A Gulf Unites Us: The Vietnamese Americans of Black New Orleans East

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King's Meat Market and Grocery sits on the northern end of the Broad Street bridge in the midcity section of New Orleans. When storeowner Mike Tran returned to King's six weeks after Hurricane Katrina, he found only a shell of what once was. In addition to being flooded, the store had been broken into and his entire stock of nonperishable goods stolen, along with some cash and office equipment. Meanwhile the stench of rotten meat choked the air for blocks. "I just cried," said Tran, who had built the business from scratch. At thirty-two, he is the youngest child of Vietnamese American refugees who resettled to New Orleans after the U.S. war in Vietnam.[1]

On the opposite end of the bridge sits Orleans Parish Prison (OPP). Here, more than 1,200 prisoners, the overwhelming majority black men, were stranded as the hurricane tore through the city and as the floodwaters steadily rose. These prisoners were abandoned without food, water, or proper ventilation. Two days passed before any of the prisoners were evacuated. By then, the waters in some of the cells had reached chest level. Several died as a result of the unbearable conditions. "They were screaming for their lives," one witness testified.[2] Among those eventually evacuated, some were taken to the bridge, where heavily armed Louisiana state troopers detained them. As it happened, this was not the only bridge in New Orleans where blacks were being held at gunpoint. On the Mississippi bridge, a throng of mostly black residents attempted to escape the rising waters in New Orleans by crossing westward into Gretna, a majority white township that had not been severely flooded. But the group of evacuees would never make it across. Gretna police were ordered to push them back. Some officers fired shots into the crowd in an attempt to turn it around.[3]

Aerial news images of people of color corralled on the bridges of New Orleans offered a stunning tableau of black suffering at the hands of white institutional power. The point was not lost on Tran, who, though having lived his entire life in New Orleans, had never witnessed this level of racial terror against blacks. "I was shocked by some of the things I saw happening

to blacks," Tran said. "Katrina hit everyone; everyone was impacted. But some black folks were just left out there to die. 'This was not the New Orleans I know,' I said to myself."

Yet at the same time Tran is not naive about the way in which race permeates virtually all aspects of social life in New Orleans, particularly when it comes to community segregation. Tran was only ten months old when his parents resettled to what would eventually become the heart of the city's Vietnamese American community, a neighborhood known as Versailles, located in New Orleans East. New Orleans East stretches as far as twenty miles east of downtown, and Versailles is situated on its eastern-most edge, along a waterway known as Chef Menteur Pass. The neighborhood's official name is Village d'Lest, but it was dubbed Versailles because when the first wave of refugees arrived, they were placed into the Versailles Arms Apartments—a complex of low-income units that served as gateway homes for refugees.

When Vietnamese Americans first arrived in Versailles, the neighborhood was approximately 90 percent black, a demographic that is attributed to several events, beginning with urban renewal efforts that pushed many blacks out of the downtown and uptown sections of the city during the postwar years.[4] This was followed by the construction of new and relatively affordable housing in New Orleans East during the 1960s and 1970s that pulled many first-time black homeowners to the area. Not incidentally, during this same period of time, New Orleans East would see a steady pattern of white flight. Whites had originally moved east to enjoy the new housing stock and to escape downtown density. But before long they would have their sights set on even newer and certainly whiter subdivisions in neighboring Jefferson Parish. Contributing to white flight was the closure of some industries that had originally drawn white workers to New Orleans East. In particular, the closing of the NASA plant led to the departure of white workers who had once occupied the Versailles Arms Apartment complex.[5] Those apartments remained vacant until they were redesignated section-eight housing. As working-poor and welfare-dependent black families moved into those units, white flight from the neighborhood only accelerated.

By the late 1970s, Vietnamese Americans essentially became the lone racial minority in what was a decidedly black New Orleans East. "Growing up out East, all I knew was Viets and blacks," Tran said. A lifetime of socialization in this racial context may explain why Tran defied the stereotypical reactions of an immigrant storeowner whose business had been looted, ostensibly by black residents. He exudes a deep ambivalence when asked about those who

apparently stole from him. "Cash, liquor, and cigarettes—yeah, they stole everything," he said, appearing visibly annoyed. "But, you know, not everyone was there to steal. Some people were just finding a way to survive."

Proudly, Tran points out that his store must have served as shelter for those who were stranded. It was built on an elevated slab, which meant that it took some time before the waters rose high enough to flood the property. Moreover, he recalls finding large pieces of cardboard scattered across the floor. These were no doubt used as makeshift sleeping mats. Pieces of clothing and other personal effects were also left behind.

Tran's empathy for those stranded in his store may come across as unexpected, even anomalous. And yet it reflects a broader disposition among the Vietnamese American community of New Orleans East in the months following the great storm. This was a period marked not only by their remarkable rate of return, but also by the acts of solidarity and sharing between Vietnamese American and black neighbors. In the weeks following the storm, representatives from both communities would support each other on the political front, as each demanded greater state accountability, as well as with concrete resources such as meeting space for political and religious congregation.

In the wake of a catastrophe such as Katrina, such acts of solidarity should not be entirely surprising; it should make sense that neighbors who are commonly afflicted by tragedy engage in mutual support. Yet what transpired between black and Vietnamese Americans stood out for several interrelated reasons, beginning with the way in which Asian Americans have historically been enlisted to delegitimize black claims for justice in the aftermath of racial crises. Whether it was the wave of urban unrest of the late 1960s or the conflagration of Los Angeles in 1992 following the Rodney King verdict, Asian American "successes," specifically those achieved without (or even despite) state intervention, have served white racial dominance as an important countervailing argument against those who would hold the state accountable for the reproduction of racial inequality.

According to Glenn Omatsu, the inextricable linkage between model minority tropes and Asian Americans has intensified over the past thirty-five years, owing largely to ways in which such racialization has enabled the political right to radically redefine civil rights in America.[6] By championing Asian American successes in education and business in particular, neoconservatives from the Reagan era on have sought to reframe civil rights as the distinct right of individuals to have their successes protected *against* government intervention. Asian Americans have therefore been cast by neoconservatives as the victims

of affirmative action and racial quotas in higher education; meanwhile, their supposed penchant for creating economic opportunities amid postindustrial urban decline has served as condemnation of the social welfare programs emblematic of big government. [7]

As the Vietnamese mounted their improbable return to New Orleans East—the first in the area to do so without significant government assistance—the conditions seemed ripe for the reproduction of racial discourses that underscore Asian American self-reliance in distinction to black government-dependency. Moreover, that Vietnamese Americans are perceived to be an intractably conservative ethnic group—due in large part to the anticommunist views of the generation that resettled to the United States following the fall of Saigon—should have driven an even bigger wedge between them and their black neighbors.

But in the wake of Katrina, the Vietnamese American community revealed a radically alternative political sensibility. They demanded greater accountability from local and federal officials, who were slow with providing recovery resources. They engaged in bold direct actions, including civil disobedience, against state and private companies seeking to dump Katrina debris in their neighborhood. In the media, Vietnamese American leaders could be heard extolling grassroots efforts to defend New Orleans from developers and others who would profit from the disaster. And through it all, they allied with their black neighbors, who saw Katrina as nothing short of a referendum on race and class inequalities in the United States.

This article analyzes the distinct political choices and nuanced racial position of the Vietnamese Americans of New Orleans East. In so doing, it uncovers the conditions of possibility that underlie racial solidarity, particularly those unexpected alliances that overcome prohibitive discursive and structural forces. I begin with a fuller description of the political activism and gestures of solidarity aforementioned. From here I explore two key factors that allowed for such activism and solidarity to take shape in post-Katrina New Orleans. First, both communities were buoyed by respective histories of resilience—"usable pasts" that community members summoned to explain their unlikely return and rebuilding efforts.[8] Between Vietnamese American and black residents, these stories became mutually recognizable—or resonant—as each saw in the other motives for return that could not be reduced to economic concerns. Second, Vietnamese American and black residents of New Orleans East were not prone to the class antagonisms that are said to provoke the well-rehearsed black-Asian conflict in the postindustrial city: Vietnamese Americans are not overrepresented as small business owners who operate in poor black communi-

ties without investing in those very communities, and black residents are not homogenously the working or jobless poor who are beholden to an interloping, nonblack entrepreneurial class. In New Orleans East, one finds class heterogeneity in both communities: each consists of the business owners, the home owners, the working poor, the welfare dependent, and the jobless.

According to scholars from various fields of study, white racial dominance is invariably strengthened by the putative black-Asian conflict. This is true even when such conflicts seem to be rooted primarily in class opposition between Asians and blacks, and when whites appear absent from the scene. In fact, the seeming absence of whiteness from the conflict signals the very power of white racial dominance. As historian Vijay Prashad argues, the figure of the Asian merchant as perpetual stranger and irredeemable interloper in the black community (be it the South Asian merchant in East Africa or the Korean American shopkeeper in South Central Los Angeles) has historically served to reinforce white institutional power by concealing white imperial dominance over both communities:

> Those who shape and mainly benefit from the economic order appear exculpated from the systemic deprivation in this country: the white elites can be liberal because they do not have to be at the front lines of class struggle. For the working poor, the merchant appears to be the decisive exploiter and oppressor, while financial houses are protected by their spatial invisibility and by their crafty mechanisms that create economic distance. Because of this perverse logic, the oppressed in urban America seek to destroy the shops, if not in the name of white elites, then certainly not in opposition to them. And the idea of the "Korean," forged in the smithy of U.S. imperial policies, becomes the determinate contradiction to black liberation.[9]

Similarly, ethnic studies and literary scholar Elaine Kim recalls how this dynamic took shape when, in April 1992, black and Latino residents of Los Angeles took their outrage over police brutality to the streets, with many destroying property owned by those who they believed to be complicit with white institutional racism and black disempowerment. Included among these targets were hundreds of Korean American–owned businesses. Below, I will revisit the 1992 Los Angeles unrest in greater detail. Here, I want to highlight Kim's observation of the way in which whites lorded over the conflict between black/brown residents and Korean American shopkeepers. She describes the rage she felt upon overhearing whites "discussing the conflicts as if they were watching a dogfight or a boxing match";[10] here, she likens whiteness to the polygamous patriarch who operates at a distance: "He can afford to be kind

and pleasant because the structure that pits his wives against each other is so firmly in place that he need never sully his hands or even raise his voice." [11]

For political scientist Claire Jean Kim, the puissant and unsullied position of whites in relation to the front-line race and class struggles in the contemporary U.S. city is the very ontology of whiteness. In the U.S. context, white racial dominance comes into existence wherever it situates itself in distinct relation to blacks and Asian Americans within a power-laden "racial field of position." Kim describes this operation as "racial triangulation."[12] According to this theory, white racism sits at a specific coordinate or power from which it emanates two distinct yet complementary vectors. Moving in one direction, the first vector locates Asians Americans at a coordinate of unassimilability; here they are cast as "immutably foreign and unassimilable with whites on racial and/or cultural grounds in order to ostracize them from the body politic and civic membership," according to Kim.[13] From this coordinate, a second vector is released, one that valorizes Asian Americans over blacks, locating blacks at a third coordinate of inferiority to whites, as well as to other people of color. According to Kim, this schema serves as a corrective to theories suggesting that U.S. racial groups have been formed through distinct and independent trajectories, with Asian Americans serving as a buffer between prefigured black and white formations. Instead, according to racial triangulation, Asian American, black, and white positions are mutually constitutive—they remain in a constant process of informing one another. The devaluation of black life is therefore always substantiated in relation to Asian Americans. And the power of white racial dominance is determined by its ongoing ability to reproduce itself by maintaining positions of antagonism between racial others.

In New Orleans East, where white residents are few and far between, racial triangulation may appear less obvious. But, here again, the invisibility of white racial dominance signals its potency. Though whites may not live in New Orleans East, white institutional power is felt everywhere. This point came into sharpest relief in the post-Katrina era. And yet the interactions between the Vietnamese Americans and blacks of New Orleans East remind us that racial triangulation is never a fait accompli. It can be stymied by historical trajectories and class positions that do not conform to triangular design. So, too, it can be challenged by the agency of racialized subjects whose complex daily relationships to one another exceed the binary of antagonism versus solidarity, thus neutralizing the interests and desires of whites who stand the most to gain from triangulation.

Model Minorities of a Different Sort

As a child of refugees, Tran is well versed in the history of his parents' generation—those who rebuilt their lives after two decades of war in Vietnam. From an early age he learned that the reclamation of home—especially when achieved in solidarity with fellow displaced peoples—was a kind of success that trumped all others, including monetary success. So it came as no surprise to him that among the first community residents to return to New Orleans East in the weeks following Hurricane Katrina were the Vietnamese Americans of the area, led by the elderly residents who decades earlier had escaped the throes of the Vietnam wars.[14]

The Vietnamese Americans first shocked the poststorm city when, in mid-October 2005—only a little more than a month after the flooding—a group of residents returned to their neighborhood in New Orleans East. In the fall of 2005, Versailles would be among of the first heavily impacted neighborhoods in the city—and certainly the first in New Orleans East—to become functional after the storm. In early November 2005, its community leaders successfully pressured the city to turn on the utilities. By January 2006, even a few Vietnamese American small-business owners had returned; by spring of that year approximately 75 percent of their businesses were operational. But most impressive of all was the rate of residential return; approximately 1,500 of the 5,000 residents had returned to Versailles by June 2006, and on the first anniversary of Katrina, the population stood at approximately 3,000.[15] These were remarkable and unrivaled numbers, and yet they also posed a troubling racial disparity. Few could ignore that surrounding black neighborhoods in New Orleans East were still in ruins. The mere image of Vietnamese Americans busily rebuilding Versailles while other neighborhoods remained desolate had the potential of fomenting those axiomatic racial comparatives: Asian Americans were once again succeeding while neighboring blacks were faltering.

But as it happened, such comparatives were not much in evidence. To the contrary, the Vietnamese Americans were lauded by neighboring black leaders who were impressed by the community's activism and grateful for the way in which its leaders shared limited resources with black residents.

"After the storm, there was so much sharing from the Vietnamese Americans, especially from Father Vien," said Myron Angel, a longtime African American resident of New Orleans East who today sits on the Board of the Greater New Orleans East Neighborhood Association.[16] Angel was referring to Father Nguyen The Vien, head of the Mary Queen of Vietnam Church

(MQVN). The priest was a well-known community leader prior to Katrina, but his stature only grew with his poststorm heroics. He was responsible for coordinating evacuation and rescue efforts as the floodwaters overwhelmed Versailles; then, a few weeks later, he led that first group of returnees back into the neighborhood, doing so over the objections of state and federal authorities. Black community leaders such as Angel expressed admiration for his pugnacity, but also for his deep compassion for his neighbors.[17]

"We had no place to meet, and Father Vien was the first person to open up his doors," Angel said. Angel's group had been granted unconditional access to MQVN church in the weeks and months following the storm. Completed in 1985, MQVN is the largest Vietnamese American Catholic church in the United States, a monument not only to refugee resettlement to New Orleans, but to the singular role of the Catholic church in engineering that process. In the months after Katrina, the church served as temporary shelter for the first wave of returnees, as the site for food and clothing donations, and as a clearinghouse for information on the whereabouts of missing family and friends. But it also became an important gathering point for black community leaders such as Angel, those whose churches and community centers had been all but destroyed. So, too, the MQVN would provide a temporary religious home for black parishioners. New Orleans East was without a Catholic mass for the first four months after the storm, a privation felt by black and Vietnamese Americans alike, as both communities maintain large Catholic majorities. In the first week of November 2005, Father Vien decided that his church was finally ready for services. One of his first steps was to reach out to black religious leaders, inviting their congregants to join what would be the area's first post-Katrina mass. On that Sunday morning, the pews at MQVN, which hold approximately eight hundred, were completely filled. Those who attended the mass described it as something of a turning point moment for all of New Orleans East, signaling the inevitable return of the displaced.

Angel recalls that prior to Katrina, the relationship between Vietnamese Americans and blacks could at best be described as "tolerant," but certainly not allied. The genesis of this new sense of solidarity is something that he struggles to fully explain. "After a catastrophe, groups can become more insular, more defensive about protecting their community and businesses. But the Vietnamese folks did just the opposite."

The generosity exhibited by the Vietnamese Americans toward their neighbors could be considered part of the many acts of grassroots solidarity shown between and among residents after the storm. Yet in the media, one also detected

a hint of model minority exceptionalism. According to several media reports, the speed and efficiency with which the Vietnamese Americans were able to return and rebuild had much to do with the fact that they had survived past traumas, particularly a history of war and displacement. Father Vien offered a more sobering explanation. "We were lucky," he said. "Our church was not badly damaged and this allowed us to get back in to coordinate the return and rebuilding effort."[18] Without denying the importance of survival skills, the priest plainly recognized that his community did not sustain the degree of damage experienced in other neighborhoods, particularly in the predominantly black sections of New Orleans East—areas situated farther to the west, closer to the levees of the Intercoastal Waterway. He asserts that had the floodlines in Versailles reached only a few feet higher, the fate of his community could have been very different.

And yet the relocation of the Vietnamese Americans along that eastern edge of New Orleans East was never a kismet matter. Thirty years earlier, the archdiocese of New Orleans, working through Catholic Charities, deliberately sought an underpopulated area of Orleans Parish in which to resettle the refugees. The quiet stretch along Chef Menteur Pass seemed ideal.[19] The area is surrounded by wetlands (the less charitable description is swampland) and is located so far to the east that it is often jokingly referred to as "Mississippi." Below I will explore the historical dynamics that led the archdiocese to resettle refugees to New Orleans in the first place. For now suffice it to say that the Catholic church has long played a central role in determining not only the geographic resettlement of the Vietnamese American community, but its political power as well. Indeed, the institutional backing of the archdiocese may serve to explain why leaders such as Father Vien were able to challenge city officials who discouraged his community's precipitant return, or why he felt emboldened to excoriate foot-dragging federal officials slow to deliver on the temporary shelters. But the dominant role of Catholicism among the Vietnamese Americans fails to explain several important post-Katrina developments, most notably the social justice—some might argue, left-leaning—activism that accompanied the community's rebuilding process.

"This is the first time I've seen a Vietnamese church practicing liberation theology," remarked James Bui, gulf coast regional director of the National Association of Vietnamese Service Agencies (NAVASA).[20] It is a radical designation that few would associate with Catholicism in New Orleans, which, as scholar Clyde Woods reminds, has often been on the wrong side of the city's racial justice struggles.[21] According to Woods, in New Orleans, the centuries-

long struggle between black freedom and white racial dominance is no less the struggle between the blues tradition and Bourbonism, and the Catholic Church has often supported the agenda of the latter. Here, it may be overreaching to suggest that in the aftermath of Katrina, Vietnamese Americans were summoning the blues. But they were certainly staking out a political pole that would take the city's power structure by surprise while drawing them deeper into an alliance with the black community.

The Landfill

Among the more subtle signs of Vietnamese American rootedness in Versailles are the luscious garden beds that float atop the wetlands surrounding the neighborhood. These gardens are meticulously tended each day by the neighborhood's sixty- to ninety-year-olds, who were part of the first wave of refugees to resettle to the neighborhood.

In February 2006, no less than six months after Katrina ravaged those gardens, they would come under threat again as a makeshift dump site, located only one-half mile from the center of Versailles, was opened under an executive order signed by Mayor C. Ray Nagin. The unlined landfill was created to hold more than a fourth of New Orleans' Katrina debris. According to community members, most of what was being dumped was unsorted waste, and some feared that toxins were seeping into the wetlands. Community members, with the support of outside advocacy groups, were determined to shut it down. Leading the charge were the older members of the community. They took to city hall in the weeks following the opening of the landfill, staging a major protest that drew more than four hundred people. For all the reports of returnees scraping by without basic resources, the residents managed to arrive with printed signs and T-shirts denouncing the landfill. Nobody—neither the elected officials nor the protestors' supporters outside—was prepared to see this level of organization.

Faced with mounting pressure, Nagin promised to close the landfill by late August 2006, when its current permit expired. But as this date approached, he showed clear signs of pulling back on that promise. The mayor suggested the possibility of renewing the landfill permit because the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality had recently stated its support for the continued use of the site. According to several Versailles residents I interviewed, this about-face was nothing short of a betrayal.[22] Months earlier, their leaders had supported Nagin in his successful bid for reelection.

On August 23, 2006, the day the landfill permit was set to expire (and only one week before the first anniversary of Katrina), community members took to the front lines of a demonstration at the site. For the previous two weeks they had been preparing for civil disobedience. Elderly residents and neighborhood youths stood shoulder to shoulder at the gates of the landfill, determined that no dump truck would pass.

"This is either going to be a community celebration or a protest with people getting arrested," said twenty-two-year-old Minh Nguyen, as he prepared to march on the landfill. "If no dump trucks appear, then it's a sign that the permit was not renewed. But if the trucks do [arrive], then those of us blocking the entrance are going to get arrested."[23] Nguyen is the director of the Vietnamese American Young Leaders Association of New Orleans (VAYLA-NO), a group that organized a team of youth from Versailles to join the elderly residents for the action. Nguyen noted that no less than six months earlier, these youths were scattered to evacuation sites across the United States; now they were back home, poised to take their first political arrest. In the end, no dump trucks showed up. The mayor's office sent word that the landfill site was officially closed. As the mostly Vietnamese American protestors celebrated at the shuttered gates of the landfill, they would be joined by black community leaders, most notably Councilwoman Cynthia Willard-Lewis. Lewis, who represents the Ninth Ward, stood before the crowd and praised them for bringing the "gift of unity and organization to New Orleans East," for winning a "just and right fight . . . that strengthens and unites all of New Orleans."[24]

The activism demonstrated by the Vietnamese Americans of Versailles rendered model minority talk irrelevant, and yet as a result of their political efforts, a new kind of success story now seemed applicable. The struggle to close the landfill made headlines in the *New York Times* and other major print media.[25] The TV news networks followed the story week to week, as well. As the public attention mounted, Versailles, hardly known as a hotbed of activism, had overnight become something of a beacon for a grassroots movement determined to assert the rights of Katrina returnees. Asian American community organizers, activists, filmmakers, students, attorneys, and academics traveled to New Orleans East to lend support to the rebuilding efforts and the landfill campaign. Among the city's grassroots movements, the landfill closure was one of the few victories (and certainly the only one of its magnitude) in a year marked by unprecedented death and destruction, government neglect, and the rapid decline of the city's black population. In light of all of this, it was important to the leadership of Versailles that the political win not be cast as an exclusively Vietnamese American success story.

"The landfill struggle, everything we're fighting for out here—this is about the Vietnamese and the blacks together," asserted James Bui of NAVASA. Bui was often responsible for fielding media questions about the landfill campaign. He was cognizant of the way in which the social justice achievements of Vietnamese Americans, even when removed from the constraints of model minority typecasting, could be used by the media to yet again assert Vietnamese American exceptionalism. In an attempt to correct those who would cast the landfill struggle as solely a "Vietnamese thing," Bui made sure to point out the multiracial character of the effort. He noted that the campaign had gained momentum from the support it received from an umbrella organization known as Citizens for a Stronger New Orleans East, which consists of both Vietnamese American and black-led groups. Moreover, the venerated Southern Christian Leadership Council lent invaluable support to the Vietnamese American leadership in the weeks and months after the storm.

If racial triangulation is predicated upon the power of whiteness to valorize Asian Americans over blacks, then what becomes of it when—in a post-crisis instance such as Katrina—the common interests of Vietnamese American and black residents comes into sharp focus? Moreover, what becomes of triangulation when Vietnamese Americans recognize the ways in which the historical struggles of blacks bear directly on their own fate? Leaders such as Father Vien and James Bui were candid about their community's lack of experience with environmental justice issues prior to Katrina, suggesting that if it were not for the tutelage they received from environmental groups that for years had been organizing against dumping in neighboring black communities, the residents of Versailles might have acquiesced to the city's use of the landfill site. Father Vien was initially compelled by the mayor's argument that in order for New Orleans to fully recover, the hurricane debris had to go *somewhere*. Perhaps this was a sacrifice the Vietnamese Americans should make for the greater good. But local community activists quickly convinced the priest otherwise. They provided Vietnamese American community leaders with a crash course on the long-term effects of the toxins, helped them find experts to test the material in the landfill (which revealed high levels of toxicity), and guided them through lengthy legal fights against the city and the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality.

Father Vien and other Vietnamese American community leaders would find ways to reciprocate. As the first anniversary of Katrina approached, the priest became a regular presence at meetings and events concerning the rights of displaced black residents. Offering the support of the people of Versailles,

he spoke at the rallies, town hall meetings, and community events put on by black coalitions seeking not only the right of return, but also the reopening of schools and public healthcare centers.

Finally, Vietnamese American leaders would have considered the landfill victory incomplete if it resulted in the resumption of dumping in another Hailnerable neighborhood. As it happened, this is precisely what the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality and the Waste Management Corporation had in mind. They set their sights set on Waggaman, a multiracial, working-class town in Jefferson Parish. Although officials tried to assure Waggaman residents that any potential landfill site would be fully certified and properly lined, local resistance to their proposal began almost immediately. "I'm completely with them," Father Vien said.[26]

That racial triangulation operates within a field of position suggests the implicit possibility of *repositioning*. Here, it helps to conceptualize positions in the Gramscian sense: specific coordinates that uphold a hegemonic form while simultaneously possessing the potential of that form's undoing. With respect to triangulation, the inherent possibility of counterhegemony is evinced when a change in the position of one racial group consequently repositions the other two. If Vietnamese Americans choose to challenge discourses that valorize their efforts at the expense of blacks, such a move simultaneously alters the racial positions of blacks and whites within that field of power. However, the question remains, what are the conditions that give rise to these moments in which particular racial groups will break from hegemonic discourse?

In what follows, I argue that the exigency of crisis is not enough to set forth the conditions of possibility for lasting solidarity, nor can it support the sustained articulation of cross-racial belonging in New Orleans East. In the years since the landfill struggle, political alliances between Vietnamese Americans and black residents have persisted through various channels. The two communities worked closely together in influencing the so-called master plan for New Orleans, ensuring that the area be recognized as an important cultural heritage district. Young activists from both communities have also been jointly active in struggles to reopen area schools. Most important, both groups have avoided falling into competition with one another over scarce resources, even as government officials politicized the process of doling out recovery funds. These efforts defy political expediency and other ephemera. They are rooted in a mutual recognition of commonalities that run deeper than post-Katrina victimization.

On Resonant Histories of Resilience

"Before Katrina, the black and Vietnamese communities never had a chance to learn each other's history," said Ron Chisom, director of the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, a grassroots organization dedicated to anti-racist education.[27] Since the mid-1960s, Chisom has been actively involved in the civil rights and Black Power movements, work that continues through the post-Katrina period. In 2007, the People's Institute began coordinating regular meetings among a new and multiracial corps of community organizers that emerged in the post-Katrina era. Included among them were some of the young organizers from Versailles, those who were involved in the action against the landfill. The goal of the gatherings was simple enough: to deepen the connections between communities that first began to work with each after the storm. For Chisom, if such relationships were to continue in what some now termed the "post-post Katrina" era—when all the national attention was beginning to fade—then it was important that each community appreciate the specific historical struggles of the other.[28] But Chisom concedes that even before this opportunity arose, there was something about the way in which the Vietnamese Americans had gone about their return and rebuilding process that immediately resonated with black residents of New Orleans, signaling to them that the two were potential allies, not competitors:

> What the Vietnamese were doing right after the storm made a lot of sense to black folks. [The Vietnamese] weren't the developers, the opportunists, trying to grab up land after the disaster. It was clear to black people that they weren't just in it for the money. They came back to rebuild a place that most people in New Orleans wanted to forget. Black folks understood that and they respected it.

His observation affirms what Vietnamese Americans believe about themselves: economic motives alone do not explain why so many insisted on returning and rebuilding. Many of those who first resettled in Versailles in the mid to late 1970s have never moved on; it is the only U.S. home they have ever known. On the one hand, this could signal economic stagnation and the absence of opportunity: refugee job assistance programs failed or were dismantled prematurely, thus leading to unemployment and decades of welfare dependency that in turn limited the opportunities for residents to move outside of Versailles. Yet lack of growth and opportunity fails to explain why so many Vietnamese American residents decided to return after the storm.

The equal yet opposite economic theory suggest that the refugees have remained rooted in Versailles because they have somehow turned that original

resettlement neighborhood into a land of opportunity, developing a bustling "ethnic economy"—Vietnamese-owned groceries, restaurants, and small factories—that keep ethnic capital flowing in the area. The theory of the ethnic economies, as scripted by sociologists such as Alejandro Portes, Ivan Light, and Min Zhou, argues that by creating their own labor market match through self-capitalization and coethnic employment, new immigrant groups, particularly Asian immigrants, have built ethnic enterprises that have allowed them to avoid the poverty and underemployment experienced by nonimmigrant working-class groups during the postindustrial epoch.[29] According to this theory, although exploitation and working poverty continue to exist within the ethnic economy (as ethnic owners will exploit "their own"), there nevertheless exists a strong degree of *bounded solidarity* among coethnics. Such solidarity keeps capital and labor flowing within the bounded ethnic community, and this accounts for the remarkable growth of Chinatowns and Little Saigons even in periods marked by urban decline and economic recession. The ethnic economy thus serves as the sociological adjunct to model minority discourses steeped in the perceived cultural values of Asian immigrants. However, upon closer examination, the theory of ethnic economies actually relies heavily on cultural explanations, especially when it attempts to explain why immigrants possess embedded solidarity and blacks do not. According to Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou, the answers are largely cultural. Unlike new immigrants, blacks have experienced the "thorough process of acculturation among U.S.-born members . . . [leading] to a gradual weakening of their sense of community and to a re-orientation towards their values, expectations, and preferences."[30] Here, the ideological underpinnings of racial triangulation are clearly evident.

Still, in her own study of Versailles, titled *Growing Up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States* (1998), co-written with Carl L. Bankston III, Zhou stops short of suggesting that the Vietnamese Americans of New Orleans have developed a vertically integrated ethnic economy. Although Zhou and Bankston's study analyzes the emergence of Vietnamese-owned restaurants and shops in Versailles during the 1980s, these businesses never grew to the scale of an ethnic economy resembling the Little Saigons or Chinatowns of other major cities—economies that could offer employment opportunities to a large number of coethnic residents.[31] Versailles represents no clear-cut economic model that might explain residents' persistent attachment to the area.

Father Vien suggests turning to history for an answer. "If you want to know what drove our people back to New Orleans, you have to look at least fifty years

in the past, to the war before the war." He is referring to the little known fact that those who first resettled in New Orleans in 1975 have shared a journey that dates back not only to the U.S. war in Vietnam, but to the anticolonial wars against the French In November 1954, French forces were decisively defeated by Ho Chi Minh's revolutionary army in the northern province of Dien Bien Phu, bringing an end to more than a century of French colonialism in Vietnam. In the northern Vietnamese villages of Bui Chu and Phat Diem, located in the Red River delta, lived a concentration of devout Catholics who feared acts of reprisal against them by the revolutionaries, who were deeply suspicious of Catholicism's role in bolstering French rule. Soon after the ouster of the French, Catholic leaders engineered a mass exodus of tens of thousands of parishioners to the southern Vietnamese villages of Haing Tau and Phuc Thinh, located southeast of Saigon, where for the time being revolutionary forces held little sway.[32]

As these refugees from the north went about rebuilding their lives in southern Vietnam, U.S. military forces began their build-up in the region as well. Determined to succeed where the French had failed, the United States officially invaded southern Vietnam in March 1965, taking control of the capital city of Saigon.[33] The Catholic refugees could not have imagined that the outcome of this American phase of the war would result in their resettlement to New Orleans. A decade later, with the defeat and withdrawal of the U.S. military, followed by the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam in April 1975, they were once again on the run. This time, however, there would be no safe haven within Vietnam, as the communist victory was complete.

They would become international refugees, scattered to refugee camps, including several emergency relocation centers in the United States: Camp Pendleton (California), Camp Chafee (Arkansas), Elgin Air Force Base (Florida), and Fort Indiantown Gap (Pennsylvania). Archbishop Philip Hannan, then head of the New Orleans archdiocese, was intrigued by the story of the devout Catholic refugees who had sojourned together since 1954. He visited Camp Chafee and Elgin Air Force Base, and extended an open invitation to the refugees to resettle in New Orleans. Not only was New Orleans a Catholic city, but it also possessed a tropical climate and seafaring opportunities for which the Vietnamese were well suited. In the decades following resettlement, the refugees would indeed find steady work as gulf coast shrimpers. They took well to the region's climate, with many commenting that it often felt like home.[34]

"For better or worse, New Orleans East is now their home," Father Vien said. "This place gave them a chance to replant some old roots." Having been

uprooted from home twice in the fifty years prior to Katrina, they would not so easily be removed a third time. According to Father Vien, the history of this community served as the driving force behind their improbable post-Katrina return.

"Resilience" has emerged as the heuristic concept in several post-Katrina studies that seek to determine prospects for the city's full recovery. Resilience analysis had been conducted with respect to the city's built and natural environment,[35] its ability to respond to future hazards,[36] the mental health of hurricane survivors,[37] and the socioeconomic characteristics of those who returned compared to those who did not.[38] In particular, this last factor has been measured through several variables of social and economic capital: income, educational background, and homeownership rates. However, for the Vietnamese Americans of Versailles, the shared experiences and collective memory of a community are no less vital in determining resilience. Such history functions as a form of social capital for the Vietnamese American community by expanding members' capacity to engage in return and rebuilding efforts when other social and economic indicators suggest that return is improbable. This point is reiterated by Karen Leong, Christopher A. Airriess, Wei Li, Angela Chia-Chen, and Verna M. Keith in their important essay, "Resilient History and Rebuilding of Community: The Vietnamese Americans of New Orleans East":

> The Vietnamese American community in New Orleans East possesses social and cultural capital that is based on its members' lived experience and historical memory. Because migration occurred within the past three generations and under the conditions of war, the community has sustained the strong social networks that operated during the refugee and migration experience as well as confidence in the efficacy of those networks.[39]

But if shared experience and collective memory serve as a particular asset to the Vietnamese American community, Leong and her coauthors are careful not to equate this with yet another form of racial exceptionalism. In other words, a resilient past does not set Vietnamese Americans apart from other racial groups, thus reinforcing the model minority trope. To the contrary, the authors observe how it encouraged Vietnamese Americans to engage in new forms of civic activism, including a burgeoning alliance with black neighbors. This point can be taken one step further. In addition to expanding political horizons, how might the community's history also serve as the basis for mutual recognition across communities of color? Returning to Ron Chisom's assertion, how might historical particularity provide the necessary access points for a lasting solidarity?

Racial and cultural particularity are the social facts of political solidarity. That is, racial groups rarely enter alliances with the goal of downplaying difference for the sake of a broader, abstract unity.[40] Rather, they often approach alliances with an eye toward seeing in another some of their own particularity. If black leaders saw something laudable in the Vietnamese American return to Versailles, perhaps it was because they saw something of themselves in those efforts.

One of the least discussed post-Katrina phenomena was the remarkable number of black residents of New Orleans East and the greater Ninth Ward that eventually did return despite having sustained heavy property damage. Similar to their Vietnamese American neighbors, they returned when most social and economic indicators suggested they would not. And they would do so by drawing upon the black community's own history of resilience.

Rates of neighborhood return have been analyzed by the Greater New Orleans Data Center, which used postal data to determine which zip codes resumed mail delivery service in the years following Katrina. Among the areas that revealed the most impressive rate of return (relative to the damage sustained) was zip code 70127, encompassing the West Lake Forest neighborhood in New Orleans East. West Lake Forest is located immediately to the west of Versailles, and its pre-Katrina black population stood at 85.6 percent. From August 2006 through December 2008, the recovery rate in this zip code was 470.02 percent (the percentage gain in total number of households receiving mail during this interval).[41] The significance of this percentage gain becomes clearer when compared to rates in whiter and more affluent neighborhoods that sustained equivalent damage. The recovery rate in Lakeview (zip code 70124), for example, was 183.75 percent. According to 2000 census data, whites constituted 95.7 percent of the Lakeview population prior to the storm. Pre-Katrina, Lakeview residents had higher household incomes, twice the number of bachelor degrees, and a much higher percentage of homeownership rates than their counterparts in West Lake Forest.[42] In other words, Lakeview residents were stronger across each of the key social and economic variables that were supposed to determine resilience. Nevertheless, the black residents of West Lake Forest demonstrated a stronger recovery rate.

According to community leaders such as Myron Angel of the Greater New Orleans East Neighborhood Association, counterintuitive as it may seem, the low-income homeowners were more likely to return to their homes than their wealthier counterparts because they had fewer economic options; in particular, they were tied to big mortgages that continued to require payments despite

the catastrophe. But this argument is offset by another astounding statistic. According to a study conducted by sociologists James Eliot and Jeremy Pais of Tulane University, black residents of New Orleans were four times more likely than white counterparts to lose their jobs after the storm. When they re-analyzed the data to account for low-income black workers in particular—those who made from $10,000 to $20,000 annually—the figures revealed that blacks were seven times more likely to lose their pre-storm jobs. Still, many returned.[43]

For black community leaders such as Ron Chisom, black returns were no less than a form of resistance politics that has long defined New Orleans. By returning and rebuilding without significant support from the state, and when most standard indicators suggested that returns were economically unviable, black residents were engaged in acts of racial self-making that can be traced to previous political moments. "People don't realize that we had been here before," Chisom said. "As catastrophes go, Katrina was perhaps the worst, but certainly not the first." On August 27, 1965, forty years before Katrina made landfall, a category three storm named Hurricane Betsy tore though New Orleans. Betsy flooded the entire Ninth Ward, including New Orleans East. But the worst damage occurred in the Lower Ninth Ward, where floodwaters reached above ten feet. Those who remember Betsy often comment on how eerily it was mimicked by Katrina. As it was in 2004, the massive floods of 1965 had less to do with the storm itself than with the breeching of inadequate levees, underscoring the extent to which the most severe losses were the result of government negligence.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Betsy, community members would return and rebuild, and within a few years the area's black home-ownership rates steadily increased and black businesses thrived again. These efforts would also take place within the context of an ongoing civil rights movement and its new engagements with Black Power ideologies.[44] Within such a milieu, the call for black autonomy was consistent with the actions of residents who were returning and rebuilding without significant government support. Moreover, during this same period, the entire Ninth Ward would see a sharp increase in the black population, as white residents displaced by the storm decided not to return. As the area became blacker, city officials did increasingly less to support it with economic investment, public works, and the funding of public education.[45]

This in turn resulted in two important political developments among the grassroots movements. First was the intensification of community organizing efforts demanding greater government accountability. The second was the

simultaneous, if paradoxical, deepening of black political autonomy in the form of community-run institutions that could meet immediate needs being ignored by the state. In addition to the well-known Survival Programs of the Black Panther Party, the Ninth Ward also saw the emergence of new arts programs and public health clinics that were autonomously run by local leaders. Kalamu ya Salaam, the renowned poet and revolutionary activist who helped pioneer the Black Arts Movement, participated in many of these efforts. In his view, black autonomy was a direct response to the state's capacity for lawlessness toward black residents. In the aftermath of Betsy, it was rumored that the levees surrounding the Lower Ninth Ward had been secretly detonated during the storm. According to the conspiracy theory, the Ninth Ward was deliberately flooded to alleviate potential flooding in more privileged areas of the city. But in Kalamu's view, conspiracy theories only obscure the fact that the state was more than willing to sacrifice and was capable of *openly* sacrificing black lives on a daily basis: "I'm not a paid-up member of the Negro Conspiracy League. I don't think we need conspiracies to explain just brutal class warfare," he asserts. "The reason I caution against buying into conspiracy theory with Betsy is because even if the levees were blown, it was the power structure that did it. It wasn't the Klan."[46] His caustic observation speaks to the importance of developing black resistance strategies that go beyond the call for state accountability.

In the post-Katrina era, this two-pronged political orientation has resurfaced, pointing to the way in which the shared experiences and collective memory derived from the post-Betsy years continue to inform black returnees today. According to sociologist Rachel Luft, several of the social justice groups that have been central to the post-Katrina rebuilding and accountability efforts have again developed a "strategic synthesis" of grassroots organizing and service provision.[47] They have eschewed the notion that these two tactics can work only at cross purposes: that is, the assumption that direct services will only undermine organizing by alleviating the state and owning class of its responsibilities, while diverting the masses from direct confrontation with power. To the contrary, Luft notes how some of the most effective organizers in post Katrina New Orleans have used direct services as a vital "base-building strategy that could strengthen community, increase consciousness, and link needs to action."[48]

Among the most salient examples of this is the collaboration between the New Orleans Women's Health Clinic and the New Orleans Women's Health Justice Initiative. The clinic delivers direct, low-to-no fee health care to low-

income women of color who were disproportionately affected by the demise of the public health-care system after the storm. Simultaneously, the initiative works to organize those who rely on the clinic's services, mobilizing them and community allies to bring public attention to a health-care crisis that existed long before the storm. The project has been lauded as a novel approach to organizing the most marginalized community members while meeting their most pressing needs. But according to Shana Griffin, director of the initiative, taking such an approach has largely been a matter of political common sense. When the state has clearly demonstrated its disregard for those who reside at the intersection of black, poor, and female, it would be irrational to limit political resistance to an appeal for *greater* state intervention. In a 2007 interview with Clyde Wood, Griffin elaborates on this point: "When you identify the state as the main orchestrator of violence in the lives of many communities, it's hard to make appeals to the state to mitigate the violence the state is committing."[49]

Here Griffin echoes the previous generation of activists who understood that a degree of political autonomy is necessary when faced with the state's capacity for lawlessness. Moreover, she evokes a sorely overlooked fact about the black grassroots community in the post-Katrina era: its actions were never limited to issuing grievance and demands against the state—"waiting for the government to save them," as some have criticized. Rather, it was deeply engaged in the process of return and rebuilding as an act of racial self-making. In so doing, it could draw upon a rich political past to inform its understanding of resilience.

Usable pasts served as vital assets for both Vietnamese Americans and blacks respectively. Yet the question remains to what extent do resilient histories have the power to resonate across communities? Such resonance was evident in Chisom's observation that the return and rebuilding efforts in Versailles simply "made sense" to black residents, even before they had a chance to fully understand the history of their neighbors. So, too, it was evident among black leaders outside of New Orleans East—those who were receiving only second-hand reports of the developments in Versailles, yet nevertheless embraced the Vietnamese American recovery effort. In July 2006, I interviewed Norris Henderson, director of Safe Streets, Strong Communities, a New Orleans group that is leading efforts to reform the city's dysfunctional prison and criminal justice system. I asked Henderson if, among those he worked with, he sensed any resentment of the Vietnamese Americans who were drawing the lion's share of media attention on the eve of the first anniversary of Katrina.

"I don't see any resentment of the Vietnamese coming from the black community or any other community," Henderson replied. "What I see is an

example of what we all can do if we hang in there together." Having served more than twenty-seven years in prison, Henderson knows perseverance when he sees it: "Most people don't think you can win. They're too quick to become defeatist. But [the Vietnamese Americans] had a common goal and they were persistent—they had what it took."[50]

Finally, such resonance was evident among the Vietnamese American leadership that often linked its accountability to a legacy of black activism. Father Vien's efforts to build new alliances with black leaders in the months after the storm betray the fact that, pre-Katrina, he knew very little of the history of his black neighbors. Still, he knew enough to recognize that the Vietnamese Americans, in taking up the mantle of the area's grassroots movement, were honoring a past that transcended its own. There was a political trajectory in New Orleans East that the priest and others around him felt accountable to, one that would bear influence on the political orientation of the Vietnamese Americans:

> Before Katrina, I guess you could call us libertarians. Our attitude toward government was: you don't bother us, and we won't bother you. But New Orleans East has a long history of fighting back. It was impossible for us to not speak up. We realized that if we speak, the powers will listen. They would have to heed the people's voice. We had a responsibility to contribute, to push for government accountability.

By no means do the Vietnamese Americans and blacks of New Orleans East possess a shared history, but it is indeed a resonant one. And such resonance serves as a condition of possibility for pending political solidarity. Between Vietnamese Americans and blacks in particular, resonant histories also function as counterdiscourse, challenging the discursive power of racial triangulation that would seek to valorize the former over the latter in an effort to sustain white dominance.

Of course, conditions of possibility are never limited to discourse. It remains that the power of racial triangulation registers at both the discursive and the structural levels. And between Asian Americans and blacks in particular, oppositional class positions and labor market competition have largely defined their relationship in the contemporary city. These structural tensions reached a breaking point during the Los Angeles upheaval of April 1992, when thousands of Korean American businesses were looted and destroyed following the infamous Rodney King verdict. The events in Los Angeles serve as the apotheosis of racial triangulation in the post-civil rights era.

"How Are We Supposed to Be?"

Store owner Mike Tran was determined to rebuild, and rebuild he eventually did. Today, King's Meat Market and Grocery is a bustling business again due in large part to the black customers who account for the overwhelming majority of the store's income. This fact gives Tran pause when he reflects on the looting that took place nearly three years ago. "How can I sit here and say, 'Hey, *these* people stole from me?'" Tran rhetorically asks.

That Tran had the means to rebuild his business in less than two years raises important questions about the class privileges indelibly connected to the possibility of return. So, too, the impressive number of black returnees to New Orleans East signals the relative class privilege of black home owners in the area: though these home owners did not possess the social and economic capital found in whiter neighborhoods, they nevertheless possessed some means of return largely unavailable to those who remained displaced. If a usable past was available to all, then class privilege determined who might readily mobilize that past in concrete ways. The forthcoming 2010 Census data should reveal what percentage of the returnees to New Orleans East are low-income residents, and whether or not that percentage matches pre-Katrina numbers. However, a before-and-after storm comparison of the total number of section-eight housing units in New Orleans East indicates that the area has seen the steady return of low-income residents. According to the Housing Authority of New Orleans, nearly all the zip codes of New Orleans East now have more than twice the number of section eight units than they did before Katrina.[51] We do not know if these numbers include the very same tenants who occupied section eight housing in New Orleans East prior to Katrina. However, we do know that New Orleans East continues to maintain class heterogeneity. The post-Katrina return to New Orleans East has not been limited to middle-class home and business owners.

For the thirty years prior to Katrina, the Vietnamese American and black communities of New Orleans East have each maintained a complex class mix consisting of home owners, small business owners, middle-income workers, low-income workers, the jobless poor, and the welfare dependent. No single economic class clearly dominates in either community, and as a result it is difficult to differentiate precise political orientations between and among both groups. The postindustrial city is defined by what are now familiar race/class archetypes—immigrant shopkeepers, underemployed black youth, overworked immigrant sweatshop laborers, women of color in the welfare state—each cor-

relates with the other as a coherent picture of a contemporary city emerges. But in New Orleans, such correlations are not so easily made.

During one of our conversations, Tran seemed bewildered by my own sense of bewilderment over the myriad race and class positions to be found among Vietnamese and blacks in New Orleans East. He finally had to ask me: "So how are we supposed to be?"

I offered him my interpretation of narratives of conflict emerging from New York City and Los Angeles from the early 1980s through the 1990s. This conflict cast Asian American store owners, particularly Korean Americans, as those who freely set up shop in poor black neighborhoods, but refused to hire local residents or invest in those neighborhoods, and who often treated customers with rude indifference. Black customers were in turn portrayed as those who would sooner resent the hard-earned success of newcomers than engage themselves in an honest, entrepreneurial living. There were major flashpoints to the conflict: harassment and violence against Korean American store owners by black customers, shootings (at times fatal) of black customers by shopkeepers; the highly publicized black boycotts of Korean American–owned groceries in New York City.

The crescendo was the Los Angeles unrest of April 1992, when the city burned following the acquittal of four Los Angeles police officers who were caught on tape brutally beating Rodney King, a twenty-five-year-old black man. As the mostly black and Latino insurrection took its anger to the streets, some would target Korean American–owned businesses under the pretense that they were accessories to white racial dominance over blacks. Others simply took advantage of the fact that the Los Angeles Police Department chose not to protect Koreatown during the upheaval. Approximately half of the 3,100 Korean American–owned businesses in Los Angeles sustained damage, much of which was irreparable. Total losses neared $350 million. The mainstream media would offer lurid and deeply racialized accounts of looters amid an urban crisis. They were invariably portrayed as young, black, male, criminal, and dangerous: "thugs" was the preferred media shorthand.[52] Meanwhile, Korean American merchants, even those who would arm themselves, were invariably cast as victims of wanton black violence. In the aftermath of the destruction, activist leaders from both the black and Korean American communities took pains to point out that divisions between them, largely exacerbated by corporate media reporting, worked to divert attention away from white institutional racism, thus sustaining white racial dominance.

Following the events of April 1992, "black-Korean conflict" dominated the popular discussion on interracial dystopia in the contemporary city.[53]

So omnipresent was the narrative of conflict that it seemed to boil over into unexpected locations: even in municipalities where Asian American and black interactions were few and far between (and where the Asian American small entrepreneurial class was scarce), there emerged reports of increased racial tensions between these groups.[54]

But by all accounts New Orleans East was spared this conflict. Since the initial resettlement of Vietnamese Americans to New Orleans, they have never been overrepresented as small business owners poised to take advantage of a black customer base. And black residents were certainly not overrepresented as the jobless or the working poor who, deprived of their own ethnic capital, were compelled to spend at immigrant-owned businesses. In fact, during the early years of refugee resettlement, the opposite was often true. Tran recalls his childhood years, when the newly arrived refugees families—the vast majority of whom were receiving public assistance— shopped primarily at black-owned grocery stores in New Orleans East. These businesses were the only ones that accepted food stamps, according to Tran. As the years wore on, some Vietnamese refugees would eventually accumulate the capital to purchase their own small businesses—primarily small groceries, lunch counters, and gas stations. And, as it happened, they would often purchase these businesses from black owners who had done well for themselves over the years. This is exactly how Tran and his brothers acquired their butcher shop and grocery store. The transfer of business ownership from black to Vietnamese American points to the complexity of the economic relationship between the groups. On the one hand, it raises the problem of ephemeral black community ownership. Indeed, what are the barriers that would prevent such transfers from occurring between black business owners and black workers? But on the other hand, that Vietnamese Americans were purchasing from black owners rooted in the black community—as opposed to whites who have historically controlled retail business in black communities—worked to subdue narratives of racial antagonism where the new immigrant is portrayed as the proxy to white proprietorship. In other words, in New Orleans, Vietnamese Americans were not so easily enlisted as stand-ins for "the man." [55] All told, these sales did not occur at a scale that would produce sharp class disparities so that poor blacks were now compelled to buy their goods from Vietnamese American shopkeepers. Instead, the working class, and primarily the working poor, have constituted majorities in both communities. Through the 1990s, both groups demonstrated similar poverty rates in New Orleans East: 35 percent among blacks, 31 percent among Vietnamese Americans—both well above the 18 percent average for all of New Orleans.[56]

New Orleans was never incorporated into what is known as the "new South." While cities such as Houston, Atlanta, and Charlottesville became destinations for industries abandoning the rust belt, New Orleans did not attract similar businesses that could in turn streamline new opportunities for the upwardly mobile while eliminating some of the city's older niche economies. Stagnation meant that many workers would remain in a diverse range of industries that have sustained New Orleans for decades: tourism and hospitality, light manufacturing, and fishing. That so many in New Orleans have subsisted in working poverty leaves one to question whether or not black and Vietnamese American workers have directly competed for a finite number of jobs. This is certainly an issue evoked in other major U.S. cities where the long-standing black proletariat is said to be losing ground to a wave of new immigrant laborers. But according to economists James R. Elliot and Marcel Ionescu, this has not been the case in New Orleans and other cities of the deep south triad: Biloxi, Mississippi, and Mobile, Alabama.[57] Here again, the lack of economic growth in the region accounts for this difference. Because these cities have failed to attract new industries, they have also failed to draw new waves of immigration over the past thirty years—decades that saw unprecedented numbers of immigrant arrivals to other major southern cities. According to 2000 Census data, the foreign-born population in Alabama was only 2 percent; in Louisiana, 2.6 percent; and in Mississippi, 1.4 percent. Given these numbers, competition between so-called native blacks and new immigrants has remained largely irrelevant in those areas. With the exception of a steady stream of Honduran refugees over the course of the twentieth century, the Vietnamese refugee resettlement to New Orleans East could easily be described as the city's lone new immigration event.

Finally, economic stagnation and the concomitant persistence of an older, diversified economy have resulted in the spreading out of black and Vietnamese American workers across multiple industries. Thus, they have avoided direct competition with one another, according to Elliot and Ionescu. This is true even within industries in which one group has historically shown a strong concentration. Blacks who dominate the low-wage hospitality industry have seen little encroachment from Vietnamese Americans. And Vietnamese Americans who developed a large niche in the regional fishing industry—particularly as gulf coast shrimpers and crabbers—did not compete directly with the relatively small number of black commercial fishing boats in the area. By contrast, Vietnamese American shrimpers would become the targets of racial violence directed at them by white fishermen. Whites resented the competition of Vietnamese

Americans, who proved not only skilled at the trade, but who tended to work longer hours than whites while drawing on the labor of numerous family members (wives, children, and extended clan) to boost production and corner their share of the market. Along the Louisiana and Texas Gulf Coast, particularly in Galveston Bay, Vietnamese American–owned boats were routinely vandalized or destroyed by arson. Several Vietnamese American operators even reported coming under sniper fire. In the Galveston Bay, the situation escalated when the Ku Klux Klan joined in support of white residents who were organizing protests against the Vietnamese American shrimpers. The Klan acted as a militia that would disrupt Vietnamese American business through sheer intimidation. It was ultimately undone by a federal lawsuit filed by the Southern Poverty Law Center, arguing that its actions not only violated the civil rights of Vietnamese Americans, but also the state's arcane antitrust laws.

In New Orleans, racial violence against Vietnamese American shrimpers never reached the level of intensity witnessed along the Texas coast. The archdiocese would serve as a mitigating political force against white groups attempting to organize against the Vietnamese Americans. Still, the situation sent a clear message to the residents of Versailles that though they did not live in proximity of whites, the specter of white racism was ever present. Moreover, Ron Chisom recalls that the racism directed at the Vietnamese American fishermen was not without precedent. According to Chisom, during the 1970s, white shrimpers in Louisiana had also attempted to create barriers for black fishermen by adopting boat regulations that would disproportionately affect black-owned boats, most of which were antiquated compared to those of their white counterparts. As blacks witnessed the racial animosity directed at Vietnamese Americans during the 1980s, it was clear to them that white racism drew no subtle distinctions between those it sought to exclude from the trade. Whereas white dominance through triangulation relies on the separation of Asian Americans and blacks—often by valorizing the former over the latter—the racial and economic conditions along the gulf coast did not always conform to that process.

None of this is to say that prior to Katrina, New Orleans East was a portrait of race and class harmony. Recall Myron Angel's earlier observation that the relationships were at best tolerant, but certainly never allied. Some recall that during the very first years of resettlement there were certain tensions, as Catholic Charities began resettling refugees to Versailles without notifying local black residents of their pending arrival. Since those initial years, however, the history between both communities has remained rather unremarkable. Few

can recall an episode in which Vietnamese Americans and blacks ever made headlines together—for better or for worse.

Perhaps the most accurate gauge of daily interactions between both racial groups is its youth who, prior to Katrina, attended high schools that were almost exclusively black and Vietnamese American. According to VAYLA-NO director Minh Nguyen, the historical relationship between both sets of teens could also be described as tolerant: some became friends, but most did not. In the months following the storm, VAYLA would emerge as the only youth development program in the area. Minh proposed that the organization open its ranks to anybody from the neighborhood who desired to join, and soon several black teens would become members. When I asked Minh about the process that led to this decision, he claims that it was all rather seamless. "There was not much debate one way or the other," he said. "We just decided it needed to be done."

Among the VAYLA members, hip-hop and Vietnamese pop music are embraced in equal measure. There is even a core group of Vietnamese American teens that considers itself the group's resident emcees. During one of my conversations with these young men and others, I questioned whether the overwhelming presence of hip-hop music and vernacular among Vietnamese American teens is a reflection of their desire to adopt forms of blackness. The group neither fully agreed nor disagreed with my presumption. In a moment of self-reflection, one young man conceded that though he may come across as culturally black, he has never consciously crossed any boundaries. In New Orleans East, hip-hop was simply the most available genre. A young woman in the group affirms his observation by commenting on the provinciality of the self-appointed emcees: "These guys have never been outside of Versailles."

Mike Tran is jokingly referred to in Versailles as "neighborhood superstar," a dubious distinction he earned for driving flashy sports cars, but also for having never moved on to a more prosperous area, despite having years ago acquired the means to do so. Tran explains this choice with doses of self-deprecation and cliché: "I guess I'm just a strange guy. I always felt more comfortable in the 'hood," he said.

Even as a businessman, Tran breaks with convention. In the summer of 2007, a year after rebuilding his store, he decided that he was no longer going to work every day. The rehabilitation process had exhausted him, and now that the business was running smoothly again, he would place daily operations in the hands of his staff, particularly his manager, Cheryl, a thirty-year-old African American woman.[58] Other store owners, including family members,

were critical of his decision, claiming that he was certain to lose money if he did not directly manage the shop. And although nobody questioned his choice of manager, Tran is sure that it raised some eyebrows. "All I can say is that I'm lucky to have her," Tran asserted. He eschews the notion that hiring coethnics is always the safer, more reliable choice. "Vietnamese folks will burn you, too," he said. Along these lines, he describes how the rotating credit system popular among many Asian immigrant entrepreneurs has unraveled in recent years. Instead of borrowing from banks, immigrants have maintained a practice of pooling their money together, each taking a rotating turn at using the pooled funds as a loan.[59] The system is predicated on trust and an ineluctable sense of ethnic solidarity, but according to Tran there have been far too many instances in which a member of the credit circle has absconded with the funds. It so happens that even his mother recently lost money this way—to her cousin.

The rest of Tran's employees at King's Meat Market & Grocery include butchers Darryl and John, who are both African American and have years of local experience in the trade. Their apprentice is Hai, a twenty-five-year-old Vietnamese American from Houston who speaks with a heavy Texan drawl. In 2007, Hai was released from a Louisiana State Prison, where he had been serving a four-year sentence for couriering drugs between Houston and New Orleans. As a condition of his parole, he was required to find work immediately. Tran learned about Hai's situation through a mutual friend; before long, Hai was working at the store. Among the group at King's, Hai is known for researching the meat specials at competing groceries and then coming up with even better ones. "He's working hard. Everybody here loves him," said Tran.

One gets the distinct impression that the scene at King's is New Orleans as Tran envisions it, one in which Vietnamese Americans and blacks subsist across a set of nuanced relationships. Here they all *appear* together in the truest sense, each with full complexity. And though such class complexity, on its own, does not make for multiracial alliances, it does clear a path for it. That is, it serves as yet another condition of possibility, enabling solidarity in moments of crisis and scarcity. It does this by staying the discursive and structural forces that uphold hegemonic power by creating divisions among racialized groups. If, in the post-1992 Los Angeles context, the evocation of "Asian storeowner in the black ghetto" yields a distinct semiotics of race—one of mistrust, exploitation, and miscommunication—then New Orleans East offers a different kind of racial common sense. Here, Vietnamese Americans and blacks are allowed to carry on as all communities should: without a presupposed cloud of mistrust or a premature sense of racial solidarity. This was the New Orleans that Tran

became familiar with while growing up in Versailles, the one that seemed unrecognizable immediately after the storm, but soon found a way to return and be rebuilt.

Notes

Research for this article, which took place between August 2006 and August 2008, included semi-structured interviews with the informants who appear throughout the narrative, as well as observations by the author while in New Orleans on the eve of the first anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. Some sections of the article are excerpted from a previously published article, "Rebel Survivors: The Vietnamese Americans of New Orleans Won a Grassroots Victory Nobody Expected," *Colorlines Magazine* (January 2007). Real names are used for those interviewees whose ex-officio status has already placed them within the public discourse, and who granted permission to use their names for publication. Some interviewees who are not public figures also agreed to be identified. Pseudonyms, where used, are noted. The term "black" is used as a descriptive for persons of African-diasporic decent living in New Orleans. Included in this group are African Americans, Haitians and Haitian Americans, those of black Caribbean descent (English-speaking basin), those of mixed African American and Native American ancestry, and those of African descent from Latin America. "African American" is used for informants who self-identified as such. The author would like to thank Charity Boutte for her research and editorial assistance with this article.

1. All quotations from Mike Tran are based on Mike Tran interview by the author, June 19, 2008 (notes in author's possession).
2. For a comprehensive account of what occurred at Orleans Parish Prison in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, see the report prepared by the American Civil Liberties Union, *Abandoned and Abused: Orleans Parish Prison in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina* (New York: American Civil Liberties Union, 2006).
3. See "Racism, Resources blamed for bridge incident," *CNN U.S.* (September 13, 2005), http://articles.cnn.com/2005-09-13/us/katrina.bridge_1_evacuees-bridge-incident-west-bank?_s=PM:US. The Gretna police officers involved in this incident were ultimately commended by superiors for their actions.
4. For an overview of the history of the racial landscape in New Orleans, see Elizabeth Fussell, "Constructing New Orleans, Constructing Race: A Population History of New Orleans," *Journal of American History* 94.3 (2007): 846. For an analysis on the process by which black residents were pushed from the center of the city eastward—into the Lower Ninth Ward and beyond—see Juliette Landphair, "'The Forgotten People of New Orleans': Community, Hailnerability, and the Lower Ninth Ward," *Journal of American History* 94.3 (2007): 837.
5. This observation was made in Christopher A. Airriess, "Creating Vietnamese Landscapes and Place in New Orleans," in *Geographical Identities of Ethnic America: Race, Space, and Place*, ed. Kate A. Berry and Martha L. Henderson (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2002).
6. Glenn Omatsu, "The Four Prisons and the Movements of Liberation: Asian American Activism from the 1960s to the 1990s," in *The State of Asian America: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s*, ed. Karin Aguilar San-Juan (Boston: South End Press, 1993), 49.
7. Ibid.
8. Here, I evoke usable past in accordance with Warren Susman's suggestion that the historical facts are often no more important than the "attitudes of the past [that] frequently become facts of profound consequence for the culture itself." Warren Susman, "History and the American Intellectual: Uses of the Usable Past" in *Locating American Studies: the Evolution of a Discipline*, ed. Lucy Maddox (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).
9. Vijay Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung-Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Boston: Beacon Press), 104.

10. Elaine Kim, "Home Is Where the Han Is: A Korean American Perspective on the Los Angeles Upheaval," in *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding Williams (New York: Routledge, 1993), 217.
11. Ibid.
12. Claire Jean Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," *Politics & Society* 27.1 (1999): 105–38.
13. Ibid., 107.
14. Most elderly Vietnamese Americans view the U.S. war in Vietnam to be an extension of previous wars, particularly the protracted war of Vietnamese independence from French colonial rule. This is certainly true for the elderly residents of Versailles, those who have been sojourning together since at least 1954, when the French were decisively defeated. For an elaboration on the multiple, extended Vietnam war*s* of the twentieth century, see Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars: 1945–1990* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991).
15. Because there was no official accounting of returnees within specific regions or neighborhoods in New Orleans, this estimate was largely based on a simple counting of the number of Vietnamese American homes in Versailles that were being rebuilt versus those that remained empty. Another reliable formula was to count the number of Vietnamese-owned businesses that reopened on the eve of the first anniversary of Katrina. And here the disparity between black and Vietnamese American returnees was stark. Nearly 75 percent of Vietnamese American-owned businesses had reopened by July 2006. By contrast, only 10 percent of black-owned businesses were operational by this time. This accounting was conducted by the staff of the National Association of Vietnamese American Service Agencies (NAVASA).
16. All quotations from Myron Angel are based on Myron Angel interview by the author, June 18, 2008 (notes in author's possession).
17. From June 18–24, 2008, the author conducted interviews with several African American community leaders of New Orleans, including Ron Chisom of the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, Angel Myron of the Greater New Orleans East Neighborhood Association, and Andre Perry, assistant professor of higher education at the University of New Orleans, associate dean of the College of Education and Human Development, and CEO of the University of New Orleans Charter Schools. These interviewees described Father Vien as "compassionate," "inspirational," "a true ally," "uncompromising," "a force."
18. From Father Nguyen The Vien interview by the author, August 20, 2006 (notes in author's possession).
19. On the role of the Archdiocese of New Orleans in resettling Vietnamese refugees to New Orleans East, see Min Zhou, and Carl L. Bankston, *Growing up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1998), 76–83.
20. All quotations from James Bui are based on James Bui interview by the author, August 19, 2006 (notes in author's possession).
21. Clyde Woods, "Katrina's World: Blues, Bourbon, and the Return to the Source," *American Quarterly* 61.3 (Sept. 2009): 427–453.
22. "Betrayal" was the exact descriptive used by Father Nguyen The Vien during one of our interviews. (Father Nguyen interview, August 20, 2006). It was also the word used by Mimi Nguyen, aid to Councilmember Cynthia Willard Lewis. Mimi Nguyen interview by the author, August 23, 2006 (notes in author's possession).
23. All quotations from Minh Nguyen are based on Minh Nguyen interview by the author, August 21, 2006 (notes in author's possession).
24. Cynthia Willard Lewis footage from Chef Menteur landfill rally August 23, 2006 (footage in Leo Chiang's possession).
25. Leslie Eaton, "A New Landfill in New Orleans Sets Off a Battle," *New York Times* May 8, 2006; Leslie Eaton, "New Orleans Mayor Closes Disputed Landfill Used for Debris from Hurricane," *New York Times*, August 16, 2006.
26. Father Nguyen interview by the author, November 12, 2006 (notes in author's possession).
27. All quotations from Ron Chisom are based on Ron Chisom interview by the author, June 23, 2008.
28. The author credits community organizer and writer Jordan Flaherty for the coining the term "post-post-Katrina era."

29. See Ivan Light and Stavos Karageorgis, "The Ethnic Economy," in *The Handbook of Economic Sociology*, ed. Neil J. Smesler and Richard Swedberg (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 647.

30. Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou, "Gaining the Upper Hand: Economic Mobility Among Immigrants and Domestic Minorities," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 15 (Fall 1992): 514.

31. For an analysis of the specific type of ethnic economic enclave that exists among Vietnamese Americans, see Christopher A. Airriess, "Scaling Central Place of an Ethnic-Vietnamese Commercial Enclave in New Orleans, Louisiana" in *Landscapes of the Ethnic Economy*, ed. David H. Kaplan and Wei Li, 17–34 (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

32. The history of the Vietnamese Americans who eventually resettled to Versailles is documented in Christopher A. Airriess, "Creating Vietnamese Landscapes and Place in New Orleans."

33. See Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars: 1945–1990* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991).

34. Here again, in his important article "Creating Vietnamese Landscapes and Place in New Orleans," Christopher A. Airriess offers compelling analysis of how the residents of Versailles (re)created a distinctly Vietnamese cultural landscape in New Orleans East.

35. See, for example, Donald R. Nelson, W. Neil Adger, and Katrina Brown, "Adaptation to Environmental Change: Contributions of a Resilience Framework," *Annual Review of Environmental Resources* 32 (November 2007): 395–419; Thomas J. Campanella, "Longer View: Urban Resilience and the Recovery of New Orleans," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 72.2 (2006): 141.

36. See, for example, C. E. Colten, R. W. Kates, and S. B. Laska, *Community Resilience: Lessons from New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina*, Community and Regional Resilience Initiative Report Number 3 (September 2008).

37. See, for example, Carl F. Weems, Sarah E. Watts, Monica A. Marsee, Leslie K. Taylor, Natalie M. Costa, Melinda F. Cannon, Victor G. Carrion, and Armando A. Pina, "The Psychosocial Impact of Hurricane Katrina: Contextual Differences in Psychological Symptoms, Social Support, and Discrimination," *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 45.10 (October 2007): 2295–2306.

38. See, for example, M. Brodie, E. Weltzien, D. Altman, R. J. Blendon, and J. M. Benson, "Experiences of Hurricane Katrina Evacuees in Houston Shelters: Implications for Future Planning," *American Journal of Public Health* 96.8 (2006): 1402–8; Campanella, "Longer View," 141.

39. Karen J. Leong, Karen J, Christopher A. Airriess, Wei Li, Angela Chia-Chen Chen, and Verna M Keith, "Resilient History and the Rebuilding of a Community: The Vietnamese American Community in New Orleans East," *Journal of American History* 94.3 (2007): 777.

40. See Juliet Hooker, *Race and the Politics of Solidarity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

41. Alison Plyer, "Neighborhood Recovery Rates: Resiliency of New Orleanians Shown in Neighborhood Repopulation Numbers" (Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, 2010). For further analysis of the percentage gain in total number of households receiving mail from August 2006 through December 2008 see Lauren Marie DeFrank, "Resiliency of New Orleans Following Hurricane Katrina: A Study of Communities Three Years After the Storm" (master's thesis, environmental studies, Louisiana State University, 2009), 18–24.

42. Statistical differences between the two communities around these key variables: bachelor's degrees: Westlake Forest (19.6%), Lakeview (50.6%); household income: Westlake Forest ($30,954), Lakeview ($51,864); owner-occupied housing units: Westlake Forest (48.3%), Lakeview (50.6%).

43. James R. Elliot and Jeremy Pais, "Race, Class and Hurricane Katrina: Social Differences in Human Responses to Disaster," *Social Science Research* 35 (2006): 295–321.

44. See Orissa Arend, *Showdown in Desire: The Black Panthers Take a Stand in New Orleans* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2009).

45. Landphair, "The Forgotten People," 840–41.

46. D'Ann R. Penner and Keith C. Ferdinand, *Overcoming Katrina: African American Voices from the Crescent City and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 83.

47. Rachel E. Luft, "Beyond Disaster Exceptionalism: Social Movement Developments in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina," *American Quarterly* 61.3 (Sept. 2009): 499–527.

48. Ibid.

49. "The Politics of Reproductive Violence An Interview with Shana Griffin by Clyde Woods, *American Quarterly* 61.3 (Sept. 2009): 583–92.

50. Norris Henderson interview by the author, August 19, 2006 (notes in author's possession).

51. Housing Authority of New Orleans, *Housing Choice Voucher Distribution by Defined Zip Codes* (2010). This data was compiled in response to a statistical request to HANO from the author at the University of Texas at Austin. I defined zip codes in conjunction with my research (research document in author's possession).

52. The majority of those arrested for looting were, in fact, Latinos. See Paul Lieberman, "Latinos Lead in Riot Arrests, Study Says," *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 1992, A1.

53. Among the books published that examine the so-called black-Korean conflict from a range of political perspectives in the wake of the Los Angeles upheaval of April 1992 are Don Hazen, ed., *Inside the L.A. Riots* (New York: Institute for Alternative Journalism, 1992); Robert Gooding-Williams, ed., *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Anna Deavere Smith, *Twilight Los Angeles, 1992* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994); Nancy Abelmann and John Lie, *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995); Edward T. Chang and Jeannette Diaz-Veizades, *Ethnic Peace in the American City: Building Community in Los Angeles and Beyond* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); Claire Jean Kim, *Bitter Fruit: The Politics of Black-Korean Conflict in New York City* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000).

54. See, for example, Irwin Tang's account of such conflicts in cities such as Fort Worth, Texas: Irwin Tang, ed., *Asian Texans: Our Histories and Our Lives* (Austin: The It Works, 2007), 219–20.

55. This is described by economic sociologists as race and ethnic "queuing" in specific niche industries. See Roger David Waldinger, *Still the Promised City? African-Americans and New Immigrants in Postindustrial New York* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996).

56 Karen Leong et al, "Resilient History and the Rebuilding of a Community: The Vietnamese American Community of New Orleans," 771.

57. James R. Elliott and Marcel Ionescu, "Postwar Immigration to the Deep South Triad: What Can a Peripheral Region Tell Us about Immigrant Settlement and Employment?" *Sociological Spectrum* 23.2 (2003): 159–80.

58. The names Cheryl, Darryl, John, and Hai used here and in the next paragraph are pseudonyms.

59. For a discussion on the central importance of rotating credit circles within Asian American communities, see Ivan Light, Im Jung Kwon, and Deng Zhong, "Korean American Rotating Credit Associations in Los Angeles," *Amerasia Journal* 16 (1990): 35–54.