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# Museums, Disasters, and Resilience: The Presbytère's Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond Exhibit

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Museums, Disasters, and Resilience: The Presbytère's *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina  
and Beyond* Exhibit

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A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of Social Sciences

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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by

Molly Hagan

November 2016

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Title: Museums, Disasters, and Resilience: The Presbytère's *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* Exhibit

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## ABSTRACT

This research project focuses on the entanglement of cultural heritage, museums, disasters, and resilience. Using The Presbytère museum's exhibit, *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* as a case study, I critically examined *who* is represented in the exhibit and how, what roles museum professionals and New Orleans community members held in the exhibit construction, and visitors' insight on the exhibit content. I argue that the promotion of New Orleans' culture and recovery post-Katrina throughout the exhibit has promoted the overall image of New Orleans and her residents as resilient. Framed by a variety of academic fields, this research contributes to a growing body of knowledge and interdisciplinary literature on disaster mitigation, the importance of culture to recovery, the benefits of and restrictions to incorporating the New Museology into common museological practice, as well as the changing functions and purposes of museums in the new millennia.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

I will never forget the first time I visited New Orleans. It was less than a year after Hurricane Katrina had unleashed her power on the city and the larger Gulf Coast and the devastation was tangible. Trees were down all around and as my eyes scanned the horizon, stark flood water lines and houses with bright blue tarps on their roofs peppered the landscape. Most noticeable though, was the lack of people. Despite the passing of time, the city and its surrounding suburbs seemed empty. The vibrancy of New Orleans was elusive and a strange quietness hung in the thick summer air. Regardless of the immense damage inflicted on New Orleans by Katrina the year prior, my sister had taken a risk and chose to go to college at Tulane University. My family loaded all of her things into the car and, somewhat nervously, drove down to New Orleans, not knowing what we would find.

Over the next four years, I visited the city frequently. With each trip, signs of rebuilding and recovery abounded. Foundational restaurants, music venues, and cultural institutions had reopened, sparking a feeling of hope in current and former residents of New Orleans. The return of second line parades in November 2005 and Mardi Gras in the Spring of 2006, events which epitomize the cultural landscape of the city, reinforced the historical connection between the city's residents and their historically unique culture.

In the year following Katrina, two major narratives emerged in the national dialogue about the aftermath of the storm and its effects on the city. On the one hand, there was a focus on the recovery process. Would they rebuild? *Should* they rebuild? Local newspapers carefully chronicled recovery developments and highlighted the efforts of ordinary heroes. On the other hand, however, a more pernicious narrative arose. The much publicized inept federal response to the hurricane reminded the region, the nation, and the international community, that racism and structural inequality remained alive and well in the United States of America (Taylor 2010).

One could argue it is fitting that these two narratives surrounding the discussion about Katrina. The city had dealt with natural and man-made disasters as well as rampant inequality since its foundation. It was as much a part of the cultural makeup of the city as the famously hedonistic Bourbon Street or the smooth Delta Blues jazz sound. Despite a difficult history, the city and her residents always persisted and exhibited that a true spirit of resilience was the bloodline of New Orleans.

### **Spirit of Resilience**

Historical records show New Orleans' relationship with disaster dates back to the first European settlements. The region had been inhabited by Native American groups for approximately 1300 years prior, but the city of New Orleans was officially settled by the French in 1718 under the guidance of Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville. Following several years of development in the marshy wetlands, a hurricane struck the region in 1722, destroying most of the French colonists' structures. Early residents of New Orleans also struggled with yellow fever, malaria, and other mosquito-borne illnesses that were rampant in the swampy environment.



The Louisiana Purchase in 1803 brought New Orleans under United States of America's rule, ending years of alternating Spanish and French colonial control. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the city continued to serve as one of the largest shipping points, due to its strategic location at the mouth of the Mississippi River. The prominence of the city as a shipping port ultimately helped shape the New Orleans we know today, as it served as a location for people from a multitude of ethnic backgrounds to engage in trade and commerce. What resulted was a modern city teeming with diverse cultural roots and histories.

New Orleans culture is often described as Creole, meaning a mix of French, Spanish, African, and Caribbean cultures, which makes it a uniquely diverse city (McKernan and Mulcahy 2008). Despite the growing city and its' continued importance to the economy of the American South, the low-lying city could not escape the wrath of Mother Nature, and unfortunately also the wrath of war. Hurricanes and floods often wreaked havoc on New Orleans and her residents and the end of the Civil War exposed underlying racial and sociocultural inequalities. Faced with continual threats of destruction, the diverse residents of New Orleans often turned to cultural expressions as a means to combat both natural and man-made threats.

### ***Joie de vivre and New Orleans' Cultural Heritage***

When thinking of New Orleans culture, the food and the music emerge as two of the most tangible cultural expressions. Both have defined the city over the past century and signify an unwavering attachment and loyalty to place (Taylor 2010). Hearty meals such as jambalaya and gumbo combine fresh and local seafood with a culturally and regionally distinct flavor profile, commonly referred to as "creole" or "cajun", a reference

to the historical Afro-Creole influence on the regional cuisine. In a recently published online blog post titled “Roux and Resilience: Eleven Years After Hurricane Katrina”, anthropologist Katherine E. Browne (2016) argues that maintaining the ability to cook these distinctively Louisiana recipes has helped families and communities reconstitute a sense of self and place after being displaced following Hurricane Katrina in 2005. She goes on to surmise that nurturing traditional cultural expressions, such as food, serves a psychological function as it provides a temporary connection to one’s sense of place, thereby encouraging resilience and mitigating feelings of cultural distress and loss (Browne 2016).

The distinct sound of American jazz music has historically fulfilled a similar purpose, especially for the African American community. Music is central to the identity and cultural character of the city of New Orleans as evidenced by the rich history of musical greats such as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Jelly Roll Morton, and Sidney Bechet. New Orleans is widely acknowledged as being the birthplace of jazz, which has “been bestowed cultural capital as America’s most singular artistic invention” (Sakakeeny 2006, 42). Jazz music is representative of New Orleans’ cultural diversity, as the origin of jazz can be traced back to Africa when African slaves brought their musical traditions of call-and-response and rhythmic drumming to colonial Louisiana around the seventeenth century (McKernan and Mulcahy 2008). Over the course of the next two hundred years, “the musical aesthetics native to Africa and the formalized notation found in European music created a hybrid. In effect, the Creole musical world emerged as an expression of the black spirit in a predominantly white world” (McKernan and Mulcahy 2008, 225). Despite the oppression from Jim Crow laws and systematic

disenfranchisement post-Reconstruction, early jazz music often held a cathartic place in that it centered on *joie de vivre* (joy of life) and ‘good times’ in the face of the persistent threat of destruction and despair (Raeburn 2007, 813). In this sense, jazz music has filled a psychological function in holding society together by providing an outlet for social commentary and “an escape from the problems of life” (Hatcher 1999, 110).

Although New Orleans was considered a safer alternative for freed slaves than many areas in the American South, the collapse of the Confederacy and the transition into Reconstruction reinstated racial tensions and conditional freedom for African American populations (Sakakeeny 2006, Ingersoll 1991). Second line brass bands were born out of these renewed tensions as freed slaves began to play instruments used in military bands. In contrast to the regimented music of military bands, these African American brass bands performed joyful and upbeat songs while marching through and taking over the streets that had formerly been occupied by disciplined white soldiers (Sakakeeny 2006). Occupying white dominated streets effectively enabled a transformation and repurposing of geographic space, as “through the transformative experience of the parade, *they became owners of the streets*” (Regis 1999: 478, original emphasis). Over the course of the next one hundred years, second line parades have continued to provide a venue through which marginalized African American communities have come together in an effort to challenge institutionalized oppression in a public space (Barrios 2010).

### **Music, Resilience, and Recovery in New Orleans**

The marginalization of African American populations is a socio-cultural issue that became exacerbated in the wake of Katrina, and as is in the past, the African American community turned toward performative music as a means to contest the institutionalized

oppression against their community. On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans with strong winds and torrential rain. As a result, the levees built by the Army Corps to Engineers collapsed, flooding 80 percent of New Orleans and killing more than a thousand people (McKernan and Mulcahy 2008, see Appendix A). Populations who collectively feel marginalized or displaced have a particularly difficult time reconstituting a feeling of community identity in the wake of disasters. Research and analysis has shown that areas that experience the highest level of disasters, as well as the most severe, are disproportionately lower-income areas with larger minority population demographics (Kish 2009). In New Orleans, neighborhoods such as Treme and the Lower Ninth Ward, both historically black neighborhoods, experienced much more severe ramifications from the storm, both economically and psychologically. In line with a long tradition, following Katrina many turned to music as a means to subvert discrimination, raise awareness of the incompetent response, and to reinvigorate and empower the African American community in New Orleans.

Music has significantly shaped the cultural identity of New Orleans over the past three hundred years and as such, there is a shared belief among New Orleans residents that long-term recovery of the city after Katrina is inherently tied to the return of the vibrant musical traditions (Le Menestrel and Henry 2010). Bruce Raeburn, curator of the Hogan Jazz archive at Tulane University, has argued that “[i]f the musicians do not come back, the culture will die...music is intrinsic to the way people have lived in New Orleans” (Raeburn 2007, 819). And as can be expected, musicians have been at the forefront of the recovery effort of New Orleans. Astral Project, a jazz quartet based out of New Orleans, was in Seattle on tour when Katrina struck their home city, but as media

reports of the devastation surfaced, the band tried desperately to get back in the city. In November of 2005, Astral Project performed at a popular local jazz establishment, Snug Harbor, which is located on Frenchman Street in the Faubourg Marigny neighborhood (Raeburn 2007). The performance brought people back together and allowed them to swap storm stories. Harry Connick Jr. and Branford Marsalis, both contemporary jazz musicians who started their career in New Orleans, partnered with Habitat for Humanity to construct a “Musician’s Village” after Katrina that would provide housing for musicians that had been displaced as a result of the storm (Raeburn 2007). Musician’s Village has not been seen as a total success; however, it does highlight the nexus among music and place, as for many musicians that had been displaced in the storm felt the cathartic release of jazz music and second lines could not be accomplished outside of their historical home (Raeburn 2007). Furthermore, contemporary New Orleans jazz artist Kermit Ruffins partnered with a restaurant in the Seventh Ward called Vaughan’s, where every Thursday night he hires local musicians to perform and provides free red beans and rice, a staple Creole dish, to anyone that comes to hear and support local musicians post-Katrina. The slow trickle of musicians back into New Orleans after Katrina has allowed well-known music venues to reopen, such as the world renowned Preservation Hall, the House of Blues, and more locally celebrated venues such as Tipitina’s and Chicki Wah Wah’s. Lastly, the successful return of the annual New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival had been seen as representative of the musical and cultural recovery of New Orleans (Le Menestrel and Henry 2010).

Similarly, many native New Orleans rappers also began to produce music that spoke to the narrative of displacement and exposed the frustrations felt by New Orleans

residents regarding the federal and local response to Katrina (Kish 2009). Many of these artists were raised in the crowded and underserved neighborhoods that were the birthplace of second lines. New Orleans Bounce specifically incorporates many of the rhythmic beats that define second line music and is performed in dancehalls that invite collective dancing, similar to second line performances (Kish 2009). In the context of post-Katrina New Orleans, “bounce takes on new meanings as both strategy and metaphor for survival, a rebounding on the dance floor as well as into new ways of life, a pleasure-filled resilience in the face of adverse conditions” (Kish 2009, 678). It becomes evident that New Orleans Bounce is situated within the *joie de vivre* tradition of the New Orleans musical aesthetic. In the months following Katrina, New Orleans producers Master P and the 504 Boyz recorded and released a compilation album with the objective that the money earned from the selling of the album would go back to the victims of the storm (Kish 2009). Furthermore, many of songs written in the immediate aftermath of Katrina were written in relocation centers in Houston and Atlanta and “channeled the anger, fear, and sadness of evacuating New Orleans as it drowned...and served as much to reclaim community bonds and suggest strategies for getting home as to lodge criticism” (Kish 2009, 677).

The musical traditions of New Orleans *act* on the New Orleans community in increasingly more evident ways in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Jazz was born in New Orleans out of a deep and intense longing for freedom that was expressed through a cathartic release of music. New Orleans Bounce hip-hop has brought the struggles of exiled African American New Orleanians to a mainstream forum in the wake of Katrina. Lastly, second lines have actively sought to challenge and contest the urban landscape of

New Orleans both before Katrina and after. Through the performances of music and second lines, the African American community of New Orleans “have not been relegated to a silent, passive stroll through history, but have remained vital and relevant through the ongoing activities of participants” (Sakakeeny 2010, 24). Similar to Browne’s discussion on the importance of regional Louisiana cuisine to the resilience and recovery of those effected by Katrina, the reiteration of the centrality of New Orleans’ music to the cultural identity of the city and her residents illustrates the need to preserve and promote a community’s cultural heritage in the wake of disaster. Museums, as protectors of a community’s cultural heritage, have a unique responsibility and opportunity to insert themselves in the recovery process. In New Orleans, constructing exhibits which incorporate important aspects of the city’s cultural heritage, especially music, showcases the cultural makeup and historical context of the city and thus, aids in community recovery and resilience.

### **Conclusion and Chapter Summaries**

Born out of an interest and emotional connection to the ‘lost city’ of New Orleans, this research project focuses on the entanglement of cultural heritage, museums, disasters, and resilience. Using The Presbytère museum’s exhibit, *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* as a case study through which I critically examined *who* is represented in the exhibit and how, what roles museum professionals and New Orleans community members held in the exhibit construction, and visitors’ insight on the exhibit content, I argue that the promotion of New Orleans’ culture and recovery post-Katrina throughout the exhibit has influenced the overall resilience of the city and her residents. Framed by a variety of academic fields such as anthropology, museum studies,

psychology, and environmental sciences, this research contributes to a growing body of knowledge and interdisciplinary literature on disaster mitigation, the importance of culture to recovery, and the changing functions and purposes of museums in the new millennia.

The organization of this thesis is designed to educate the reader about cultural and theoretical trends relevant to my research before delving into the analysis of the findings from my fieldwork. This initial chapter has outlined a brief cultural history of New Orleans and introduces the assertion that cultural heritage is central to social cohesion and thus, resilience, after disasters by specifically looking at the musical traditions of New Orleans. The theoretical and practical implications of this argument to my own research in post-Katrina New Orleans are articulated in detail in Chapter 2, specifically familiarizing the reader with how museums fit within this discussion. The third chapter discusses the research design and methodological framework which has informed my research and analysis. Chapter four centers on The Presbytère museum's exhibit *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* and presents my analysis of the exhibit construction and content as they pertain to the themes of cultural heritage and resilience. The fifth chapter begins by recapitulating key findings from longitudinal research on the exhibit conducted by an outside firm, People, Places, and Design and then evaluates visitor understandings of these themes by analyzing survey responses I designed and distributed to museum visitors. Lastly, chapter six offers a summary of my research results and presents a call to action for contemporary museums in a progressively entropic 21<sup>st</sup> century.



## **CHAPTER TWO: CULTURAL HERITAGE, IDENTITY, AND RESILIENCE IN MUSEUMS**

### **Introduction**

As the rates of natural disasters have increased globally over the past several decades, acknowledging the importance of preservation and promotion of cultural heritage has become increasingly relevant within the museum and heritage sector (Jigyasu 2013). Recent anthropological inquiry and literature suggests that cultural heritage plays a central role in community identity construction, social cohesion and resilience (Oliver-Smith 2011, Harrison 2013). In preparation for the 4<sup>th</sup> Session of the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction in 2013, several representatives from UNESCO and other international cultural heritage organizations prepared a background paper titled *Heritage and Resilience: Issues and opportunities for Reducing Disaster Risks* that tackles many of the issues cultural heritage institutions face in the wake of natural disasters. In the preface to the paper, Rohit Jigyasu, a UNESCO Chair Professor, states “[h]eritage contributes to social cohesion, sustainable development and psychological well-being. Protecting heritage promotes resilience” (Jigyasu 2013, 8). A similar sentiment was echoed by Olsen Jean Julian, a key partner in the Haiti Cultural Recovery Project undertaken by Richard Kurin and the Smithsonian Institution in the wake of the 2010 earthquake that hit Haiti: “after trying to save people’s lives, the next thing to save is peoples’ reason for living” (Kurin 2011, 24). The central theme to this chapter is that the nexus between cultural heritage,

community identity, and resilience can be navigated within museums as museums serve as symbols of a community's shared heritage and identity. Using The Presbytère's exhibit, *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* as a case study, I will focus on how museums, as cultural heritage organizations, promote resilience and aid in recovery after natural disasters.

### **Heritage and Identity**

Heritage has long been recognized as an important aspect to identity, whether on a national, regional, local, or individual scale. As cultural heritage studies have gained prominence within academic and applied fields since the 1970's, the definition of what constitutes cultural heritage has been heavily debated and ultimately the definition has expanded (Wajdner 2013). Traditionally, cultural heritage has been conceptualized in terms of tangible objects, including monuments and artifacts that serve as iconic symbols of a community's identity (Harrison 2013). On the other hand, there has been a marked shift in the definition of cultural heritage, which now includes intangible forms of cultural heritage such as traditional knowledge, oral histories, music, etc. (Harrison 2013). Many in the cultural heritage sector suggest this is central to identity (Jigyasu 2013, Graham 2008).

### **Critical Heritage Theory**

Current theoretical approaches towards cultural heritage and identity reflect a broadening definition of what constitutes cultural heritage and the recognition that everyday people have agency in shaping identity and cultural heritage (Harvey 2008). Although still a burgeoning field of inquiry, recent critical heritage theory has been

developed and expanded upon by Laurajane Smith, Rodney Harrison and John Schofield. Smith has argued that traditional approaches towards cultural heritage are inevitably rooted within a hegemonic ‘authorized heritage discourse’, which “acts to validate a set of practices and performances, which populates both popular and expert constructions of heritage and undermines alternative and subaltern ideas about heritage” (Smith 2006, 11). In this scenario, ‘heritage’ is defined by professionals as opposed to local communities, where ultimately value and meaning are outlined by external perspectives. Harrison echoes Smith’s sentiment by outlining the history of international global heritage organizations, such as UNESCO, whose 1972 conference on cultural heritage produced a limited and narrow definition that borrowed mostly from Euro-American constructions of cultural heritage (Harrison 2013).

Democratizing definitions of heritage allows heritage and identity to be constructed within vernacular cultural expressions, as opposed to solely within an official discourse, therefore allowing subaltern or marginalized populations an opportunity to exert agency over cultural heritage meanings and uses (McDowell 2008). Harrison further expounds on this point as he asserts that the focus within heritage studies should not be placed on the creation of a uniform official definition of what constitutes heritage, but rather on the examination of whose heritage is being represented within the discourse and subsequently, whose is being neglected (Harrison 2013). Schofield echoes these sentiments and urges an engagement with communities in order to empower them to take control of the ownership of their heritage in a critical and beneficial manner (Wajdner 2013). Broadening the

definition of what constitutes heritage should also include a component that comments on *who* possesses the agency to define and create cultural heritage.

The implications of a broadening definition of heritage are perhaps most evident when examining cultural heritage and identity narratives of marginalized populations. While national identity narratives were established throughout the nineteenth century as a result of increased colonialism by Euro-American nations, these narratives were often ‘white-washed’ and ignored the heritages of indigenous and minority populations (Littler 2008). This is demonstrative of the power relations that are inherent within official heritage construction (Harrison 2013, Smith 2006). The expansion of UNESCO’s definition of heritage to incorporate intangible heritage is arguably a step in the right direction as it includes forms of traditional knowledge that are often associated with and central to the identities of indigenous or minority populations. Richard Kurin has critically pointed out:

[t]o be recognized, intangible cultural heritage has to be consistent with human rights, exhibit the need for mutual respect between communities, and be sustainable. This is a very high and one might say unrealistic and imposing standard. [The UNESCO conventions] see culture as generally hopeful and positive, born not of historical struggle and conflict but of a varied flowering of diverse cultural ways (Kurin 2004, 70, cited in Littler 2008, 99).

Ignoring the historical context through which subaltern population’s heritage was omitted from the mainstream narrative propagates the hegemonic forces of official heritage definitions as it ignores that many national histories are “constituted through waves of immigration and diaspora—histories that were effectively whitewashed and streamlined by the rise of nationalism” (Littler 2008, 94). When The Presbytère began to conceptualize the *Living with Hurricanes* exhibit, the museum staff found that members of the local New Orleans community who participated in focus groups and front end evaluation research

wanted the exhibit to tell ‘the truth’ of what happened, as they felt that too often the reality of the lived experiences of many of the poor or minority populations had been left out of the overall national narrative produced through the media (People, Places, and Design 2013).

### Identity and Narrative Construction

The construction of narratives profoundly impacts individual identity construction as well as how communities as a whole construct a collective identity. With that said, identity is notoriously difficult to define in concrete terms. However, the nexus between cultural heritage and identity, whether on a national, regional, or community level, allows one to better understand the complexities of identity formation and cohesion as “culture connects individuals to their communities and histories and is integral to human identity” (Goldewijk et al. 2011, 10). Identity has been defined as “the ways in which markers such as heritage...and shared interpretations of the past, are used to construct narratives of inclusion and exclusion that define communities and the ways in which these later are rendered specific and differentiated” (Donald and Rattansi, 1992 cited in Graham and Howard 2008, 5). That is, a shared heritage or collective cultural memory of the past actively shape and define community identity. Articulating one’s identity in relation to the past contributes to feelings of belonging and attachment to a cultural landscape as these places serve as tangible locations to examine identity and heritage (McDowell 2008). The Presbytère’s exhibit, *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* is demonstrative of this importance of a profound sense of place in relation to identity, as a significant portion of the exhibit focuses on how the people of southern Louisiana have utilized intangible forms

of heritage, especially traditional knowledge in order to adapt to the environment and thus make it more hospitable.

Uses of heritage are often diverse, as heritage is as malleable as identity. However, governments or other political powers often use heritage in order to exert control and power (Harrison 2013). Historically, governments have utilized heritage in order to establish a sense of national identity by constructing narratives on national traditions (Anderson 1991). Given that community identity is a social construct partly defined by a shared cultural heritage past, cultural traditions can also be seen as signifiers of identity (Harrison 2013). This was an especially prominent practice throughout the colonial era when newly formed nation states constructed national narratives based on a shared sense of cultural heritage in order to establish what Benedict Anderson has termed ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson 1991). Anderson asserts that the idea of a national identity is imagined “...because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or ever hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their community” (Anderson 1991, 6). Despite a diverse population with diverse backgrounds, national identities consolidate a population within a limited boundary of what constitutes a ‘nation’ and therefore a national or collective identity (Anderson 1991).

#### Identities on Display

With international travel steadily increasing, demand for ‘authentic’ cultural experiences from tourists has risen. Anthropological inquiry into this phenomenon has shown that heritage tourism often requires hosts to display themselves to an audience in a problematic way that results in higher entertainment value at the loss of authentic cultural

heritage representation (Porter 2008). Harrison has argued that when heritage and thus identity are placed into an entertainment or public sphere, Euro-American hegemonic constructions of heritage are reproduced (2013). The Presbytère's exhibit centered their focus of the exhibit on demonstrating to visitors of both the museum and New Orleans as whole, that the city is important to the national identity of America in its diversity and vibrant cultural heritage (Peoples, Places, and Design 2013). Although the exhibit does incorporate many interactive and experiential aspects, the representation of 'what is New Orleans' remains front and center and does not attempt to utilize gimmicks or false representations for the sake of an increase in museum visitors.

The *Living with Hurricanes* exhibit includes several pieces of material culture that were rescued from the storm debris and the inclusion of these select pieces is central to telling the story of Katrina. Material culture has long been associated with the identity of a community or population. Christopher Tilley has argued the relationship between objects and people is dialectic in nature, as objects obtain meaning through their relationship with people (Tilley 2006). Material culture objects do not possess an inherent value, rather "things change their meanings through their life cycles and according to the way they are used and appropriated and in the manner in which individuals and groups identify themselves with them" (Tilley 2006, 71). The assertion that objects have their own life stories that illustrate and reflect the identities of people was first put forward by Arjun Appadurai in his seminal work *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (1986).

At the time of Appadurai's publication, there was what some have termed a 'memory boom' or a 'heritage boom' in America and worldwide (Connerton 2006, Harrison 2013). Increasingly people and governments were becoming more interested and concerned with the preservation, or more crudely the salvage of, cultural patrimony objects as it was accepted that certain cultural heritage objects were essential to the identity of communities (Connerton 2006). Given the interconnectedness of heritage objects and collective community identity, it is of utmost importance that museums and cultural heritage organizations place the preservation of such objects after disasters as a critical necessity.

### **Cultural Heritage and Museums**

As objectifications of individual or group identities, cultural heritage objects are valuable for museum exhibitions and private collecting. The ability to define what constitutes cultural heritage is intrinsically tied to asymmetrical power relations between cultural heritage professionals and the people that cultural heritage objects represent (Harrison 2013, Smith 2006). James Clifford popularized the term 'contact zones' which refers to "the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relationships, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (Clifford 1997, 192). Clifford's focus on the asymmetrical power relations is especially relevant within museums, and more specifically to the case of Katrina, as racial and monetary inequality played a significant role in how people experienced the storm.



Throughout front-end research and development of The Presbytère's Katrina exhibit, the community of New Orleans made it clear that they desired 'the truth' to be told about Katrina (People, Places, and Design 2013). The version of Katrina that many throughout the world received was one dictated by external forces with drastically different socioeconomic backgrounds than the people who experienced the worst effects of Katrina. Media outlets placed attention on the looting and crime that occurred in the days and weeks following Katrina without offering counter-narratives to these behaviors. Locals who participated in focus groups during early stages of the exhibit development expressed a desire for multiple narratives of the Katrina experience to be presented throughout the exhibit (People, Places, and Design 2013).

Informed by data gathered in the focus groups, The Presbytère sought an exhibit that provided several different views of the storm and shared curatorial authority with typically ignored populations within and outside of the museum sector. The importance of democratizing museum practice to incorporate marginalized voices is a relatively new trend in museology and must be examined through an historic lens. Early museums of the nineteenth century were often associated with the wealthy and elite. In Europe and North America, collections assembled from around the world were placed in so-called 'curiosity cabinets' and were meant to be displayed as exotic wonders from colonies far away (Macdonald 2006). This process of 'othering' was a defining feature of museum collections of the time and often legitimized colonization. The people and populations whose cultures were being represented in museums were not afforded the power to control how their cultural heritage objects were displayed in an exhibit, as it was believed they did not have

the capability to preserve their material culture (Cooper 2007). In this sense it is appropriate to say that museum exhibits did not so much display subaltern cultures, so much as they displayed “the power relationship between those subjected to such classification and those promoting it” (Lidchi 1997, 191). Within the last half-century however, museums have instituted new policies and methodologies in an attempt to give source populations power over their material culture. As calls for universal human rights were being heard the world over throughout the 1960s and 1970s, these same calls were beginning to gain ground within museums (Hill 2007). Native American, indigenous, and other marginalized populations saw an increase in representation within the museum and heritage sector. For many, the opening of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture in 2016 was a major leap forward in confronting the intersection between heritage and race in the United States.

Acknowledging how museum practice often reasserts curatorial and professionalized dominance, museums and museum professionals are attempting to actively engage with their source communities in order to implement consensual power relations in which the museum is a “vibrant public sphere of contestation where different views can be usefully confronted” (Lynch 2013, 453). Listening to the needs and wishes of those whose cultural heritage is being represented in a museum allows for a dialogue to open in which source communities or other subaltern populations can share power with museum professionals and convey the importance of their indigenous curatorial and preservation methods (Kreps 2006: 469).

## **Museums and Trauma**

The shift towards inclusive practices in museums was partly inspired by museums' renewed focus to take on social roles within the communities they serve, as opposed to solely serving as educational establishments. In cases of trauma, many communities are turning towards museums as places of refuge and professionals within the museum sector need to be increasingly aware of how to deal with grief and trauma (Williams 2008). Heritage objects and other iterations of material culture play a significant role in the formation and continuation of identity, on the national and local scale. Due to the interconnectedness between material culture and identity, Richard Kurin suggests that in the wake of disasters, both natural and man-made, concerted efforts and protocols should be implemented to ensure the conservation of cultural heritage works and sites (Kurin 2011).

The emergence of culturally conscious exhibits that deal with difficult heritages or events is a delicate but necessary shift within museums. The September 11, 2001 attacks in New York City provide a relatively recent example of how museums play a crucial role in their communities in the face of traumatic upheaval. In a New York Times article published only six days after the terrorist attacks, a visitor at the Metropolitan Museum of Art stated, “[t]oday it’s comforting to come back and see everything still here. All this beauty. And to see the good that people do” (Kimmelman 2001, cited in Van Orden 2006). As museums protect heritage objects, the display, interpretation, and promotion of cultural heritage in times of traumatic upheaval is essential to the process of meaning-making and collective recovery.

## Collecting and Displaying Amid Disaster

While museums have traditionally been concerned with the preservation of material culture, increasingly the focus has shifted towards an interpretation of these objects. Vanessa Van Orden has posited, “today museums are less concerned with the display of objects and more interested with the interpretation of material culture and constructing historical narratives” (2006, 51). This is especially evident in cases of disaster or trauma, as the creation of memorial or commemorative exhibits related to disasters use objects to construct historical narratives of traumatic events that also represent a community’s identities. At times this can prove to be difficult, especially in relation to natural disasters, where many objects are found in poor physical condition (Besley and Were 2014). While objects often serve as important representations of the lived experiences of communities after disasters, they are also emotionally charged. As objects salvaged from disasters also carry with them an objective truth, a sort of scar that bears witness to traumatic events. Their association with difficult events makes the collection of such artifacts risky (Besley and Were 2014). Due to the rarity of finding material culture that survive natural disasters, the salvaged cultural objects acquire an increased cultural value. The inclusion of mundane objects as well as bits of rubble in memorial museum exhibits is demonstrative of this increase in value, both in economic and social terms (Williams 2008).

Another aspect of collecting and displaying material culture objects after disaster is the question of which objects and whose lived experiences will be represented in museums? After Katrina, professionals from the Smithsonian Institute traveled to New Orleans to collect artifacts that embodied the strength of the storm and its effects on the

community (Shayt 2006). While the federal response to Katrina is viewed as a large chapter in the overall experience of New Orleans residents, curators sought to acquire an object symbolic of the efforts and failures of the federal response. A 'FEMA' t-shirt was used to highlight the relationship between FEMA and New Orleans residents. According to Shayt, this was "the type of shirt disaster-relief workers were instructed not to wear in late 2005 because of the violent reaction those letters provoked in some quarters" (2006, 363). The discovery of a mud-caked Fisher-Price toy castle on the steps of a home that was leveled by a 645 foot break in the levee also proved to be especially symbolic as it seemed ironic that a castle is the emblem used by the United States Army Corps of Engineers (Shayt 2006). In total, the team from the Smithsonian was able to collect 58 artifacts and almost 2,000 photographs. Despite the arguably limited number of objects recovered, the Smithsonian collection is perceived to demonstrate the diverse lived experiences and identities of those who resided in New Orleans and neighboring parishes when hurricane Katrina hit the mainland.

Engaging the community in restoration procedures within museums is essential for museums to fulfill a social role after disasters. Academic literature has been written on the cultural aspect of recovery and resilience, with almost all pointing to the fact that making culturally informed decisions about cultural heritage that align with localized meanings and desires is imperative (Jigyasu 2013). In the case of memorial exhibits that document the lived experiences of survivors of natural disasters, involving the source community in the creation and execution of an exhibit can potentially give a voice to those who feel they have lost theirs in the entropy of disaster. In late 2010 and early 2011, the towns of Brisbane

and Ipswich in Queensland, Australia experienced catastrophic flooding. Some estimates state that as many as 200,000 people were directly affected by the flooding and approximately 40 people were killed (Besley and Were 2014). In the face of this tragedy, the local museum and library collaborated with the community in their collection efforts (Besley and Were 2014). Utilizing social media and similar digital arenas, these cultural heritage organizations reached out to the community and put together a list of objects they would like to accession into an exhibit about the Queensland floods (Besley and Were 2014). Similar to the cultural artifacts rescued from the debris of Katrina, many objects were of little monetary value and often were representative of how normal, ordinary people lived through the experience and made sense of such calamity. However, as the curator noted, “[t]hese objects articulate the personal dimensions and deep ambivalence of disaster, for which loss comes gratitude, and with destruction, creativity” (Besley and Were 2014, 48). Allowing communities to participate in the collections process after disasters allows people to exert agency on what story or narrative is going to be told about the disaster and furthermore offers an opportunity for communities to re-establish connections with both their material and cultural landscapes.

In the weeks and months following Hurricane Katrina, cultural institutions within New Orleans, including the Louisiana State Museum system museums such as The Cabildo and The Presbytère, quickly began taking photographs and collecting artifacts from the storm (Roddy 2010). The inclusion of Fats Domino’s Steinway piano that was rescued from the Lower Ninth Ward “resonated both with local and tourist audiences as symbols of the personal and cultural devastation and loss that accompanied the storm” (Roddy 2010,

19) The piano was placed at the entryway to the *Living with Hurricanes* exhibit as it represented both the vibrant cultural heritage of jazz music in New Orleans as well as the indiscriminate destruction of Katrina (Roddy 2010). Initially, many of the exhibits on Katrina focused on the devastation and destruction of the city and surrounding parishes. This focus quickly shifted and as Roddy (2010) has noted:

In addition to providing a basic understanding of the devastation of Katrina, exhibits in the first year emphasized positive themes of recovery, rebuilding heroism, and hope, reflecting a need for healing within the city as well as the importance of offering a positive, united front to visitors (Roddy 2010, 32).

Audience research conducted from 2006-2013 solidified and quantified the public's desire to see a positive-oriented exhibit on Katrina. The result was *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* at The Presbytère. Although the exhibit does illustrate the devastation caused by Katrina, the overarching theme is one of a city and community of resilience. This message is clearly displayed at the entrance to the last of the four galleries on a plaque that reads: "Through it all, a spirit of resilience and a profound sense of place has carried us through".

### **Resilience**

The study of disaster related resilience has historically been interdisciplinary, however, the construct of community resilience emerged out of the field of Psychology. Community resilience theory places special emphasis on resilience as a process and focuses on the ties between a strong community identity, place attachment, and the implementation of risk reduction measures (Norris, et al 2008). The underlying assumption in community resilience speaks to how individual wellness is collectively expressed. It is also important

to note that community resilience is a dynamic process, not an end result, and is dependent upon several identifiable factors. In their report detailing the interconnectedness of heritage and resilience post-disaster, the Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Change Adaptation defines resilience as:

the ability of a system and its component parts to anticipate, absorb, accommodate, or recover from the effects of a hazardous event in a timely and efficient manner, including through ensuring the preservation, restoration, or improvement of its essential basic structures and functions (Jigyasu 2013, 21).

To characterize resilience in a singular manner is difficult, as each community or population's process of recovery and resilience is unique. In the wake of natural disasters, the importance of cultural heritage and identity to community resilience is becoming increasingly recognized. Resilience manifests itself on both an individual and a community level and has often been characterized as a 'return to normalcy.' It is important to recognize that "normalcy" is elusive as the reality which existed before is impossible to obtain" (Convery et al. 2005, cited in Whittle et al. 2014, 201). In the wake of a natural disaster, not only is the physical landscape disrupted but also the cultural landscape and social cohesion of a community as the bonds between place, heritage, and identity become strained.

Cultural heritage scholars have emphasized the importance of preserving and rescuing cultural heritage in times of disaster and assert that the process "is essential for the mental survival of people in emergency situations, and can contribute to their overall resilience and empowerment when overcoming catastrophe" as it reconstitutes a sense of community identity and reinforces individual worth and meaning (Chronis et al. 2011,



348). Often in our society, people say ‘oh they’re just things, they can be replaced’. However, in cases such as a natural disaster or war, the loss of permanence, ownership, and personal history is intricately tied to objects, and can never be fully replaced. Repurposing remnant material objects left in the wake of disasters, natural or man-made, is a way in which people can tie their present to their past in order to attempt to reconcile the trauma of their loss.

Although material objects are typically the focus of cultural heritage preservation efforts, intangible heritage is arguably more susceptible to destruction or erasure in the wake of natural disasters. One reason why this is the case is the strict limitations of what constitutes official intangible heritage in terms of UNESCO and other international heritage organizations. Traditional knowledge, a major categorization within intangible heritage, is essential to look at when examining the nexus between cultural heritage and resilience. As Jigyasu has asserted, “[w]hen traditional skills and practices are kept alive and dynamic they can contribute to the rebuilding of resilience communities after disasters” (Jigyasu 2013, 21).

In Christina Kreps’ research on the Indonesian island of Nias, which was hit by a catastrophic earthquake and subsequent tsunami in 2005, it was found that houses and buildings that were constructed using local materials and traditional building methods withstood the storm better and suffered minimal structural damage in relation to more modernized buildings that were based off of Euro-American construction methods (Kreps 2015). A result of this observation, the rebuilding and redevelopment process took a

culturally conscious turn and there was increased interest and motivation to rebuild based on traditional construction methods.

Utilizing traditional knowledge in the rebuilding process arguably is common sense, as “lessons learned from what has been done in the past and from what is resilient to local hazards, provide knowledge that can be used in restoration work as well as in new construction” (Jigyasu 2013, 31). Traditional knowledge and other manifestations of intangible heritage also point towards the trend within what Kreps (2015) has termed, ‘cultural humanitarianism’, in which increased importance has been placed on how cultural heritage is central to the overall emotional resilience of a community. As Jigyasu also has effectively argued:

Cultural heritage optimizes locally available resources and the socio-cultural needs of communities. The symbolism inherent in heritage is also a powerful means to help victims recover from the psychological impact of disasters. In such situations, people search desperately for identity and self-esteem. Traditional social networks that provide mutual support and access to collective assets are extremely effective coping mechanisms for community members (Jigyasu 2013: 22).

Museums serve as public sites of cultural heritage preservation and thus, they can be thought of as symbols of their community’s identity. G.J. Ashworth echoes this sentiment as he argues that “[t]he most important use of all public heritage, and the main reason for its intentional creation by public authorities, is the creation and strengthening of group identity” (Ashworth 2008, 238). As such, museums are primed to fill a unique role in the recovery and resilience by reinforcing identity and restoring meaning to a community. In New York, visitors flocked to museums in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks in an attempt to find solace and refuge, or at the very least, separate

themselves from the harsh reality of the attacks (Van Orden 2006). After Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in August 2005, museums and other cultural heritage organizations coordinated events such as concerts that emphasized social interaction among members of the community in an effort to re-establish connections and social relationships disrupted by the storm (Roddy 2010). Additionally, it is important to note that “Katrina was far from the only subject in the exhibitions and programs at New Orleans museums; less than half of the exhibitions featured in museum newsletters, institutional website listing of past shows, and the local paper centered on Katrina” (Roddy 2010, 8). This is indicative that the goal of many museums at the time was to provide places where community members could gather in a collective escape from the devastation to the city and the disruption of daily life post-Katrina.

On a community scale, the restoration of cultural heritage sites also serves to reinvigorate local economies. Heritage tourism is a driving economic force in today’s global economy. In 2013, the tourism industry in Europe was valued at 586 billion euros per year with almost 10 million people employed in the heritage tourism industry (Jigyasu 2013: 14). While there has been much criticism of ‘disaster tourism’, on some level it is important to acknowledge the role that this sort of tourism plays in generating economic resilience. More importantly, if museums and other cultural heritage organizations utilize the local workforce in the process of restoration and rebuilding, Kurin argues that people are instilled with a new sense of meaning (Kurin 2011). In the case of Haiti and Kurin’s Cultural Recovery Project, many residents had limited disposable income and the reality of rebuilding their own lives seemed insurmountable.

By employing local residents in the restoration and conservation of various cultural heritage pieces, locals were not only receiving monetary compensation but also arguably a renewed sense of individual worth (Kurin 2011). The economic and cultural results of the recovery effort in Haiti are still in a process of being recognized. As Kurin states, “[i]f the world’s heart went out to the Haitian people, its mind marveled at their strength, fortitude, and resilience in the face of disaster. There was, in the aftermath of the earthquake, a profound respect for the victims and their basic act of survival” (Kurin 2011, 212). Community leaders in New Orleans in the wake of Katrina have echoed similar sentiments as those put forth by Kurin. Despite the catastrophic conditions, the New Orleans community has actively sought a resurgence in community pride and resilience.

### **Conclusion**

Increasingly, there has been an acknowledgement that cultural heritage is central to how communities construct their identity. It is also now widely accepted that the destruction or loss of cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible forms, “can erode a people’s sense of identity, self-confidence, and sense of place in the world” (Kreps 2015, 252). Museums have the ability to contribute to the burgeoning field of ‘cultural humanitarianism’ by actively preserving cultural heritage before disasters as well as making a concerted effort to reconstruct aspects of cultural heritage in the wake of natural disasters in order to restore a community’s sense of identity. As Anthony Oliver-Smith has asserted, the goal of any cultural heritage work after disasters “...is basically to construct and restore meaning to self, family and community in what may be radically

changed circumstances” (Oliver-Smith 2011, 225). Understanding that a return to normalcy is often an unattainable goal, commemorating the loss a community experiences after a natural disaster also provides another avenue through which museums can reconstitute identity and cultural heritage as:

[t]he evocation of symbols...that provided anchors to community identity in the past, will also play an important role in social reconstitution, though they will most likely be reinterpreted and perhaps reformulated in different ways to fit present circumstances (Oliver-Smith 2011, 227).

Currently, there is not a universally defined protocol or response for cultural recovery after disasters, something Kurin and other cultural heritage workers have argued is increasingly necessary.

In New Orleans, The Presbytère has actively sought to construct an exhibit that showcases and preserves the cultural heritage of the greater New Orleans community, as doing so contributes to the recovery and resilience of the city by re-establishing connections between the community’s present and the past. As museums are seen as symbols of the community and are increasingly being expected to fill social roles within communities, it is essential that museums begin to ask themselves how they can deal with traumatic events and serve their community in tandem.

## **CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **Statement of the Problem**

This project investigates the nexus among museums, disasters, and resilience within museums. The aim of this research is to understand how The Presbytère's exhibit *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* has contributed to the resilience and recovery of the New Orleans community post-Katrina. Using The Presbytère's exhibit *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* as a case study and building from the anthropological literature, this research anticipates that museums as cultural heritage organizations can and should promote resilience and aid in community recovery after natural disasters. The purpose of the research is to contribute to the growing body of knowledge and literature on the social role of museums in the wake of disasters.

### **Research Design and Research Questions**

This research focuses on The Presbytère museum's exhibit *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond*. My two research goals are to examine how this exhibit has promoted and displayed the resilience of the New Orleans community to tourist and visitor audiences in New Orleans, Louisiana as well as what political constraints were involved in the construction of the disaster narrative of Katrina throughout the exhibit. In order to investigate this more effectively, I developed five research questions that address

specific aspects of the development and implementation of the *Living with Hurricanes* exhibit. For organizational purposes I will list my research questions and then discuss how my research methods address each research question.

1. How are different voices and perspectives of Katrina survivors incorporated into the exhibit narrative and what mediums are utilized for representation and why?
2. How does the location of the museum affect public perception?
3. Does the exhibit address aspects of structural violence that were at play during Katrina? Why or why not?
4. Did the museum involve or engage the New Orleans community in the creation of the exhibit? i.e. Did the museum utilize community-collecting efforts?
5. What is the goal or mission statement of the *Living with Hurricanes* exhibit as defined by the curators? Do visitors to the Presbytère understand these defined curatorial goals?

## **Methodologies**

### New Museology and Critical Heritage Theory

For my research methodologies, I drew heavily from the New Museology and Critical Heritage Theory. The New Museology evolved as a social and scholarly movement in the 1960s and 1970s in response to growing critiques of museum's role as a cultural authority (Kurin 1997). Having been the product of colonialism, museums

increasingly sought to distance themselves from their colonial legacy and began to implement museological changes, especially focusing on the decentralization of curatorial authority (Marstine 2006). It was argued that sharing curatorial authority with their source communities would allow museums to better serve their communities by focusing on the social roles they fulfill (Kreps 2011, Clifford 1997). The New Museology and its associated practices were codified into New Critical Museum Theory.

At the same time that the New Museology was spreading, Critical Heritage Theory emerged offering a tangential critique of how museums and other cultural authorities define heritage. Critical Heritage Theory offers a critical framework through which to evaluate how heritage is defined and by whom. Rodney Harrison (2013) and Laura Jane Smith (2006) have asserted that heritage is typically defined in a top-down approach, where those deemed cultural authorities possessed the power to define a community's heritage. Instead, they argued, heritage should be self-defined by community leaders and members.

Drawing from these two methodological frameworks, I evaluated the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit at The Presbytère museum. I examined text panels and auditory media present in the exhibit to explore what narrative of Katrina was presented to visitors and to investigate *who* was given voice throughout the exhibit. Additionally, I conducted semi-structured interviews with current and former museum staff that were involved in the construction and implementation of the exhibit in order to understand if and how New Museological practices were used in the process as well as to



explore how decisions were made during the construction about whose voices and stories would be included in the exhibit.

#### Discourse Analysis Methodology:

Another methodology I utilized heavily during my research was discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is a methodology often associated with linguistic and semiotic studies and examines the intentionality that is embedded within texts (Gee 2014). That is, discourse analysts assert that “[l]anguage and words, as a system of signs, are in themselves essentially meaningless; it is through the shared, mutually agreed-on use of language that meaning is created” (Starks and Trinidad 2007, 1237). I specifically used discourse analysis methodology to identify and understand the concept of ‘resilience’ and its relation to the community of New Orleans post-Katrina.

As evident from my literature review chapter, the definition and concept of resilience has proved elusive to social science researchers. While multiple definitions exist, the focus and scope of the various definitions of resilience differ depending on how the concept is applied. For the purposes of my research, I chose to focus on the concept of “community resilience” as defined within the field of Psychology, as it addresses the nexus among a collective community response, community healing, and ecological recovery. For the purposes of my research, I focused on the following community resilience factors: a shared sense of community identity, a strong attachment to place, and the ability to plan ahead and implement risk reduction measures to mitigate future disasters. I employed discourse analysis methodology to examine how ‘resilience’, and

more specifically the above three factors, are encoded and represented to museum visitors throughout the exhibit.

### **Research Methods**

In order to address the above stated research questions, I identified two separate components of the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit that I critically analyzed. The first three research questions stated above address the first component of my research: analyzing and evaluating the exhibit contents and narrative. While evaluating the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit, I employed three methodological techniques: spot observation, text analysis and intercept visitor surveys. The last two research questions are directed at the second component of my research: examining the processes and politics involved in the actual construction and implementation of the exhibit at The Presbytère such as the outsourcing of exhibiting construction and difficulties in funding the exhibit. I approached these research questions using two techniques in qualitative research: semi-structured interviews and discourse analysis.

### **Museum Exhibit**

The *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit consists of five galleries that focus on different aspects of the story of Katrina and New Orleans. The second gallery, titled “Is This America?”, tackles the complexity of the lived experiences and social effects of Katrina on different groups of people in New Orleans. In this gallery there are filmed interviews with survivors of the storm that offer visitors a glimpse into the diverse narratives and lived experiences of different communities affected by Katrina,

including: First Responders, Ordinary Heroes, Hospitals, and evacuees at the Superdome and the New Orleans Convention Center. Additionally, there is a kiosk in this gallery that delves into the mass media's coverage of the aftermath of the storm. Perhaps the most provocative element in the "Is This America?" gallery is the diary of Tommie Elton Mabry, a resident of the B.W. Cooper public housing complex, one of the largest in New Orleans. Mr. Mabry documented his daily experiences on the wall of his apartment using a black felt tip marker beginning the day before Katrina struck New Orleans and ending several weeks later. Mabry's diary was meticulously peeled off of his apartment wall by The Presbytère Museum staff before the B.W. Cooper housing complex was demolished. Given that this gallery incorporates and focuses on the human element of the Katrina story, this is where I most heavily conducted spot observations.

### **Spot Observations**

My first spot observation was conducted on August 5, 2015. In this initial spot observation, I placed myself in front of the kiosk monitor that showcased interviews and stories from the various "First Responders" who descended onto New Orleans in the days following the hurricane. I sat in the gallery for one and a half hours, which is approximately how long it takes to watch every interview from the various kiosks in the gallery and to read the accompanying text panels. In this first spot observation, I centered my observations on how visitors were engaging with text and objects present in the exhibit. I looked out for any conversations related to the exhibit material occurring between visitors while in the gallery, which kiosks attracted the most visitors, as well as how visitors reacted to the assorted material culture objects throughout the gallery.

I conducted my second spot observation on August 19, 2015, only 10 days until the 10-year anniversary of Katrina's landfall. By this time, many local schools were back in session and the summer heat notoriously deters tourists from visiting New Orleans and visitor numbers had noticeably decreased since the beginning of the month. During my second spot observation I once again sat myself on a bench in front of a kiosk; however, this time I sat in front of the "Hospitals" kiosk. I remained in the gallery for approximately two hours and focused my observations on how many different kiosks museum visitors visited, how long visitors stayed at each kiosk, how long they spent reading the Mabry diary, which material culture objects garnered the most attention, as well as conversations and interactions between visitors in response to the information presented in the exhibit. I focused on conversations and interactions that demonstrated engagement with the exhibit texts and objects as well as an increased understanding among visitors of the complexities of the various experiences of Katrina that are showcased in the "Is This America?" gallery.

### **Text Analysis**

The second methodological technique I utilized in relation to evaluating the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit was text analysis. In contrast to the spot observations, I employed text analysis throughout the entire exhibit and did not focus solely on the "Is this America?" gallery. Prior to my research The Presbytère staff hired an outside firm, Peoples, Places, and Design, to evaluate the exhibit with a specific focus on the "What Happened?" gallery, which details the science of hurricanes in general and the structural incompetencies of levee engineering in New Orleans. For this

reason, I spent less time conducting text analysis in this gallery. During the text analysis phase of my research, I critically examined the text panels throughout the exhibit, affording special attention to references to the recovery, rebuilding, and resiliency of New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina. Additionally, I listened to various oral histories presented throughout the exhibit and analyzed what aspects, if any, of recovery or resiliency were addressed by community members who collaborated with The Presbytère staff in the construction of the exhibit. I specifically looked for references of community identity, strong attachment to place, or the implementation of risk reduction measures into their daily lives as markers of resiliency. One crucial element of the New Museological praxis is the sharing of curatorial authority between museum professionals and community members in museum exhibit construction. A way in which this is accomplished is the privileging of community member's voices over an authoritative curatorial voice. Drawing from this methodology, text analysis of the text panels in the exhibit allowed me to critically investigate evidence of multivocality and how these multiple voices are incorporated and represented throughout the exhibit. An example of this multivocality is present in the Superdome kiosk in the "Is this America?" gallery, as it presents conflicting narratives of what happened in the Superdome during the evacuation of New Orleans immediately after Katrina.

The last application of text analysis pertains to the musical selections that are played in the exhibit. The Presbytère staff sought to incorporate local New Orleans musician's songs about Katrina and her aftermath into the exhibit as another way to include local perspectives and narratives in the exhibit. Although only short clips of

songs are played due to copyright laws, I sought to investigate how the songs used in the exhibit characterized and portrayed New Orleans' recovery and resilience through musical production. Additionally, because music is an identifying marker of cultural heritage in New Orleans, the inclusion of local artists' music in the exhibit provides insight into how cultural heritage of the city is characterized in the exhibit and who exerts agency in defining this heritage.

### **Intercept Visitor Surveys**

Distributing random intercept visitor surveys was the last method I used to evaluate the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit. The surveys were conducted using a systematic sampling frame and were administered to every third visitor to exit the exhibit. To ensure that survey participants had spent time in the Katrina exhibit, I placed myself at the exit of the exhibit and intercepted visitors before they moved to the *Mardi Gras: It's Carnival Time in Louisiana* exhibit which is located on the second floor of The Presbytère and asked if they would like to participate in the survey. The survey consisted of six questions, rendering it quick and accessible to museum visitors. The survey collected zip codes of survey participants in order for me to analyze if geographical distance from New Orleans in any way influenced answers to the following questions. Another question asked visitors if they had ever visited New Orleans prior to August 29, 2005 when Katrina made landfall and unleashed havoc on the city. Two Likert scales were also used in the survey to measure visitor's perceptions and understanding of the cultural heritage components in the Katrina exhibit as well as the effectiveness of the message of resiliency and recovery of New Orleans in the face of

devastation. Furthermore, another question on the survey was an open-response question that invited visitors to provide a singular word that they believed best described the cultural character of New Orleans. Given that most visitors to the exhibit were not from New Orleans, this question in particular produced interesting word association data that illuminated how tourists to New Orleans perceive the city. Lastly, in collaboration with the Marketing Department of The Presbytère, the survey asked participants to identify how they heard about The Presbytère. As my research was conducted in the month of August and took place in the weeks leading up to the 10-year anniversary of Katrina, many museums and cultural institutions throughout the city opened up Katrina exhibits and I sought to understand why visitors chose The Presbytère, as opposed to other museums and exhibitions.

#### Museum Staff

While examining the narrative of Katrina constructed in the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit was an important aspect of my research, understanding the processes and motivations of The Presbytère staff in creating the exhibit and therefore, constructing the present narrative, is essential to evaluating the exhibit as a whole.

#### **Semi-structured Interviews**

I adopted a non-probability sampling framework to identify key informants for this second component of my research. I appealed to the lead Historian who worked on the exhibit, Karen Leathem, and asked her to name other employees of The Presbytère who were involved in the exhibits construction. In total, I conducted five semi-structured

interviews with current and former employees of Louisiana State Museums, which operates The Presbytère. All interviewees were heavily involved in the various stages of construction and implementation of the Katrina exhibit at The Presbytère but fulfilled different roles throughout the process. Two of the five interviewees are no longer affiliated with The Presbytère or Louisiana State Museums. All five interviews were audio-recorded using the QuickTime Player application on my computer and were conducted using the same interview guide but ranged in length from thirty minutes to over two hours. The questions focused on the motivations and goals of the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit as identified by museum staff, their goals and understandings of the narrative they constructed in the exhibit, as well as how the museum reached out to New Orleans community members in order to incorporate their voices and experiences of Katrina throughout the exhibit.

### **Discourse Analysis**

After conducting the semi-structured interviews, I employed discourse analysis to analyze the interviews. Drawing on New Museological praxis and Critical Heritage Theory framework, I searched for patterns in the five interviewee's responses related to who was represented in the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit and whose voices were also incorporated into the exhibit narrative and how. Additionally, I wanted to understand how different people described the overall mission, goal, or "take-home message" of the exhibit. I also sought to pinpoint linkages in the interviews on the concept of resiliency and how the museum staff chose to illustrate the resiliency and recovery of New Orleans in the exhibit in various ways.



## CHAPTER FOUR: EXHIBIT ANALYSIS

### **Katrina: What Went Wrong?**

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans as a Category 3 storm, making it one of the strongest hurricanes in recorded history. The heavy rains and strong storm surge eventually caused the levees to collapse, resulting in the flooding of 80 percent of the city (McKernan and Mulcahy 2008). Although many residents of New Orleans had evacuated the city prior to Katrina's landfall, approximately 1,500 died as a result of the catastrophe (Kish 2009). This chapter will focus on how the Presbytère's *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit was conceived and implemented, as well as how the exhibit's disaster narrative of Katrina in New Orleans has contributed to the broader perception of New Orleans as a place of resilience and recovery.

### **Exhibit Development Decisions: What and whose story to tell?**

One former Presbytère museum staff member said, "we knew if we didn't tell the story ourselves, it would be told about us" (Babineaux, personal interview, August 24, 2015). In the days and weeks following Hurricane Katrina, members of The Presbytère staff began to conceptualize how to construct an exhibit that effectively told the story of Katrina and New Orleans. Unlike past exhibits in The Presbytère, a history museum, the story of Katrina was not relegated to the past; rather, it was an actively developing story that continues to unravel ten years later. Given the complex, and at times, contentious,

subject matter, developing the exhibit was a lengthy and arduous five-year process with the exhibit opening in October 2010. Some of the most difficult decisions made during the initial stages of the exhibit development related to what story was going to be told in the exhibit. Would it be the culture of New Orleans? the storm itself? the role of incompetent engineering? Factors such as state politics, funding obstacles, and the choice of an outside exhibit design firm, shaped what the narrative of Katrina would be in the exhibit and how it was represented.

As a state-funded institution, The Presbytère was subject to political and economic structures while developing the exhibit. The director of The Presbytère and other Louisiana State Museums is a direct appointment under the state's Lieutenant Governor, making the museum's operations directly tied to politician's agendas. On at least one occasion, the Lieutenant Governor became upset with the current director of the museum and replaced him with another director of his own choice (Jeff Rubin, personal interview, August 24, 2015). The state government of Louisiana quickly became a target of blame in the aftermath of Katrina but there were concerns among some museum staff members that if the exhibit addressed the state's culpability too harshly, they could become vulnerable to political reprisals. The former project manager for the exhibit stated:

One of the outside consultants [from the exhibit design firm] wanted us to make it very political, but we, because we are a state agency, we didn't want to make it political. Not that politics weren't obviously at play, but we were like 'we're not

going to make a statement like that' (Whitney Babineaux, personal interview, August 24, 2015).

The political ties between the Presbytère and the State of Louisiana government not only played a role in how the story of Katrina was presented in the exhibit, but also how the exhibit was funded. Similar to most state-run museums across the country, The Presbytère operates off of a limited budget. The state budget for the museum and the other Louisiana State Museums does not include money allocated for exhibit design, construction, or maintenance. Rather, the money given by the state to the museum pays solely for employee's salaries and operational costs (Jeff Rubin, personal interview, August 24, 2015). In addition to fundraising and donations made through their sister organization, Friends of the Cabildo, The Presbytère was fortunately able to secure a sizeable National Science Foundation (NSF) grant to fund the exhibit (Leathem, personal interview, August 26, 2015).

With the majority of the exhibit funds coming from the NSF grant, the science aspect of hurricanes became a prominent part in exhibit development decisions (Jeff Rubin, personal interview, August 24, 2015). Jeff Rubin, the former Director of Curatorial Services, commented that "[w]ith the NSF grant, science became a really big part of it. There were a lot of differing opinions, differing scientific opinions. Especially related to the Army Corps of Engineers, not the hurricanes, but the cause of the flooding, the cause of the disaster" (Personal interview 2015). The focus on science was not seen necessarily as a drawback, but did present unique hurdles. As Leathem pointed out, "[w]e are not a science center; we are a history museum telling a story with scientific elements"

(Karen Leathem, personal interview, August 26, 2015). In an effort to present the scientific side of the Katrina story, staff members collaborated with engineers, meteorologists, and other environmental and natural scientists to find and implement innovative ways of teaching STEM subjects in an established history museum.

With funding for the exhibit secured, museum staff went through a selection process of designers, and The Presbytère staff eventually contracted KPC Design out of Boston as the head exhibit design firm (Babineaux, personal interview, August 24, 2015). Outsourcing the exhibit design presented certain obstacles to exhibit development. In particular, having an exhibit team with little, or no, knowledge of what happened during Katrina or an understanding of broader New Orleans culture impacted the overall goals and narrative of the exhibit. As Karen Leathem, the lead historian for the exhibit, stated:

In the beginning we thought we needed to explain New Orleans culture but that was really a narrative our exhibit designer and consultants were embracing because they were learning New Orleans culture. But we eventually settled on providing some historical and geographical background at the beginning of the exhibit (Karen Leathem, personal interview, August 26, 2015).

Greg Lambousy, the then-Director of Collections, also commented that one of the early iterations of the exhibit involved having an orientation room at the entrance of the exhibit that would introduce visitors to the richness of culture and ethnicities in New Orleans (Greg Lambousy, personal interview, August 21, 2015). While the cultural make-up of New Orleans is an important aspect of the exhibit, it was decided that it would not be the overarching theme or narrative presented to visitors.

There were also differing opinions regarding how much of the exhibit should focus on the devastation of Katrina. Patrick Burns, the exhibitions manager, commented on how the Katrina disaster narrative shaped the exhibit construction:

When the process was going on, we decided there was going to be this room with projections of the storm with flood walls...what is now the storm theater. I didn't like the notion of the storm theater...it's just this cheesy thrill seeking thing (Patrick Burns, personal interview, August 20, 2015).

Focusing on the disaster aspect of Katrina proved to be a contested point in the exhibit construction process. Whitney Babineaux, the project manager for the exhibit, candidly stated:

We had a director at the time the project started and he hadn't been there very long. He was smart and had a lot of experience, but I remember some of the first few meetings, he said we need to have this storm experience! It needs to be thunder and shaking floors! And we said...it's not about the storm. It's about the people (Whitney Babineaux, personal interview, August 24, 2015).

While the devastation aspect of the hurricane was undoubtedly at the forefront of everyone's minds, the museum staff wanted the exhibit to show that while Katrina was a disaster precipitated by a natural event, it was not a natural disaster and "[o]ne of the goals for the exhibit was to explain the causes behind the disaster. The short term and long term environmental hazards that we are dealing with, which is a disappearing coastline and wetlands" (Leathem, personal interview, August 26, 2015).

Politics, funding, and choice of exhibit design firm all played roles in determining the narrative that *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* would present to its visitors. Despite the differing opinions and contestations about what story of Katrina should be showcased throughout the exhibit, the Presbytère staff and their contracted exhibit design firm concluded that the the story of Katrina is a story of individuals' experiences and actions and a story of a city that has historically been, and continues to be, a city of resilience.

### **The Story of Katrina is About the People, Not the Disaster**

In an effort to incorporate local understandings of cultural heritage, collaboration with source communities is increasingly seen as 'best practice' in museums. Following this museological trend, The *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit team reached out to community members in an effort to understand what locals wanted to see in the exhibit and what topics should be discussed (Leathen, personal interview, August 26, 2015, Lambousy, personal interview, August 21, 2015). In conjunction with People, Places, and Design, an evaluation firm, museum staff conducted intercept interviews at the New Orleans Museum of Art and the Historic New Orleans Collection to aid in the storyline development of the exhibit (Leathem, personal interview, August 26, 2015). The Presbytère staff and the exhibit design team, informed by the community's input, settled on an exhibit narrative that highlighted the singular experiences of people in New Orleans during Katrina.

In contrast to previous calls for disaster spectatorship, it was decided that the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit would offer a comprehensive

overview of the history of hurricanes in New Orleans, the actions and stories of ordinary citizens and first responders in the days following Katrina, the science of hurricanes and the subsequent flooding of New Orleans, and lastly, the importance of civic activism for the future of the city (Leathem, personal interview, August 26, 2015).

### What to Collect?

With an exhibit narrative established, the next phase was to curate objects that could effectively encapsulate the multitude of Katrina experiences of people in New Orleans. Questions about what objects should be collected for the exhibit abounded before funding for the exhibit had been secured or any decisions had been made regarding the exhibit narrative. In the days immediately following the storm, there was a keen awareness among museum staff members that this was a major historical event and they needed to start collecting objects. As Babineaux expressed:

Two staff members came the day after and the rest of the team came the next day. We already knew we should pick that up! Just driving around...we knew. You see abandoned stuff and you ask, 'When do we start collecting? What's our criteria?' We just started to do it (personal interview, August 24, 2015).

A couple of weeks after Katrina, from their temporary housing in Baton Rouge, museum staff began to construct more formal criteria for object collecting. The exhibit's collections team instantly was faced with making decisions and placing values on objects they deemed significant (Rubin, personal interview, August 24, 2015). Rubin stated:

History isn't made by objects, they're just a visual to let you tell a story...we were looking for dramatic pieces. Pieces that had those stories behind them and tied to

individuals and tied to the human-ness of all of it, not just here's something that survived or something that we found (Rubin, personal interview, August 24, 2015).

Rubin's sentiments were echoed among other former and present museum staff who worked on the exhibit. With the city still reeling from the hurricane, evidence of the devastation was prolific; however, the objective of the collecting process was to bring the human side of the story to the forefront, as opposed to the spectatorship of disaster.

Babineaux vocalized this objective when she said:

There was still so much destruction everywhere and mountains of trash and refrigerators sitting on curbs and we felt the image of destruction...we figured if people bothered to come [to New Orleans], they've probably seen some of the construction. Seeing another waterlogged sofa or mud covered teddy bear...we picked things with a story attached (personal interview, August 24, 2015).

As objectives and goals became more established over time, the exhibit and collections teams began to reach out to the community and other social networks to collect artifacts. The collections team members collected objects throughout New Orleans and the larger Gulf Coast region irrespective of if these objects would be featured in the final exhibit (Lambousy, personal interview, August 21, 2015). Some museum staff, such as Patrick Burns, the exhibitions manager, donated personal items for the exhibit's collection. Burns donated a board of a house with a spray painted "X" on it, a mark that represented that



his house had been cleared by emergency response crews and a startling symbol of Katrina's aftermath. Although this was not included in the final exhibit, it was later loaned to the Smithsonian's Katrina collection in Washington, D.C.

Many of the artifacts featured in the exhibit came from the local New Orleans community. The Presbytère published a call for artifacts but a large portion of the local collecting was accomplished through word of mouth (Leathem, personal interview, August 26, 2015). Having objects donated by the community included in the exhibit provided an added layer of significance, as it spoke directly to the exhibit team's narrative of the human element of Katrina. Rubin asserted:

I don't think there was a whole lot of people coming to us that didn't have a knowledge of what we were doing. But, for those people that gave things or had an association with things, it was really significant that their life or a piece of their life is in the exhibit. There was an added level of significance, more so than people giving manuscripts or a painting. So there, people really wanted to share their pain and their experiences with everyone who happened to come by, to those people that came through the museum door (personal interview, August 24, 2015).

The collections team, in collaboration with the Friends of the Cabildo, also interviewed New Orleans community members in an effort to collect the oral histories that accompanied the donated objects (Leathem, personal interview, August 26, 2015). One of the more haunting, yet memorable, elements in the exhibit is a recreated attic with only a hatchet and flashlight. Visitors have the option of picking up an audio device and

listening to story of the woman who donated the hatchet and how it was used to save her and her daughter's life (Leathem, personal interview, August 26, 2015). Stories such as these not only provide museum visitors a first-hand account of what it was like to live through Katrina, but also illustrate how Katrina was experienced differently by everyone.

### Competing Narratives

When Katrina struck New Orleans in the early morning of August 29, 2005, thousands of people were affected. Whether they had evacuated the city or not, everyone who called New Orleans home had their own story, their own experience, of Katrina. At times, these stories conflicted with one another's accounts, resulting in competing narratives. The exhibit team sought to include the multitude of experiences in the exhibit. Leathem articulated:

We thought it would be more powerful if people told their own stories. In the oral histories we wanted to show a diversity of opinions. In the development of the exhibit, we really wanted to represent everyone in this area who was affected and tell stories that happened in various geographical spots. New Orleans is a very neighborhood-minded city, so we wanted to have different stories from different parts of town. That was important to people who live here, who wanted to see their stories heard in the exhibit and represent the different experiences (personal interview, August 26, 2015).

As briefly mentioned previously, some of the oral histories included in the exhibit came from people who donated objects for the exhibit. Other oral histories from community members were collected by the media firm the Presbytère contracted for the

exhibit in an effort to incorporate multiple view points. It was important to understand that “[e]veryone had stories to tell, but these significant things that tied into the exhibit...the hospitals...Charity, Tulane...all these places, lots of people with lots of stories and different takes on what happened” (Rubin, personal interview, August 24, 2016). Similar to the collecting of objects, collecting oral histories required the exhibit team to make decisions about whose stories to represent. While it was understood everyone had a story to tell, the exhibit team strived to find people who could speak to and represent the chaos that erupted throughout the city following Katrina. Babineaux communicated this desire and linked it with the overall objective of the exhibit narrative:

You had to have people who could speak with authority about the experiences of these different places. There’s a multiplicity of views and interpretation and we wanted to avoid saying, ‘this is what happened.’ Instead, we wanted people to tell their own stories, show their own impact, and also wanted to focus on the human story as opposed to the storm (personal interview, August 24, 2015).

The “Is this America?” gallery features these competing narratives most prominently through a series of listening station kiosks featuring oral histories, selectively curated objects, and media clips. Not only does this gallery offer the most comprehensive look at Katrina in the exhibit, it presents a critique of the aftermath that made Katrina notorious and put New Orleans at the center of a national dialogue on racism and inequality.

#### The Aftermath

The second gallery visitors enter in the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit is titled “Is This America?” and is arguably where the human element of

Katrina is best expressed. The oral histories discussed above are available in the form of multiple listening stations and some of the most haunting objects are featured prominently; but, it is the discourse found throughout this gallery that gives voice to the pain and frustration felt by the New Orleans community in the aftermath of Katrina.

The entry text panel to the gallery aptly introduces the multitude of ways that the days and weeks following the hurricane shifted the public knowledge of Katrina from a natural disaster to a man-made catastrophe:

In the days following Hurricane Katrina, shock turned to frustration and anger as millions watched desperate citizens trapped on rooftops or stranded at triage points for days, with woefully inadequate food, water, and medical supplies. First responders and ordinary citizens labored long hours to bring people to safety, but government at all levels seemed stymied by the catastrophe. As tens of thousands of evacuees awaited rescue in the Superdome, at the Convention Center, and along highways, observers worldwide echoed the thoughts of *Chicago Tribune* columnist Clarence Page, who said on September 2 (2005), “A lot of folks are looking at TV and saying ‘is this America?’” *Is This America?* (New Orleans, LA, The Presbytere, n.d.).

This text panel touches on many of the themes present in the oral histories and throughout the gallery, and also identifies key players in the narrative of Katrina: ordinary citizens, first responders, government leaders and agencies, and the media. Importantly though, it also illustrates the immense number of people impacted and the conditions under which these people lived in the immediate wake of the storm.

The use of terms such as “woefully inadequate” and “stymied” in the text panel contribute to the narrative that although the hurricane sparked the devastation, it was the response of leaders and governmental agencies which elevated the scale of destruction. This narrative is taken further by looking at the last line of the text panel, which is also the name of the gallery: *Is This America?* Babineaux, referring to the incompetent response to

Katrina, said, “[i]f people had been treated with dignity and compassion, we’d have a very different story” (Personal interview, August 24, 2015). The notion that America has access to limitless resources and yet, the city and people of New Orleans were in a state of extreme disarray, left people wondering how this could happen in America.

#### What the world saw: the role of the media

For many people, the media served as the window through which the story of Katrina unfolded internationally. In the age of 24-hour news, stories of disaster and devastation are often littered with hyperbole and misrepresentation, though presented as fact, to appease viewers’ appetites for drama and entertainment. For news anchors, reporting on large-scale disasters can serve as a career launching pad, such was the case of CNN anchor Anderson Cooper. Regarding Katrina, the media presented the international community with snapshots of devastation, violence, and in the now-infamous words of then-Mayor of New Orleans, Ray Nagin, a “chocolate city”.

The view of Katrina presented through the media resulted in very real consequences for the people trapped in the flooded city. The museum staff wanted to incorporate the story of the media’s role within the exhibit in order to reinforce the message to visitors that what they saw on their televisions was not necessarily an adequate depiction of the aftermath of Katrina. This message also reiterates the singularity of experiences of the thousands of people stranded in New Orleans. As one text panel reads:

The storm and floodwaters destroyed the area’s communications systems, isolating first responders and storm victims alike. With people cut off from information and the media scrambling for first-hand reports, rumors proliferated on the streets, over the airwaves, and in cyberspace. While images of very real

looting and disorder riveted the nation, eyewitnesses often perceived a different reality. One doctor at Charity Hospital in downtown New Orleans said, ‘I never saw a sniper, I never saw a looter. All I saw were people struggling to get by.’ Nevertheless, reports of civil breakdown delayed the arrival of emergency aid. (Communication Breakdown. New Orleans, LA: The Presbytère, n.d.).

In addition to loss of communication systems, many basic services were also unavailable after the storm. In evacuation sites like the Superdome and the Convention Center, the loss of running water meant the bathroom facilities could no longer function. The powerful first-hand accounts of survivors of Katrina presented in the exhibit introduce visitors to the inadequate living conditions of the evacuation sites and also give voice to the survivors themselves, by enabling them to tell their own story. Several of the oral histories in the “Is This America?” gallery mention the overwhelmingly foul smell of raw sewage at these locations and the fear of illnesses spreading due to the contamination. The floodwaters created by the breached levees also damaged evacuation sites’ HVAC systems. Late summer in New Orleans is historically a time of sweltering heat and high humidity. The loss of environmental controls combined with large numbers of people in a confined space, made remaining indoors unbearable. Exposure to the heat, unsanitary living conditions, and people with imminent medical needs, combined with the delays in emergency aid undoubtedly contributed to the rising death toll attributed to Katrina.

The entropy occurring in New Orleans after Katrina was amplified through media reports and with few communication methods available, reports of violence and civil unrest quickly produced a pernicious feeling of fear, most notably among first responders. A text panel titled “Fear and Chaos” reads:

Catastrophic flooding, loss of electrical power and communications, lack of basic supplies, extreme heat, and outbreaks of looting and arson—though often

exaggerated in media reports—created an environment of fear that spawned reprehensible actions. Five years later, federal investigations continue and criminal charges have been brought in cases ranging from a citizen vigilante to unjustified police shootings. (Fear and Chaos, New Orleans, LA, The Presbytère, n.d.).

By including the federal investigations and unjustified police shootings in the text panel, the museum staff challenges visitors' preconceived notions of what happened in New Orleans in the days following the hurricane. Contrary to the belief that first responders and law enforcement officials always maintain order, this text panel specifically places blame on the police regarding the civil unrest that was unfolding throughout the city. Although not stated explicitly, this text panel also subtly hints at the unfortunate truth that often, these “reprehensible actions” were directed at the African-American population, launching a broad conversation about “black fear” and especially the historical stereotyping of young African-American men as wild and violent. The Katrina narrative in the media shifted away from the devastation and towards the visible racism playing out in New Orleans.

### Discrimination

Much has been said about the racial tensions that arose in the aftermath of Katrina. Street art, music, local community leaders, and culture bearers spoke angrily about the civil unrest that unfolded throughout New Orleans. Garnering national attention, hip-hop artist Kanye West famously went on television and declared that President George W. Bush hated black people because of the government's inept response to the disaster. While critiques of perceived racial injustice arose swiftly, few could agree on what actually happened.

When The Presbytère staff and exhibit team began to write text panels and construct the exhibition narrative, questions about racial inequality, poverty, and discrimination in regards to Katrina were still heavily debated. Through text panels, oral histories, and musical selections, the museum staff attempted to incorporate a multiplicity of voices in the exhibit that illustrated the underlying racial tensions that played out in New Orleans.

As was noted above, the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) quickly became a target in discussions about racial inequality after Katrina. Media pundits, community leaders, and local citizens spoke out vehemently against the actions of the NOPD and argued they targeted poor African-Americans and routinely used excessive force. One text panel in the “Is This America?” gallery states:

More than a dozen former or current New Orleans police officers have been charged with shooting unarmed civilians or covering up the incidents; several have admitted to concealing the truth in the most infamous of these cases, the shootings of six persons, resulting in two deaths on the Danziger Bridge (Fear and Chaos, New Orleans, LA: The Presbytère, n.d.).

The Danziger Bridge case highlights how racial profiling became common practice among the NOPD. Six days after Katrina struck New Orleans, six unarmed African-Americans were shot on Danziger Bridge, resulting in the death of two men. One of the victims, forty-year-old Ronald Madison, was shot in the back with no evidence of him provoking the NOPD officers. The NOPD fabricated a cover up story in an attempt to justify their actions. In 2011, a year after the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit opened to the public, five police officers were convicted by a federal jury on various charges, ranging from police cover-up to violations of civil rights. This conviction was overturned a little



over two years later due to prosecutorial misconduct. It was not until April 2016 that the trial finally came to an end, with all five former police officers pleading guilty and accepting lesser sentences than they had originally been given.

The longevity of the Danziger Bridge trial was one of the issues exhibit and museum staff encountered when constructing the text panels and narrative of the exhibit. As Leathem stated, “[w]hen we started there were a lot of investigations still going on. Police misconduct...the conversation is still happening and is still up in the air with the new Danziger Bridge trial” (Personal interview, August 26, 2015). When the exhibit opened in 2010, the outcome of this case was not finalized and therefore, the staff had to exercise caution with what they wrote. For instance, they could not write about police misconduct or unjustified shootings while a trial was actively underway. Since the opening of the exhibit, this text panel has been edited as history has unfolded in an effort to provide visitors with a comprehensive view of what happened in New Orleans, as well as give voice to the victims and their families.

While local police actions and misconduct remained prominent in the dialogue about racism and Katrina, the federal government and its response to the devastation cannot be overlooked. From the FEMA trailers that were quickly and unscrupulously built with toxic levels of formaldehyde to the inadequate distribution of recovery monies, it was the federal response that highlighted the deep roots of racism in New Orleans.

Anthropological research has shown that many African Americans in New Orleans expressed a belief that the inadequate response to Hurricane Katrina was an intentional act to “white wash” the city of New Orleans (Regis 1999). These beliefs were amplified when

President George W. Bush and other politicians shifted the conversation away from racism to a focus on poverty. A text panel titled “Race, Class, and Inequality” reads:

As broadcast and print images showed predominantly African American crowds at the Superdome and the Convention center, race, class, and inequality became central themes of media and public discussion in Hurricane Katrina’s aftermath. President George W. Bush addressed those issues directly in his nationally broadcast speech from Jackson Square on September 15 (2005), ‘As all of us saw,’ he said, ‘there is...deep, persistent poverty in this region [with] roots in a history of racial discrimination...We have a duty to confront this poverty with bold action (New Orleans, LA, The Presbytère, n.d.).

The use of the phrasing “addressed those issues directly”, suggests that the President and in a broader sense, the federal government, took notice of the inequality and racism in New Orleans and acted accordingly in their response to the disaster. Interestingly, there is no other mention of what these bold actions proposed by the President were or how they played out. Instead, another text panel in the exhibit discusses how race and class both played a large role in the recovery response:

The Road Home is a federally financed, state-administered program to compensate Louisianans for uninsured damage to their homes after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Applicants could opt to receive a rebuilding grant or sell their property to the program and relocate. While \$8.61 billion had been distributed among 127,792 homeowners by September 2010, critics lambasted the program for its frequently changing rules, conflicting communications, erroneous home valuations, and agonizingly slow process. In 2010 a federal court ruled that the Road Home’s method for determining grants discriminated against African American homeowners. The grants were based on pre-storm values instead of repair costs. Since a house in a black neighborhood had a lower market value than a similar house in a white neighborhood, African Americans were left with fewer dollars to recover building costs (The Road Home Program, New Orleans, LA, The Presbytère, n.d.).

The subsequent scandal of the Road Home program contributed to the notion that the government, at all levels, was intentionally trying to rid the city of its African American

population. Although the exhibit does not explicitly address this pervasive belief through its text panels, many of the musical selections featured in the exhibit do.

Karen Leathem and the other historian working on the exhibit diligently chose the music that would be used in the exhibit. In an effort to showcase the diverse musical traditions found in New Orleans, they curated a list of songs that encompassed the range of emotions felt by those affected by Hurricane Katrina. Strikingly, the belief that the devastation after Katrina, and the subsequent inadequate response, was a calculated move made by those at the highest levels of authority to rid the city of its historically African American population is a prominent theme in the music.

While some point to the Road Home program as evidence of the intentional whitewashing of New Orleans, there is also a persistent belief the levee failures and flooding during Katrina was an intentional action taken by governmental officials. In his song, “Walking Thru New Orleans”, local hip hop artist Y. Luck, shouts, “...home of the flood and a bunch of other Bush jokes/ like when the levees blew/ I mean the levees broke” (Y. Luck, *Walking Thru New Orleans*, 2005). Another song in the exhibit, “We Made It Through That Water” by the Free Agents Brass Band reiterates the belief that the levees were deliberately destroyed: “We know they blew them levees/but we ain’t got no proof” (Free Agents Brass Band, *We Made It Through That Water*, 2006). The lyrics in both of these songs contradict the widely accepted notion that the levee failures were a direct result of the rising water levels and storm surge. Both sets of lyrics also propose that not only were the levee failures deliberate, but that those with authority had intentionally covered up evidence to prove it. These songs are written and performed by local New Orleans

African American musicians and demonstrate how the perception and narrative of Katrina differs along racial lines.

A majority of the text panels in the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* do not explicitly discuss the roles race and class played in the response to Katrina. Instead, as stated previously, the goal of the exhibit team was to highlight individual experiences and stories. The inclusion of songs with such accusatory lyrics suggests the exhibit team understood that the underlying discourse of racism and exclusion of African Americans in the wake of Katrina was an integral part of the Katrina narrative. Given the long-standing history of racism in New Orleans, cultural forms of expression, such as music, have historically served as a means to combat racism and most importantly, unite communities in times of struggle and recovery.

### **The Story of Katrina is About Recovery and Resilience, Not the Disaster**

For many, Hurricane Katrina is defined by the destruction caused to New Orleans and the larger Gulf Coast. Scenes of devastation and destruction are potent and abundant. In the immediate aftermath of the storm, the narrative surrounding New Orleans centered on the merits of rebuilding the city after such large scale devastation. Some referred to New Orleans as an ill-fated city, a desolate place so prone to natural hazards it would be a waste of time, money, and resources to rebuild. News stories often focused on the infeasibility of recovery and rebuilding the city. Taking a different approach, The Presbytère staff chose to set aside the spectatorship of disaster and instead focus on the human side of the storm in the exhibit. By doing so, the exhibit highlighted the recovery and resilience of New Orleans and its residents.

## Resilience and Recovery

When visitors enter The Presbytère to see an exhibit about Katrina, it is hard to anticipate exactly what they expect to see. Many visitors come in with preconceived notions of Katrina and New Orleans. The exhibit staff was faced with the challenge of reorienting visitors' preconceptions about Katrina and New Orleans. They wanted to show that the people of New Orleans have, can, and will recover from any obstacle they are faced with. Focusing on New Orleans as a place of resilience was an important story the museum staff wished to highlight in the exhibit. Leathem stated:

Another goal that became increasingly important was to talk about the future. About how to live more safely with the risk we do face. That's why we named the exhibit *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond*. It's about living with hurricanes...we have lived with them and we will continuously. (Personal interview, August 26, 2015).

This goal to focus on resiliency is apparent throughout the exhibit. Although some of the exhibit content about Katrina is inherently sad, the exhibit staff aimed to consistently evoke the feeling of hope among the exhibit's visitors as opposed to sadness or frustration. The first text panel of the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit reads:

Even as Indians taught early European settlers how to survive off the abundance of Louisiana's natural resources, challenging conditions persistently shaped the way that people lived. Over three centuries, springtime floods, hurricanes, epidemics, poverty, and war tested the residents of this land. But from those who sought their fortunes to those who were brought here in shackles, the people of Louisiana persevered. We adapted to Mississippi River deluges by building levees, to levee failures by creating spillways, and to street flooding by raising our houses. We invented screw pumps to remove excess rainwater and combated yellow fever through modern water treatment and drainage. Through it all, a spirit

of resilience and a profound sense of place has carried us through. (The Spirit of Resilience, New Orleans, LA, The Presbytère, n.d.).

By providing an exhaustive list of the multitude of challenges overcome by the residents of New Orleans throughout history, this text panel immediately challenges the notion that New Orleans is an ill-fated city. It also invites visitors to think about Katrina in a long-term historical context, as opposed to in isolation as a singular event. Hurricanes have shaped the city, but not defined it.

The discourse in the exhibit surrounding New Orleans as a resilient place is subtle but persistent. As visitors enter the last gallery of the exhibit they are again reminded of the historical resiliency of New Orleans:

Resilience means the ability to return to a prior form. But when communities experience trauma, such as a war or natural disaster, rarely do they return precisely to their former way of life. More often, people adapt, debate, innovate, and try new approaches as they reconstruct their lives. They change the game. Hurricanes, wars, epidemics, and such longer-term disasters as environmental degradation have all affected New Orleans and the Gulf Coast over the course of history. As we react to current challenges, including potentially stronger storms and rising sea level, we seek ways to live with the water around us, reduce our risk, and nourish a rich cultural tradition with new energy and new ideas, in the spirit of resilience. (Changing the Game, New Orleans, LA: The Presbytère, n.d.).

This text panel is significant for a couple of reasons. First, it echoes the language used in the first text panel of the exhibit by using the phrase ‘spirit of resilience’. Visitors both enter and exit the exhibit with a text panel that discusses resilience and New Orleans. Additionally, the tone changes midway through the text panel. The beginning of the above text panel is outwardly focused and encourages visitors to think about resilience in terms of their own lives and geographical homes; however, the second half of the text panel uses “we”, suggesting the writers of the text panel are aligning themselves with the people and

community of New Orleans. A similar approach is used in the first exhibit text panel as well. The use of “we” situates the museum staff as members, and representatives, of the larger New Orleans populace.

By focusing on resilience in the final gallery of the exhibit, museum staff hoped that visitors would form an optimistic view about the future of New Orleans. They also wished to inform museum visitors about civic activism and actions that could be taken in New Orleans, or visitors’ own home towns, to ensure the devastation caused by human error after Katrina is not repeated. Leathem, referring to this goal, stated:

Resilience is something built up here over generations. While this was a grand story to tell, we also wanted people to feel that there was hope for the future and they could do something about it. In the final room we give a final look at what people had done since the storm and how people had taken action to avoid that disaster again and an outlook for the future. Managing water, not only for hurricanes but also heavy rainfall, and also more active neighborhood associations and citizens serving as watchdogs and the structural issues that needed action taken to improve (Personal interview, August 26, 2015).

Illuminating how civic engagement is beneficial to communities’ resilience, the last gallery of the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit features a collage of window frames with individual screens fitted within. The screens feature different people talking about the devastation of Katrina but also the future of New Orleans in an expertly synchronized display. In the videos, the future of New Orleans was not defined by the threat of another natural disaster. The future of New Orleans was not dependent upon

increased economic stability or government accountability. Instead, the people passionately spoke about how the future of New Orleans rested in the hands of the city's culture bearers. The Mardi Gras Indians, the second line parades, the gumbo...these are the things that have, and will continue to, define New Orleans.

### **Cultural Resilience and Recovery**

As discussed in Chapter 3, it is widely accepted that the preservation of cultural heritage in times of disaster helps communities reconnect with one another. New Orleans is known for its unique cultural make-up and lively cultural expressions. The physical devastation of New Orleans after Katrina was easily visible in various forms of media, but the cultural devastation was subtler. The Presbytère museum staff were keenly aware of how important the cultural heritage of New Orleans was to the identity of the city and its residents.

When planning the exhibit, the exhibit team quickly realized they could not provide a comprehensive look at New Orleans culture in the exhibit. Lambousy recalled:

A couple of us, generally, we concluded that there was no way we could do a full exhibit on that [culture]. The scope and scale...too large. I think that we concluded we couldn't do justice to it in the exhibit. Rather, it was artifacts and personal items from people or organizations. It's not a look at Louisiana culture but how the storm affected the culture (Personal interview, August 21, 2015).

The cultural pieces included in the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit are intended to showcase the damage to the cultural heritage of New Orleans, but also to remind visitors and locals of the identifying characteristics of New Orleans culture.



Although the culture area is one of the smaller areas in the exhibit, the theme of New Orleans cultural heritage is threaded throughout. When entering the Presbytère, visitors immediately encounter a large Steinway piano in ruins in the lobby. The inclusion and placement of this piano at the entrance to the museum serves as a powerful representation of the devastation of the storm but also the musical history of the area. Leathem stated:

We chose the piano in the lobby to display the potential and actual cultural loss. It is symbolized by Fats Dominos' piano. We always wanted something that would be a statement and symbolized New Orleans culture. He [Fats Dominos] is such a legendary music figure and his song 'Walking Through New Orleans' was played so much in the days and months after the storm. It was a powerfully symbolic song...maybe second only to '1927', a song about the Great Mississippi Flood. It's how many people connected with New Orleans after the storm. There was a musical response (Personal interview, August 26, 2015).

When the exhibit first opened in 2010, a film was projected behind Fats Dominos' piano showing footage of New Orleans cultural expressions such as second-line parades and Mardi Gras. Unfortunately, mechanical issues with the projector and a lack of maintenance funds resulted in the footage no longer being shown. Despite the loss of video footage, the piano still serves as an impactful reminder that music is a defining trait of New Orleans.

### **Musical Recovery**

The importance of music to New Orleans' identity is also evident in the music featured in the exhibit. While some of the songs speak to the discrimination and perceived

whitewashing of New Orleans, many of the songs reflect the historical use of music in New Orleans as a cathartic response to discrimination and catastrophe.

The song “Louisiana 1927” was originally written by Randy Newman and told the story of the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 that displaced hundreds of thousands of people in New Orleans and the larger Mississippi Gulf region. In the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit, a rendition by local artist John Boutté is played. Some of the original lyrics have been changed in Boutté’s version to reflect the impact of Katrina specifically, but the message remains the same. The chorus of the song repeatedly says “[t]hey’re trying to wash us away”, a reminder of the belief that the flooding of New Orleans after Katrina was an intentional and calculated act. In the original version, Randy Newman laments over President Calvin Coolidge’s racially charged response to the 1927 Great Mississippi Flood with the line “President Coolidge came down in a railroad train/With a little fat man with a note-pad in his hand/ The President say, ‘Little fat man isn’t it a shame what the river has done/ To this poor cracker’s land’” (Louisiana 1927, Randy Newman 1974). The line insinuates that President Coolidge was not concerned with the African American, but instead with the white population of the region.

The Katrina version by Boutté instead refers to President George W. Bush but explicitly draws parallels between the two president’s responses. Boutté sings, “President Bush, I mean King Bush y’all/ flew over in his aeroplane/ he had a fat man, a couple of fat men/ with Blackberries in their hands/ Bush said, ‘hey, great job, great job, what the levees have done to these poor Creole’s land’” (Louisiana 1927, John Boutté, 2006). In the Katrina version, President Bush, like President Coolidge, is portrayed as caring little for the African

American and Creole population of Louisiana. Boutté's version implies that President Bush was happy that these people's land and property was destroyed. Additionally, the use of the term "King Bush" in the lyrics affirms President Bush's authority and hints that it was this authority which was used to order the destruction of the levees to flood the streets of New Orleans.

Songs such as "Louisiana 1927" express the frustrations of a long history of discrimination against African Americans; however, the poetic lyrics in many of the songs featured in the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* also serve as a reminder that music, as part of New Orleans' unique cultural identity, has the power to reconnect people in times of chaos. Referring to Y. Luck's song "Walking Thru New Orleans", Leathem said, "Y. Luck uses Fats Dominos' song 'Walking Through New Orleans' and he actually got Fats Domino to appear in the music video. There was a factor of music being a comfort to people in the New Orleans diaspora and a factor in recovery and healing" (Personal Interview, August 26, 2015). Repurposing iconic songs such as "Louisiana 1927" and "Walking Through New Orleans" to tell the story of Katrina symbolizes the strong connection between the past and the present experiences of New Orleans residents. Visitors to the exhibit may not be aware of the historical association of these songs, but for locals who visit the exhibit, the musical selections represent a strong attachment to the city of New Orleans and the historical resilience of the city's population.

Brass band music, an iconic symbol of New Orleans' musical traditions, is also incorporated into the exhibit. New Orleans' brass band music emerged in the late 1800's, during the time of Reconstruction. African Americans and newly freed slaves took up brass

instruments in protest of the militarization of the city after the Civil War. Over the past century, brass band music has continued to be a popular musical form among the African American community in New Orleans, most notably in second-line parades. The history of second-line parades is intrinsically tied to the empowerment of the African American population and the parades themselves have become a symbol of the city's unique and vibrant cultural heritage. Reinforcing the power cultural markers such as second-line parades have as a means of community building, a text panel in the exhibit reads:

As artists, musicians, writers, chefs, and countless others who contribute to the rich culture of south Louisiana and the Mississippi Gulf Coast returned to ruined homes, they found remnants of precious photograph and book collections, fanciful Mardi Gras costumes, historical musical instruments, and a host of other items that infused the present and the past. Second-line parades, for example, served as testimony of an abiding attachment to place, and people gathered to regain a taste of home in such foods as gumbo and red beans and rice. In returning to beloved rituals, they reclaimed a culture. As musician Michael White reflected, 'The most valuable things I had before Katrina were never lost: jazz, the memories and knowledge gained from older musicians, and the strength and wisdom that comes with thirty years of a jazz life. These things will always be with me and forever enrich my soul. (The Threat of Cultural Loss, New Orleans, Louisiana, The Presbytère, n.d.).

This text panel illustrates how culture helps constitute a community's identity, and the return of these cultural expressions after a disaster, such as Katrina, aid in the recovery process. Music was not the only aspect of New Orleans' culture that brought people back together after the hurricane. Alluded to in the above text panel, the return of other markers of culture, such as culinary traditions and Mardi Gras, were paramount to the future and resilience and New Orleans.

## **Cultural and Spiritual First Responders**

The same year that the Presbytere's *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit opened, the television network HBO premiered a new series based on post-Katrina New Orleans called *Tremé*. The show addressed many aspects of life in New Orleans after the hurricane (e.g. poverty, racism, crime, mental illness) but centers on the cultural identity of the city. The opening scene of the series shows one of the main characters enthusiastically jumping out of bed as he hears brass band music playing outside his window, a signal that the first second-line since Katrina was taking place. The scene aptly portrays the importance of cultural heritage to the residents of New Orleans through a colorful and energetic display of music and dancing.

The return of weekly Sunday afternoon second-line parades to New Orleans after Katrina was one of the first indications that the city, and its people, were committed to keeping the city's culture alive. In the early months of 2006, attention turned to Mardi Gras, as locals and tourists alike wondered if the archetypal New Orleans event would take place amidst the devastation. In the spirit of resilience, residents of New Orleans rallied together to ensure that their annual celebration occurred.

When asked about important cultural items in the exhibit, Patrick Burns stated, “[t]he Katrina costumes, the tarp ones. The first Mardi Gras was a relief...it was like okay, Mardi Gras was still going to happen and people were able to embrace the disaster and mockery of the bad” (Personal interview, August 20, 2015). Mardi Gras is characterized by the flamboyant and colorful costumes worn by participants during the celebrations and

the inclusion of blue tarp costumes in the exhibit highlighted how residents made do with what they had. The text panel that accompanies the costumes states:

Responding to the ubiquity of blue tarpaulins ('blue tarps') used to cover damaged roofs, creative residents recycled the material that seemed to sum up the post-Katrina landscape. Artists and designers even created special designs for the Blue Tarp Fashion Show, a benefit for tourism promotion and the America's Wetland coastal restoration campaign held at Antoine's Restaurant in February 2006. Some of the costumes auctioned at the event reappeared a few days later on Mardi Gras, joined by many others who took advantage of the costume trend of the year, satirizing all things Katrina. (Blue Tarp Costumes, New Orleans, LA, The Presbytère, n.d.).

The blue tarp costumes are displayed in a narrow hallway that leads into the last gallery of the exhibit and are adjacent to the "Changing the Game" text panel, quoted above, which defines resilience. In the text panel's definition, it states that "people adapt, debate, innovate, and try new approaches as they reconstruct their lives" (Changing the Game, New Orleans, LA, The Presbytère, n.d.). Whether the placement of the costumes near this text panel was intentional or not, the blue tarp costumes offer a visual display to visitors of how New Orleans residents embodied the spirit of resilience.

Mentioned above, the last gallery of the exhibit features a video that reflects the hope felt by many as cultural traditions reappeared after Katrina. The exhibitions manager discussed the message the exhibit team wanted to imbue on visitors through this video by saying, "[i]t expresses a lot of the heritage of New Orleans. It's not about hurricanes...it's about life and culture before and after Katrina. The closing video with the windows ends the exhibit on a positive note. It says why we are here and why it's important" (Patrick Burns, personal interview, August 20, 2015). Importantly, the video enables New Orleans locals to express the importance of culture in their own words. One woman featured in the

video poetically refers to the culture bearers of Mardi Gras and second-line parades as “spiritual and cultural first responders”. Although it would be impossible to return to a life before Katrina, the continuation of cultural expressions in New Orleans offered a sense of stability amidst the chaos. The importance of culture to the recovery of New Orleans is expressed throughout the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit. From the carefully curated music to the ruined Steinway piano in the museum lobby, visitors are inundated with the message that despite the devastation of Katrina, the city of New Orleans will persist.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter outlined how the Presbytère’s *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit was conceived and constructed. Opposed to focusing solely on the destruction caused by Katrina, the exhibit team strived to bring the humanness of the storm to its visitors. Concentrating on individual’s experiences during Katrina, the exhibit effectively showcases the complexity of the Katrina narrative while inviting visitors to rethink their own perceptions about Katrina and New Orleans. With the threat of natural disaster consistently looming over the New Orleans community, the exhibit defines the city as a place of resilience by placing the events of Katrina within an historical context and highlighting the rich cultural identity of the city.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: VISITOR UNDERSTANDINGS AND EVALUATION**

### **Introduction**

As The Presbytère staff began conceptualizing the *Living With Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit, they reached out to the evaluation firm People, Places, and Design. Between 2006 and 2013, People, Places, and Design conducted audience evaluation of the exhibit in order to better understand New Orleans residents' and tourists' desires, motivations, and reactions to the exhibit. This chapter will briefly outline the findings of the People, Places, and Design evaluation as well as present the findings from my own research at the Presbytère in August 2015. Noted above in Chapter 2, throughout the month of August I collected 200 surveys from visitors to the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit. With August 2015 marking the ten-year anniversary of Katrina, the visitor surveys collected provide longitudinal insight on the effectiveness and visitor understanding of the exhibit, as well as visitors' perceptions on the recovery of New Orleans post-Katrina.

### **Front End Research**

Within a year of Katrina striking New Orleans the Gulf Coast, plans were already being made at The Presbytère for an exhibit about Katrina. In 2006, the evaluation firm People, Places, and Design began to conduct front-end research on a Katrina exhibit with the "to provide information about audience expectations and perceptions...so that the team of people who are planning an exhibition can make decisions with the audiences'



perspectives in mind” (People, Places, and Design 2013, A-3). People, Places, and Design first identified their audience: a mix of locals and tourists. Through intercept interviews at museums in New Orleans, Houston, and Atlanta, the firm contacted a total sample of 252 adults who identify as regular museum visitors. Four focus groups for local residents were also held. The four different focus groups focused on different demographic groups: parents with children under ten, African Americans, people who lived in the suburbs of New Orleans, and people who lost their home, or job, or both as a result of Katrina. The front-end stage of the evaluation process focused on respondents’ motivations, knowledge, and interests as pertaining to an exhibit on Katrina.

The front-end research highlighted the heterozygous nature of people’s motivations, knowledge, and interests of a Katrina exhibit. In summary, the firm found the main motivations cited for the exhibit were to “‘to tell our story’, to find out what really happened, [and] to get hope from information about the city’s recovery” (People, Places, and Design 2013, A-6). While the motivations differ slightly, the firm and museum staff concluded that all of the motivations could be addressed and fulfilled in the proposed exhibit.

Regarding knowledge of Katrina, there was a noticeable split between locals and potential out-of-state tourists. Most locals understandably expressed a breadth of knowledge about Katrina but importantly, also noted they were still uncertain about the details and explanations for what went wrong (People, Places, and Design 2013, A-6). Conversely, potential tourists from out of the state who were not affected by Katrina expressed “substantial misperceptions—such as the extent of evacuation—and informing

them will be an important role for the exhibition” (People, Places, and Design 2013, A-6).

An analysis of people’s interests related to the exhibit content also illuminated several trends. First, the front-end research found a clear interest, especially among local residents, in uplifting and positive content as opposed to depressing images and a focus on the devastation. The front-end research also suggested that people were interested in seeing the human side of the story of Katrina, specifically stories of evacuation and heroic actions.

One of the last major trends that emerged through the focus group aspect of the front-end research was an overt interest among New Orleans locals for the exhibit to contribute to a community dialogue and critique of the recovery process of the city. Topics such as redevelopment, job loss, civic activism, and environmental and wetland depletion, were all brought up in focus groups as important topics that should be addressed in the exhibit content or through supplementary programming (People, Places, and Design 2013, A-10). It was also found that supplementary programming efforts could aid in the community recovery of New Orleans by facilitating the opportunity “to hear what other people are going through, to know that you’re not the only one, to validate your experiences and opinions” (People, Places, and Design 2013, A-10). The social role of museums as places of healing is a well-researched topic and is discussed in detail above in Chapter 3.

## Storyline Testing

After conducting front-end research, the evaluation firm began Storyline Testing in 2007. In the Storyline Testing phase of the evaluation, 138 people were shown a preview of the exhibit by museum staff at various museums, coffee shops, and other sites around New Orleans (People, Places, and Design 2013, A-12). Similar to the front-end research, it was found that respondents preferred positive oriented words such as ‘resilience’ and ‘lessons’ in exhibit titles and content. However, when interviewed about a proposed gallery titled “Reinventing Our World”, which focused on the future of New Orleans, only approximately 20% of respondents expressed “hopeful thoughts and recognition of the New Orleans’ resilience. For most, however, the rosier picture in this area meets a skeptical and worried mindset” (People, Places, and Design 2013, A-14). Interestingly, respondents indicated an eagerness to learn about the rebuilding of the city and people’s lives when interviewed about another proposed gallery titled “What Have We Learned”. These seemingly conflicting findings suggested to museum staff personal tangible stories about recovery and resilience were better received than an overarching narrative of the entire city’s recovery.

A major topic that arose in Storyline Testing was the desire for a discussion on politics to be present in the exhibit, specifically a discussion about how local, state, and federal politicians failed the people and the city of New Orleans. The urge to blame politicians and other culpable parties for the devastation in the aftermath of Katrina is stronger among visitors to New Orleans than it is for local residents “suggesting that perhaps most locals have worked through whom to blame or need to get beyond blame

and just get on with their lives” (People, Places, and Design 2013, A-16). However, when questioned about the emotional impact of the exhibit, local and tourist responses were alike in many ways, but not all. Both groups anticipating feelings of ‘hope’ and ‘sadness’ in reaction to seeing an exhibit on Katrina; however, “residents are more likely to also say they will feel ‘anger’ and visitors are more likely to add ‘respect’” (People, Places, Design 2013, A-17). The inclusion of ‘anger’ in residents’ responses could be interpreted as being in opposition to the above conclusion proposed in the People, Places, and Design report that locals have moved on from negative emotions such as blame.

While interest in identifying culpable parties post-Katrina differed between local and tourist respondents, both groups agreed that the exhibit should feature a science element. From the data collected in Storyline Testing, it was found that “[t]he science area evoked strong interest in learning about science topics related to Hurricane Katrina and the aftermath” such as how hurricanes form, the role of environmental degradation in the disaster, and why the levees failed (People, Places, and Design 2013, A-13). The scientific explanation of Katrina and the subsequent devastation coupled with the multitude of individual’s experiences proved to best reflect the motivations, interests, and desires of both local and tourist audiences.

The variety of reactions to the proposed storyline of a Katrina exhibit illustrated the complexity of the story of Katrina. It was understood that visitors to a Katrina exhibit would arrive with their own preconceptions and the museum staff was tasked with constructing an exhibit that challenged these preconceptions without presenting an authoritative discourse of “this is what happened”. Through the Storyline Testing, it

became clear to the museum staff that a Katrina exhibit needed to be inclusive and incorporate the many different realities of Katrina as experienced by locals. Themes which emerged during Storyline Testing such as forward-thinking and positive-oriented rhetoric, hope and recovery, as well as individuals' stories came to fruition in the the final construction of the exhibit ultimately influenced the decision to name the exhibit *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond*.

### Longitudinal Study and Major Findings

From 2007 to 2013, the evaluation firm continued to conduct research on The Presbytère's Katrina exhibit. As exhibit construction moved through various stages, the evaluation firm People, Places, and Design researched visitors' reactions, perceptions, and understanding of the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit. The final stage of the exhibit evaluation was a longitudinal study which was designed to provide insight into whether or not the exhibit impacted people's lives. The study paid particular attention to five main topics:

perception of benefit for the community; perception of benefit for people who saw the exhibition, understanding the influences on, and effects from, hurricanes/Katrina; whether people talked about the exhibition with others, and why; and interest in the science associated with hurricanes (People, Places, and Design 2013, A-42).

The longitudinal study was conducted using telephone interviews of people who had seen the exhibit in the previous two years. Through the longitudinal study, it was found that the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit is a powerfully emotional and memorable exhibit for both local and non-local museum visitors alike. More than half of participants in the telephone interviews stated they "recalled the experience as

‘emotionally beneficial for me’” (People, Places, and Design 2013, A-43). Similarly, a majority of participants also said they believed the exhibit taught them important lessons about disaster preparedness and recovery that they have, or could, apply to their own life (People, Places, and Design 2013). Half of the longitudinal study participants also expressed that in their opinion, the exhibit was beneficial to the New Orleans community emotionally, as well as in terms of increased knowledge of disaster management and preparedness.

The scientific elements in the exhibit also proved to be successful. Despite concerns of presenting scientific information in a history museum, results from the longitudinal study found that “[m]ore than half of the people interviewed also reported an increased interest in the science behind hurricanes as a result of seeing this exhibition” (People, Places, and Design 2013, A-43). Local New Orleans residents were also found to have increased understanding of two of the major STEM topics in the exhibit (wetlands and levee engineering). The numerous interactive stations featured in the science gallery are credited with forming long-lasting memories and more complex understandings of the science of hurricanes, with a third of study participants recalling a specific fact or topic they learned by visiting the exhibit.

The longitudinal study and evaluation of the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit, while exhaustive, provided a framework for future research to be conducted. With a heavy focus on the scientific aspects of the exhibit, little qualitative data was collected in the longitudinal study regarding the human-side of the exhibit. The findings reported from People, Places, and Design showed that the exhibit was perceived

as beneficial to visitors as well as the larger New Orleans community. However, participants were not questioned about how the exhibit did, or did not, influence their perceptions about New Orleans and the city's recovery post-Katrina.

### **Visitor Surveys**

Building off of the framework provided by the People, Places, and Design report, I designed a visitor survey that focused on museum visitors' reactions to the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit and their perception of New Orleans ten years after Katrina. Utilizing a combination of Likert scales and open-ended questions, the visitor survey was completed by 200 people as they immediately exited the exhibit. Distributing the surveys directly outside of the Katrina exhibit was a methodological decision, as the Presbytère houses another exhibit upstairs that I did not want to influence participants' answers.

#### **Who are the Visitors?**

Before asking questions related specifically to the exhibit, participants were presented with two questions that were intended to provide insight into where museum visitors were coming from and their familiarity with New Orleans before Katrina. The data collected from these two questions was later taken into account to evaluate if participant's geographic distance and familiarity with New Orleans prior to August 29, 2005 influenced their other survey responses.

The first question on the visitor survey asked participants to provide their zip code or country of origin. Out of 200 survey respondents, only fourteen were considered "locals", which I defined as living within 15 miles of New Orleans. Even if the definition

is widened to include anyone living within 50 miles of New Orleans or any other Gulf Coast area directly impacted by Katrina, the number only increases to 32 which comprises only 16% of survey respondents. Of the remaining respondents, 28 (14%) were international tourists and 140 (70%) were out-of-state tourists. The second question asked if respondents had visited New Orleans prior to Hurricane Katrina. Forty-one percent of survey participants said they had visited New Orleans prior to Katrina, while 59% had not. These results are significant, as it highlights that while the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit was heavily influenced by input from the New Orleans community, it is mostly tourists with limited familiarity with the city who actually visit the exhibit.

#### Perceptions of Culture and Recovery

The third and fifth questions on the visitor survey utilized a simple Likert Scale and asked survey participants to select from “yes”, “somewhat”, and “no” as their responses. Although “no” was an option for both survey questions, it was only chosen once out of two hundred surveys and therefore is not reflected in the results. These two questions were designed to evaluate visitor’s understandings and reaction to two themes in the exhibit: culture and recovery.

The third question asked visitors if they thought the exhibit showcased the cultural heritage of New Orleans. One hundred and fifty-five respondents (78%) selected “yes”, while forty-four (22%) selected “somewhat”. Only one survey respondent selected “no” in response to this question. Interestingly, the respondent who selected “no” also wrote on the survey that they did not know anything about New Orleans and had arrived



to the city two hours prior. Given that surveys were distributed to museum visitors before they had a chance to view the Mardi Gras exhibit, located on the second floor of the Presbytère, and that a majority of survey participants had not been to New Orleans prior to Katrina, it is impressive that 78% percent of respondents believed the exhibit showcased the cultural heritage of New Orleans, as it is one of the less salient themes present throughout the exhibit.

The fifth question on the visitor survey asked if the exhibit showcased the recovery of New Orleans. The responses to this question were similar to the above question, with 144 (72%) participants selecting “yes” and 56 (28%) selecting “somewhat”. It is interesting that fewer people believe the exhibit explicitly showcased the recovery than the cultural heritage of New Orleans. As discussed in the previous chapter, as well as above, resilience and recovery were major themes the museum staff wanted the exhibit to address. As opposed to the cultural heritage theme, discussions and references to the recovery of New Orleans are overt throughout the exhibit. The responses to the above two questions are given more meaning when analyzed alongside the results of the fourth survey question.

#### Word Association

The fourth question on the visitor survey arguably provided the most insight into visitor’s perceptions regarding New Orleans’ recovery after Hurricane Katrina. This question asked visitors to list one word that would describe the character of New Orleans. Given that it was an open-ended question, responses varied greatly among the two hundred collected surveys. Despite this variability, three words were unequivocally listed

most frequently: unique, vibrant, and resilient. These three words account for 32 percent of the total word responses and therefore, necessitate further analysis and discussion.

### **Unique**

Out of two hundred collected visitor surveys, sixteen respondents (8%) described the character of New Orleans as “unique”. While it is impossible to know how the respondents arrived at the decision to write unique, the frequency of unique as a word to describe the character of New Orleans is significant. Colloquial use of the word unique implies singularity, rarity, or remarkability.

First used at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Oxford English Dictionary defines unique primarily as “of which there is only one; single, sole, solitary” (Oxford English Dictionary Online 2016). Applying this meaning to the city of New Orleans suggests respondents view the city as unparalleled and thus, cannot be replaced or reproduced. A key theme throughout the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit is the importance of rebuilding New Orleans despite the geographic propensity for disaster. Perceiving and understanding New Orleans as a unique and irreplaceable location further strengthens the argument for reconstruction while simultaneously highlighting the importance of the city’s historical and cultural attributes which define its character.

### **Vibrant**

Similar to unique, the word “vibrant” was used by sixteen respondents (8%) who completed visitor surveys. While the original meaning of vibrant in the 16<sup>th</sup> century references agitation and a heightened emotional state, today the word has acquired a more

positive connotation (Oxford English Dictionary Online 2016). In vernacular use, the word ‘vibrant’ conjures a feeling of excitability and paints a picture of the city of New Orleans as teeming with life and energy.

Describing the character of New Orleans with the word ‘vibrant’ is significant in that it designates the city as a place of life and energy, as opposed to destruction and despair. In the immediate aftermath, it appeared that New Orleans would be forever defined by the entropy that was Katrina. As discussed in the previous chapter, the team at The Presbytère wanted the exhibit to focus on the future, not the past, of the city. Describing New Orleans as vibrant insinuates that visitors’ perceptions of New Orleans are not characterized by the images that littered mass media ten years prior. Like the use of “unique”, the frequency of “vibrant” as a response to the fourth survey question offers a forward-thinking view of New Orleans and emphasizes the inherent vitality of the city.

### **Resilient**

From the outset of this research project, particular focus was placed upon the concept of resilience. A goal of the research was to examine how the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* impacted and contributed to the perception of New Orleans as a place of resilience. Outlined in detail in Chapters 2 and 4, I sought to understand how the concept of resilience was encoded in the exhibit and to evaluate if this concept was being identified and understood by museum visitors.

Chapter four detailed how resilience was represented and displayed throughout the exhibit, but visitor survey responses offered deeper insight into how effectively the exhibit showcased the concept. Accounting for 16 percent of word responses, by far, the

word “resilient” was most commonly provided by survey respondents as the word they would use to describe the character of New Orleans. Resilience has been defined in a multitude of ways and has been applied to various contexts. Despite this variability, common usage of the word implies a basic ability to adapt and rebound or return to a prior form. Although the application of this word to a geographical location or community is a relatively recent linguistic shift, only occurring in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the original meaning persists.

With “resilient” being the most oft-cited word in visitor surveys by a wide margin, coupled with the concept of resilience being of significant interest in this research project, I chose to analyze these results further through a quantitative lens. I sought to examine how geographic distance from New Orleans could be a factor in these survey responses. Using the data provided in the first question of the survey, I separated the two hundred surveys into “local” and “non-local” categories, defining “local” as anyone living within 50 miles of New Orleans or another coastal region directly affected by Hurricane Katrina. In sum, I identified 32 “locals” and 168 “non-locals”. I then calculated the frequency of “resilient” and “other-word” responses among these populations to identify if there was a significant difference in frequencies.

Four “locals” and twenty-eight “non-locals” wrote “resilient” on the visitor surveys. Among the local population, resilient had a frequency of .125 (12.5%), while among the non-locals, there was a frequency of .167 (16.7%). This shows that the non-locals were slightly more likely to describe New Orleans as a place of resilience.

Although the visitor surveys were collected using random sampling, there were far fewer

local visitors to the museum than non-locals. Understanding the numerical discrepancy between the two groups, I also wanted to compare the results from the visitor surveys, the sample population, with a comparison random population to see if there was a significant difference in frequencies. In order to do this, I conducted a simple z-test.

Sample population:

	Resilient	Other word
Locals	4	28
Non-locals	28	140

Comparison against random:

	Resilient	Other word
Locals	5.12	26.88
Non-locals	26.88	141.12

The calculated value of z for both locals and non-local's "resilient" word responses (-.60 and .23 respectively) falls below the critical value of z (1.96 with alpha=.05). Therefore, I must conclude there is not a significant difference in frequency of "resilient" word response data between the sample population of locals and non-locals when compared to word response data from a random population of locals and non-locals.

The numbers shown above demonstrate that the character of New Orleans is described as resilient both internally and externally, as resilient was the most frequent response to the survey question among both local and non-local respondents. However, with the non-local population having a slightly higher frequency of "resilient" among survey responses, it can be surmised that geographic distance from New Orleans had an impact, be it minimal, on the survey response data. The data also illustrates that the frequency of "resilient" among the survey data is not a coincidence, as there is not a significant difference between the sample population and a random population. These

results can be interpreted to mean that the theme, or message, of resilience throughout the exhibit is understood by visitors to the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit. In a similar vein to “unique” and “vibrant”, the use of “resilient” as the main descriptor suggests museum visitors perceive New Orleans as a place that has not only persevered, but continuously adapted and thrived, despite an exhaustive history of disaster.

### **Conclusion**

The museum staff at The Presbytère went through a lengthy process when creating and constructing the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit. From the beginning, there was an understanding that community input was imperative for the exhibit to benefit the local population and adequately portray the story of Katrina to a large tourist audience. Informed through community outreach and the comprehensive audience evaluation done by People, Places, and Design, museum staff built the exhibit with explicit goals and themes. The goal of the visitor surveys collected in August 2015 was to assess how effectively these themes were presented and understood by museum visitors. As outlined above, it was evident during the audience evaluation research that locals wanted an exhibit about Katrina to be focused on the future and have positive-oriented rhetoric that would reflect the strong cultural and historical attachment to place felt by residents of New Orleans, as well as feelings of hope and recovery. Additionally, community involvement illuminated how the story of Katrina was complex and individuals’ experiences varied greatly. Data from the visitor surveys has shown that visitors undoubtedly believe that the exhibit effectively showcases both the cultural

character and recovery of the city. The fact that a sizeable percentage of 200 respondents volunteered ‘unique’, ‘vibrant’, and ‘resilient’ as descriptors with significant frequency, accounting for almost a third of total survey responses, reflects the effectiveness of the exhibit. The data extracted from the visitor surveys and outlined above is evidence that not only does the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit encapsulate the mosaic that was Katrina, but that visitors also leave the exhibit with a favorable and positive perception of the recovery and future of New Orleans.

## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Museums often take on various roles in any community. Whether it be an informal educational lesson on local history and culture for community members or a place of touristic interest, the importance of museums to the identity of a community is increasingly being realized, both within and outside of academia. Given the centrality of museums in a community's identity, it is unsurprising that after man-made or natural disasters, museums have also been charged with taking on a role as a place of refuge, reflection, and recovery. This research project has focused on the nexus among museums, disasters, and community resilience, using The Presbytère's exhibit *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* as a case study, looking specifically at what role the exhibit has played in the promotion of the overall image of New Orleans and her residents as a community of resilience.

Using New Museology and Critical Heritage Theory as my guiding theoretical methodologies, I sought to examine questions concerning the representation and inclusion of community voices in the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit. Both New Museology and Critical Heritage Theory argue that museums have an increasing need to decentralize curatorial authority in exhibit construction and content development in an effort to increase community engagement and inclusivity. In doing so, communities are empowered to define their shared identity and heritage internally as



opposed to an authorized heritage discourse, which is often externally constructed. Sharing curatorial authority also enables source communities to play an active role in how their identity and heritage are represented within museums. These shifts in museological practice speak to the augmented awareness of the social roles of museums in communities and highlight the need for museums to strive for inclusive and culturally conscious representation in their exhibits.

This project has also focused extensively on the concept of resilience and how the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit represented the resilience of New Orleans in a post-Katrina context. The concept of community resilience, developed in the field of Psychology, asserts that community resilience is a dynamic process defined by the ability of a community "...to face a threat, survive and bounce back, or, perhaps more accurately, bounce forward into a normalcy newly defined by the disaster related losses and changes" (Cox and Perry 2011, 395-396). It is important to note that community resilience cannot be essentialized or singularly defined; rather, resilience is characterized through individual community's identities, cultural heritage, and environment. While expressed in a multitude of ways, there are three fundamental facets of community resilience: shared sense of community, strong attachment to place, and the recognition and implementation of disaster mitigation measures.

Building off of the principles outlined by these methodologies, I analyzed how the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit represented the New Orleans community, promoted the city's unique cultural heritage, and incorporated the heterogeneity of Katrina experiences. In addition to spot observations and interviews with

current and former Presbytère staff whom worked on the exhibit, I also critically analyzed textual and audio elements in the exhibit to gain insight into the narrative encoded within the exhibit. In an effort to further explore visitors' understandings of the exhibit content and narrative, as well as how the exhibit represents the resilience of New Orleans, I distributed surveys to visitors exiting the exhibit.

### **Summary of Findings**

When disasters strike, much attention is placed on the entropy that inevitably emerges in the affected community. When Katrina struck New Orleans and the larger Gulf Coast region, images of the destruction quickly littered the media. Moreover, the people of New Orleans who remained in the city to ride out the hurricane were often characterized as destitute and in many cases, violent and unruly. The narrative of Katrina presented in the media in 2005 was one of tragedy, chaos, and catastrophic loss. In a sharp departure from this trope, the staff at the Presbytère museum sought to construct an exhibit that spoke to the many nuances of the Katrina experience and focused on the recovery, not the destruction, of their beloved Crescent City.

From the early stages of exhibit development, museum staff understood the importance of incorporating local understandings and stories into their Katrina exhibit. Informed by extensive front-end research conducted by the evaluation firm People, Places, and Design, it became evident that the story of Katrina was filtered through neighborhood, race, age, and social and economic class. These political undertones of the Katrina narrative are carefully addressed in exhibit elements such as text panels, musical selections, and listening station kiosks. Text panels throughout the exhibit, but especially

in the “Is This America?” gallery, shine light on the frustration felt by many New Orleans residents regarding the incompetent recovery response by the local, state, and federal government bodies as well as the inaccurate media portrayals of what was happening in the city.

Curated musical selections played throughout the exhibit illuminate the spectrum of emotions felt by citizens of New Orleans and also situate the hurricane’s aftermath within both a present day and an historical context, by connecting Katrina and previous disasters with deep-seated beliefs of systematic ostracization of the city’s minority communities. The text panels and musical selections illustrate how the Katrina experience cannot be singularly defined; rather, the story and narrative of Katrina is inherently multi-faceted.

In order to effectively represent the multiplicity of experiences, museum staff incorporated listening station kiosks where recorded oral histories from survivors are coupled with a montage of photographic images, which provide both an auditory and visual account of New Orleans in the immediate aftermath of Katrina from a variety of perspectives. Incorporating these oral histories and local understandings of the Katrina narrative into the exhibit empowers the New Orleans community to define and take ownership of their difficult heritage by literally giving voice to those affected by Katrina. The listening station kiosks further demonstrate that despite a long history of disaster and tragedy, the Crescent City and her residents have an ingrained spirit of resilience, which has continuously propelled New Orleans forward, at times against all odds. This propensity for resilience is noticeably expressed in the unique and rich cultural heritage

of the city. The *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit showcases the city's cultural heritage and its connection to community resilience through objects such as the Mardi Gras blue tarp costumes and Fats Domino's piano, which signify the importance of cultural heritage to the city's identity and tell a story of continued perseverance and resilience.

As noted above, a shared sense of community, a strong attachment to place, and the ability to implement disaster risk reduction measures are hallmarks of community resilience. The Mardi Gras tarp costumes in particular demonstrate community resilience and the ability of the New Orleans community to adapt to their newly defined 'normal' by appropriating blue tarps, a symbol of the devastation of Katrina, and altering them for use in Mardi Gras, a fundamental symbol of New Orleans culture. In doing so, the costumes represent the shared sense of community and attachment to place felt by New Orleans residents post-Katrina and a commitment to the continuance of cultural mainstays despite the hurricane.

The video in the last gallery of the exhibit references spiritual and cultural first responders as imperative to the recovery of the city. Like the blue tarp costumes, the return of second-line parades, Mardi Gras Indians, and jazz musicians reinforced social cohesion, community identity, and the attachment to New Orleans. This last video also calls on community members to increase their civic engagement by encouraging the implementation of disaster mitigation measures, such as increased efforts to protect the wetlands and overall environmental landscape of the Gulf Coast region.

Analysis of the exit surveys revealed that visitors believe the exhibit effectively promotes the city's cultural heritage and recovery. Word association data also demonstrated the visitors generally hold a positive view of New Orleans, as almost a third of the two hundred respondents volunteered 'unique', 'vibrant', and 'resilient' as words that described the cultural character of the city. These descriptors also signify that visitors understood the overarching themes of forward-thinking and resilience embedded within the exhibit content.

### **Significance**

The significance of this research lies in how it speaks to the ways in which a museum can be a significant component of a community's recovery after a natural disaster by representing and promoting the cultural heritage and identity of the city. This project has shown that The Presbytère seems to have achieved its defined goals of representing the human-ness of the Katrina story and the resilience of the New Orleans community. Using visitor surveys as an indicator, The Presbytère successfully challenged museum visitors' preconceptions surrounding Katrina and New Orleans by highlighting and giving voice to the multiplicity of locals' experiences. The story of Katrina is not singular; rather, it is a heterogeneous compilation of tales of tragedy, loss, compassion, and most importantly, resilience. The *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit systematically addresses themes of politics, racial inequality, cultural loss, and environmental climate change as they relate to Katrina, simultaneously educating visitors and dismantling the perception of New Orleans as an ill-fated city.

This research also highlights the need to incorporate the New Museology into museological practice, especially in regards to exhibits that deal with difficult heritages or tragedy. A central tenant of New Museology is the need for museum professionals to include their source community in every stage of exhibit design and content development, thus decentralizing curatorial authority. Although community collecting efforts and extensive front-end research served as a way to incorporate New Orleans locals' input in The Presbytère's exhibit, a strong curatorial voice was also present.

The limited community engagement in the development of the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* is a result of several factors. Being a state-run museum, The Presbytère staff had to carefully navigate the political landscape of the Katrina narrative. One example of this was the inability to overtly designate blame on local, state, and federal government responses. With a lack of adequate exhibit funding for their exhibit, The Presbytère staff eventually secured a sizeable grant from the National Science Foundation. External grants such as the one The Presbytère received from the National Science Foundation often dictate exhibit content. In the case of the *Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond* exhibit, the NSF grant meant that the exhibit team had to devote a sizeable portion of the exhibit to the scientific aspects of Katrina.

The story of Katrina is still unfolding, as demonstrated by the Danziger Bridge trial and thus, museum staff had to exercise caution when writing text panels. Although many of the text panels in the "Is This America?" gallery point to the social, racial, and political issues of the Katrina experience, the text panels do not necessarily encapsulate the complexity of the lived reality of those affected by Katrina. Instead, the nuances of

these experiences are expressed through the video listening stations and musical selections. Although the selection process of audio and visual elements of the exhibit was decided by staff of The Presbytère as opposed to source community members, these elements present the many competing and conflicting narratives of Katrina to museum visitors.

The limitations of a museum's ability to engage in comprehensive community collaboration is not unique to The Presbytère. Political structures, lack of adequate funding, and complex narratives often put museums in a precarious situation that necessitates and propagates curatorial hegemony and authority. As museums continue to strive to fulfill social roles in their communities and incorporate inclusive New Museology practices, it is paramount that they also become increasingly autonomous from political and economic structures and restrictions. Along with the proliferation of natural and man-made disasters in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the need for museums and other cultural institutions to reiterate their respective communities' identity grows. Anthropological and other social science literature has shown that in times of crisis, a cohesive identity serves as a significant factor in determining the ability of a community to recover and rebound. Constructing exhibits and implementing supplementary programming that promotes a unique cultural identity offers stability to effected communities and renews attachment to place. When communities establish a strong identity and sense of place, residents are more likely to be invested in the recovery and resilience of their homes in the wake of disaster.

From a broader perspective, in a globalizing world that is fraught with cultural misunderstandings, distrust, and divisiveness, museums have the opportunity to remind us all of a collective heritage. Similar to the story of Katrina, the story of humans is one that is defined by an insatiable desire to adapt and persevere in the face of hardship. Increasingly, museums have become places of memorialization and remembrance, a shift that necessitates culturally conscientious museological work that does not avoid difficult heritages or events, but instead highlights mistakes from our past, initiates a dialogue on solutions for our future, and encourages museum visitors to examine the world through the lens of resilience.



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## APPENDIX A

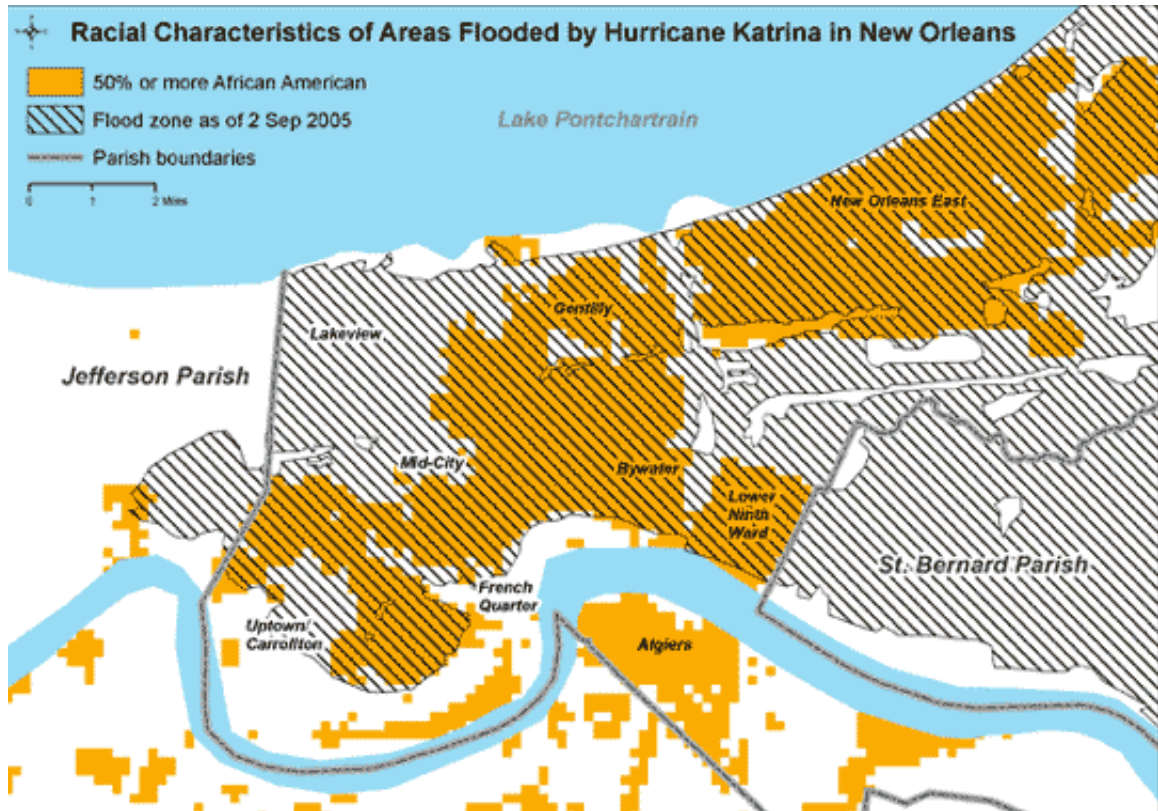


Figure 1: African Americans were 67 percent of the total population of New Orleans, but 75 percent of the population in the flooded areas. (Courtesy Lynn Seirup/CIESIN)