of New Orleans as jezebel through a black feminist lens, placing black single mothers at the center reveals the multilayered cultural narratives at play. The city itself is mapped as an uncontrolled female both geographically and socially and the individual bodies of black single mothers are mapped by as latter day Jezebels because of social, economic, familial and sexual choices deemed deviant by patriarchy evident in contemporary conservative political discourses about Katrina. They are the abject woman, the woman who deserves no sympathy or empathy, but rather blame for their own poor choices and irresponsible acts. Like the fated Jezebel, poor black single mothers were marginalized, destined to fail by socio-economic conditions in which they worked in poverty to support often extended families, economically confined to geographically vulnerable, lower-lying areas of the city or no-longer standing public housing, lacking economic and often social capital to survive a disaster, and as such were effectively displaced from the city in large numbers.

All of these intersectional, dynamic socio-political, cultural, and historical narratives compounded during and after Katrina leaving an absent presence in its wake. Yet still political extremists failed to acknowledge the complex, fluid historically rooted systems of power that combined with narratives to shape responses to the disaster on local and national levels. Returning for a moment to Richard H. Baker's words illustrates the completely one-sided view of society and the black poor via the lens of white,

Christian capitalist patriarchy. Recall, speaking directly about public housing he states, “We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did” (qtd. in Walden). Baker sees the evacuation and proposed destruction of public housing, home to 77% of women-led households, as the cure to societal problems, the corrective to a pathology. Moreover, his words illustrate a profound disconnect, whether willful or not, concerning the social, cultural, and historical narratives of black women and the physical spaces these communities occupy. He lauds a solution to black urban poverty, specifically those living in public housing, that systemically wipes them out. The aberrant black bodies were removed from sight, their physical homes destroyed. This is a shockingly cruel statement, but more shocking is the position his words place him in. By uttering these remarks, he removes himself from the physical and social world into the realm of a higher power. And this God apparently shares his racist, sexist, and classist ideologies. His goals and those of God are one and the same. Why wouldn’t they be; it’s only “natural” like a “natural” disaster itself. Baker’s words illustrate his failure to consider a number of circumstances. He assumes that his views with their historically rooted prejudices against poor black people, specifically women, serve as the normative narrative. He also dehumanizes the residents of public housing, which as mentioned encompass huge numbers of female-led households. He neglects to acknowledge the connections that these families have to their communities and the geographic and environment space itself. Public housing was *home* for so many black single mothers and women-led households. By asserting that his God approves of the displacement and destruction of this particular population and spaces, he effectively denies their humanity and their ability to create a home. Clearly, his attitudes and ideas echo so much of the

discourse that denigrated black families during slavery and justified the dispersal of family members via the auction block.

Stringing this compound series of texts together crafts a complex narrative about New Orleans as a mixed-race female body and simultaneous Jezebel, the historical and contemporary implications of the Jezebel trope with all its gothic invocations, and the effects of these mappings on the lives of actual poor black women. Are the black single mothers, like the city itself, doomed? If the Jezebel narrative is believed, then yes. However, this narrative is just that...a story, “the single story” scripted by white supremacist capitalist and patriarchal society (Adichie). And both Black feminism post-positivist realist suggests that the way to combat the single story is to examine other stories to get a fuller idea of the “real” social and physical worlds people occupy. Ransby asserts, “[t]he narratives, testimonies, and profiles of real flesh and blood people are the best rebuttal to one-dimensional stereotypes” (217). Creating space for alternative narratives, specifically the experiential narratives of the disaster survivors, adds depth to the overarching discourse of the storm. Her research strives to fill in the gaps, the absences in the discourse surrounding black women during the storm.

Watching CNN Ransby is haunted by one woman’s moment of resistance. She describes one woman’s account

...which I could not get out of my mind for weeks...The scene was of a middle-aged Black woman, dirty, desperate, and crying. She looked into the camera and said to the viewers, ‘We do not live like this.’ She repeated it over and over again...this woman’s face reflected not simply fatigue and hunger, but humiliation. (Ransby 218)

This literal interjection in the politically charged Katrina discourse by a real woman, a real human being in severe emotional and physical distress proves undeniable. Her very presence on the screen disrupts the demonizing or patronizing and victimizing discourse often seen in post-Katrina media accounts.

Such interventions prove integral as the city works to physically and economically reconstruct its Queen City, as the rebuilding and recovery efforts proceed slowly and steadily. Yet the face of the iconic lady/Jezebel continues to change. Physical, structural, and cultural shifts constantly occur as developers shape neighborhoods from low-income communities to mixed-income housing. Lots are bought up and consolidated, making room for fewer newer structures in the spaces that used to contain multiple homes. New Orleans' "Big Four" housing projects remain closed or demolished and rental rates have increased substantially. For many residents "housing is the issue in recovery, and the signs thus have not been promising for low income, non-white residents and would-be returnees" (Katz 21).⁴ Whole communities remain effectively shut out of the recovery efforts.

Another key problem inhibiting the return of many displaced residents, especially single black mothers is the availability of good school systems. New Orleans school systems struggled long before the storm, but in the post-Katrina landscape, the school system has been aggressively privatized. New Orleans educator Dr. Raynard Sanders calls New Orleans "the last frontier of privatization." The struggles facing residents,

⁴ See Mark A. Bernstein, Julie Kim, Paul Sorensen, Mark Hanson, Adrian Overton, and Scott Hiromoto. 2006. "Rebuilding Housing Along the Mississippi Coast: Ideas for Ensuring an Adequate Supply of Affordable Housing.;" Crowley, Sheila. "Where is Home? Housing for Low-Income People after the 2005 Hurricanes" in *There is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster: Race, Class, and Hurricane Katrina*; Muriel J. Harris, Monica H. Powell, and Elvin Stampely. "Re-Establishing a Home after Katrina: A Long and Winding Road." *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*; and Quigley, William P. "Obstacle to Opportunity: Housing That Working and Poor People Can Afford in New Orleans Since Katrina." *Wake Forest Law Review* 42 (2007) among others for more details about the housing debates and Katrina's recovery.

children, teachers, whole communities, and the school boards remain contentious. A slew of issues surround the restructuring of the school system evolves daily and includes the massive layoffs or firings of public school teachers, lack of accountability for chartered schools, difficult admission requirements, and the restaffing of schools with “inexperienced non-union teachers” who are often from areas outside of New Orleans (Katz 21).⁵

Housing and schools are but a few of the ongoing issues faced by all residents back in the city or hoping to return. But they are especially relevant for black single mothers who need spaces and facilities to take care of their children and to secure a solid education for their future. These two issues were on the forefront of those single mothers I interviewed in December 2010 in New Orleans. I asked one mother why she returned one month after the storm despite the lack of infrastructure, and she matter-of-factly stated,

I didn't want to leave. This is my home...my kids' home...my momma's home. Where am I gonna go? So, I work to pay double the rent on a place that's a little better than my old place. But what can I do? It's either stay here or leave, and I don't know where else to go. This is all I know (N.O. 2).

When asked about life in the city after Katrina, she said, “It's not the same. I don't live near anybody I really know like I used to. So many people didn't come back. My cousins ended up in Texas, and they stayed. Couldn't find a school for the kids. One of my

⁵ I am deeply indebted to Dr. Raynard Sanders, Lolis Eric Elie, and Sarah Carr for their input and insight about the educational system in New Orleans. This topic proves so huge that it merits its own project, which I hope to develop in the coming years. For more information listen to The New Orleans Imperative at nolabeez.org and also look for Sarah Carr's forthcoming book about the school system privatization.

cousin's daughter's needs special ed" (N.O. 2). Another respondent describes the process of finding a new school for her son, "It was tough. I can't lie about that. But I'm really lucky. My son's a genius, and he passed those admissions tests on the first try. Got a 100" (N.O. 8). When asked about her home she clarifies, "Oh, we lost everything, but like I said, I'm lucky. I owned my home, so I got the Road Home⁶ money and we rebuilt, 9 feet up" (N.O. 8).

Clearly there exists a class disparity between these two single mothers, but their individual stories offer direct, contrasting voices to the so-called jezebel narrative inscribed upon them. These women battle everyday to carve out a space for themselves and their families. Each cares deeply for their children. Each woman wants a better future for their children and a better city, and they work with hope and hardiness to earn it.

In the series of seventeen conducted interviews, only two of my interviewees are black single mothers currently living in New Orleans. I found in the majority of my interviews that my interviewees had not heard specific, quantitative data about displaced black women, specifically single mothers. Most were interested, but not wholly surprised by the figures compiled by the Institute for Women's Policy Research given the circumstances of their struggling city. Despite the absent presence in my interviews, amplified by the sociological data, these two black female narratives show the complex dynamics of their real lives mediated and mitigated by social systems of power and privilege. Black feminist research and post-positivist methodologies seek spaces for each of these women to share their experiences because these stories promise a fuller, richer

⁶ See among numerous other resources: Cutter, Susan L., Christopher T. Emrich, Jerry T. Mitchell, Bryan J. Boruff, Melanie Gall, Mathew C. Schmidlein, Christopher G. Burton, and Ginni Melton's "The Long Road Home: Race, Class, and Recovery from Hurricane Katrina" as well as the FEMA website for final reports and information about the Road Home program. In addition, numerous periodicals, including the Times-Picayune and the New York Times, have extensively reported on the struggles for families to qualify for the Road Home program and the difficulties of getting the funding.

narrative. These positionings creates spaces wherein the black woman can work “to reclaim the body—the maimed, immoral, black female body—which can be and is still being used by others to discredit them as producers of knowledge and as speaking subjects” (Hammonds 99). As Bibler elegantly argues, “We must dispel the myth and recognize finally how the city and the region—especially its sizeable numbers of now-displaced, poverty-stricken African Americans—are bound to the nation, not as a foreign dead weight that is fated to be and needs to be cut off or excised, but as a *body* of people whose life and prosperity are vital to our own” [emphasis added] (Bibler 25). In this way he argues for a reconfiguring of the cultural and national Katrina narratives that map the city, a re-visioning of this metaphorical Jezebel that Eckstein envisions as Marie Laveau. Evelyn Hammonds posits a reclamation of the black female body to produce alternative narratives of black female subjectivities.

I have worked to craft a narrative that grafts together America’s gothic history, historical framings of the city as a black female Jezebel, Katrina discourse that perpetuates these historical narratives and sociological data of the storm, and this narrative charts a map of black female bodies in terms of cultural, political, sociological, and physical positions in New Orleans. This mapping works to connect the narratives told about the city and its people to the social, economical, political, historical, and geographical positions of the city’s poor black women. Attitudes about the racialized Other, especially the aberrant black female, permeate discussions of New Orleans’ displaced populations. In repeating these extreme examples of racist discourse, my goal is not to politically polarize any discussions of my analysis, but rather to illustrate the persistence of the racist and sexist discourse of black female sexuality in contemporary

times. In discussing these narratives and focusing on the seemingly “natural” narrative that privileges white supremacist, heteronormative, capitalist ideologies, one can see how the dominant discourse fails to acknowledge and examine the interconnected, dynamic webs of discourse that are mutually constitutive of all people in New Orleans and the city, as well as the connections of these discourses to the city’s physical and social landscapes and the nation’s landscapes and identity as well.

In the future restoration and reconstruction of New Orleans, a term not without its own historically encoded implications, having a more complex, sophisticated and nuanced discussion of the multitude of historical, social, cultural, political, spiritual, and environmental realities and constituting ideologies can aid in shaping the “New” New Orleans, as Anna Hartnell calls it. In some ways this calls for a metaphorical reclamation of its own, a reclamation of the numerous folkways and interconnected technic-ways that make up and constitute Katrina’s larger discourse and the city’s physical geographies. Public policy will ultimately reclaim the physical body of New Orleans. But public policy is not the only narrative that shapes and influences New Orleans’ the physical and cultural identity. Private investment, micro and meso-scale political, social, cultural, and environmental activism, as well as the multiple fictional and non-fictional stories, testimonies, and texts inform this historically, geographically, and socially fluid space; all have a place at the table if we are willing to see them holistically. The interplay of these narratives influences the reclamation of New Orleans’ body. Here I refer to multiple bodies, including metaphorical body of Jezebel, the body politic, and the physical body of New Orleans itself, branded with its Katrina tattoos, a local name for the cryptic symbols of death that still mark some houses. I learned in my interviews that some people cherish

those markings, these brands, using them to bear witness to all the devastation, dynamism, and dreams for their city. These artifacts and others tell the city's stories, claiming space themselves.

While the idea of a reclamation and revisioning of a female body can be fraught for feminists, I argue that this act of reclaiming the city's mythic and geographic body while simultaneously revising the narratives of black female bodies can deepen the rooted historical, cultural, and social connections that black communities have with home. Through such reclamations via political and social activism, cultural production of narratives and cultural artifacts, bearing witness through personal testimonies, and a complicated complicity to serve as both colonized and colonizers, black communities in particular can find spaces of resistance, agency, and change in shaping the future construction of their city, the Jezebel, and its presentation to the nation. A revised narrative, such reclamations offer the space to "be," to exist, to claim self and origin(s) as Karen Kaia Livers does in *Swimming Upstream*:

I have had no less than twenty-five encounters with FEMA employees, operators, caseworkers, torturers, or whatever the fuck you want to call them. I am totally pissed off after each encounter. One of them bitches had the nerve to ask me, "Why don't you stay in Houston, you'll have a better chance to rebuild your life. Better chance at what ***? New Orleans IS my life! I speak New Orleans (I make groceries, go by people's house, etc.), I look New Orleans, I dance New Orleans, I sing New Orleans, I walk New Orleans, I think New Orleans, I eat New Orleans, I AM NEW ORLEANS! (Bebelle 24)

New Orleans folkways grow more complex and nuanced, and the city and the nation can more fully engage in the “ongoing dialectic of materiality and representation” (Eckstein 3). And a multitude of Katrina narratives await theorizing, analyzing, producing, and disseminating to piece together fuller, deeper understanding of this exceptional, yet American city.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

Reflecting on my analysis, I feel the need to reassert my overarching goal in the development of this project. I hoped to uncover how gender “works” in the discourse surrounding Hurricane Katrina. This topic proved incredibly broad and rich with numerous possibilities and research directions. While my initial idea involved a mostly textual analysis of a HBO’s fictional post-Katrina narrative *Treme*, as the project took shape I found myself deeply embedded in post-positivist, ecocritical, critical race feminist, Black feminist, and feminist theories that narrowed the scope of this project. Mostly, I became interested in a close, deep analysis of gendered discourse, but rather than focus on only literary or cultural narratives, I sought to explore a number of disciplinary texts including literary, historical, cultural studies, sociological, and environmental and social justice texts. In seeking to understand gender, I find that a multidisciplinary approach that incorporates a variety of diversely grounded texts offers a more extensive comprehension of how gender operates in the construction of New Orleans and its people, choosing to focus specifically on black women most displaced by the storm.

Using bell hooks definition of feminism helped me greatly define this work. A feminist project hopes to “end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (hooks “Feminist Politics” 1). Keeping this in mind I sought to develop a specific example of sexist oppression relating to some aspect of the storm. That example developed into the mapping of the city and of real black women as jezebels, a trope grounded in America’s gothic past. Having the opportunity to explore this trope, further deepen the analysis of its

use, and re-vision this mythic metaphorical, geographical, and literal body via experiential narratives and revisions provides me with the opportunity to create a deepened understandings of the intricate connections of historically, socially, and culturally informed discourses and systems to the physical lives of New Orleanians in their social and physical geographies. By theorizing a series of narratives about the storm, I hoped to uncover systems of power and privilege that operate invisibly, seemingly “natural,” as this in itself is an emancipatory action.

As a white female currently living outside the city, I do not aim to speak on behalf of black women or for the city’s residents either. I do not believe that I can “offer” voice or agency to anyone. To assume so would be to place myself in a position of power and above the systems I work to unveil. But my familial and personal connections to the city have offered me a different insight to the city. I did not see New Orleans as a space of spectacle, vice, imbibition, and sexuality. For me, the city has always been a yet unique urban city with a rich culture but also a simultaneous space of families, food, homes, and communities. My narrative of the city is one that in some sense normalizes the cultural narratives that position the city as a surreal spectacle.

Also, I hoped to explore alternate narratives of New Orleans and its people to explore the ways that the city and its communities speak back to these larger discourses. Geographically and environmentally New Orleans should not exist as it sits in such an unstable fluid environment contained only by a labyrinthine system of levees and canals that constantly battle the fluid ecologies. Black single women displaced by the storm also should not be there either if one believes some of the political attitudes that see them as a “solved” problem because of their displacement or if one examines the multiple socio-

economic and policy barriers hindering their return to the city. So, I believe that listening to their narratives and those that want to return is key to disrupting the socio-historical and cultural narratives that seek to inscribe and/or speak for them.

In addition, I do not strive for an overarching objective voice, as “‘Objectivity’ itself an example of the reification of white male thought” (Hull and Smith xxv). My task at hand for this project was to review and analyze the cultural discourse, engaging with other scholarship to do so and analyze how gender functions in the circumstances surrounding Katrina and New Orleans’ recovery. As a feminist, clearly gender matters but because I claim space as a feminist does not mean that I believe sexism to be at the root of socio-political oppression. That would be too simplistic and essentialist an explanation for a myriad of oppressions. Rather, I believe by exposing invisible, seemingly natural, oppressive social systems, the possibilities of agency and subjectivity not defined and circumscribed by gender is possible. And using an multidisciplinary theoretical and epistemological framework illuminates the connections between these systems, the cultural and historical narratives of a space, and the social and environmental realities of cities and their inhabitants, which all impact and influence one another. And New Orleans is no different.

Rachel Luft states it best: Post-Katrina New Orleans “became a staging ground for the reenactment of classic American tropes. In this way the story of race and gender in New Orleans after Katrina is both highly specific and transhistorical, both local and global—a parable of place, power, and an American approach to assistance” (6). I engaged in this project with the hopes of finding moments where the synthetic threads of social fabrics get exposed so as to find the possibilities for agency and fluidity not just in

narratives but in public policy as well. And I can say for certain that I will continue to explore the ways that oppressive systems historically and continually operate in New Orleans as the community negotiates the tricky process of rebuilding. Exploring these geographic, cultural, and social spaces holds the potential of a simultaneously restoration and re-visioning of the city, its communities, public policy, and larger discourses of New Orleans. Rather than *limiting* the scope of a city's place-tone, broadening that narrative to include a multitude of disciplines, texts, voices, discourses, and other narratives crafts a deeper picture of the historical underpinnings of the cultural and physical geographies of New Orleans. The city will forever be changed the storm; Katrina is now part of the fabric of the narrative. What I hope the body politic can do with such a multitude of narratives is to facilitate an equitable model for the city that privileges the fluid, diverse, ever-changing dynamics of a uniquely ecologically, socially, and culturally diverse American city. This "frontier" awaits; what we as a nation do with it will define our national identity. New Orleans' narrative changes everyday, serving as a model for shaping national identity. Katrina issued the call, and the folkways and technic-ways continue to respond. Whether Americans bear witness and enact change is yet to be determined.

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