The "Real" New Orleans: Perceptions of Katrina Survivors

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Bio:

Vadal Bolds is a senior at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. Her research interests include Latin American studies, visual anthropology, and the perspectives of New Orleanians post-Katrina. She is currently researching the effects of environmental degradation on communities, and hopes to incorporate the use of visual mediums in her studies. After completing her B.A., she hopes to volunteer in the Peace Corps and pursue a career in law as well as a Ph.D. in anthropology.

Abstract:

The media's portrayal of the city of New Orleans and its residents post-Hurricane Katrina casts an unrepresentative picture of everyday life, and does not offer residents' perspective of their immediate surroundings. Offering residents the opportunity to create an image for themselves is important because it will contribute to a well-rounded point of view. The photographs in this project will be used to provide fellow Americans and individuals around the world a glimpse of New Orleans through the eyes of those who were directly affected.

Introduction

This study examines what native New Orleanians perceive as the "real" New Orleans post-Hurricane Katrina. The participants were given disposable cameras with very limited instructions about what to photograph. Instead, each participant was asked to photograph anything he or she felt represented present-day New Orleans. Participants had the freedom to define New Orleans through whatever viewpoint they felt most accurately depicted their surroundings or everyday experiences.

The origins of research are rooted in my dissatisfaction with the media's portrayal of New Orleans post-Katrina. Rather than relying on external definitions and representations, this study seeks to identify and capture a more authentic perspective by directly engaging residents of the city New Orleans. *Authentic* is defined as something that has been created by native New Orleanians. It shows how individuals themselves feel about the entire disaster and the process not only of rebuilding a city, but of rebuilding and re-situating their entire lives. The study documents a commonly overlooked viewpoint and searches for a reality embedded in an everyday person's point of view.

Background

There are vast amounts of literature and countless images that seek to document the city of New Orleans and the people who reside there today post-Hurricane Katrina. External perceptions may not be as representative or accurate in relation to actual occurrences, which add to the intrinsic importance of exploring the perspectives of those who have experienced the aftermath firsthand. Since August 29, 2005, many articles have been written and studies have been conducted by those who are peripheral to the direct effects of the hurricane. There is also a

great deal of literature written by persons who experienced the disaster firsthand. For instance, Adeline Masquelier discusses her evacuation experience and expresses her discomfort with "the designation of Hurricane Katrina-displaced victims as refugees" (Masquelier, 2008, p. 735). Her article suggests that the haphazard use of the term *refugee* marginalized New Orleanians and depicted them as "nationless and stateless," although these are both inaccurate portrayals. Next, Robbie Ethridge's "Bearing Witness: Assumptions, Realities, and the Otherizing" of Katrina counters typical notions about social groups and their reactions to disaster by stating "they certainly lost much of their social order and social networks, but they quickly rebuilt these and forged new ones" (Ethridge, 2006, p. 810). This critique supports the importance of understanding how survivors of disaster view themselves and their surroundings. An important part of his analysis explores how often his notions and understanding about the disaster "did not match the on-the-ground realities that Katrina survivors relayed to me or that I witnessed firsthand" (Ethridge, 2006, p. 811). There have also been studies about the role of visuals in hurricane coverage. In the article "What Katrina Revealed: A Visual Analysis of the Hurricane Coverage by News Wires and U.S. Newspapers" suggests that "gate keeping decisions played an influential role in the coverage of Hurricane Katrina in the late summer of 2005…front-page photographs differed significantly from photographs provided by news wires" (FaJimy, Kelly, & Kim, 2006, p. 546), and that this phenomena represents a specific visual framing technique that assigns greater hierarchical value to "news photographs [that] manifest emotional and intimate human elements" (FaJimy et al., 2006, p. 546). This suggests that photographs are taken and referenced based on how provocative the images are, not necessarily how representative or true to life the images may be.

When current president George W. Bush made reference to New Orleanians as "people from *that* part of the world [emphasis added]" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 470) immediately following Hurricane Katrina, it exemplified how the incident and the lives of those involved were viewed as outside the scope of contemporary American society. This type of marginalization and stigmatization highlights the critical need for exploring the reality of New Orleans internally. This exploration may potentially challenge such negative representations of the city and its residents. Henry Jenkins' article, "People from that Part of the World: The Politics of Dislocation" stresses the "importance of local knowledge" and states "you cannot really know what I know until you know where I am coming from" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 469). Jenkins also references George Lipsitz's writings, which suggest "that we pay attention to the local perspectives of those people who live in the areas most affected by the storm" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 473). Moreover, Lipsitz argues that we can learn about a collective past that escapes notice in more conventional accounts and that there are many possible ways to tell the story of a city. This exploratory research project seeks to achieve Lipsitz's goal of "reclaim[ing] the place of the local" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 474) through allowing locals to define what is significant and culturally important today and giving voice to less conventional perspectives. A wealth of knowledge resides within the communities of New Orleans and utilizing "the local as a way of exploring how culture touches our daily lives" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 474) may potentially provide a more holistic understanding of the city of New Orleans and the residents.

This study is focused around gathering photographs from citizens. Understanding their perspectives is an important step toward building a broader knowledge about what is going on in New Orleans not only from a theoretical point of view, but from those who have firsthand experiences of the disaster. At this point in the study, the research is primarily exploratory.

However, the photographs might also be analyzed in order to identify whether or not there is any evidence of how each participant's worldview or perceptions of their immediate surroundings have been affected by a traumatic experience of a natural disaster like Hurricane Katrina. Literature suggests, "Worldviews represent an internally consistent and systematic means for organizing and interpreting experiences" (Gluhoski & Wortman, 1996, p. 417). Perhaps there is a connection between an individual's perception and understanding after a traumatic experience, but researchers have not definitively shown that worldviews change after trauma.

Population

The population of this study includes 8 participants: 5 males and 3 females. Each participant has a diverse racial, social, and cultural background as noted in his or her personal descriptions. All the participants are older than age 18, lead very different lifestyles, and reside in different locales of the metro area of New Orleans. Most participants hail from areas concentrated in and around the Gentilly and Uptown areas but are not limited to these two communities (see map in Figure 1). The community of the Gentilly/Lakefront area is relatively diverse in racial composition and includes individuals from a wide mixture of socioeconomic classes. The Uptown area has a distinctly different composition; some neighborhoods are impoverished while adjacent neighborhoods are comprised of individuals of a wealthier socioeconomic class. This study includes samples and responses from areas that are typically wealthier and located near Tulane and Loyola universities.

Although some individuals may live in one particular area, they prefer to claim other areas that they frequent often as their community. Some participants closely identified with areas where their jobs, schools, or recreational activities are located rather than their actual neighborhood as shown in the photographs each participant took.

Methodology

The methodology has primarily been adopted from the Photovoice technique as developed by

Caroline Wang (2005) in "Photovoice: Concept, Methodology, and Use for Participatory Needs

Assessment." Several stages of this project have been adopted from Photovoice, which include:

1. conceptualizing the problem
2. defining broader goals and objectives
3. taking pictures
4. critical reflection and dialogue
5. selecting photographs for discussion
6. contextualizing and storytelling
7. telling stories about what the photographs mean
8. codifying issues, themes, and theories (Wang, 2005)
9. identifying the issues, themes, or theories that emerge (Wang, 2005)

Each of these stages have been achieved through participatory observation methods, which

means not only does the researcher try to identify themes and construct theories, but the

participants themselves are presenting that information through their photographs and responses.

(Wang, 2005)

Although Photovoice focuses heavily on mobilizing the community to change public

policy, this project has a unique set of goals. The project also includes participatory observation

along with some semi-structured interview questions about the photographs each participant

took. The research goals of this project emphasize potentially providing a better understanding of

what the reality is for New Orleanians today. Information about what residents feel is a portrayal

of the city that challenges common misconceptions as well as facilitates a healing process for

New Orleanians through the art of photography. Overall, the purpose of this project is to give a

voice to residents through photography.

The Locals' Perspective (Findings)

The current social and cultural atmosphere in New Orleans may be somewhat ambiguous given the rebuilding process post-Katrina. As a result, this project engages residents in defining this atmosphere by photographing what he or she perceives the "real" New Orleans to be right now. The major themes that appeared in this research include: nature, landscapes, industry, and rebuilding efforts. While there is a lot of variation within each of these themes, each set of photographs taken by participants were centered on these primary themes. Many of the photographs appear to be very similar in nature but are laden within subtle undertones, which can be noted by one photographer's statement about his photo of the lakefront shown in Figure 2:

> The ones on the lakefront I can explain why I took those...if you look at those pictures carefully that water was raging...and I said this is just a little bit of what we saw and how much water we have and how we are so surrounded by the water and how this water can rage and that was just a small windfall a very light wind but the water was ripping all over the lake all over the walls. (Respondent #1, personal communication, July 2008)

The photograph appears to be a lake with a strong current, but there are all sorts of meanings behind his decision to document this sight. There were also photographs of barges and building supply stores as well as homes being rebuilt. The meanings behind these pictures may seem one-dimensional but there are often underlying meanings. For instance, there is a picture of Lowe's home improvement store, which is a necessary component of rebuilding, but the interviewee explains another dimension of meaning: "I was trying to show some new development… New Orleans east was hit so hard and that was the only major store that came back from that entire mall area. So I took that picture for that reason" (Respondent #1, personal communication, July 2008). Refer to Figure 3.

There were many pictures of downtown New Orleans and the photographer explained the significance by saying: "Well …Canal St. is the downtown area basically in New Orleans….most people...most tourists venture down to that site...there's a lot of things that's back on Canal St. that is running, that is open…open to the public right now, so I felt that would be a good picture to take" (Respondent #1, personal communication, July 2008). Refer to Figure 4. After asking her whether or not that photograph was reflective of New Orleans as a whole she stated: "I guess it would depend on other people's point of view. I guess some people, it would be, and some it won't."

There were also photographs of scenes that are unique to New Orleans. A man explained his photographs by saying: "I did that one because of the difference with New Orleans ... [being] buried above ground and all…yeah that's what I was thinking when I took that" (Respondent #2, personal communication, July 2008). Refer to Figure 5. He also took a picture of a swamp because "when most people think of New Orleans they think of swamps, but it's not that far away" (Respondent #2, personal communication, July 2008). Refer to Figure 6.

Visual Findings

Other pictures that respondents shared with me included a picture of a solitary beach against a backdrop of raging waters (see Figure 7) and a picture of a streetcar widely used for transportation in the Uptown neighborhood (see Figure 8). Another respondent provided a photograph of a local restaurant: "It represents a well-known restaurant here located in New Orleans" (Respondent #3, personal communication, July 2008). Refer to Figure 9. Finally, another woman presented a picture of a church: "Well the church… represents my life in the past that's a church I normally attended pre-Katrina. It's not back holding services right now…but I just wanted to have a picture in there" (Respondent #4, personal communication, July 2008).

Refer to Figure 10. The woman later explained how this photograph is important or representative of New Orleans by saying: "I'm thinking maybe from 80 to 85% of New Orleans may be Catholic" (Respondent #4, personal communication, July 2008).

Analysis

This research is still in the preliminary stages and each set of photographs can be analyzed much further. The majority of the research findings and analysis has been conducted through qualitative methods. Yet this research also lends itself to analysis using quantitative methods including using demographic information like gender, racial or ethnic identity, and area of residence in New Orleans to find connections between the photographs.

According to Susan Sontag, "photographs really are experience captured, and the camera is the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood" (Sontag, 1973, p. 4). The results of this research project suggest that the participants chose to document what they encounter on a daily basis along with some other scenic landscapes.

Some other major themes in each set of photographs seem to highlight the interplay between nature and humans with distinct undertones of local traditions and sights found in New Orleans. There seems to be an emphasis on the local. The pictures of restaurants like Mother's, Jacquimo's, and a picture of a PJ's coffeehouse mug represents the importance of local staples in the community.

Perhaps these findings show that Katrina survivors are devoted to recovery and are working toward stabilizing both their personal lives and the city of New Orleans. The pictures show more or less a mix of homes and businesses that are completely recovered as well as areas that are still in the preliminary stages of recovery. It is quite possible that residents are trying to show that they are a people and a city that are no longer completely devastated, but that the past

should not be forgotten because there is still a great deal of work to be done. Each of the photographs shows New Orleans in transition. Is recovery the proper term for the situation in New Orleans? After all, recovery means to return to something normal or an improved state after a setback or loss. The photographs and interviews do not definitively show a complete return to normality or an improved state of living. Rather the photographs show a spectrum of realities that includes destruction and reconstruction.

The depictions that were cast by the media are staunchly different from those captured by residents. The media frames images and attempts to show images that are generally representative of a whole area rather than local perspectives and needs.

Each of the participants asked whether or not positive images should be the primary focus of their photographs and perhaps their assumptions about the research project influenced their picture taking. Even though the participants were encouraged to photograph anything that represented the "real" New Orleans, most chose to show only positive images.

Reflection

I decided to do this project because I was disappointed that I could not find any truly authentic representations of New Orleans post-Katrina. By authentic I mean something that has been created by native New Orleanians to show how individuals themselves felt about the entire disaster and the process of not only rebuilding a city, but of rebuilding and re-situating their entire lives. I wanted to see what people would identify as "real" without placing an idea in their heads or asking them about a particular topic. I do not want my project to simply be another account of Katrina survivors with some over-arching theme or agenda—I wanted individuals to show me their experiences without limitations. As quoted earlier, I want to dispel the categorization of New Orleanians as "people from that part of the world" (Bush, 2005).

Everyone's experience was different, but also probably very similar in terms of trying to secure housing, fight insurance companies, rebuild, and so on. I wanted to see what people would select to photograph and then ask them why. I want to know how their experiences might have shaped their perception of the city. Many of the participants asked if I wanted them to photograph the positive things; they automatically assumed that my project was calling for them to photograph the city in a positive light.

Overall, I am interested in seeing everything in order to draw connections between people's photographs in relation to how they identified themselves and their experience post-Katrina.

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Figure 1. Greater New Orleans Map
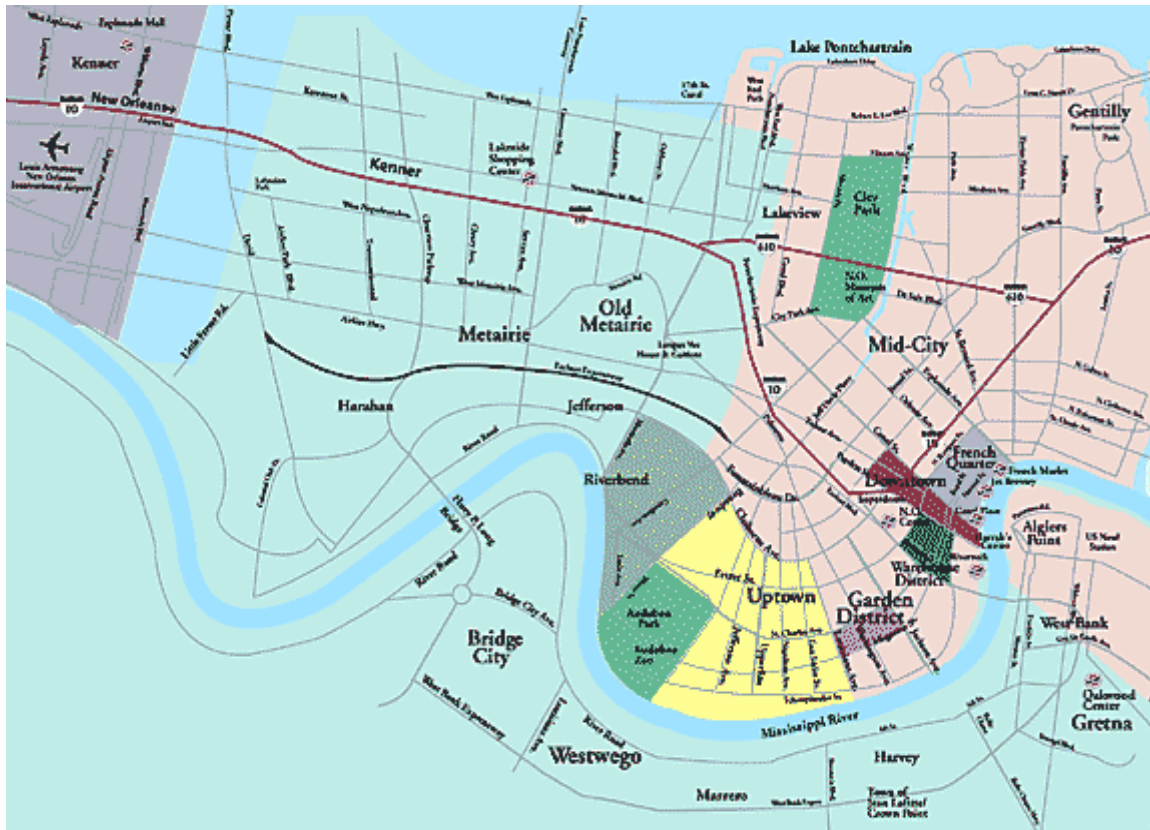
http://www.louisianataxfree.com/map_no.html Accessed August 4, 2008.

Figure 2. Photograph of Lakefront in New Orleans

Figure 3. Photograph of Lowe's as an Example of New Development

Figure 4. Photograph of Canal Street

Figure 5. Photograph of Aboveground Burial

Figure 6. Photograph of Swamp near New Orleans

Figure 7. Solitary Beach Against a Backdrop of Raging Waters

Figure 8. A Streetcar Used for Local Transportation in the Uptown Neighborhood

Figure 9. Photograph of an Example of a Well-known New Orleans Restaurant

Figure 10. Photograph of a Church in New Orleans