New Orleans, Invisible City

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the hidden, suppressed elements of New Orleans leading up to and immediately following Hurricane Katrina. The article is juxtaposed with excerpts from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* in order to provide a lens through which to ask questions not typically raised by government officials, city planners, and science and technology experts. This uncovers aspects of New Orleans that must not be overlooked in the rebuilding process. If policy, culture, and technology render aspects of New Orleans invisible, then only by revealing these aspects can one ascertain the truth of the city.

KEYWORDS

Katrina, Calvino, rebuilding, technology, simulacrum, revealing

Introduction

In Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1974), merchant-explorer Marco Polo describes to Kublai Kahn all the cities that make up Kahn's vast empire. As Calvino's narrative unfolds, Kahn realizes that Marco Polo's astonishing reports are actually all tales of Venice, Polo's distant homeland. For Calvino, Venice is an invisible city, not because it cannot be seen, but because it does not *exist*. Venice is not one city, but an infinite number of cities, with an infinite number of pasts, presents, and futures. The faces of the city are limited only by Marco Polo's ability to recognize them, name them, commit them to memory, catalog their citizens, their gods and demons, their desires and fears.

After the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina (in August of 2005), the country has become aware of another invisible city: New Orleans. Perhaps all cities are invisible in the way that Calvino's Venice is invisible; perhaps all cities contain an infinite number of invisible cities within. Perhaps in order to make a city less invisible, it is necessary to begin to disclose, to dis-cover, some of its hidden identities.

The United States is in the process of defining New Orleans—committing her to memory and preparing to restore her to life. How does the New Orleans that exists in the national imagination correspond to

the historical city, the economic city, the cultural city? How can we reconstruct her form unless we can recognize her multiform identities? This essay takes up Calvino's work of literature as a lens through which we may begin to explore the invisible cities of New Orleans. This re-visioning is ventured not as a mere thought experiment, but as an attempt to approach these issues from the standpoint of the humanities, with insights from literature, history, philosophy, and myth. Such an approach is essential in order to ask questions that will perhaps not be asked by those disciplines—the disaster relief officials, the city planners, the economists, the scientists and engineers—in charge of the rebuilding project. At the beginning of this immense task, the country finds itself in a unique position. There exists an opportunity (and, indeed, a responsibility) to engage in conversation across professional specializations, across political and economic interests, across racial and class divisions. For, after all, who determines the truth of a city? New Orleans is not the purview of any one class, any one industry, any one policymaker, city official, or urban planner. It is a city of complex relationships between nature and technology, black and white, rich and poor, industry and folk culture. Any effort to consider the city in a meaningful way must be prepared to examine its many faces from a variety of perspectives. The truth of New Orleans will be found in the hidden, the unlikely, the ambivalent, the invisible.

Cities and Memory

> In Maurilia, the traveler is invited to visit the city and, at the same time, to examine some old post cards that show it as it used to be: the same identical square with a hen in the place of the bus station, a bandstand in the place of the overpass, two young ladies with white parasols in the place of the munitions factory. If the traveler does not wish to disappoint the inhabitants, he must praise the postcard city and prefer it to the present one, though he must be careful to contain his regret at the changes within definite limits …
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> Beware of saying to them that sometimes different cities follow one another on the same site and under the same name, born and dying without knowing one another, without communication among themselves. At times even the names of the inhabitants remain the same, and their voices' accent, and also the features of the faces; but the gods who live beneath names and above places have gone off without a word and outsiders have settled in their place. It is pointless to ask whether the new ones are better or worse than the old, since there is no connection between them, just as the old post cards do not depict Maurilia as it was, but a different city which, by chance, was called Maurilia, like this one. (Calvino 1974: 30–31)

New Orleans has been a postcard city for some time. The Big Easy is replete with postcard images—Mardi Gras beads draped around every neck, jazz musicians on every street corner, revelers in the French Quarter, the mansions of the stately Garden District. Of course, some images don't make it to the postcards. Will these discarded pictures—the homeless in the Ninth Ward, the condemned houses, the street gangs—exist in the New Orleans of memory? Will the invisible elements of the city's past remain invisible in the city's future? Or by clinging to the postcard images, will the country rebuild a city that never existed in the first place?

According to the New Orleans Convention and Visitors' Bureau, New Orleans hosted 10.1 million visitors in 2004, and visitor spending brings in $5 billion of annual revenue. The relatively small city is the nation's fifth most popular convention destination. Eighty-one thousand residents (44% of the city's workforce) are employed in hospitality industry jobs. The effects of tourism on the city cannot be overestimated. Travelers to New Orleans are treated to a smorgasbord of sights, sounds, and smells that is an essential part of the New Orleans experience. The rich cultural history of the region lives on in the easygoing atmosphere, the colorful Creole accents, the spicy Cajun food, and the vibrant music scene; however, that is just one side of the city.

Just before Katrina devastated the region, the racial makeup of New Orleans was 67.25 percent African American and 28.05 percent white (with the remaining 4.7% distributed among Asian, Hispanic, and other ethnic groups). According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the median household income in the city was $27,133, compared to $41,994 nationally. The per capita income for a white person in the city was $31,971; the per capita income for a black or African American person was $11,332. The percentage of city residents living below the poverty level was 18.4% (35% of black residents). Twelve percent of the households in New Orleans had no car.

Why were buses not available to evacuate the city's indigent population in the days immediately following Hurricane Katrina? This question has been asked by many, but official answers remain unsatisfactory. Census data is widely available—is it possible government officials and relief agencies were unaware that 160,000 people were stranded in the city without transportation? When city officials refused offers of food and water from the Red Cross, explaining that they did not want to "encourage" people to stay in the city, why did the reality of the situation not command the attention of the country? As many as 20,000 people took refuge at the New Orleans convention

center, but Federal Emergency Management Agency director, Michael Brown, claimed in a CNN interview to have no "factual" knowledge of its use as a shelter until the afternoon of 1 September 2005—three days after the hurricane (CNN 2005). Before they were abandoned in the New Orleans Superdome and convention center (or left looting on the streets or dying in their homes), did these individuals exist at all in the American consciousness?

As evocative as the images on her postcards are the various appellations history has bestowed on New Orleans: the Big Easy, the Crescent City, the Bayou City, the City that Care Forgot. What names should the city be given now? The Drowning City? The Abandoned City? The Resurrected City?

Jean Baudrillard identifies four phases of the *image:* one that reflects a basic reality; one that masks or perverts a basic reality; one that masks the absence of a basic reality; and one that bears no relation to any reality, and is its own pure simulacrum. "When the real is no longer what it used to be," he writes, "nostalgia assumes its full meaning" (Baudrillard 1994: 6). The images of New Orleans are neither true nor false; they take on identities of their own as nostalgic references to a city that exists solely in the mind. I do not suggest that, in New Orleans, there was no culture or beauty or festive atmosphere—those were all important aspects of a vital, dynamic city. But the city in the minds of many Americans, especially after one of the most devastating disasters in recorded U.S. history, does not depend on the reality (or, rather, the many realities) of the city itself.

It is necessary to recognize here that, although those who are displaced rightly mourn the loss of their homes, their livelihoods, and their city, the question of rebuilding must acknowledge and confront the hard truth that the nation may place a greater price on the loss of what New Orleans stood for rather than what New Orleans actually was: a complex and often troubled city. The simulacrum—the postcard city—is not without value. But neither is it the whole story.

The Big Easy has a somber history. In the early eighteenth century, the region was unproductive, hostile to agriculture and settlement. Colonists built earthen levees to attempt to cope with the Mississippi River's frequent flooding, but they managed only to eke out a subsistence living raising livestock and growing rice. In 1719, the fortunes of the city changed when two slave ships landed at Dauphine Island; slave labor built the city of New Orleans. For a century and a half, slaves constructed thousands of miles of levees, cleared and drained swampland, and planted hundreds of acres of profitable crops, completely transforming the region. Without that transformation, no city

would ever have come to occupy such an unlikely place (Morris 2000: 33).

The legacy of racial and class differences in New Orleans is alive and well. The sections of the city that were hardest hit by Hurricane Katrina were the poorest parts of town—primarily black neighborhoods, where the elevation was as much as 14 feet below sea level. The residents of those neighborhoods lived in a New Orleans that was completely foreign to many visitors of the postcard city.

A traveler to New Orleans expects to see certain scenes, certain images, and the city will almost always comply. Naturally, the traveler will not ask whose hands cleared the land he or she stands on, or built the levees that have contained the mighty river for so many years. The traveler will walk through the postcard city—the French Quarter and the Garden District, the jazz bars and high-rise hotels. He or she has no reason to wonder what the rest of the city looks like. To this traveler, that city is only marginally connected to the city he or she is visiting. In fact, the traveler usually is not even aware it exists.

After Katrina flooded the city, the country was flooded with images of New Orleans: images of the flooded streets, chaos on the highways and in the shelters, marauding street gangs, heroes and criminals, negligent leaders, and destruction on every level. Some of these images served to reveal what was previously hidden, while others served to propagate myth and rumors. Even the city itself is, to some extent, merely an image after the hurricane—its drastically reduced population and limited civic activity places New Orleans somewhere between image and reality. The question is not an epistemological one; it is moot to discuss whether the city is completely real or completely imaginary. All human realms are created by an exchange between reality and human desires to shape that reality, in image and in fact. What is important in post-Katrina New Orleans is not to mistake the images for the truth, and to recognize and consider all its images as vital information about what the city is and what it should be. The temptation will be to reject the less appealing images; to attempt to control them through planning, policy, or technology; to relegate them again to the invisible; or to privilege a thin postcard city over one that is more difficult to explain to the tourists.

Thin Cities

> Isaura, city of the thousand wells, is said to rise over a deep, subterranean lake. On all sides, wherever the inhabitants dig long vertical holes in the ground,

> they succeed in drawing up water, as far as the city extends, and no farther. Its green border repeats the dark outline of the buried lake; an invisible landscape conditions the visible one; everything that moves in the sunlight is driven by the lapping wave enclosed beneath the rock's calcareous sky.
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> Consequently two forms of religion exist in Isaura.
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> The city's gods, according to some people, live in the depths, in the black lake that feeds the underground streams. According to others, the gods live in the buckets that rise, suspended from a cable, as they appear over the edge of the wells, in the revolving pulleys, in the windlasses of the norias, in the pump handles, in the blades of the windmills that draw the water up from the drillings, in the trestles that support the twisting probes, in the reservoirs perched on stilts over the roofs, in the slender arches of the aqueducts, in all the columns of water, the vertical pipes, the plungers, the drains, all the way up to the weathercocks that surmount the airy scaffoldings of Isaura, a city that moves entirely upward. (Calvino 1974: 20)

Although Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville (the elder brother of Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville who is credited as the father of New Orleans) did not arrive there until 1699, humans have been modifying the lower Mississippi River valley for at least 4,000 years. Native Americans had lived in those marshes since 2000 B.C., subsisting on hunting, gathering, and especially fishing. The remains of their meals of clams, or *rangia*, accumulated over time and formed shell middens or shell heaps, resulting in the creation of a completely new ecozone, as well as a vertical buildup of the area. It was this elevation that prompted colonizers to identify the region as a viable place to settle (Kidder 2000: 13).

In the early years of the eighteenth century, French colonists struggled to establish some sort of balance with the mercurial river. Wheat refused to grow in land that was constantly wet, but rice, a staple of hydraulic agriculture throughout much of the world, thrived in the environment. In order to better manage the flooding of the fields by releasing the floodwaters at optimum times for the growing cycles, farmers began to build up the natural levees on the banks of the river. As the levees grew higher, so did the river's water table. Periodically, the river rose above the levee and flooded the area, or the river's pressure would increase until the river broke through the levees. In response to this, landowners built the walls even higher and stronger. In the winters, slave owners kept their slaves busy by putting them to work raising, extending, and fortifying the levees, and by 1732, the levee system stretched from 12 miles south of New Orleans to 30 miles north on both sides of the river (Ibid., 34).

Despite frequent floods caused by the Mississippi River's rising water levels, New Orleans rapidly grew into a busy and prosperous

port city, situated in an optimal position to command the traffic of goods at the mouth of the river. Technology enabled humans to control the river, and control of the river meant power—political, economic, and cultural. That power increased enormously in 1817 when Henry Shreve made the trip from New Orleans to Louisville, Kentucky, an arduous journey that could take up to six months, in just 24 days. Shreve's trip inaugurated the age of steamboat travel, an age when technology's victory over nature seemed complete.

As technology overcame many of the obstacles of river travel, the waterfront of New Orleans became an important entrepôt with a carnival atmosphere where, as one observer remarked, "Every day some come from above and others depart, on excursions of one or two thousand miles, to St. Louis, Louisville, or Nashville, or hundreds of other places. For distance is no longer thought of in this region—it is almost annihilated by steam" (Kelman 2000: 54). Ari Kelman writes that the power of technology to manipulate nature served to distance humans from the environment: "In some respects steamboats isolated people from the Mississippi valley's environment, buffering them from the unpredictability of the river system, ultimately diminishing their awe at the power of the nonhuman world in favor of a reverence for new mechanical innovation" (Ibid.).

However, even during such heights of technological ascendancy, natural forces continued to deny humans a complete sense of control. Tree limbs in the river, or snags, could tear open the hulls of the wooden ships. These dangers proved to be enormously costly and frequently fatal to riverboat passengers. Snags took on a mythical status—a floating tree was frequently described as a many-headed hydra, or a long-handed ogre, "waiting to sink its teeth into vessels" (Ibid., 57). Kelman notes that residents' reactions to the destructive potential of snags in the river suggest a significant change in the way they viewed natural forces during this era. "They did not view such disasters as a matter of course in an early period of a new technology's development, nor as limits that their environment had placed on the ease of river transit. Instead, valley residents attempted to consolidate gains they had made in their effort to control the river system by imposing further order on their environment" (Ibid., 55). Once humans begin to assert their dominance over nature, there seems to be no limit to which they will seek to maintain and extend that domination.

The relationship between humans and nature in New Orleans in the nineteenth century substantially altered the way the local environment would be regarded in future years. Technological optimism cre-

ated a reality in which natural forces were obstacles, but never limitations; they were hurdles to be overcome, controlled, and manipulated. The destruction from Hurricane Katrina is a direct result of this attitude. Katrina should not be considered a natural disaster. Human attempts to contain a massive river's natural flow, and subsequent transformations of the area for the purposes of human profit and convenience, severely inhibited the region's ability to cope with natural forces. It will be tempting to try to solve the disaster wrought by Hurricane Katrina by devising new technologies that will impose ever more control over the effects of nature. But the problems we face are, to a large extent, not technological in substance. Of course, the country will undertake rigorous investigations into the many physical issues that accompany rebuilding in this ecologically fragile area. But our policies and technologies suffer from a *meta*physical lack of understanding about our place in the natural world. The control of nature is complicit in a world where images take the place of reality, where invisible cities, invisible worlds, are disguised, dominated, and subjugated by human *techne*.

The gods of New Orleans live in the thousands of miles of levees that contain the raging Mississippi River. They live in the pumps that miraculously drain the underwater city. They live in the oil and gas refineries that perform an industrial alchemy, converting nature's raw materials into profit and power. The city's gods also live in the dark, strange shops on South Rampart Street, where women in colorful headscarves sell jars of mysterious powders, oils, and ointments—Five Finger Grass, Dragon Blood Sticks, Flying Devil Powder, Johnny the Conqueror—the *gris gris* of Voodoo spells. They live in drumbeats and bonfires in the swamps in the middle of the night. They live in the myths of voodoo queens who float on the city's canals, lakes, and bayous. Voodoo came to New Orleans with the first African slave ships. It thrives there to this day, claiming to keep the secrets of the darkest powers of nature: a nature that refuses to yield its own agency, that refuses to recognize the authority of man.

Hidden Cities

> Recurrent invasions racked the city of Theodora in the centuries of its history; no sooner was one enemy routed than another gained strength and threatened the survival of the inhabitants. When the sky was cleared of condors, they had to face the propagation of serpents; the spiders' extermination allowed the flies to multiply into a black swarm; the victory over the termites

> left the city at the mercy of the woodworms. One by one the species incompatible to the city had to succumb and were extinguished. By dint of ripping away scales and carapaces, tearing off elytra and feathers, the people gave Theodora the exclusive image of human city that still distinguishes it.
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> But first, for many long years, it was uncertain whether or not the final victory would not go to the last species left to fight man's possession of the city: the rats. From each generation of rodents that the people managed to exterminate, the few survivors gave birth to a tougher progeny, invulnerable to traps and resistant to all poison. In the space of a few weeks, the sewers of Theodora were repopulated with hordes of spreading rats. At last, with an extreme massacre, the murderous, versatile ingenuity of mankind defeated the overweening life-force of the enemy.
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> The city, great cemetery of the animal kingdom, was closed, aseptic, over the final buried corpses with their last fleas and their last germs. Man had finally reestablished the order of the world which he had himself upset: no other living species existed to cast any doubts. To recall what had been fauna, Theodora's library would preserve on its shelves the volumes of Buffon and Linnaeus.
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> At least that is what Theodora's inhabitants believed, far from imagining that a forgotten fauna was stirring from its lethargy. Relegated for long eras to remote hiding places, ever since it had been deposed by the system of no extinct species, the other fauna was coming back to the light from the library's basements where the incunabula were kept; it was leaping from the capitals and drainpipes, perching at the sleepers' bedside. Sphinxes, griffons, chimeras, dragons, hircocervi, harpies, hydras, unicorns, basilisks were resuming possession of their city. (Calvino 1974: 159–160)

Cattle were introduced to the Mississippi valley in order to feed the first French settlers. The cattle grazed on the thick growth of cane shoots that held the natural levees together, permitting the river to deposit soil without washing it away. Without the cane, the process by which the river rebuilt its banks halted, and the land was also susceptible to erosion from rain. As the levees weakened, the river shifted unpredictably, threatening settlements and new agriculture (Morris 2000: 31). Landowners reinforced the levees, building them higher and stronger, and the result was even more frequent inundation due to rising water levels and increased water pressure.

Between the years 1717 and 1799, there was, on average, one notable flood every five years. Between 1801 and 1927, the average was one flood every two and three-fifths years (Davis 2000: 88). Draining the wetlands, which act as a natural buffer from periodic flooding, has resulted in greater destruction from those floods.

When steamboats came to the Mississippi River, there was even greater need to control the adverse affects of nature. Henry Shreve devised a way to reduce the possibility of riverboat destruction from snags;

he began to clear the forests that lined the banks of the river. Root systems of trees protect soil stability, and as Shreve removed the trees, he increased the tendency of the banks to cave into the river (Kelman 2000: 62).

The outcome of an engineering debate that took place in the mid-nineteenth century serves to illustrate the intensity of the will of humans to control the forces of the Mississippi River. In 1850, Charles Ellet, a civilian, published his *Report on the Overflows of the Delta of the Mississippi River,* in which he claimed that humans had "exacerbated the Mississippi's inundations by confining floodwaters behind levees" (Kelman 2003: 163). In response, a few Louisiana state engineers proposed a diversified approach to levee building that utilized outlets to accommodate the natural flow of the river. The majority of engineers, however, demanded a levees-only policy: higher walls would confine the river to a single channel, and this, in turn, would force the river to scour a deeper path for itself. George Willard Reed Bayley, an assistant to the state engineering office, declared, "Outlets never will be adopted, they are contrary to the spirit of the age; that spirit of improvement which would reclaim and cultivate, that would convert every swamp and fen into abodes of wealth, into cultivated fields" (Pabis 2000: 6). By 1881, most civil and military engineers had accepted the necessity of the levees-only policy. They "agreed in the idea of severing the natural relationship between the Mississippi River and its alluvial lands. At all costs, they claimed, engineers needed to prevent the river from infiltrating the conquered territory claimed by the American settler" (Ibid., 82). It was not until the catastrophic flood of 1927 that they would be proven wrong.

In "The Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger writes, "The will to mastery becomes all the more urgent the more technology threatens to slip from human control" (Heidegger 1977: 5). In New Orleans, technology is pursued as an aspiration toward complete control of the Mississippi River. But technology begets more problems, which are then attacked with more technology, and so on. Each time the New Orleans levees were made stronger, higher, and longer, the river lashed out with greater force. Because containing the river interrupts the sedimentation process by which the delta is replenished, "an acre of delta marsh disappears every fifteen minutes. Acreage the size of Rhode Island subsides every fifty years" (Shallat 2000: 136). As a result of Hurricane Katrina, scientists estimate that the area has lost more than 30 square miles of marsh to open water, or 20 to 26 percent of the 133 square mile area around the upper portion of Breton

Sound (U.S. Department of the Interior 2005). Attempts to protect the region from nature have made the region even more vulnerable. To paraphrase Heidegger, the essence of technology is not technological. To understand the purpose and effects of our technology, we will have to approach the problem of New Orleans with more resources than technology alone can provide.

It is also important to recognize the agency of nature in determining our relationship to the Mississippi valley. Nature is not merely a backdrop on which humans assert their will. The river's direction and flow, the region's alluvial soil, the processes of erosion and subsidence, the annual floods, the wetlands climate, the cane and cypress, and the insects and muskrats all played a primary and active role in shaping human activity in the area. Further, the city of New Orleans was not created by man acting against nature, it was co-constituted by man and nature, acting and reacting to one another. "In the delta's environment one finds compelling evidence of the Mississippi's ongoing role in city building … In building the natural levee upon which the city sits, and then in eroding or depositing riverfront land in the form of the batture, the Mississippi has constantly asserted its role as an active participant in New Orlean's history" (Kelman 2003: 49).

In Calvino's city of Theodora, nature suppressed has returned with a vengeance. Technological humans, as image-makers, modify nature in order to construct a reality that approximates those images. But nature does not tend to remain invisible for long. After 300 years of technological intervention in New Orleans, nature continues to elude human control.

Cities and the Sky

> Summoned to lay down the rules for the foundation of Perinthia, the astronomers established the place and the day according to the position of the stars; they drew the intersecting lines of the decumanus and the cardo, the first oriented to the passage of the sun and the other like the axis on which the heavens turn. They divided the map according to the twelve houses of the zodiac so that each temple and each neighborhood would receive the proper influence of the favoring constellations; they fixed the point in the walls where gates should be cut, foreseeing how each would frame an eclipse of the moon in the next thousand years. Perinthia—they guaranteed—would reflect the harmony of the firmament; nature's reason and the gods' benevolence would shape the inhabitants' destinies.
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> Following the astronomers' calculations precisely, Perinthia was constructed; various peoples came to populate it; the first generation born in

> Perinthia began to grow within its walls; and these citizens reached the age to marry and have children.
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> In Perinthia's streets and square today you encounter cripples, dwarfs, hunchbacks, obese men, bearded women. But the worse cannot be seen; guttural howls are heard from cellars and lofts, where families hide children with three heads or with six legs.
>
> Perinthia's astronomers are faced with a difficult choice. Either they must admit that all their calculations were wrong and their figures are unable to describe the heavens, or else they must reveal that the order of the gods is reflected exactly in the city of monsters. (Calvino 1974: 144–145)

In the days immediately following Hurricane Katrina, evacuees began to question whether destruction caused by the flooding of the city was indeed accidental. "Remember," said one former resident, "this was a premeditated disaster. They flooded the city. It happened on a pretty, sunshiny day, two days of rising water. You tell me: where the rich people at?" (Remnick 2005: 54–55). Another former resident explained why she will not return to New Orleans, saying, "I was in Betsy forty years ago: September, 1965. And the levee broke. What are we, stupid? Born yesterday? It's the same people drowning today as back then. They were trying to move us out anyway. They want a bigger tourist attraction, and we black folks ain't no tourist attraction" (Ibid.: 56).

In April of 1927, as a massive flood threatened the city, officials decided to dynamite a portion of the levee below the city, flooding the Plaquemine and St. Bernard parishes in order to "safeguard and protect greater interests" (Kelman 2003: 177). The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers used 1,500 pounds of explosives to open a crevasse 3,213 feet wide that funneled 325,000 cubic feet per second from the main channel (Davis 2000: 100). This action effectively diverted floodwaters from the city, but it was at the expense of the poorer areas. At its peak, the resulting flood stretched over a thousand miles long and eighty miles wide, covering more than sixteen million acres of land (Kelman 2003: 187). The residents who were affected were promised compensation for the destruction that followed the demolition of the levee, but most never received anything. Those who lost the most were the trappers who worked the area's backwaters—at least 50 percent of the state's muskrat population was destroyed due to the artificial crevasse (Ibid., 185).

The press amplified the appearance of class prejudice. Speaking of the compensation promised to the evacuees, one journalist noted that the people of the river parishes were just "glad to be well paid" (Ibid., 180). Similar remarks were heard after Hurricane Katrina from former first lady Barbara Bush: "Everyone is so overwhelmed by the

hospitality … And so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this is working very well for them" (E&P 2005). John Barry writes that after the Mississippi River flood of 1927, New Orleans decayed as a city, falling far behind its competitors (Atlanta, Dallas, and Houston) in economic activity. He describes the post-flood city as ingrown, lacking vitality, "a place for tourists, and picture postcards" (Barry 1997: 411). Efforts to save the city by sacrificing its poor (choosing the visible over the invisible) resulted in a diminished city.

During Katrina, there was no overt attempt to sacrifice the vulnerable for the sake of the rich. However, the perceptions of the city's poor, displaced by Katrina and its ensuing civic breakdown, create a powerful force—one that should not be overlooked in the reconstruction of the city. The so-called City of Exclusion is an invisible, perhaps even imaginary city, but it could negatively impact the future of New Orleans in a very real way. Current polls indicate that fewer than half the evacuees in shelters will return to New Orleans (Remnick 2005). Several have suggested that the rebuilt New Orleans will be a city for the rich, an ersatz community more like a Disney theme park than a true urban environment.

There is perhaps another more realistic possibility than the Disneyfication of New Orleans. Relief housing is notoriously unsubstantial, shoddily constructed, and aesthetically unappealing. What percentage of the reconstruction budget will be allocated to housing for the lower classes, and what percentage will be used to erect a polished and handsome tourist destination that will serve as a national landmark, a city that is "better than ever before"? There is a very real danger that the rebuilt city will be divided even more sharply down race and class lines. Although the poor were overlooked in the postcard city, the unique traditions and lifestyles of the region's working class contributed enormously to New Orleans folk culture. In the city of the future, how much of the traditional life of New Orleans will be displaced—removed to the periphery of the city and replaced by a paltry imitation, or a simulacrum no longer bearing any resemblance to reality?

Conclusion

> If you choose to believe me, good. Now I will tell how Octavia, the spider-web city, is made. There is a precipice between two steep mountains: the city is over the void, bound to the two crests with ropes and chains and catwalks. You walk on the little wooden ties, careful not to set your foot in the

> open spaces, or you cling to the hempen strands. Below there is nothing for hundreds and hundreds of feet: a few clouds glide past; farther down you can glimpse the chasm's bed.
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> This is the foundation of the city: a net which serves as passage and as support. All the rest, instead of rising up, is hung below: rope ladders, hammocks, houses made like sacks, clothes hangers, terraces like gondolas, skins of water, gas jets, spits, baskets on strings, dumb-waiters, showers, trapezes and rings for children's games, cable cars, chandeliers, pots with trailing plants.
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> Suspended over the abyss, the life of Octavia's inhabitants is less uncertain that in other cities. They know the net will last only so long. (Calvino 1974: 155)

The country will rebuild New Orleans. Concerns about the prudence of rebuilding in a problematic area seem to have been dismissed by an overwhelming sense of determination. The question now is *how* to rebuild, and to what end?

Throughout history, humans have insisted on maintaining New Orleans as an invisible city. They have done so through politics, through cultural images, and through technology. Calls have been made to rebuild the levee system in New Orleans in order to withstand a category five hurricane, to drive steel reinforcements 30 to 40 feet into the ground, stabilizing the concrete embankments, to gate Lake Pontchartrain, sealing the lake during a storm from rising Gulf waters—the rationale behind these proposals is, in every case, to protect New Orleans against the threat of nature. But whatever the feat of engineering or civic planning, it is certain that the future of New Orleans is largely dependent on uncontrollable forces.

If we could instead find ways to bring forth the forces of nature, the human diversity, the social dynamics—if we could begin to reveal the invisible faces of New Orleans—how might the city respond? This would require listening to new voices, seeking out discarded images, accessing the wisdom of diverse realms of thought. It would require allowing the natural, the invisible, some measure of agency in determining the future of the city. Otherwise, we are in the precarious position of the citizens of Octavia: we know the net (the gate, the levee) will last only so long.

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