

“Choosing to Stay”: Hurricane Katrina Narratives and the History of Claiming Place-Knowledge in New Orleans

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Abstract

Oral histories of the Hurricane Katrina experience abound in stories of conscious decisions to “ride out the storm.” My article explores the narrative of “choosing to stay” as an empowering narrative rooted in assertions of place-knowledge and traces its historical genealogy to the nineteenth century. I argue that claiming agency in New Orleans and articulating a sense of belonging and local identity through professed intimate knowledge of the local environment took shape as a strategy of resistance against dominant discourses of American progress after the Civil War. Ultimately, this counternarrative of connecting to place as “homeland,” drawing on knowledge arising from lived experience, defied the normative twist of modernization, simultaneously reformulating power relations within the city. “Choosing to stay” thus turns out to be a long-lasting narrative not only of disaster, but of place, belonging, and community; without understanding its historical layers, we cannot fully make sense of this particular Katrina narrative.

Keywords

Hurricane Katrina, disaster narratives, nineteenth-century New Orleans, levees, Creole history, environmental knowledge, flood prevention

Introduction

I am not leaving New Orleans, Louisiana. I was born here in 1963 on December 24th. And this is where the f*** I’m gonna die, whether you try to drown me or I die naturally. I’m gonna stay here until the end.¹

In Spike Lee’s 2006 Hurricane Katrina documentary *When the Levees Broke*, New Orleans resident Phyllis Montana LeBlanc is only one among many to powerfully declare their deep attachment to the city of New Orleans, that fragile place on earth they call home. Like the other interviewees, Phyllis had just lived through a veritable nightmare of destruction and death, of displacement, loss, and hardship.

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On Sunday morning, August 28, 2005, at 10:00 A.M. local time, New Orleans Mayor C. Ray Nagin had called for the first-ever mandatory evacuation in the city's history. A few hours before, the National Hurricane Center (NHC) had classified Hurricane Katrina as a Category 5 storm.² The hurricane had been building up for a few days and was racing across the Gulf of Mexico toward the mouth of the Mississippi river. When Katrina made landfall the next day as a Category 3 yet unusually large storm, its eye missed New Orleans, passing slightly to the East. The storm surge, however, did not fail to hit the city. Defined as the extreme rise of ocean water generated by a storm, the surge often represents, according to the National Hurricane Center, "the greatest threat to life and property from a hurricane."³ Katrina pushed water up the canals that crisscross the Gulf region, such as the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet (MR-GO) and the Intracoastal Waterway. Katrina also raised Lake Pontchartrain's water level. What followed has been recounted numerous times. The water overtopped and breached levees on the MR-GO and other inner city canals such as the Industrial Canal, London Avenue Canal, and the 17th Street Canal.⁴ Within a day of Nagin's evacuation order, roughly 80 percent of the city was under water.⁵ New Orleans, the "accidental city,"⁶ the "unnatural metropolis,"⁷ the city that had been painfully wrested from nature and water in the swampy grounds of Louisiana since the eighteenth century, the city shaped like a bowl—it simply and quickly filled up with water.⁸

With the storm surge, the death toll started to rise. Today, it is estimated that approximately eighteen hundred people lost their lives in Hurricane Katrina, almost eight hundred alone due to rising waters within Orleans parish.⁹ The National Hurricane Center lists Katrina as a "prime example of the damage and devastation that can be caused by a surge."¹⁰ In 2005, New Orleanians who had not yet left the city sought refuge from the rising waters in attics and on rooftops, desperately waving and crying for help—caught in snapshots and film clips that were broadcast around the world. News commentators kept asking how it was possible for one of the richest and most powerful nations of the world to generate images of such despair.¹¹ In response, government officials were quick to blame the panicked residents themselves. Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff simply stated that "some people chose not to obey that order [mandatory evacuation]. That was a mistake on their part."¹² Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Director Michael Brown joined in claiming that the rising death toll was mostly attributable to "people who did not heed the advance warnings" and "chose not to evacuate."¹³ In other words, the deadly impact of the flooding was explained by the outright disobedience of New Orleans citizens, by their negligence, and by their inability to make "correct" decisions.

This narrative persisted in the immediate aftermath of the storm. It shifted from debates on evacuation responsibility to the assessment of what was happening in the city after the storm had passed. With this shift, the narrative of "blaming the victims" became discursively connected to a tale of anarchy and disorder manifesting itself in looting, rapes, and murders, in short: a tale of unrestricted violence, of a "Hobbesian state of nature, a war of all against all."¹⁴ "Blaming the victims" for their distress became one strand of a broader "decivilization narrative." In the absence of government control, Katrina survivors assumedly reverted to a barbaric, debased state of "apes,"¹⁵ as Timothy Garton Ash put it in *The Guardian*. While his variation of the "decivilization narrative" blamed a supposedly flawed human nature, most other deeply racist versions directly criminalized New Orleans's mostly African American residents.¹⁶ These people had obviously been making a series of wrong choices such as staying, looting, raping, and murdering. "Blaming the victims" finally culminated in the most sweeping of charges against New Orleans residents: Why on earth had they chosen to live in such an unsafe place, stubbornly rebuilding their homes against all odds after every hurricane? Wouldn't it make more sense to "bulldoze" "a lot of that place"¹⁷?

Choosing not to obey governmental orders, trespassing the boundaries of legality in search for food and shelter, clinging to a risky place and the right of return—"blaming the victims" implied New Orleanians' agency and conscious choice. Simultaneously, though, it transferred

responsibility for disaster and despair from the state to its citizens. For republicans such as Chertoff and Brown and many conservative commentators, the logical consequence of these charges was not to question neoliberal ideologies of individual self-reliance. Instead, Katrina survivors were deemed unfit to make “the right choices” and to properly take care of themselves, which in this case, ironically, meant obeying the government’s orders—with right-wing commentators explicitly attributing the victims’ alleged lack of “good judgment” to them being African Americans.¹⁸

Not surprisingly, numerous studies conducted after the storm have convincingly exposed the racialized framing of these narratives by showing that for most parts “looters” were people seeking basic supplies for survival, that reported rapes and murders were indeed rumors, and that poor, mainly African American New Orleanians who did not own a car, nor had money for gas or for hotel rooms, as well as the elderly, the sick, and the disabled, did not really have the choice to leave.¹⁹ These data fueled far-reaching and important debates on institutionalized racism, poverty, environmental inequity, neoliberalism, government responsibility, and the meaning of citizenship in the twenty-first-century United States. Katrina is rightly remembered as a disaster that exposed contemporary American society’s injustices in an unprecedented way.²⁰

However, just like the unqualified comments by Chertoff and others, these important Katrina analyses miss something. While rightly denouncing the actual inability of poorer New Orleanians to evacuate and drawing attention to the racial dimension of poverty, there is a narrative of helplessness and choicelessness woven into these studies’ findings that was countered by black Katrina survivors such as Phyllis Montana LeBlanc from early on. The story of New Orleanians’ choicelessness disseminated the image of a powerless people at the mercy of external influences. While “blaming the victims” implied New Orleanians’ power to choose but simultaneously suggested their utter inability to choose the right thing, the narrative of choicelessness denied them any agency at all. Both the tale of bad choice and the tale of choicelessness are questioned by a third Katrina narrative, namely the empowering narrative of “choosing to stay” as a good choice.

This essay explores the counternarrative of “choosing to stay” more closely, thus focusing on a specific disaster discourse that emerged in the aftermath of Katrina. My aim is not to judge different responses to the hurricane or to evaluate the efficiency of flood-prevention technologies and evacuation practices. Instead, I will investigate the ways in which some of those New Orleanians who did not evacuate retrospectively sought to make sense of their own behavior in the face of the storm. Understood as a disaster discourse, “choosing to stay” can be grasped as a third post-Katrina narrative, next to those of disobedience and choicelessness. It is a narrative that frequently recurs in post-Katrina interviews conducted both for oral history projects and documentary films on the Katrina experience. While I have not interviewed Katrina survivors myself, this article draws on the wealth of existing testimonies collected by scholars, activists, and filmmakers alike in myriad attempts to preserve individual New Orleanians’ accounts and to make them accessible to a larger public, be it in digital collections such as those featured in the *Hurricane Digital Memory Bank*, in edited volumes such as the compilations of interviews conducted by University of New Orleans faculty and students for the *Katrina Narrative Project*, or in prominent documentary films such as *When the Levees Broke*, to name a few.²¹ I am aware that these testimonies do not constitute a representative sample, filtered as they are through the selective processes of editing and filmmaking. Both the editors’ and film directors’ take on Katrina history necessarily framed their choices of interviews.²² Yet this does not make the narrative of “choosing to stay,” linked to a strong commitment to place, less present and valid within individual testimonies. Taking a step back from the overarching narratives editors and filmmakers might have created, it seems legitimate to take a closer look at some of these accounts. This paper proposes to listen carefully to these “voices rising”²³ and it tries to do so by further exploring their stories of choice and by tackling the discursive web in which their narrative of encountering the storm is embedded. This also implies a look at past, similar voices. My research agenda is

based on the assumption that “choosing to stay” has to be understood as a narrative, not as an account of an actual decision-making process, and that this does not make it less meaningful. In fact, residents who emphasized their own choice in staying might not have had that choice at all. In short, my paper does not focus on people’s decision-making process in the face of the storm, nor does it search for reasons that could have induced residents to remain in the city despite an evacuation order. Instead, it hopes to shed light on one specific way some New Orleanians represented their own reactions to the approaching hurricane—no matter whether they did actually choose to stay—and to highlight this narrative’s discursive connections to similar representations in the city’s past.²⁴

In the narrative of “choosing to stay,” I will argue, “staying” does not amount to disobedience, a mistake, simple mindedness, or even to poverty or choicelessness but to an active and conscious claim to agency, power, and a right to the city. This claim to agency and power is based on the assertion of place-knowledge—more precisely, a professed intimate knowledge of the city’s environment through lived experience. Being virtually resourceless in the face of the storm and agentic as well as attached to place is not mutually exclusive. Furthermore, the rationalization of “staying” by claiming a more profound, experience-based knowledge of local “nature” can be understood as a long-standing New Orleans strategy of resistance against the threat of displacement and dispossession. My article argues that it emerged in the nineteenth century within the larger context of Americanization processes in New Orleans, as part of a counterdiscourse to the dominant discourse of American progress. Uncovering the historical layers of these assertions of place-based knowledge allows us to give the narrative of staying historical depth, while ultimately illuminating local power struggles and constructions of group identity by way of different imaginaries of place within shifting, historically contingent constellations.

At the same time, these narratives of “knowing nature” reach out beyond local identity politics. Pointing toward a fundamentally different system of knowledge based on relational experience instead of science, a system akin to “indigenous knowledge,” they suggest that the modern Western scientific knowledge regime that rests upon the discourse of progress through the control of nature is fallible as well as intrinsically linked to power relations. We may thus refrain from dismissing the stories of “choosing to stay” as mere nostalgic, idealizing tale of place, instead acknowledging their transformative stance in the exposure of environmental inequities. Weaving together histories of the urban environment, of struggles against environmental and social injustices, and of competing knowledge regimes in American New Orleans through the lens of disaster narratives as narratives of resistance, this essay hopes to make fuller sense of one particular Katrina story. It also hopes to open up perspectives for more systematic, quantitative, and possibly policy-relevant research on the connection between postdisaster stories of staying, actual decision processes by individuals, and family history in New Orleans.

Knowing Hurricanes

Oral histories of the Katrina experience abound in stories of conscious decisions to “ride out the storm.” They are given a larger audience through prominent Katrina documentaries such as Spike Lee’s *When the Levees Broke*, and they are taken up in novels like Rosalyn Story’s *Wading Home*.²⁵ After the storm, Katrina survivors reiterated two arguments when asked why they had stayed in Katrina’s way. First, many interviewees emphasized their roots in the city. They maintained that they had not left because, like their ancestors, they had been born and raised in New Orleans.²⁶ Beyond the practical consideration of having no family and hence no place to evacuate to outside of the city, the emphasis on “being native” to New Orleans since many generations amounted to a claim to the city as home. Staying in this sense became the logical consequence of always having been there, while attachment to place and territorial rootedness became the positive version of immobility. At the same time, the assertion of “nativeness” insinuated a

dichotomy between “them” and “us,” between insiders tied to the place and outsiders such as government representatives, news commentators, and the rest of America, between longtime residents of New Orleans and newcomers. The insistence on a long line of ancestors present on a certain site can be read as an attempt by Katrina survivors to carve out an identity for themselves as “true New Orleanians” and to claim authority over that same site—a familiar mode of reasserting identity in times of social disruption, irrespective of race or class.²⁷

The threat of having to leave from Katrina resonated all the more with collective African American traumatic memories of a long history of displacement and dispossession ranging from slavery to 1950s urban renewal.²⁸ This history also included a long chapter on flood experience: Throughout the twentieth century, urban planners had repeatedly used floods as opportunities to remove poorer, largely African American residents from their flood-prone neighborhoods, destroying communities for the sake of “slum clearance.”²⁹ Against this background, the assertion of being “native to the soil” did not only articulate a sense of identity tied to territory but also countered the threat of being “placeless.” When the flood comes, “there ain’t no place for a poor old girl to go,” Bessie Smith sings in her 1927 *Backwater Blues*, reminding us that “placelessness” has been a constant experience in African American history that is explicitly reflected and countered in cultural forms such as the blues.³⁰ Viewed through the lens of a traumatic imaginary of forced leaving deeply ingrained in African American collective memory, it seemed more than doubtful that Katrina evacuees would ever be allowed to return. To a certain extent, this fear has proven right if we consider the post-Katrina demolition of housing projects throughout New Orleans that made it impossible for many former residents to return after the evacuation.³¹

Katrina survivors’ claims to territorial belonging are underscored by a second argument for not leaving the city, an argument that closely ties into assertions of nativeness and that was brought forward by black and white residents alike. “I’m 45 years old. I am a New Orleans native,” Joseph Melancon, resident of the Third Ward, explains in Spike Lee’s documentary. “I’ve been in New Orleans all my life. My mother was born in New Orleans. My father was born in New Orleans. My grandmother was born in New Orleans. And I was there when Betsy hit.”³² Melancon was not the only Katrina survivor pointing to his ancestors’ and to his own successful survival of previous New Orleans disasters.³³ The most frequent point of reference in the past within the narrative of “choosing to stay” is Hurricane Betsy. “I was born on November 6, 1917, and grew up Uptown. . . . We lived in Gentilly for fifty years. Our house was an inheritance from my wife, Audrey. . . . I’d been through four hurricanes. . . . We decided to stay for Katrina because we rode Betsy out with no problem,” Leonard Lozano recalls in an interview post-Katrina.³⁴ In September 1965, Betsy hit New Orleans, its surge overtopping and breaching the levees on the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet and the Industrial Canal, killing eighty-one people and leaving most of the Lower Ninth Ward under water.³⁵ Thus, in the eyes of these Katrina survivors, the presence on the Crescent City’s swampy grounds since times immemorial legitimized the refusal to move, because it implied a familiarity with those grounds that others, outsiders, would not have. Being native to New Orleans suggested that those “true” New Orleanians knew the city and its environmental risks through lived experience. Natives to New Orleans were sure to make the right decisions faced with their city’s nature; they were neither lacking agency, nor making bad choices—and if they had disobeyed an evacuation order, that was because they had deeply trusted their own profound knowledge of the New Orleans environment. This knowledge was not generated by science, like the knowledge that government agencies relied upon. Instead, it was gained from local experience with hurricanes, transmitted through stories for generations.

I grew up in New Orleans and remember my first hurricane in September 1947. Many have occurred but Audry [*sic*] (1957), Hilda (1964), Betsy (1965), and Andrew (1992) stand out. Everyone I knew was familiar with and accepted the hurricane threat of wind and water to New Orleans, south Louisiana, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast. In today’s parlance, “Hurricanes Happen.” . . . In

anticipation of a storm my family implemented its own “emergency response plan.” These “traditions” were passed to my brother and me. Building on what my brother and I do, the next generation has developed their “emergency response plan.”³⁶

In his detailed account of his family’s tradition of preparing for riding out hurricanes, New Orleans native Rodney E. Emmer describes a routine of storing food, water, and medicine, stocking up on batteries and candles, clearing the porch and yard of loose things, and boarding up the house. “Funny how you build on what you learned as a kid experiencing hurricanes in Louisiana,”³⁷ Emmer muses. Whereas the scientific (meteorologic, engineering) knowledge of Katrina suggested that residents should definitely leave the city before the storm hit, some New Orleanians rather interpreted the information on the approaching storm as an incentive to enact their own hurricane routine. In their preparations, they relied on the experiences of their ancestors, or on their own, in riding out storms, and on family memories—at least according to the narrative of “choosing to stay.”

For these Katrina survivors, recounting their ancestors’ and their own experiences with hurricanes explained the decision to stay in Katrina’s way not with choicelessness but with agency relying on place-knowledge, which, in turn, underscored their assertion of being New Orleans natives. The ability to live with the Crescent City’s natural environment and risks and knowing them through lived experience, was thus cast into a crucial part of their identity as New Orleanians and simultaneously served as evidence for the right to place. “Choosing to stay” can thus be understood as a post-Katrina narrative of resistance in the face of displacement and hardship as well as a narrative of knowledge countering accusations of inability and simplemindedness.

Katrina’s destructive power, however, had apparently proven all those who had decided to stay wrong and their knowledge valueless: The storm surge seems to have contradicted the stories of “knowing nature” before they were even told. Narratives of “knowing nature” thus revert to the levees as key players in the Katrina disaster. In her opening testimony before the House Committee on Katrina in December 2005, Louisiana State Governor Kathleen Blanco declared: “We in Louisiana know hurricanes and hurricanes know us. We would not be here today if the levees had not failed.”³⁸ Echoing the reference of Katrina stayers to their experiences with previous hurricanes, the Governor used this local knowledge to point to the breached levees as culprits, thereby also diverting attention from the slow state response to the storm. Without the levees’ failure, the city assumedly would have come out of Katrina without much harm.

Pointing to the failed levees as the main cause for the city’s despair entailed entirely justified accusations against the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the local levee boards for not properly building and maintaining the levees. Relying on their own memories of hurricanes, those who sought to ride out Katrina also hinted at the dangerous fading of what Craig Colten has called the “social memory”³⁹ of past hurricanes on the level of hazard management and urban planning, a loss that allowed for the “erosion of preparedness”⁴⁰ revealed in the inadequate maintenance of the levees (and that, ironically, was in part a result of successful past flood control on the basis of which the city deemed itself safe).⁴¹ Yet, taking the accusations one step further, rumors emerged that the levees had been purposefully blown up. With the breaching of the levees, an old fear had flared up in the low-lying wards such as the Lower Ninth Ward. Residents claimed to have heard the sounds of explosions and suspected that the levees had been dynamited in order to save other, richer and whiter neighborhoods from flooding.⁴² The theory spread rapidly on the internet and then quickly gained larger media attention, especially when it was most prominently supported by Louis Farrakhan, the leader of the Nation of Islam. This prominent support, however, also led to charges by conservative commentators that the levee rumors were a mere political instrument, contentions that ultimately caused their dismissal as conspiracy theory by most mainstream media.⁴³

As historian Ari Kelman has argued, though, shrugging the levee rumors off as paranoia or simple means of race and class warfare does not do them justice since it silences their historical

genealogy. Kelman has convincingly explored these historical resonances, demonstrating how a collective local memory of past disasters, paired with frustration at environmental inequities, made these theories seem not far-fetched to many poorer New Orleanians. More precisely, the levee rumors built upon the memory of similar rumors that had circulated in the aftermath of Hurricane Betsy in 1965. Both Betsy and Katrina rumors harkened back to the actual blowing of the Mississippi's levees in 1927.⁴⁴ During the Great Mississippi River flood, the wealthy Orleans parish elite had indeed lobbied toward the creation of an artificial crevasse in the downriver neighboring parish St. Bernard in order to save their city—a decision that ultimately destroyed the lives, homes, and livelihoods of thousands of residents of the poorer, agricultural, and racially mixed river parishes of St. Bernard and Plaquemines, thus disclosing the entanglement of social injustice with environmental inequities and an urban–rural imbalance of power.⁴⁵

Against this precedent, Kelman has rightly argued that post-Katrina rumors of the deliberate destruction of the levees come as no surprise.⁴⁶ The narrative of “knowing nature,” I’d add, increased the appeal of the levee rumors. Within its frameworks, it just seemed unthinkable that Katrina alone had been able to provoke such disaster—Katrina, a simple variation of that natural force that New Orleanians knew so well through years of hurricane experience. “We returned back to the 7th ward and stopped at my best-friends father’s house,”⁴⁷ New Orleans resident Kendrick Perkins recalls his driving around the ghostly city after Nagin’s evacuation order:

He was an elderly man, about in his eighties, and he, myself, and my friend sat in his living room and had a couple of drinks. We all laughed about how the news and our family were overreacting about Katrina coming our way. Being that he went through Camille and Betsy, he reassured us that our neighborhoods would never flood. He told us how the Ninth Ward flooded out only because the politicians of the time ordered that it be done, and this was during a racist era. Knowing this eased my nervous some.⁴⁸

As the ultimate and logical consequence of the rationalization of “staying” by “knowing nature,” the “levee-myth” seems not only plausible, but inevitable. At the same time, it represents the necessary precondition for the narrative of “knowing nature”: Without the levee-myth, claims of local, experience-based knowledge would have been proven wrong by the storm itself, as would the decision to stay. The “levee-myth” is thus rooted in the unequal treatment of poorer neighborhoods in previous cases as well as in the experience of general environmental inequity throughout the city’s history, but also in an asserted intimate knowledge of nature through lived experience—an assertion that the levee-myth simultaneously reinforces.

As a story of agency and power in the face of environmental inequality and the threat of displacement, “choosing to stay” unconsciously takes up a long-standing local narrative on the relationship of place, nature, and power in New Orleans. Claiming agency and rights and articulating a sense of place through declared intimate knowledge of the city’s natural environment is a discursive strategy that took shape in the nineteenth century. Less a result from specific hurricane or disaster experiences, it evolved out of residents’ constant, day-to-day grappling with the natural environment or New Orleans, the contested character of the infrastructures that were supposed to keep this environment—water in the first place—at bay, and the environmental inequity that expressed the Crescent City’s social inequalities from early on.

Rationalizing Water and the City

Water has a long, culturally and socially meaningful history in New Orleans. Throughout the nineteenth century, the blurry boundaries between land and water stirred the imaginations and deeply influenced the cultural imagery of New Orleans. Nineteenth-century comments on New Orleans reveal a fascination for a city that seemed to be hard to locate in its dynamic and hybrid

state between land and water. "I never could find out exactly where New Orleans is. I have looked for it on the map without much enlightenment. It is dropped down there somewhere in the marshes of the Mississippi and the bayous and the lakes. It is below the one and tangled up among the others, or it might some day float out to the Gulf and disappear,"⁴⁹ New York editor Charles Dudley Warner confided his readers in 1887. Imaginaries like this did not refer only to the physical setting of the Crescent City, but always implied references to its cultural landscapes. In the case of New Orleans, the non-ability to grasp the city, its seeming fuzziness and mystery, tied into larger cultural imaginaries of swamps as gloomy places of pestilence and crime.⁵⁰ Moreover, in colonial and antebellum New Orleans, the surrounding wetlands were associated with communities of Native Americans and escaped slaves, mixed communities that resisted the supremacy of white Southerners and were as fuzzy to grasp as the city itself, as intriguing as seemingly menacing.⁵¹

While it made New Orleans a somewhat fascinating place for distant observers, local business and political elites were less than happy with their city's image as a watery hotbed of miasmas and mosquitos, of cultural and racial mix. Ever since the city's founding in the early eighteenth century, New Orleanians had been aware of its precarious site. As historians and geographers have convincingly shown, the history of the city of New Orleans since colonial times has to a large extent been a history of dealing with the environmental risks resulting from a location in a hot, humid, swampy, and flood-prone site.⁵² In 1720, French aristocrat Jean-Baptiste B nard de la Harpe criticized Bienville's choice of site for the new metropolis in the New World because he perceived it as "flooded, impractical, unhealthy."⁵³ Since the eighteenth century, levees and drainage canals have been the primary tools through which architects and engineers have sought to keep the city dry.⁵⁴ The levees, above all, have been considered the one crucial part of the urban space responsible for successfully separating city from water and dry from wet.⁵⁵ With the Mississippi at the core of the city's economic success, both water and urban area were essential for the prosperity of New Orleans—as long as they were kept separate.

After the Civil War, controlling water in New Orleans seemed to become ever more urgent. With their social world disrupted, the insecurity of white elites throughout the South manifested itself in fantasies of clear spatial and social boundaries. Everyone and everything had to get back into place, a place assigned to them by the white elites who would thereby reaffirm their contested authority. This desire manifested itself most vehemently in the ensuing Jim Crow laws, inscribing the rigid principle of racial segregation into the urban space. New Orleans elites particularly bemoaned their city's economic downturn. In these years, with the decline of the steamboat, the city on the Mississippi lost its dominance as a commercial hub. The former Queen City of the South struggled hard to compete with the new cities of the New South such as Atlanta, cities that built their empire on railroads.⁵⁶ Frequent quarantines due to epidemics such as yellow fever did not help to sustain business life. In the name of public health and economic prosperity, local boosters—councilmen, doctors, newspaper editors, engineers, and businessmen—were quick to blame the sanitary conditions of the city. And according to the diagnoses of contemporaries, these had a lot to do with the presence of undesirable water within the urban fabric.⁵⁷

In the 1880s, the insufficient drainage system and the open canals that crisscrossed the city were identified as the main villains. While levees were to prevent the Mississippi from overflowing—which they only partially did—rain water would constantly stagnate within the city, creating insalubrious conditions according to contemporary miasma theories. "Even the sudden heavy showers . . . are enough, at present, to overflow the streets of the whole town, often from sill to sill of opposite houses and stores, holding the life of a great city water-bound for hours,"⁵⁸ George Washington Cable observed in 1884. Dr. Joseph Holt, president of the Board of Health of Louisiana, graphically described the drainage canals as "huge accumulations of seething, bubbling putrescence in sluggish flow,"⁵⁹ since they were also used for waste disposal. New Orleans was to be saved by a "scientific,"⁶⁰ comprehensive drainage and sewerage system. The following

decades saw the city's boosters struggle to revamp their city by controlling its "unruly" waters. "The subjugation of nature through science . . . is the only foundation of New Orleans,"⁶¹ the Report of the New Orleans Parking Commission postulated in 1913, referring to the "jungles of savage reality"⁶² that New Orleanians had to combat. These proponents of a new, modern, dry, and rationally ordered New Orleans sought to establish their own authority over the city through science, technology, and engineering, determining what good urban space was, where the urban fabric was flawed and "sick," and how to cure it. Firmly entrenched in discourses of inevitable progress, planning, and efficiency, true to the Progressive Era creed, the elite of New Orleans sought to follow a plan to, as the *Times-Democrat* put it in 1888, "absolute perfection," a city "free from water."⁶³ This finally seemed to come true in 1913, with the invention of a new type of pump by the engineer A. Baldwin Wood. The swampy regions between the city and Lake Pontchartrain were drained and opened to settlement.⁶⁴ As a consequence, racial segregation increased rapidly, with black New Orleanians moving into the cheap, low-lying lands of the former swamplands that have remained most vulnerable to flooding until today.⁶⁵

These Progressive Era visions of controlling the urban environment by neatly dividing water from land through engineering seemed to focus first and foremost on the physical space of the city. Yet, as the increasing racial residential segregation suggests, they also carried visions of a certain type of social order, representing, in a sense, early attempts of social engineering. The systematic and rationally planned flow of water in a clean drainage system paralleled the vision of streets free from obstruction, cleaned up in endless clean-up campaigns.⁶⁶ Both mirrored the idea of a free flow of goods in the modern city and the assignment of a functional place for everything and everyone, neatly separated within clearly delineated spaces and connected by well-regulated networks. This specific vision of an orderly city testifies to the underlying ideal of a rational order rooted in scientific methods popular in the nineteenth century, such as taxonomy, and based on classification and categorization.⁶⁷ The social vision inherent in this ideal image of the departmentalized space was most blatantly visible in racial segregation, but also extended to the (discursive and physical) classification and stratification of all New Orleans residents by those who tried to create a modern city.

In this process, people's social and physical place in the city was identified. In the rhetoric of drainage advocates, a city free from water would be a progressive city, enterprising and successful, a city of the future. A swamped city would be literally and metaphorically stagnant, "marked by lack of energy and enterprise"⁶⁸ and thus unprogressive and turned backwards.⁶⁹ "As the environment—so are the people,"⁷⁰ the New Orleans Parking Commission reminded the city's mayor in 1909. A stagnating environment would encourage an unprogressive population, while—and this was the underlying assumption—lazy residents, "the lowest elements in the community,"⁷¹ would never create a flowing, progressive environment: They had to be educated to progress by a neat urban environment that was created for them by "the better classes."⁷²

Consequently, New Orleanians critical of the engineers' drainage plans and levee policy or those simply not cleaning up their backyards were explicitly deemed irrational impediments to progress carrying the "spirit of obstruction and ignorance."⁷³ They were cast as obstacles to circulation and mobility, both literally and metaphorically. Like their streets, these people were in dire need of being cleaned up and reshaped. Thus, clean-up campaigns initiated by neighborhood associations and the city alike did not only encompass the removal of weeds from drainage canals or garbage from the streets but also a "visible check on the presence of beggars in the business district."⁷⁴ The discourse of "cleaning" the city from obstructions, waste, and undesirable residents alike, with all its race, class, and ethnic bias and the resulting discursive associations of cleanliness, purity, and whiteness were widespread in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.⁷⁵ They even lingered in post-Katrina comments. When Baton Rouge Rep. Richard Baker (R-LA) infamously remarked that public housing had finally been cleaned up,⁷⁶ he did not only inscribe himself into the American culture of seeing calamity as opportunity for progress⁷⁷ but

also took up a long tradition of thinking about place and people, of blending and identifying urban spaces with their residents in normative, culturally constructed place-images that were represented “as signifiers of [a place’s] essential character.”⁷⁸

In the decades around 1900, those supposedly ignorant New Orleanians were the usual suspects: African Americans (“negroes of the lowest grade”⁷⁹) and Italian immigrants (who might keep “their places, or the grounds near them, in a bad condition”⁸⁰ and had transformed the “old French quarter”⁸¹ into a kind of “slum”⁸²). Moreover, in the eyes of urban boosters, more or less all people living in downtown New Orleans were prone to disorderly living.⁸³

Downtown referred to the part of the city located downriver from Canal Street, the city’s major commercial avenue. In the imaginary geography of New Orleans, Canal Street separated the city into an uptown, American (anglophone, protestant) part, and a downtown, French, or creole (francophone, catholic) part.⁸⁴ This mental pattern had its roots in the antebellum-era divisions of the city, and it divided blacks and whites alike.⁸⁵ In their attempt to remodel New Orleans on the example of Atlanta or Dallas, local Progressive Era boosters tended to cast the downtown wards as stagnant.⁸⁶ They especially kept an eye on the poorer Third District that comprised the Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth Wards. These were home to immigrants and creoles alike. Many of the creoles were descendants of free people of color who concentrated in the Seventh Ward, while immigrants from Europe dominated the Eighth and Ninth Wards.⁸⁷ Playing on the stereotypes of the indolent, backward, and racially mixed French cultured Old South, business elites of New Orleans conceived of the downtown district as the quintessential “other” within, as a foreign realm of markedly different “social customs” compared to the uptown wards or “Americanized city.”⁸⁸ At the same time, these wards were underserved by the new infrastructural utilities,⁸⁹ reinforcing the negative image boosters had of that part of the urban fabric.

Knowing the River

On several occasions, however, residents countered such accusations by openly protesting the city’s plans and connecting their neighborhood’s neglect with fears of displacement, demands for environmental justice, and a claim to place. In 1897, the city council of New Orleans circulated plans to enlarge the levees along the Mississippi’s bank in the Third District. The plan also provided that residents adjacent to the existing levees would be expropriated without compensation in order to create space for the raised flood protection. Major newspapers such as the *Daily Picayune* enthusiastically endorsed the plan as a further step on the road of progress and encouraged the city representatives to implement it immediately.⁹⁰

The Third District newspaper *Le Réveil*, however, embarked on a veritable campaign of protest. A francophone semiweekly that considered itself the voice of the downtown wards, the *Réveil* had a strong record of openly denouncing the unfair distribution of public services and infrastructures and of pointing to environmental injustice within the city—the white city, more precisely: The *Réveil* was clearly the advocate of the white residents of the Third District who represented more than 80 percent of the Eighth and Ninth Ward residents.⁹¹ In its protests, the newspaper framed its diagnosis of inequity in terms of a French American, downtown–uptown dichotomy, silencing racial injustices.⁹² Imagining Canal Street as a class and ethnic boundary alike, the *Réveil* openly accused the city of providing services such as drainage and paving primarily for the “quartier Américain,”⁹³ of neglecting the neighborhoods below Esplanade Avenue, and of concentrating insalubrious industries such as slaughterhouses, soap factories and canned fish production in the Third District.⁹⁴ “Il y a bien des sujets de mécontentement au 3^{me} district,” the newspaper maintained. “On l’a négligé outre mesure.”⁹⁵ As a consequence, it even promoted a secession from the city and the formation of an independent municipality.⁹⁶

Yet when it came to the levees, the editors did not limit themselves to the rhetoric of inequity. While they indeed protested the expropriation plans by pointing to the poverty of Third District

homeowners, they also voiced a scathing critique of the levees per se. In their argument, the francophone newspaper editors contrasted two fundamentally distinct systems of knowledge, which implied radically different attitudes toward the Mississippi river and, ultimately, different discourses on the human–nature relationship. On the one hand, they situated those wishing to raise the levees within a conception of knowledge that relied on the technical and scientific expertise of engineers and thus on a rather abstract form of knowledge. On the other hand, the editors themselves argued for a greater trust in local knowledge that was grounded in the long-time experiences and observations of residents and that was passed down over generations.⁹⁷ True to their pro-francophone stance, the editors located this local type of knowledge with the Third District's (white) creoles, a group that claimed long-standing presence on the Mississippi's banks and made up a vociferous part of the District's population.⁹⁸

Within the experience-based knowledge framework, the Mississippi was conceived of as a capricious, yet well-known, acquaintance, an agentic player in the complex web of environmental relations that shaped life in the Louisiana wetlands. The experience of locals with the river had revealed the Mississippi's obstinacy, when, in times of high water, it had simply overflowed and chosen an alternative riverbed. In view of this undeniable capriciousness and power, the editors of the *Réveil* explained to their readers, residents' experience suggested to accommodate the river by giving it back its natural outlets, bayous and creeks that had been gradually cut off in the process of urban expansion. Outlets would enable the Mississippi to discharge potential surplus water without flooding residential areas. This attitude also implied refraining from the confinement of the river between levees, since in times of heavy rains that very containment contributed to raising the river's water level. Hence, building up the levees seemed to be the most inapt method of preventing flooding, ironically even increasing the risks for adjacent residents.⁹⁹ "Enfin rendez-nous nos bayous et nous dormirons plus tranquilles que derrière vos levées,"¹⁰⁰ the *Réveil*'s editors claimed, outlining an alternative path to flood security.

At the same time, the reliance on local experience carried a fundamental critique of scientific knowledge and technical expertise, as well as of those who personified these modern ideals in the day-to-day interaction with the nature of New Orleans, namely, the engineers. Not listening to stories of the river's power, ignoring its agency, and confining it to even greater extents seemed grossly negligent and seemed to speak to the incompetence of engineers and to their self-interested motivation. Engineers, the *Réveil* contended, were not the impartial defenders of public interests they pretended to be. On the contrary, they were pursuing their own professional interests by advocating the raising of the levees.¹⁰¹ After all, work on the levees was creating jobs for engineers. In its protest, the newspaper thus categorically questioned the authority of the modern engineer as a neutral expert, and along with it, the knowledge regime within which the engineers were acting, a regime that was ultimately embodied in the engineers' attempt to master the river:

Mais vous [ingénieurs] ne connaissez rien des caprices du fleuve; vous ne savez pas ce qu'il fera demain. Quand vous lui aurez préparé un lit spacieux sur la rive gauche, il s'en créera un à sa guise sur la rive droite. Il se moquera des ingénieurs et des pauvres diables qu'ils auront sacrifiés pour lui faire place. Jamais la main de l'homme n'accomplira des travaux durables pour maîtriser le Mississippi. Comme par le passé, il suivra ses propres lois, que les ingénieurs ont le dessein de vouloir violer continuellement.¹⁰²

Decisions on how to carve out the city's urban space in its natural environment, on how to deal with the potential intersections of "wet" and "dry" were to be based not on scientific knowledge but on knowledge gained through a life on and with the river. "L'expérience vault parfois mieux que la science,"¹⁰³ the *Réveil* succinctly concluded. This, in turn, meant acknowledging the Mississippi's power and agency as well as discarding the discourse of progress based on man's mastery of nature, all the while suggesting tools for keeping the river's power at bay on the very

basis of its acknowledgment. In this perspective, the *Réveil* inscribed itself into a counterdiscourse of flood prevention through accommodation; within this discourse, scientific knowledge that supported levee building was not “in the true.”¹⁰⁴ Accordingly, those people speaking from within the discourse of accommodation—in this case, local residents such as the *Réveil*’s editors—were ascribed with power. “It is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together,”¹⁰⁵ Foucault writes. Ultimately, relying on experience-based knowledge within a discursive framework of “accommodating local nature” would transfer authority from engineers and scientists to the Third District’s white creole population.

However, the divide between professionals and local residents was not nearly as clear as the *Réveil* suggested. As early as 1846, Louisiana state engineer Paul Octave Hébert had proposed to reopen several of the Mississippi’s branches as outlets in order to lower the river’s water level and relieve the pressure.¹⁰⁶ His plan relied on findings by geographer William Darby, who in 1817 had pointed to the connection between the river’s confinement by levees and its increasingly high water level.¹⁰⁷ Hébert’s successor as state engineer, Absalom D. Wooldridge, equally endorsed the creation of outlets, mainly for economical reasons: The maintenance of levees was quite costly.¹⁰⁸

The ensuing decades saw a bitter controversy tear apart the engineering community in Louisiana, opposing proponents of a strict levees-only policy to those who wanted to complement levees with outlets.¹⁰⁹ Yet the levees-only policy prevailed between the 1840s and the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and was endorsed as official flood prevention policy by the Army Corps of Engineers. The outlet policy was rejected by the majority of engineers because it seemed in profound disaccord with the discourse of progress that emphasized the human ability to conquer nature.¹¹⁰ Containing the river and nature in general through engineering was deemed more modern and adequate in an age that praised progress as the result of science and technology. Even though, strictly speaking, outlets represented a solution as technological as a levee, the majority of engineers thought that opening outlets for the Mississippi was tantamount to giving in to the river; an outlet thus represented the ultimate failure of modern engineering to subdue nature. The levees-only policy of flood prevention was only reversed when the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 painfully proved it wrong. In 1927, the dynamiting of the levee to create an artificial outlet was seen as the last resource for saving the city—at the cost of drowning the neighboring river parishes.¹¹¹

In discursively monopolizing the outlet policy as traditional local knowledge, the editors of the *Réveil* overlooked the existing cleavage within the engineering community. They simply ignored the fact that what they styled into an experience-based knowledge of New Orleans natives was similarly one possible opinion within the science-based knowledge regime—albeit a minority view. Moreover, the “old planters,” those “vieux planteurs”¹¹³ who, the *Réveil* claimed, had always argued for outlets, had in fact been staunch opponents of outlet policies in the antebellum era, fearing that the creeks and bayous would overflow their plantations.¹¹³ The outlet tradition is thus more of an “invented tradition” that reveals the close link between knowledge and power. By arguing for the superiority of knowledge resulting from lived experience and by (wrongly) identifying it with the local white creole population, the editors of the *Réveil* sought to assert a white, creole, Third District identity, claiming a place and authority for these creoles.

For the creole community, the enlarged levees represented the threat of displacement and resonated with the more general fear of losing power as a group: for one, New Orleans’s creoles were struggling to keep their neighborhoods francophone. By imagining a city divided along French/American, downtown/uptown boundaries, and by denouncing neglect of the “French” part of town, the *Réveil* ignored the realities of turn of the century residential distribution in New Orleans, more precisely: It completely erased immigrants from the picture. During the last decades of the nineteenth century, the Third District had become home to a large group of especially Italian immigrants.¹¹⁴ At times, the *Réveil* lamented, “Les Italiens ont envahi ce quartier de

telle sorte qu'on peut l'appeler dès aujourd'hui le quartier italien et non français."¹¹⁵ Hence, constructing a "Creole outlet tradition" must also be read as a discursive strategy of countering pressure from other ethnic groups that had more recently made their way to the city.

Secondly, it is equally no coincidence that the *Réveil's* editors framed the struggles they saw in the city precisely in terms of French versus American. This was the traditional opposition that had shaped creoles' view of New Orleans's history since the city had become American in 1803.¹¹⁶

What is more, by sketching a special relationship between creoles and the river, the *Réveil's* editors inscribed themselves into one particular antebellum narrative. This narrative had emerged in the context of a bitter struggle that had opposed downtown francophones and uptown anglophones within the city council in the 1830s. At that time, downtown elites had vehemently protested against the development of new wharves in the uptown district. Arguing that such a mistreatment of the river would one day entail its inevitable revenge, the creoles insisted on their better knowledge of the Mississippi.¹¹⁷ Economic interests lurked underneath this argument, since the new wharves promised to bring more than a fair share of the river trade to the "American sector,"¹¹⁸ yet the creoles framed their protest in terms of local knowledge, emphasizing their "origin in the soil"¹¹⁹ and thus their "native identity against the newcomer."¹²⁰ This tied in with the identification of the term "creole" with "native-born" in the antebellum era, a definition that, as Joseph G. Tregle put it, "gave the older residents the most profound warrant of the right not to be dispossessed in their own land."¹²¹ As a consequence of the dispute, the uptown district successfully pushed for a division of New Orleans into three distinct municipalities. From 1836 to 1852, each district had its own city council and mayor.¹²² It is well possible that the antebellum creole elite's discourse of acknowledging the Mississippi as a mighty agent in the city's life and their ensuing reluctance to transform the river at discretion was transmitted in local collective memories as a specific creole position. Attesting to the creoles' nativeness, "knowing the river" not only countered immigrants' presence in the Third District but more generally the feeling of being colonized by Americans, a feeling that pervaded nineteenth-century creole culture.¹²³ Accordingly, the *Réveil* oscillated between self-confidence and expressions of nostalgic longing for a bygone past in which downtown was the metaphorical heart of the city. At times, resignation speaks from its pages: "il faut s'incliner devant l'américanisation qui passe la tête haute."¹²⁴

Yet it is remarkable that in the face of losing economic, political, social, cultural, and physical ground, the newspaper encouraged its readers to hold on to their (physical and social) place in the city by arguing for their own special knowledge of the Mississippi. In the struggle over the Third District levees and the adequate mode of flood prevention, the *Réveil's* editors inscribed themselves into a local discourse of accommodating nature, into an imaginary of life with the river, using it both to articulate the frustration over structural neglect and fears of dispossession, and to substantiate claims to place and authority.

Clinging to the place by asserting knowledge of the place's nature through lived experience thus became tantamount to resilience, to resisting Americanization and a hegemonic discourse of American progress from a subaltern perspective. In this sense, the *Réveil's* narrative of choosing to stay on the banks of the river was grounded in similar tenets as the narrative of choosing to stay in Katrina's way, similarly opposing immobility and a sense of place to the potentially threatening culture of mobility and progress—by drawing upon knowledge deemed "native," knowledge of experience with the place. This assertion of "placed knowledge," in turn, contributes to a sense of identity which is, therefore, deeply enmeshed in the locality. Articulating a "land-locked identity,"¹²⁵ Katrina survivors and nineteenth-century creoles alike voiced their identity as New Orleanians as well as their right to place. Those who remained in the city in the face of Katrina (unwittingly) inscribed themselves into a local genealogy of resistance by claiming knowledge of local nature, a genealogy that, interestingly, transcended racial boundaries, common to all those New Orleanians who rose their voice against being marginalized. "The great strength of the

concept of the subaltern . . . is that it provides a social category and power structure a good deal less restrictive than that of class,”¹²⁶ Robert Young explains in his history of postcolonial theory—and, one could add, less restrictive than that of race. Katrina narratives of “choosing to stay,” then, do not only relate to contemporary, larger political and social contexts such as racial inequality and neoliberalism but also to past local narratives of place, nature, knowledge, and power.

The Transformative Power of Relationality

In a larger analytical perspective, the narratives of knowing nature through lived experience refer to an alternative knowledge system akin to what has been termed “Indigenous knowledge.” As numerous First Nations scholars have pointed out, this system of counterknowledge does not rest on scientific inquiry as conceived of in Western thought since the Enlightenment but on the concept of relationality.¹²⁷ Relationality emphasizes the connection of the individual to its community and to place, an “inter-reliant experience in the land,”¹²⁸ as a way of generating knowledge; it represents a less abstract, more personal way of knowing that is transmitted through generations by story. Considering the specific character of the two different knowledge systems clashing in the representations by the *Réveil* and Katrina survivors, the transformative potential of these narratives becomes evident. “Indigenous knowledge is far more than the binary opposite of western knowledge. As a concept, Indigenous knowledge benchmarks the limitations of Eurocentric theory—its methodology, evidence, and conclusions—(and) reconceptualizes the resilience and self-reliance of Indigenous peoples,”¹²⁹ Marie Battiste reminds us. Pointing to the lack of relationality in dominant discourses of flood prevention and challenging the homogenizing and normative twist of the belief in man’s control of nature, narratives of “knowing local nature from lived experience” suggest three things: the contingency of power relations inherent in knowledge systems, an alternative vision of New Orleans, and a different way of thinking the human–nature relationship in an urban environment.

First, narratives, just like discourses and images, have “material causes and consequences,”¹³⁰ as Jordan Camp rightly points out. Disaster narratives make sense of past events, bringing order into the experience of the chaotic and violent disruption of everyday life, yet they also tell us about the kind of order imagined for the postdisaster future and shape the reconstruction of disaster-stricken areas.¹³¹ Silencing the “voices of besieged communities” amounts to a reinforcement of existing power relations; engaging with them is a step toward “reinvigorat[ing] the languages of struggle.”¹³² It is thus important that we do not dismiss Katrina survivors’ testimonies of “knowing hurricanes”—nor the *Réveil*’s invocations of “knowing the river”—as nostalgic idealizations of communities that might not have been as perfect as these narratives suggested. With regard to Katrina, several scholars have criticized the idealizing stance of narratives of staying and return.¹³³ However, I’d argue, these narratives are not simply “fantasies of belonging”¹³⁴ playing on identity politics while hiding the harsh realities of social, racial, and environmental inequity behind a deluding veil of community and the enticement with place. They do not silence the misery of life in the housing projects in the early twenty-first century nor, for that matter, the vicissitudes of living downtown in the Ninth Ward in nineteenth-century New Orleans. On the contrary, they draw attention to fundamental inequalities by challenging the master narratives from a position of inferiority—simply by suggesting the power to choose. Their insertion into claims of place-knowledge makes narratives of “choosing to stay” even more powerful: unconsciously or not, they question nothing less than the validity of a Western modernist knowledge order grounded in the authority of science, an order that has decisively shaped the relationship between man and what was thought of as “nature” since the eighteenth century.

In the case of residents riding out Katrina, rationalizing staying by pointing to local knowledge seemed futile in view of the decision’s outcome. Hurricane experience had most obviously

been proven wrong. Yet by connecting tales of place-knowledge to the ensuing rumors of the intentional levee breach, Katrina survivors sought to reaffirm the validity of their experience-based knowledge. The levee myth shifted the blame for the disaster from nature to “them”—those who allegedly blew the levees, a conglomerate of government officials, business and white elite interests—thus denaturalizing Katrina.¹³⁵ The disaster, it tells us, was not made by nature, hence the failure of local knowledge in this case. Residents thereby implicitly admitted the importance of functioning levees in the first place, and it becomes clear that their local knowledge does not refer to “untouched nature” but to the configurations of a place already heavily manipulated. Yet they simultaneously voiced the belief that those people endorsing the dominant science-based knowledge order and the building of levees would in times of crisis destroy them in order to save special, more powerful interests. In the levee rumors, then, taming nature through science and technology appeared to be a reversible, disposable endeavor entirely subjected to power relations: blowing up the levees equaled blowing up a system of knowledge for the sake of powerful interests. These rumors echo the aggressive railing of the *Réveil*’s editors at turn-of-the-century engineers, whom they suspected to provoke flooding and displacement out of self-interest. Unmasking the prevailing knowledge order as disposable and casting the broken levees as visible manifestation of the entanglement of knowledge with power, levee rumors called attention to environmental injustice as social injustice: Some New Orleanians were obviously more dependent on the levees for flood protection than others on higher grounds, and these New Orleanians did not have the power to oversee the levees’ fate, on which they so depended. “It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge,” Foucault reminds us, and it is equally “impossible for knowledge not to engender power.”¹³⁶ By offering alternative “truths”—namely, for Katrina survivors, the rationality of staying and, in the case of the *Réveil*, the irrationality of levee-building, both of them emerging from the counterdiscourse of accommodating nature—these voices questioned hegemonic knowledge, exposed its contingent character, denounced the power relations inherent in the production of knowledge, and claimed authority and legitimacy for themselves.

Second, while the narratives of “choosing to stay” and “knowing nature” certainly represent a means of claiming agency and legitimacy on the territory, they do reach out beyond group interests. Asserting knowledge of the city’s nature recast prevailing images of New Orleans, and, ultimately, its place-myth. Like many New Orleanians before them, faced with threats of loss, dispossession, and displacement, Katrina survivors invoked those fuzzy, watery, blurry grounds they called home, the terrain that made up the city of New Orleans and that had represented such a pain for city builders since the eighteenth century. Arguing against evacuation, they recast New Orleans as a city livable despite hurricanes: you just had to know how to ride them out in order to get through without much damage. Arguing against expropriations, the *Réveil*’s editors recast the image of the city as intricately intertwined with the river: you just had to know how to properly deal with the Mississippi’s vagaries in order to prosper on its banks. Sticking by their city in all its ambivalence—including its “special connection” to water, its vulnerability to “natural disasters”—and arguing for acknowledgment of the city’s blurry and fuzzy boundaries, they represented the Crescent City’s entanglement with nature not as threat to life and property but as part of the city’s signature. The Mississippi, the hurricanes, they all would have to be allowed to overstep boundaries; with an appropriate reaction relying on locals’ experience, no disaster would result out of these transgressions. Thus, stories of “riding it out” and “living with the river” alike contributed to the creation of a different place-myth, a different cultural imaginary of New Orleans.¹³⁷ For the *Réveil*’s contemporaries, “living with the river” was part of a much broader discourse on New Orleans’s urban identity that emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century, a discourse that drew on the connection to place in order to emphasize local peculiarity instead of emulating other presumably more modern American metropolises. The early proponents of historic preservation, for example, joined into that discourse, deeming the architecture

of old New Orleans worthy of protection against the local business community's contempt for things old.¹³⁸ Ultimately, they contributed to an alternative vision of New Orleans as positively ancient, not backward, and of its nature as positively lush, not untamed and to be subdued—place-images that resonate even in today's imaginaries of the Crescent City. Similarly, those residents not leaving the city, as those returning after Katrina, cast their city as something special, emphasizing its resilience in the face of “natural” disasters as well as its cultural uniqueness that drew people back home. Those powerful narratives of New Orleans exceptionalism, then, deeply shaped the imaginations of the city—be it in the nineteenth or the twenty-first century.¹³⁹

Finally, narratives of knowing nature suggest a different relation to the urban environment. Proposing a fundamentally different knowledge gained through the intimate relation to and experience of a place, the narratives of New Orleans residents also unintentionally envision an altogether different attitude toward hurricanes, the river, water, and nature in the city generally. Instead of fantasizing about the containment of nature, these alternative narratives speak to an imaginary of accommodation, of living with nature, of successfully creating man–nature win–win situations through experience-based knowledge. Yet this does not mean that they propagate romantic dreams of untouched nature and man's unconditional submission to his natural environment: “knowing nature” means knowing hurricanes as well as the existing levees that belong to the place and whose breaching is unimaginable except for “foreign” interference. The experience-based knowledge must hence be understood as a knowledge not only of nature but of the intricate entanglement between people and nature in a certain place. Rather than a narrative of “knowing nature,” it is a narrative of “knowing place,” with “place” encompassing the totality of the environment and the relationship of residents to it. This implies fuzziness and blurred boundaries, the horror of nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernizers. “Victorian Americans conceived of civilization itself as a regime of boundaries,”¹⁴⁰ David M. Scobey observes in his study of nineteenth-century New York City urbanism, and Charles S. Maier extends this observation in time and space: “The modern world was gripped by the episteme of separation,”¹⁴¹ he posits in his analysis of the “long” twentieth century. In the *Réveil's* narratives as in the stories of Katrina stayers, these boundaries fade. They are replaced by relationality, by interdependence between “natural” and built environment and people. Understood as part of an alternative, relational knowledge system, the narrative of “choosing to stay” exposes the devaluation of place ties and belonging in Western modernist culture and suggests an alternative to the “episteme of separation.”

Based on place, not on race or ethnicity, the precepts of “Indigenous knowledge”—and, accordingly, of place-based New Orleans knowledge—thus implicitly foster a stronger environmental ethics, reflecting “an epistemology that optimum human self-perpetuation is not human centered but must be consistent with the optimum ability for the environment to regenerate itself.”¹⁴² It is not based on the idealization of pristine nature but on sustainable interaction. Constructing an image of the “natural” environment that rests upon its inclusion in group identity—Richard Atleo's “land-locked identity”—suggests a receptiveness for what John M. Meyer has called “resonant environmentalism,”¹⁴³ or “environmentalism of everyday life.” This type of environmentalism does not rely on a distinct environmentalist identity, on people's conscious choice of giving the environment highest priority. Instead, it is ingrained in people's most urgent everyday concerns such as housing, mobility, and health, arising from these priorities, emerging from existing identities. The interests of Katrina stayers and of Third District creoles in their natural environment was first and foremost rooted in their fear of displacement and dispossession. In this situation, they asserted knowledge of their (built and natural) environment, drawing on the experience of place to articulate their identity as native New Orleanians, expose environmental injustices, question dominant discourses of flood prevention and, ultimately, of the man–nature relationship. Unwittingly or not, through the articulation of their relation to place, they thereby outlined spaces for a type of environmental politics that recognizes the experience of

place—the “long-standing relationships between people and the land”¹⁴⁴—as central and therefore resonates more deeply with people.¹⁴⁵ Simultaneously, by exposing environmental inequity, they formulated a social critique: without being “radical artists, cultural workers, and grassroots activists,”¹⁴⁶ everyday people from the spaces of their everyday lives voiced implicit social and environmental criticism and demonstrated resilience.

Conclusion

In their stories of “choosing to stay,” New Orleans residents who remained in Katrina’s way offered an alternative to two dominant disaster narratives. For one, by emphasizing their own agency and the consciousness of their decision to stay (even if they did not actually have the choice), they countered narratives that described them as helpless and choiceless victims. Second, they fought accusations that staying was an irrational, bad choice that testified to their utter inability to take care of themselves. Instead, they argued for its rationality and legitimacy. Both their claims to agency and to the rationality of their choice were discursively entangled with the assertion of place-knowledge, an intimate knowledge of the city’s environment—its hurricanes, but also its levees—gained through lived experience. Within the frameworks of local, place- and experience-based knowledge, staying made perfect sense. Ultimately, maintaining the validity of a type of knowledge different from scientific knowledge served to demonstrate “nativeness” to New Orleans and a right to being there; “choosing to stay” was thus simultaneously a story of fear of dispossession and displacement and of resistance against these threats.

Narratives of knowing local nature through experience emerged in nineteenth-century New Orleans in the context of residents’ resistance against Americanization processes and their perpetual struggles with the city’s watery environment. The narrative of “knowing the Mississippi” that was reiterated by the *Réveil*, a francophone Third District newspaper, particularly, sought to establish a different strategy of flood prevention, making a case for the creation of outlets instead of relying on the Army Corps of Engineers’ levees-only policy. Similarly to the narratives of Katrina survivors, the editors of the *Réveil* put forward a knowledge system based on experience by New Orleans natives in order to prevent the expropriation of homeowners in the Third District. This knowledge system was rooted in—and simultaneously supported—a discourse of accommodation in the human–nature relationship, more precisely: in the relationship between New Orleanians and water. It can be read as a challenge to the hegemonic discourse of progress that cast the mastery of nature through science as its essential tenet. Identifying this discourse as “American” and questioning the status of engineers as “neutral experts,” critics such as the *Réveil* fundamentally contested the dominant knowledge order and its inherent power relations from a subaltern perspective.

While Katrina survivors most certainly were not aware of these struggles and counternarratives in their city’s past, and while it does not make sense to construct conscious references across the centuries, the structural similarities between these narratives of resistance are striking.

The similar confluence of the material setting of environmental hazards (flooding), debates about the appropriate way of countering these hazards (divergent flood prevention discourses), and unequal power relations underlying these debates (looming displacement for some residents), in short, constellations of environmental inequity in a risky urban environment, obviously led to similar narrative strategies of resistance. Interestingly, they were subscribed to by different groups depending on the historical moment, which speaks to the historical contingency of local identities as well as to the shifting character of power relations within the city. In nineteenth-century New Orleans, place-knowledge was most vociferously claimed by a white (often racist) population that claimed itself “creole” and thus native. These residents used it to establish an alternative discourse of flood prevention, thereby resisting Americanization processes and the ensuing loss of authority. Similarly, those New Orleanians who had stayed during Katrina used

claims of “knowing hurricanes” to rationalize their staying, resisting their own loss of agency. In the light of New Orleans’s history, framing “choosing to stay” as a purely African American narrative in the tradition of African American resistance is thus misleading. This is especially important in view of New Orleans’s (and Louisiana’s) specific racial history, in which matters were always a little bit more complicated than the biracial dichotomy of black and white might suggest. Rather, it can be read as an empowering narrative of “subaltern groups.”¹⁴⁷ It would definitely be valuable for further, more systematic analysis to take a closer look at the family history of those Katrina residents who voiced their attachment to place and claimed place-knowledge as strategy of resistance. Who exactly are those New Orleanians who stayed for Katrina, explaining their decision by attachment to and knowledge of the place and expressing the willingness to return? Did they actually have the means to leave? Where exactly in New Orleans are they from, where can they be situated as to race, age, gender, and class? Could their narratives be read as reverberations of the downtown New Orleans black creole protest tradition?¹⁴⁸ Or, in light of the *Réveil*’s role as advocate for those creoles who yearned to be perceived as white, could “choosing to stay” be grasped as a place-bound, specific Third District narrative of resistance? Can similar narratives of choice, tied to narratives of place-knowledge, be traced in other disasters throughout New Orleans’s past? Or, for that matter, in the history of “natural” disasters more generally? In any case, listening closely to assertions of knowing local nature from lived experience holds transformative power in view of environmental and social inequities in the Crescent City. Narratives of “knowing nature,” in which the narratives of “choosing to stay” are grounded, allow for an alternative episteme that claims agency and power for all of those New Orleanians who feared to lose their home, be it in the nineteenth or the twenty-first century. Moreover, it reaches out beyond identity politics, fantasies of belonging, and empowerment through the specific character of the knowledge asserted, sketching alternative imaginaries for the Crescent City and profoundly challenging the validity of a modern Western knowledge system rooted in Enlightenment thought and tied to a discourse of progress by controlling nature. Revealing the constructedness and contingency of this discourse, the experience-based, relational counternarrative of “choosing to stay” exposes the entanglement of hegemonic discourses on flood prevention with broader discourses on progress and the human–nature relationship and, ultimately, shows how enmeshed they are with historically specific configurations of power. The assertion of place-knowledge thus does not hide inequalities but strikes right at the center of environmental inequity. It also does not limit itself to a fantasy of untouched nature: “knowing hurricanes” and “knowing the river” both suggest an understanding of local nature as consisting of built and natural spaces—levees and hurricanes, outlets and the river—alike or, more precisely, as the indistinguishable blending of these. As representations rooted in the attachment to place, narratives of “choosing to stay” thus hold transformative power, opening up perspectives for a “resonant environmentalism” of everyday life.

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Notes

1. Spike Lee, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (HBO, 2006), Act III 19:39.
2. Michael Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 59.

3. National Weather Service, National Hurricane Center, "Storm Surge Overview," <http://www.nhc.noaa.gov/surge/> (accessed May 23, 2014).
4. Richard D. Knabb et al. (National Hurricane Center), "Tropical Cyclone Report: Hurricane Katrina, 23–30 August 2005," 8, http://www.nhc.noaa.gov/pdf/TCR-AL122005_Katrina.pdf (accessed July 30, 2014).
5. Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water*, 67.
6. Lawrence Powell, *The Accidental City: Improvising New Orleans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).
7. Craig E. Colten, *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005).
8. For a detailed chronological account of Hurricane Katrina, cf. Douglas Brinkley, *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (New York: William Morrow, 2006).
9. Poppy Markwell and Raoult Ratard, "Deaths Directly Caused by Hurricane Katrina," Louisiana Department of Health & Hospitals Study, 4, <http://new.dhh.louisiana.gov/assets/oph/Center-PHCH/Center-CH/stepi/specialstudies/KatrinaDeath1.pdf> (accessed June 6, 2014). See also Joan Brunkard et al., "Hurricane Katrina Deaths, Louisiana, 2005," August 28, 2008, Louisiana Department of Health & Hospitals Study, <http://dhh.louisiana.gov/assets/oph/Center-PHCH/Center-CH/stepi/specialstudies/DisasterMedPHPrep2008No1KatrinaDeaths.pdf> (accessed June 6, 2014).
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11. Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water*, 2.
12. CNN Transcripts, 2005, "Interview with Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff," aired September 1, 2005, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0509/01/ltm.03.html> (accessed February 12, 2014).
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14. Timothy Garton Ash, "It Always Lies Below," *The Guardian*, September 8, 2005, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/sep/08/hurricanekatrina.usa6> (accessed July 7, 2014).
15. Ibid.
16. Cf. Sarah Kaufman, "The Criminalization of New Orleanians in Katrina's Wake," June 11, 2006, in *Understanding Katrina: Perspectives from the Social Sciences*, <http://understandingkatrina.ssrc.org/Kaufman/> (accessed June 5, 2014); for a thorough analysis of the narrative of criminality as part of a "neoliberal racial regime of security" see Jordan T. Camp, "'We Know This Place': Neoliberal Racial Regimes and the Katrina Circumstance," *American Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2009): 693–717, esp. 698–704.
17. Republican House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-IL) in an interview with the *Daily Herald* of Arlington Heights, Illinois, on August 31, 2005, as quoted in *The Washington Post*, September 3, 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/02/AR2005090202156.html> (accessed July 30, 2014).
18. John Derbyshire, "Justice and Guidance," *National Review*, September 4, 2005. Far-right blogger Steve Sailer on vdare.com.
19. Cf. Elizabeth Fussell, "Leaving New Orleans: Social Stratification, Networks, and Hurricane Evacuation," June 11, 2006, in *Understanding Katrina: Perspectives from the Social Sciences*, <http://understandingkatrina.ssrc.org/Fussell/> (accessed June 5, 2014). For an analysis of the elderly's situation in Katrina see Bill Bytheway, "The Evacuation of Older People: The Case of Hurricane Katrina," March 15, 2007, in *Understanding Katrina: Perspectives from the Social Sciences*, <http://understandingkatrina.ssrc.org/Bytheway/> (accessed June 5, 2014).
20. On the unnaturalness of this "natural" disaster, see Chester W. Hartman and Gregory D. Squires, eds., *There Is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster: Race, Class, and Hurricane Katrina* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Neil Smith, "There's No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster," June 11, 2006, in *Understanding Katrina: Perspectives from the Social Sciences*, <http://understandingkatrina.ssrc.org/Smith/> (accessed July 18, 2014); cf. Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Conceiving of Katrina as "man-made" (or "natural," for that matter) however implies a strict dichotomy between the social and natural world

- that ignores the multiple entanglements and inseparability of these “two” worlds. Cf. Uwe Lübken, *Die Natur der Gefahr: Überschwemmungen am Ohio River im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 23–24.
21. Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, <http://hurricanearchive.org/collections> (accessed December 2, 2014); Katrina Narrative Project: Rebeca Antoine, ed., *Voices Rising: Stories from the Katrina Narrative Project* (New Orleans: UNO Press, 2008); and Rebeca Antoine, ed., *Voices Rising II: More Stories from the Katrina Narrative Project* (New Orleans: UNO Press, 2010); Spike Lee, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (HBO, 2006).
 22. Especially in documentary films, many more levels of selectiveness are at play; through directorial choices, filmmakers powerfully shape the narrative they wish to be told. On the framing of Katrina experiences by Spike Lee, see Alexa Weik von Mossner, “Reframing Katrina: The Color of Disaster in Spike Lee’s *When the Levees Broke*,” *Environmental Communication* 5, no. 2 (June 2011): 146–65/148, who points out that through a wide range of directorial choices, Lee ultimately put forth his own narrative of Katrina. For a critical assessment of Katrina oral histories, cf. Alan H. Stein and Gene B. Preuss, “Oral History, Folklore, and Katrina,” in Hartman and Squires, eds., *There Is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster*, 37–58.
 23. Antoine, ed., *Voices Rising*.
 24. There are no large-scale, quantitative, representative studies as to how many Katrina stayers subscribed to the narrative of “choosing to stay,” although a few qualitative studies hint at the sizeable presence of the narrative in Katrina accounts. A psychological study, based on a sample of seventy-nine participants (both “leavers” and “stayers”), suggests that 22 percent of those who stayed emphasized their power to choose. See Nicole M. Stephens et al., “Why Did They ‘Choose’ to Stay? Perspectives of Hurricane Katrina Observers and Survivors,” *Psychological Science* 20, no. 7 (2009): 878–86, 883. Examining the reasons African American New Orleanians named for not evacuating, a qualitative health policy study cites participants’ experience in riding out previous storms as one of several reasons to stay, cf. Keith Elder et al., “African Americans’ Decisions Not to Evacuate New Orleans Before Hurricane Katrina: A Qualitative Study,” *American Journal of Public Health* 97, suppl. 1 (2007): S124–29/S125, S127. In a 2007 survey of Lower Ninth Ward residents’ Katrina experiences, urban planner Mark Kammerbauer identified a link between late evacuation (i.e., staying during the storm, properly speaking), lack of resources, and not returning. Mark Kammerbauer, “Evacuation and Return: Crisis Mobility in New Orleans Following Hurricane Katrina” (paper presented at the Environment, Forced Migration & Social Vulnerability: International Conference, 9–11 October in Bonn, Germany), 8, http://www.academia.edu/2348377/Evacuation_and_Return_Crisis_Mobility_in_New_Orleans_following_Hurricane_Katrina (accessed July 24, 2014). Yet 10.6 percent of the respondents to his questionnaire said they would not evacuate because they “thought they were safe” (ibid., 7). Unfortunately his study does not specify whether those who said they evacuated late because they felt safe (i.e., those relying on their personal experience and knowledge, suggesting staying as a conscious choice) did actually have more resources than other stayers, or whether they were equally lacking resources yet more willing to rely on their local experiences (and why).
 25. For an analysis of Rosalyn Story’s narrative of “staying,” see Florian Freitag, “Displacement and Dispossession: The Plantation Regime as a Disaster Discourse in Rosalyn Story’s *Wading Home* (2010),” in *Ten Years After Katrina: Critical Perspectives of the Storm’s Effect on American Culture and Identity*, ed. Mary Ruth Marotte and Glenn Jellenik (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 129–51, 136–39.
 26. See, e.g., Joseph Melancon in Spike Lee, *When the Levees Broke*, Act I, 25:19.
 27. Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 217–22.
 28. Farah Jasmine Griffin, “Children of Omar: Resistance and Reliance in the Expressive Cultures of Black New Orleans Cultures,” *Journal of Urban History* 35, no. 2 (2009): 656–67, 657, speaks of “collective experiences of trauma”; cf. Keith Wailoo, Karen M. O’Neill, and Jeffrey Dowd, “Introduction,” in *Katrina’s Imprint: Race and Vulnerability in America*, ed. Roland Anglin et al. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 2. On the displacement of African Americans due to urban renewal, see Jon C. Teaford, “Urban Renewal and Its Aftermath,” *Housing Policy Debate* 11, no. 2 (2000): 443–65, 445–59. Additionally, movements of larger groups of African Americans have frequently been

- deemed an “inundation” of “vagrants”: Arnold R. Hirsch and A. Lee Levert, “The Katrina Conspiracies: The Problem of Trust in Rebuilding an American City,” *Journal of Urban History* 35, no. 2 (2009): 207–19, 213.
29. See Lübken, *Die Natur der Gefahr*, 256–65, with detailed accounts for Cincinnati and Louisville. On the historical use of disasters as incentive for urban change that implies the displacement of local residents, see Uwe Lübken, “Chasing a Ghost? Environmental Change and Migration in History,” *Global Environment: A Journal of History and Natural and Social Sciences* 9 (2012): 5–24/15.
 30. Griffin, “Children of Omar,” 657–58, 664. On the origins of the Blues as an African American form of making sense of and resisting the antebellum plantation regime, see Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: Race, Power, and the Blues in the Mississippi Delta* (New York: Verso, 1998).
 31. Hirsch and Levert, “Katrina Conspiracies,” 214. On the demolition of public housing as policy of “racial enclosure” rooted in pre-Katrina “neoliberal/neo-Bourbon” policies that aimed at displacing poor African Americans, see Clyde Woods, “Les Misérables of New Orleans: Trap Economics and the Asset Stripping Blues, Part 1,” *American Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2009): 769–96, especially 782–84.
 32. Spike Lee, *When the Levees Broke*, Act I, 25:19.
 33. See Elder et al., “African Americans’ Decisions,” S125–S126.
 34. “‘We Thought We Made the Right Decision’: The Lozanos, As Told to Caroline Skinner,” in *Voices Rising: Stories from the Katrina Narrative Project*, ed. Rebeca Antoine (New Orleans: UNO Press, 2008), 17–19, 17.
 35. Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water*, 11. Juliette Landphair, “‘The Forgotten People of New Orleans’: Community, Vulnerability, and the Lower Ninth Ward,” *Journal of American History* 94, no. 3 (December 2007): 837–45, 841–42. On reaction to and recovery from Betsy cf. Craig E. Colten and A. R. Sumpter, “Social Memory and Resilience in New Orleans,” *Natural Hazards* 48 (2009): 355–64, 357–59.
 36. Rodney E. Emmer, “Online Story Contribution, Hurricane Digital Memory Bank,” *Hurricane Digital Memory Bank*, <http://hurricanearchive.org/items/show/598> (accessed July 24, 2014).
 37. Ibid.
 38. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco, “Select Committee Hearing,” December 14, 2005, in U.S. House of Representatives, *A Failure of Initiative: Final Report of the Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina*, February 15, 2006, 86, http://katrina.house.gov/full_katrina_report.htm (accessed July 30, 2014).
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 40. Ibid.
 41. For an overview of the City of New Orleans’s history of hurricane protection, cf. Craig E. Colten, *Perilous Place, Powerful Storms: Hurricane Protection in Coastal Louisiana* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009).
 42. Hirsch and Levert, “The Katrina Conspiracies,” 208.
 43. Ari Kelman, “Even Paranoids Have Enemies: Rumors of Levee Sabotage in New Orleans’ Lower 9th Ward,” *Journal of Urban History* 35, no. 5 (2009): 627–39, 631–33.
 44. Kelman, “Rumors of Levee Sabotage,” 630–37.
 45. For a detailed analysis, see Ari Kelman, *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 171–89.
 46. Kelman, “Rumors of Levee Sabotage,” 635–36.
 47. Kendrick Perkins, “[Untitled],” *Hurricane Digital Memory Bank*, <http://hurricanearchive.org/items/show/13875> (accessed July 24, 2014).
 48. Ibid.
 49. Charles Dudley Warner, “New Orleans,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 74, no. 440 (January 1887), 186–207, 186.
 50. Colten, *Unnatural Metropolis*, 33; cf. Ann Vileisis, *Discovering the Unknown Landscape: A History of America’s Wetlands* (Washington: Island Press, 1999), 33–36. The swamps’ disrepute was partly due to miasma theory, which ascribed diseases and epidemics to insalubrious exhalations emanating from

- muddy soil. In New Orleans, the yellow fever epidemic that ravaged the city in 1853 was attributed to the swamps located “back of town.” Colten, *Unnatural Metropolis*, 36.
51. Griffin, “Children of Omar,” 660. For further details on these “maroon” communities, see Powell, *Accidental City*, 236–40, 271–72.
 52. Peirce F. Lewis, *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape* (Santa Fe: Center for American Places, 2003), 19–20; Marcel Giraud, *A History of French Louisiana*, vol. 5: *The Company of the Indies, 1723-1731* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 206. For a detailed account of the choice of the site, see Richard Campanella, *Time and Place in New Orleans: Past Geographies in the Present Day* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing Company, 2002), 16–36. The vicissitudes of the new site were made up for by the advantages of the new town’s situation as entrepot of commerce between the Atlantic Ocean and the interior of the continent—a situation it owed to its location on the very river that was much decried for its hazardous nature. *Ibid.*, 16.
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 54. Giraud, *Company of the Indies*, 206–10. As early as 1723, the “ingénieurs du Roi” began erecting levees on the Mississippi’s banks. *Ibid.*, 206. Cf. Colten, *Unnatural Metropolis*, 19. For an overview of the history of New Orleans flood control technologies see J. D. Rogers, “Development of the New Orleans Flood Protection System prior to Hurricane Katrina,” *Journal of Geotechnical and Geoenvironmental Engineering* (May 2008): 602–17.
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 57. Colten, *Unnatural Metropolis*, 36–52.
 58. George Washington Cable, *The Creoles of Louisiana* (1884; repr. Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing, 2000), 282.
 59. Joseph Holt, *The Sanitary Relief of New Orleans: A Paper Read Before the New Orleans Medical and Surgical Association, October 31st, 1885* (New Orleans: Graham & Son, 1885), 6. For a similar rhetoric in the city of Montreal, see Michèle Dagenais and Caroline Durand, “Cleansing, Draining, and Sanitizing the City: Conceptions and Uses of Water in the Montreal Region,” *Canadian Historical Review* 87, no. 4 (December 2006): 621–51, 628.
 60. Holt, *Sanitary Relief*, 5.
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 65. Colten, *Unnatural Metropolis*, 106–7.
 66. See, e.g., “Magnificent Work by Clean-Up Clubs,” *Daily Picayune*, July 30, 1905. Cf. Martin V. Melosi, *Garbage in the Cities: Refuse, Reform, and the Environment* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2005), 107–9.
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86. Cf., e.g., "Nation, State, City, and All Races Join in Great Clean-Up Campaign in Orleans," *New Orleans Item*, June 29, 1914.
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90. "Les Levées et les Ingénieurs," *Le Réveil*, September 9, 1897.

91. Colten, *Unnatural Metropolis*, 88. The *Réveil*'s identification with white New Orleanians is evident from its editors' writings on African Americans, see, e.g., their suggestions that "nègres" should be sent back to Africa in "L'avenir de la race nègre," *Le Réveil*, February 3, 1898.
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93. "Au Troisième District," *Le Réveil*, August 8, 1897.
94. "Le Long de la Levée du Troisième District," *Le Réveil*, July 25, 1897.
95. Ibid. For a rant against uptown American capitalists, see also "La Rue du Canal," *Le Réveil*, August 5, 1897.
96. "La Rue du Canal," *Le Réveil*, August 5, 1897; "Au Troisième District," *Le Réveil*, August 8, 1897. See also "Répartition des Fonds au Conseil de Ville," *Le Réveil*, January 16, 1898.
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100. "Les Levées et les Ingénieurs," *Le Réveil*, September 9, 1897.
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103. Ibid. Cf. "Le Long de la Levée du Troisième District," *Le Réveil*, July 25, 1897.
104. Michel Foucault, "The Order of Discourse" (1970), reprinted in Robert Young, ed., *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 51–78, 60.
105. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (1976; repr. London: Allen Lane, 1978), 100.
106. Paul Octave Hébert, *Annual Report of the State Engineer to the Legislature of the State of Louisiana* (New Orleans: The Jeffersonian, 1846), 10–11. Cf. George S. Pabis, "Subduing Nature through Engineering: Caleb C. Forshey and the Levees-only Policy, 1851–1881," in *Transforming New Orleans and Its Environs: Centuries of Change*, ed. Craig Colten (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2000), 64–83, 65.
107. William Darby, *A Geographical Description of the State of Louisiana* (New York: James Olmstead, 1817), 63. Cf. Colten, *Unnatural Metropolis*, 22.
108. Colten, *Unnatural Metropolis*, 29.
109. See Pabis, "Subduing Nature," 64–83, for a detailed account of this quarrel. The divergent opinions on flood prevention were also noted by Mark Twain in his *Life on the Mississippi River* (1883; repr. New York: Bantam Books, 1946), 205.
110. Pabis, "Subduing Nature," 66.
111. Cf. Colten, *Unnatural Metropolis*, 30.
112. "Les Levées et les Ingénieurs," *Le Réveil*, September 9, 1897.
113. Colten, *Unnatural Metropolis*, 26.
114. Lewis, *New Orleans*, 63.
115. "Répartition des Fonds au Conseil de Ville," *Le Réveil*, January 16, 1898.
116. On the construction of the creole/American dichotomy and the "creole myth" of creoles as Louisiana-born, white descendants of French aristocrats in the antebellum era, see Tregle, "Creoles and Americans," 134–35.
117. Kelman, *A River and Its City*, 71–73.
118. Ibid., 71.
119. Tregle, "Creoles and Americans," 138.
120. Ibid.
121. Ibid.
122. Ibid., 72–75. Tregle, "Creoles and Americans," 156. The two downtown districts were led by French and creoles, the uptown district by anglophone Americans. Cf. Hirsch and Logsdon, "Introduction to Part II," 93.
123. Tregle, "Creoles and Americans," 151–57.
124. "Décadence," *Le Réveil*, November 7, 1897.

125. On the relatedness of cultural identity and territory, see E. Richard Atleo (Umeek), *Tsawalk: A Nuu-cha-nulth Worldview* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004), 3, 96.
126. Young, *Postcolonialism*, 354.
127. Atleo, *Tsawalk*, 30, 134. On the relatedness and interconnectedness of all things in First Peoples' belief systems, see Nancy Turner and Richard Atleo, "Pacific North American First Peoples and the Environment," in *Traditional and Modern Approaches to the Environment on the Pacific Rim*, ed. Harold Coward (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 105–24, 107–8.
128. Jeannette Armstrong, "Constructing Indigeneity: Syilx Okanagan Oraliture and tmixwcentrism" (PhD dissertation, University of Greifswald, Germany, 2009), 1, http://ub-ed.ub.uni-greifswald.de/opus/volltexte/2012/1322/pdf/Dissertation_Armstrong_Jeannette.pdf (accessed July 23, 2014).
129. Marie Battiste, "Indigenous Knowledge and Pedagogy in First Nations Education: A Literature Review with Recommendations," October 31, 2002, http://www.afn.ca/uploads/files/education/24_2002_oct_marie_battiste_indigenousknowledgeandpedagogy_lit_review_for_min_working_group.pdf (accessed July 23, 2014).
130. Camp, "Neoliberal Racial Regimes," 694.
131. Cf. Kevin Rozario, "Making Progress: Disaster Narratives and the Art of Optimism in Modern America," in *The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster*, ed. Lawrence J. Vale and Thomas J. Campanella (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27–54, 33–34.
132. Camp, "Neoliberal Racial Regimes," 694. See Joy James, "Political Literacy and Voice," in *What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race, and the State of the Nation*, ed. South End Press Collective (Cambridge: South End Press, 2007), 157–66, 158–59.
133. Janet Walker, "Moving Testimonies and the Geographies of Suffering: Perils and Fantasies of Belonging after Katrina," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 24, no. 1 (February 2010): 47–64, 53–55; similarly Weik von Mossner, "Reframing Katrina," 148, 155–56, who criticizes Lee's focus on the levee rumors as obscuring "larger environmental and social vulnerabilities of New Orleans" (156).
134. Walker, "Moving Testimonies," 47.
135. Kelman, "Rumors of Levee Sabotage," 632.
136. Michel Foucault, "Prison Talk," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings by Michel Foucault, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 37–54, 52.
137. On the concept of "place-myth," see Shields, *Places on the Margins*, 61.
138. Cf. Klopfer, *Balkone von New Orleans*, 171–80.
139. On the multiple facets of the narrative of New Orleans exceptionalism, see Barbara Eckstein, *Sustaining New Orleans: Literature, Local Memory, and the Fate of a City* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1–29.
140. David M. Scobey, *Empire City: The Making and Meaning of the New York City Landscape* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 170.
141. Charles S. Maier, "Consigning the 20th Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era," *American Historical Review* 105 (June 2000): 807–31, 819.
142. Armstrong, "Constructing Indigeneity," 1.
143. John M. Meyer, *Toward a Resonant Environmentalism: Property, Freedom, and Citizenship in Everyday Practice* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), forthcoming.
144. John M. Meyer, *Political Nature: Environmentalism and the Interpretation of Western Thought* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 138.
145. On the entanglement of place, nature, and environmental politics, see *ibid.*, 136–41.
146. Camp, "Neoliberal Racial Regimes," 704.
147. Young, *Postcolonialism*, 354.
148. Hirsch, "Simply a Matter of Black and White," 271, locates the "proud creole protest tradition" in the Seventh Ward, one of the Third District's wards.

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