



## Toiling in 'the land of dreamy scenes': Time, Space, and Service-Learning Pedagogy

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: This essay examines Katrina's impact on service-learning pedagogy, in  
: particular how the instability of the storm's aftermath has generated  
: alternate approaches to service project planning and implementation.  
: Tulane's mandatory service-learning requirement following Katrina led  
: the authors to develop a joint project at New Orleans City Park, which  
: combined five sections of writing students who worked clearing  
: storm debris. The weekly movement from an idealized campus space  
: through devastated areas of the city and park served as the basis for  
: two complementary pedagogical approaches, one treating Katrina's  
: disruption of space; the other treating the storm's disruption of time.

"It is not possible to disregard the fatal intersection of time with space."

*Foucault*

"Way down yonder in New Orleans In the land of dreamy scenes, There  
is a garden of Eden..."

*Joe Turner Layton, Jr. and Henry Creamer<sup>1</sup>*

### Introduction

**H**urricane Gustav struck the Louisiana coast on Labor Day 2008, almost exactly three years after Katrina broke the levees and just after our first week of fall classes. We had spent that first week explaining the plans for a service project at New Orleans City Park. Ironically, our project plan--which combined five sections of students from our two writing-intensive courses--was to restore areas of the park damaged by Katrina. Gustav was a typical hurricane, the kind that



comes along every year or two in New Orleans, but it marked the first major test since Katrina of the city and state evacuation plans, as well as the emergency plan that our university had implemented. Although the evacuations worked with remarkable efficiency, a full week of classes was lost, and the service project that we had so carefully designed was altered beyond recognition.

The Gustav experience was a lesson in “post-Katrina New Orleans,” a manifestation of the city’s changed sensibilities and how they have affected every aspect of life here. For New Orleanians “post-Katrina” means a heightened awareness of place and time. The storm forced residents to come to terms with where they live, their neighborhoods, home flood elevations, and evacuation routes. It also affected the tempo of life in the city: an increased focus on



“hurricane season,” adjustments to academic and work schedules, and a general sense of anxiety and tension unknown in the “Big Easy” before.

We begin with these observations because they illustrate something fundamental about project planning and implementation for service-learning courses in post-Katrina New Orleans and also because they reveal how the environment invariably affects service-learning pedagogy. The service project that our essay discusses remains in a state of flux--even as we write in the spring semester after Gustav--as do the park and the city. In other words, teaching anything in post-Katrina New Orleans carries with it a certain degree of instability



and anxiety (everyone had to adjust their syllabi because of Gustav, no matter what they taught), but teaching service-learning courses intensified these factors even more. Nevertheless, rather than designing service courses and projects that are somehow impervious to change, we have chosen to embrace the unstable and anxious reality that life in New Orleans represents as part of the process of coming-to-terms with the city's "ill structured problems."<sup>2</sup> We have made this choice in part because it feels more honest, more in keeping with the imperatives of service-learning pedagogy, which privileges active engagement, however messy, over abstract knowledge and rational order.

Despite the obvious difficulties of building a pedagogy upon present instabilities, we have developed a method to address these problems; in what follows we explain how our approach works. It should be noted that our observations are tentative, that much of this is still unfolding, but we believe that the time has come for us to reflect upon the experience of Katrina and attempt to distill what we have learned. In many respects the City Park project is a microcosm of the complex interactions necessary for any restoration effort in post-Katrina New Orleans, and therefore we believe it serves as a model for projects in the city and other places where service-learning poses significant logistical problems.

Our particular project developed from an earlier partnership with City Park where two sections of students worked to restore a softball complex ruined by Katrina.<sup>3</sup> After a full semester of hard work at the complex, park administrators decided to re-designate the area. Its community of users had not returned, or they were still busy with other problems, and the space was abandoned. Frustrating as that situation was, it offered clear insights into the harsh realities of service post-Katrina. While the complex was temporarily restored then re-designated, whole neighborhoods of citizens had gone through the same frustrating process with their homes, places of employment, and schools. There simply was no certainty about the space of the city, and



service-learners gained some very powerful experience in the tangled and ill-structured problems of any effort to “restore” the city.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, in fall 2008, when we decided to return to City Park with five sections of student volunteers, we resisted the urge to define a single project for the semester. Instead, we left our work assignments up to the park’s volunteer coordinator who placed us in the areas of greatest need. Students performed hard physical labor, often with no clear sense of its role within the larger plan for the park’s recovery. For example, one Saturday was spent mulching trails in an area of the park that seemed otherwise abandoned. Another was devoted to working at a ruined greenhouse and nursery, which had lain dormant since Katrina. Students were thrust into the immediate problems that City Park was facing, and yet they did fine work. Their efforts produced amazing results: trails were established; the greenhouse became functional. At the end of the semester, students knew they had made contributions. Residents passing through the park repeatedly stopped to thank them, and subsequent trips to the park revealed new vibrancy.

The question was how to make sense of the experiences and generate “learning” from these unstable service encounters. For us, the answers lay in the experiences and in the park’s relation to the recovery of the city. We realized that there was a process to be gleaned from our hard work, one associated with meaningful service in the park’s recovery, however separate from the structured learning environment of the campus. That is, encountering the space and time of City Park signified an altogether different arrangement for knowledge-making from the familiar one of the campus. It involved an experiential immersion in the realities of New Orleans’ recovery that made demands on students physically as well as intellectually; in doing so, it exposed radically opposite ideological approaches to experience. Why was the reality of the park so different from the reality of our campus? How was the park’s space and time arranged differently from the campus and classroom? How did these differences impact what was deemed



“useful work” in the two spaces? And, how were individual students negotiating and coming-to-terms with these differences?

Students at our university come from all over the nation, and in many respects they are disconnected from the reality of life in New Orleans



because of the romantic myths about the place that have been cultivated through songs, stories, movies, and marketing. In our service-learning courses we use the bitter physical reality of Katrina as a vehicle for raising consciousness: the park exposes the ill-structured problems of the city and the city reveals the ill-structured problems of the nation. Students are encouraged to come to terms with their own relation to these problems. Thus, a project that begins with the simple act of physical engagement—getting one’s hands dirty by clearing

debris, pulling weeds, demolishing ruined structures, planting wetlands grasses—resonates outward with each week’s repetition.

We do physical work at City Park, which is to say that the service is grounded in sensory experiences. At the very least, this raises eyebrows from colleagues and others who inquire about our service-learning course and then question its “academic” value. But no writer would deny the significance of sensory detail and immediacy, and therefore, we see the harsh physical experiences at City Park as a starting point for the writing work that occurs in both of our courses. Physical detail, what might in other circumstances be considered trivia, serves as the material core from which resonances emanate, and when that felt



reality can be brought into the classroom a real articulation between service and learning occurs.

New Orleans City Park has never been “central” to the life of the city. It is much closer to what Foucault calls a “heterotopic” space, like a cemetery or mental hospital, an “other space” on the social periphery that cannot be integrated within the logical order of the dominant center. Foucault argues that “other spaces,” like City Park, function “[a]s a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live” (24). Heterotopias are real places that “have the curious property of being in relation to all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (24). The service-learning relationship between City Park and our campus, then, generates a perspective that students can explore and develop over the span of a semester. And this, of course, has important temporal implications as well because such heterotopic spaces lend themselves to the kinds of disconnections that alienate the temporality of New Orleans from the rest of the nation.

City Park has always been treated as a marginal space. It was the city’s dueling grounds in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and then became an unsuccessful plantation that eventually fell into bankruptcy shortly before the Civil War. Because the city could not afford to pay the back taxes on the land and the state was unwilling to do so, it fell into disuse and disrepair until 1891 when a group of New Orleans citizens established what would become the Friends of City Park, a community association that assumed responsibility for taking care of the site. To this day, City Park remains a disputed and liminal space with unresolved funding issues and dependency upon the citizens of New Orleans for its continued survival, this despite the fact that it houses the city’s premier art museum and botanical gardens, a historic carousel, two sports stadiums and two public golf courses, among numerous other attractions.



Our two writing-intensive courses take different, but complementary, approaches toward engagement with City Park; one stresses the ideological implications and effects of place and the other stresses those of time or temporality. The two courses are meant to intersect in ways that allow students in one course to draw upon work being done in the other, but such coordination has proven difficult. In the end, the spatial and temporal structures of campus life are deeply ingrained, and thus, our campus represents another kind of disconnected spatio-temporal environment, a utopic, rather than a heterotopic space. In much the same way as heterotopias, utopias contradict the typical space and time of society, but utopias contrast with heterotopic spaces because they do not represent an alternate “othered” space so much as an unreal or idealized one. Foucault describes utopias as “sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces” (24). Thus, the negotiation that we ask of our service students first involves a recognition of the very different spaces and times our courses move between, but then also requires students to discover their own individual relation to these spaces. Ultimately, we believe that service-learning pedagogy has as much to offer for considering the problems of the campus as it does for considering those in the community. Both the campus and the community encode ideologies of space and time that emerge through active physical engagement and guided reflection.

### **Place and the City Park Project:**

The course on place works to come to terms with the complicated physical and cultural landscape of post-Katrina New Orleans. Physical elevation, discussed in other regions in tens, hundreds, even thousands of feet, is scrutinized here in inches. And, these inches determine whether residents’ homes stay dry when the storms come or are inundated by waters that destroy everything inside. New Orleans’s unique cultural traditions are also closely linked to place: Mardi



Gras Indian tribes hail from specific streets or wards; Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs and their Second-Line brass band culture are rooted in individual neighborhoods. Even among the more tourist-oriented Mardi Gras celebrations, several of the prominent krewes that parade down St. Charles Avenue trace their history to tightly-knit neighborhoods across the city.

To date, rebuilding efforts in New Orleans have produced highly uneven results across these neighborhoods. Those on high-ground largely escaped flooding from the levee breaks and thus repopulated quickly after the storm. Boasting return rates of nearly one hundred percent, they give the appearance of full recovery: streetcars rattle down St. Charles Avenue; local restaurants and music venues open their doors to residents and tourists, alike; and children and college students make their way to nearby schools. But not far away is a vast network of flood-damaged neighborhoods in varying states of repopulation and physical rebuilding. Some have promising signs of life, while others continue to falter, with as many as sixteen neighborhoods regaining less than half of their pre-Katrina populations more than three years after the storm.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the close proximity of still-devastated neighborhoods, it is very easy on our campus to have almost no awareness of the complex spatial diversity that surrounds us. Our university occupies relatively high-ground in the Uptown area of New Orleans, but its long, narrow campus undergoes a nearly imperceptible fall in elevation. Because of this change, the academic quad escaped flooding after Katrina, while waters reached into the first floor of low-lying buildings in the middle and back of campus, causing financial losses estimated at \$600 million.<sup>6</sup> But you wouldn't know it walking across campus today. There are no markers to the water's reach, nor are there obvious signs of the work performed by a disaster recovery team that numbered in the thousands. The expansive lawns and flower beds are carefully manicured, new sculptures dot the academic quad, and students playing softball share



space with others studying on blankets in the sun—a seeming utopia once more.

The pace of recovery on campus is a tribute to the efforts of many, but the very success of these efforts has contributed to a further isolation of students from the ongoing struggles of residents and neighborhoods across the city. This type of relationship between students and the surrounding community is not unique to our university, of course, nor is it a post-Katrina phenomenon for us. As is often the case, the current separation between our university life and the rest of the city is reinforced by both physical and cultural barriers, and these barriers have a long history.<sup>7</sup> Physically, campus is bordered on three sides by busy streets and on the fourth by a tall, chain-link fence. Although there are few locked gates or security entrances, these borders discourage people who are not affiliated with the university from entering campus.<sup>8</sup>

Students do move outward across these borders in large numbers, but their movements are typically limited to areas they see as part of the “Tulane bubble.” They make themselves at home in the stretch of high-ground along the Mississippi River, nicknamed the “Isle of Denial” after Katrina, which is home to New Orleans’s famous tourist centers: the French Quarter, the Garden District, the Uptown universities. Throughout these neighborhoods, students crowd local po’boy and gumbo shops; they congregate for shows that feature a Neville or Marsalis family member; and they line parade routes for two weeks during Mardi Gras season. Their presence is obvious as they claim, experiment with, and consume New Orleans traditions. But their negotiation of the city remains largely restricted to the scenic views and traditions that grace tourism brochures.

However, living in post-Katrina New Orleans demands more from students, and from all of us, than a quick sampling of local culture followed by an easy retreat to the comfort of campus life. To come to terms with our city—that is, to take it seriously, to learn from it,



and to invest ourselves in it—we must grapple with our geographic surroundings, not as a simple physical context, nor as a stable cultural signifier, but as a socially-produced space fraught with tension and competing interests (Soja 20). For us, this mandate is rigorously academic as well as political. Our campus cannot be understood by simply looking at the beautiful scenery and seeing its relative safety and survival after the storm as lucky twists of circumstance. In the same way, our current circumstances cannot be understood without recognizing their intricate ties to, and dependence upon, national trends and priorities. In fact, everything we see around us is a symptom of centuries of complicated social relations or “Second Nature,” to use Henri Lefebvre’s terminology. As Lefebvre argues, the space in which we live is hardly objective or innocent. Instead “[it] is political and ideological. It is a product literally filled with ideologies” (Lefebvre 31).<sup>9</sup> And, in order to see this truth more clearly, it is necessary to shift perspectives, to move away from the classroom and campus and attempt to re-see our surroundings from another vantage point.

The class on place attempts to do just this. Students come together three times a week for class and then again across town at the service site for five Saturday work dates. Assigned readings focus on the city of New Orleans and theories of place, and a series of writing prompts encourages students to engage in a collaborative discovery process. Where this discovery will lead, however, depends upon the students themselves. Because the circumstances we face in New Orleans defy our attempts to stabilize or define them, we communicate that reality truthfully to our students.<sup>10</sup> We introduce the syllabus as a guide, not an unbending document, and we spend the first week helping students adjust to a class that resists rigid structures or predetermined outcomes. The usual disclaimer “All dates and assignments are subject to change” allows us to replace assigned readings with new texts in order to ensure that the questions and problems raised by students’ work at the service site infiltrate the classroom walls and, thus, retain our central focus. Fundamental to this discovery process, then, is the class members’



work at City Park, the country's sixth largest urban park, which borders several diverse neighborhoods in the northern section of New Orleans. To get from campus to the park, students ride from Uptown through Gert Town and Mid-City, decaying areas before the storm and ones that received a tremendous amount of damage during it. This fifteen-minute ride to the park moves through different geographic and temporal frameworks, and that movement reinforces the pedagogical process of both of our courses. Each trip to the park complicates the tension between the city's ideological extremes. Furthermore, the park itself contains these extremes.

Even a cursory tour through City Park reveals the tensions between its carefully cultivated image and the radical flux of its present state. The levee breaks during Katrina flooded all thirteen hundred acres of City Park with anywhere from three to nine feet of water. The front of the park, which includes its most important tourist attractions, was fairly quickly restored to pristine condition. As one moves toward the back of the park, the reality of its struggle to return becomes increasingly apparent. This reality is also reflected in the neighborhoods that border those areas, which remain fragmented, unstable, and uncertain about their future. The entrances to City Park hold most of its historical landmarks; the rear included public golf courses, a driving range, a large softball complex, walking trails, plant and tree farms, horse stables, and a vast lagoon system for freshwater fishing. Those back areas, so representative of the city's vitality, remain very slow to return, and most of our service work is done there. Their current state is not reducible to their elevation or physical geography. Rather, the quality of investment and infrastructure before the storm, as well as the status of surrounding neighborhoods and competing demands for park resources after Katrina, has hindered efforts to restore these areas of the park.

The landscape of City Park thus serves as a microcosm for both the problems of an uneven physical geography and the variant socially-inscribed spaces of the city. Students negotiate these spaces as they



move from campus to City Park and back again, and between service sites within the park. During the semester, writing prompts and service work come together in an iterative process. This begins with students' initial observations about the physical space of the park and the work they are performing, then moves onto critical dialogues between readings and the socially-constructed spaces of the park, and finally culminates in critical analyses of how these spaces resonate outward from the park to the campus and larger city. Our physical investment in City Park thus allows students to work toward a kind of experiential authority that invites an active and ambitious dialogue with both course readings and romantic narratives about the city, foregrounding crucial questions that preoccupy and divide New Orleans residents: What will our city look like in the future? Which neighborhoods are receiving substantial investment, and which ones are being left behind? If certain areas of the built environment are abandoned, what will be lost? And, where do we as members of the university community fit into the larger social fabric of the city?



Over the course of the semester, then, students repeatedly return to a landscape that one student likened to a “funhouse” mirror for their well-loved campus. This carnivalesque simile seems especially appropriate because City Park shares many physical and land-use similarities to our campus and neighboring Audubon Park, but students' reactions to the two environments are often inverted as they come face-to-face with



the devastation that has been successfully erased from our campus. The course on place foregrounds this mirroring relationship between the two sites, and, in doing so, the classroom becomes a “sort of mixed, joint experience” that lies between the utopic and heterotopic spaces. As Foucault defines it, the intrigue of the mirror is that “it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there” (24). To put it differently, service work at City Park coupled with guided reflection in the classroom allows students to recognize their immediate environment of the campus in post-Katrina New Orleans as simultaneously real and unreal, both embedded in the city and its spatial complexity and separate from all that surrounds it: the FEMA trailers, the shuttered schools with signs still welcoming students back to the 2005-2006 school year, the block after block of empty homes slowly giving themselves over to weeds.

Through their writing, students are encouraged to read their work at City Park as a “text,” but one not to be defined, understood, or mastered in isolation. Instead, the academic importance of their work stems from the way the heterotopic space of the park reveals the “messy, ill constructed, and jumbled” space of the surrounding city (Foucault 27). In this way, the park becomes a focal point, along with the campus and the city, in a process that emphasizes, as David Thornton Moore puts it, an “image of meaning as situated and fragile; of knowledge as negotiated and interactional; and of learning as dialectical and active” (275). Notably, this course design has resulted in few identifying moments for students to see others in the community as “just like me.” More typically student drafts—both individual efforts and collaborative compositions—focus on difference, and they struggle with the difficulty of bridging such difference. In one example, a student used the difficult task of pounding in support stakes for dozens of trees at City Park to help him come to terms with a frightening but evocative event he had recently experienced. He begins his essay by describing an afternoon



trip he and two friends made across town to the Lower Ninth Ward to witness and videotape a neighborhood Second Line parade. Rather than participating in the fun and returning to campus with a great story to tell, the students are accosted by a musician from the parade's brass band, and the video camera is smashed. As the musician charges the writer's friend who is holding the camera, he repeatedly yells, "Get outta here white boy, you stealin' our culture! You don' belong here." The draft begins with a description of the tense scene that engulfs the parade. It then shifts to a detailed consideration of the students' relationship to the parade's other participants and to the Ninth Ward itself. In doing so, the draft resists eliding the differences exposed by the incident:

I came to Tulane anticipating many wonders. I was excited about the Aaron Nevilles and the Cowboy Mouths and the Snug Harbors and the Hot 8s. Many students at Tulane share this passion ... Despite all my zeal and anticipation, I ultimately found myself victim of the Tulane Bubble, trapped with thousands of other students. I only left campus to go to the Superdome on Saturdays. Other than that I existed solely between the confines of Broadway and Calhoun. Separated from the city that I called my new home. Alienated from the culture that I had been so eager to join. Although I came to New Orleans to rejoice in its rich cultural intricacies, I ended up forsaking them for a life of ease on McAlister [...] So that is who stood on the street in the lower ninth, a man who turned his back on a city that was willing to adopt him. I am no better than a tourist, in spite of my two and a half years of residence. I haven't contributed to the community. I haven't lived through the tragedies the residents of the ninth ward have. I don't share wounds from Katrina with the rest of the city, because I don't have any. When [my friends] and I attended the second line and tried to film it, we really were stealing their culture. They were a community, celebrating survival, memorializing the fallen, thanking each other and God for successes, reconciling themselves



with their failures. Our intent was pure; we only wanted to show those still stuck in the Tulane Bubble the amazing stuff that goes on out there. However the tuba player and his associates feared that we were taking their celebration for ourselves, to rejoice in survival and success we did not earn.

In the draft, the student takes seriously the ethical problems associated with examining, evaluating, even enjoying cultural traditions from the idealized, but separate space of the university. Notably, however, he does not conclude his draft with a simple mea culpa. Instead, he turns to an analysis of his service work at City Park both to understand what citizenship in post-Katrina New Orleans requires and to begin his movement toward it. By coupling his labor at the park with his reflections on the space of the city, he, like many of his classmates in their writing, grapples with the incredible significance of the contemporary moment and seeks to claim a place within it, thus touching upon theoretical concerns that students in the course on temporality explored directly.

### **Temporality and the City Park Project**

The effects that Katrina had upon the space of New Orleans, and for our purposes, City Park in particular, were so profound and overwhelming that they served to conceal the perhaps more insidious problems of time. In other words, New Orleans, especially in the ways that the city advertised itself as a tourist attraction for the rest of the nation, had become quite good at romanticizing the slow decay of a place that was suffering many of the same problems of crumbling infrastructure that affected urban spaces everywhere in America. Urban decay was part of the city's charm, what paradoxically made it "timeless." Like other "timeless" places around the world, New Orleans was portrayed as somehow operating in a different temporality, one exempt from the real, modern problems of contemporary urban America. When Katrina struck, it not only destroyed the spatial façade of New Orleans; it also



interrupted a temporal façade that was invisible to most US citizens, and unfortunately, to many citizens of New Orleans as well.

New Orleans has vested itself in this temporal denial. The romantic myth of the city draws tourists, but it also allows certain neighborhoods to remain isolated from the modern temporal flow. And this occurs on both ends of the economic spectrum. Antique streetcars still carry locals and tourists alike down St. Charles Avenue, a scenic district lined with ancient live oak trees and pristine nineteenth-century mansions. A trip across the Industrial Canal (currently a popular one for “disaster tours”) shows the locations of levee breaches, but the canal also marks a temporal breach between the city and the impoverished underclass of the Ninth Ward, where many lived isolated and among ruins even before the storm. Obviously, New Orleans is not alone in its opportunistic and disjunctive temporalities. Ghettos, barrios, neighborhoods “across the tracks” are not only geographically but also temporally isolated from the life of a city. But Katrina brought a special kind of attention to the larger, “national” resonances of such problems, and the course on temporality uses this as a theoretical framework.

In *Imagined Communities* Benedict Anderson theorizes that modern nations were formed as a result of a new sense of temporality that emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The new secular time of the modern industrial era gradually displaced the sacred time of the historical past, which had been built around the hierarchical order of the Church and feudal society. For Anderson, the *secular* temporality of the nation is de-centered, dominated by the “homogeneous, empty time” of the present (a phrase he takes from Walter Benjamin). Modern print media, like newspapers, which people read every day, create an “imagined community” that coheres around the implied present that all its readers share simultaneously.<sup>11</sup> Of course, no time—perhaps least of all, the present—is either “homogeneous” or “empty” and the events of Katrina illustrate the differences that make America a radically heterogeneous and



ideologically complex nation. Despite that, Anderson's theories help contextualize the temporal effects that over-simplified media representations of Katrina created. For our students, who mostly experienced the storm through newspapers and national television reportage, the complex reality of New Orleans was reduced to two equally false extremes, the two disjointed temporalities that "other" the city: either New Orleans was depicted sentimentally as the romantic and timeless world of "dreamy scenes" or it was portrayed as a "third world" cut off from the modern temporality of the rest of the nation by horrible poverty and ignorance. Both of those representations are



"empty" and "homogeneous," but their power comes from an ideological simplicity that allows the nation to distance itself from its own involvement in such formations.

Because our students come from many other places, they represent a national perspective on New Orleans, one dominated by the mythical temporalities of the city. Moreover, students spend most of their "free time" on campus and build their school days around the rigid time schedule of classes;

in effect, the campus creates an additional barrier against reality. It suggests another kind of empty, homogeneous, and disjunctive space that the course on temporality articulates with. This means that the writing classroom becomes a site of engagement, a temporal contact zone between utopic campus and heterotopic service work. Rather than objective detachment or ethnographic documentation that attempts to remove subjectivity, we try to engage and replicate the unstable and



heterogeneous reality of New Orleans through the act of writing, which parallels the direct physical interaction of the service experience.

Most student writing is posted to a wiki, an online format that allows constant editorial emending and amplification as well as collaborative contributions. Students write in an online environment that parallels the alternate temporalities that the course is built around, and they modify their writing as the semester progresses. Thus, student writing mirrors the open-ended, heterogeneous complexities that physical work in the community suggests. Moreover, it embraces the movement of the present in a way that corresponds with the movement through space that any service-learning course necessitates. Collaborative work complicates subject and object; it resists both purely subjective personal expression and objective documentation.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, student work relies upon the notion of writing as an open-ended process, but we believe this also has important implications for how students come to understand their own relation to the institutional settings in which they have been educated.

In rhetorical terms, a course on present temporality means a course built upon the classical notion of *kairos*, which loosely translates as “timeliness.” Typically, *kairos* suggests an awareness of one’s rhetorical situation, an ability to tailor a performance to suit the specific circumstances of time and place. But in that sense *kairos* only adds context to *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. Our course foregrounds *kairos*, and makes the immediacy of an unstable present the key component of the pedagogy. Students come to terms with the city’s kairotic significance *through* their writing. Thus, the course on temporality builds a dialogue between the present reality of service work and the various ideological assumptions of students, one that resonates with each iteration of service work and written reflection. Such resonances are not merely theoretical; rather they actualize the spatial movements between classroom and campus, campus and City Park, City Park and New Orleans, New Orleans and the nation, and the best student writing



captures this movement. For example, students often use their writing as a metaphorical or allegorical vehicle that interprets the differences they experience as they move between the campus and City Park. Some produce narrative projects; others use a journal format, while still others experiment with new media possibilities. The only formal requirement is that they attempt to come to terms with the complexities of their experiences in a grammatically clear way.

The bus ride from our campus to City Park exemplifies the resonance between simplified ideological uses of time and the complex present, and students experience this transition each time they go to perform service.<sup>13</sup> A kind of triangulation occurs when students move from the utopic space of campus through the devastated areas of New Orleans to the heterotopic space of City Park, and we try to recreate that complex negotiation among alternate spaces in the writing that they produce for the class. That is, if the move from the campus to City Park suggests a kind of national awakening to the realities of post-Katrina New Orleans, then the move back to campus makes specific demands on us, on our own willingness to allow that unstable and complex present into the “timeless” or utopic order of the campus and the highly-controlled scheduling of our syllabi.

Undoubtedly, the campus often functions as a cocoon or “bubble” that students retreat into after their service forays, and so to resist that ideological retreat, the course on temporality uses written reflection as a means of bursting the bubble from the inside out, so to speak. Writing and discussion prompts ask students to articulate the relation between present conditions at the service sites and how those conditions relate to the changes that Katrina has wrought upon the community and culture of New Orleans. Students use the physical immediacy of the work as a source for invention; thus, artifacts from the experience become markers of the park’s history and its potential future: a ruined greenhouse inspired essays about the city’s decline and decay; plastic



kiddie pools for new iris plants prompted essays about the lack of resources and makeshift circumstances of life in post-Katrina New Orleans. In effect, the classroom becomes the primary site for keeping the service experiences open and immediate, and also fostering the larger resonances that the work continually suggests. The campus itself retains a utopic façade, of course, but the classroom represents a space where present instability is foregrounded as a means of interrupting and destabilizing the temporal framework of campus life.

Though students write individual reflections, some of their most interesting work comes from collaborative group projects, which allow them to reinforce the heterogeneity of the service experiences. Students bring multiple perspectives into conversation with one another and then negotiate a coherent expression of their service project. The syllabus provides writing prompts that move from a series of short assignments toward the final group project, which represents a group's last statement on the service. They are encouraged to be creative, rather than strictly objective in their writing. Formal objectivity lends itself to static approaches, and attempts to document, classify, or define the service-experience all reinforce traditional assumptions about knowledge as fixed and removed from the situated realities of service encounters. In our experience, requiring academic formality drains the writing of the genuine engagement that is necessary to the larger course goals. It also reinforces the boundaries between how knowledge is made in the university and how it is made through reflective practice and real world experience.

In the course on temporality an unstable and open-ended relation at the center supplants the traditional teacher-centered (or even student-centered) writing classroom. Thus the collaborative process of making knowledge from the service experience drives the course pedagogy. In fall 2008, students from the temporality course produced eight projects. All of these re-presented the move from a physical service experience to a realization about the "ill-structured" problems



that Katrina restoration poses for New Orleans. For example, one group used the repetitive act of weeding at a tree farm as a vehicle for discussing the problems of disuse that currently plague the rear portion of the park:

The overgrown dead space on the west side accurately reflects what is on most of City Parks 1,300 acres. Before Hurricane Katrina, the park played host to a variety of strategically planted flora, including orchids, staghorn ferns, and bromeliads. In its wake Katrina destroyed the many years of labor devoted to growing and maintaining these plants and gave rise to a vast colony of weeds. . . . But the amount of workers in the field is proportional to the number of people using the park. The absence of pedestrian presence is evident in the empty streets leading to the tree farm. It shows through the cracked and yellowing signs on the backwood trails that once educated walkers, joggers, and nature enthusiasts. Underneath the highway that runs through the park, row upon row of cement tables sit in various states of disrepair. If a weed is a plant growing where it is unwanted, then what does that say about the want of the weeded areas of City Park? (“Weeds”)

Another group examined the same problem—nature’s encroachment upon the cultivated space of the park—but took an entirely different perspective on the issue, one that exposes the problematic conflict between nature and culture in the city:

Yes, this was in-fact a war between man and nature: nature’s arsenal including fire ants and hurricanes, man’s arsenal including Voodoo-Fest and weed-wackers, have been battling it out ever since the park was first established. This battle between man and nature remains the living struggle that makes City Park what it is today. The conflict is real; despite how hard either party tries, neither will ever have complete control. City Park represents a



unique balance of ownership, it belongs to both nature and to those who try and change it.

“Man, it is way too early to be thinking this deep,” I thought out loud. Behind me the service learners were picking out gloves and rakes from the back of a trunk. I quickly turned to run and grab a pair of gloves before all of the good ones were gone but after I took my first step I heard something squish under my foot. I lifted up my shoe to reveal a flattened black widow. (“An Unexpected Experience”)

Such alternate student perspectives, even when they simplify (neither fire ants nor hurricanes are purely “natural” interventions), situate present instability at City Park and express the uncertainty about recovery for all of New Orleans. While student responses to the City Park project varied in their degree of articulation with the realities of post-Katrina service, they nevertheless produced an honest record, an interpretive moment that we can consult as the project moves forward.<sup>14</sup>

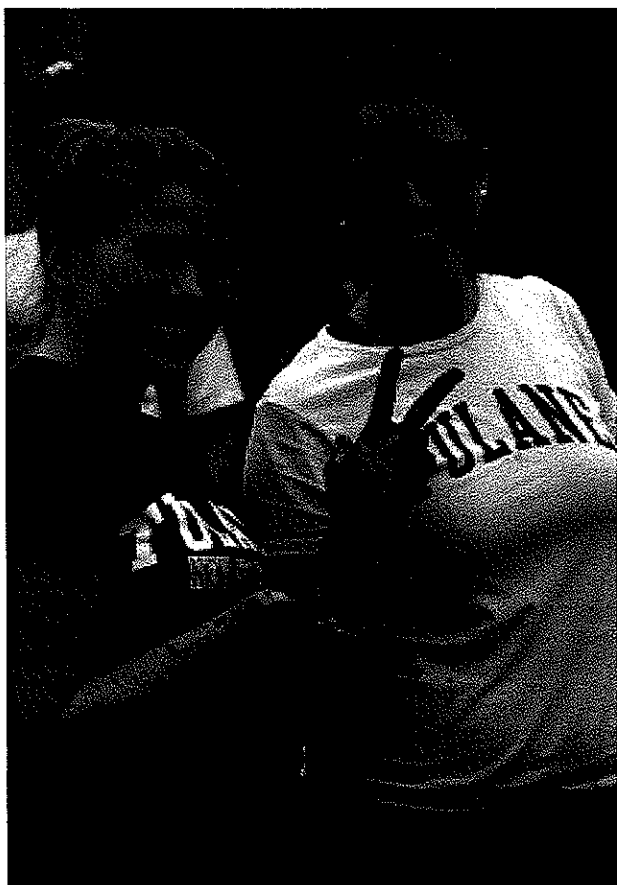
It is clear that our experiences to date at City Park undermine hopes for any final recovery of the park or of the larger city and region. Talk of “recovery,” as it plays out in contemporary discourse, implies an endpoint or point of stasis that, once attained, constitutes a long-awaited conclusion to the trauma of Katrina. This search for a stabilized end is problematic in several ways, most obviously because the work needed to build and inhabit homes, establish businesses, and open schools in neighborhoods across the city remains staggering. The same is true, if on a smaller scale, of the work at City Park. Even as individual sections of the park are redeveloped, its socially-variant space or Second Nature remains. As we’ve seen in the neighborhoods surrounding our campus, the appearance of recovery only serves to conceal the spatial and temporal disjunctions that surround us. The landscapes of the park and the city continue to be in a constant state of



flux. As a result, our course designs must evolve as we go forward. It is equally clear that future attempts to grapple with local temporal and spatial registers are best served by projects that move students beyond the so-called “recovered” areas, help them physically engage their environment, and encourage them to re-see their relationship to campus and to the larger city.

## Conclusion

As we hope this essay has illustrated, our energies in developing a pedagogy for service-learning in post-Katrina New Orleans have focused primarily on the relationship between the park, the city, and the campus, which has left little time for refining the relation between a course on place and one on time. Nevertheless, we believe such connections are possible, not least because students from both courses



work together on the service project. That is, our work readily achieves a sense of shared experience and social interaction among the various sections and courses when we are at the site, but that same sense is much more difficult to achieve when confronted by the boundaries of classroom spaces and rigid time schedules in the campus environment. Though our institution fully supports the initiatives of community engagement and service work, going so far as to require two service-learning credits for graduation, it, like so many other institutions around the country,

abides by an order that is radically different from the spatio-temporal one of the community that surrounds it. In our courses this physical distinction manifests an ideological one that represents the boundary



between “learning” outcomes for a class and real citizenship. As one student in the course on place described it:

Every other day I walk into this classroom panting from the three flights of stairs I’ve successfully conquered...Awkwardly, my classmates and I sit and wait for our professor to arrive aware of the painful silence surrounding us but too apathetic to be the first to alleviate it. We’ve all spent weekends now together planting flowers, laying mulch, weed whacking, sharing hour-long conversations, laughing, commiserating. But now we are timid. These four walls transform our friendships into clumsy business relationships [...] Our uneasiness is justifiable. Most of us come from different social circles or age groups that don’t have much interaction unless forced to interact through service learning requirements. When provided a common goal to work towards, such as our goal to help in the regeneration of New Orleans’ City Park, the divisions between us began to deteriorate and we were able to work together and find common ground.

Ultimately, the very heterogeneity and instability that students encounter through their physical interactions with the space and time of the real post-Katrina New Orleans offer their own kind of foundation for understanding what civic engagement means. Such realities cannot be neatly structured, or tightly arranged within a linear progression of assignments, an observation that only reveals the relative impossibility of measuring learning outcomes within the utopic space of a campus. In ways that go far beyond our course designs, what Katrina has taught without question is that even our most sacred, timeless spaces, the ones we arrange our whole lives around—home, church, campus—are subject to radical interventions and flux. What service-learning in post-Katrina has taught is that such flux can be a part of acquiring knowledge and ultimately of becoming real citizens.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" (22); and Joe Turner Layton, Jr., and Henry Creamer, "Way Down Yonder in New Orleans."

<sup>2</sup> Here we follow Janet Eyler and Dwight E. Giles who note, "most of the problems we face in our communities are not what social scientists call well structured . . . Problems in the social sciences, and certainly the issues faced by most of these service-learning participants, are ill-structured problems." See *Where's the Learning in Service-Learning?* (102-104).

<sup>3</sup> Both the earlier project and our current one respond to institutional changes following Hurricane Katrina. As part of its 2006 restructuring plan, Tulane added a two-tier service learning graduation requirement for incoming students. As of Fall 2006, all students entering Tulane must complete one class with a 20-hour service learning component and a second with 40-hours of service or an unpaid internship with a local nonprofit.

<sup>4</sup> The whole notion of "restoring" New Orleans raises questions about the nature of change following Katrina. We believe the recovery process, like any restoration effort, should not suggest a naïve return to the way things used to be in the city; thus, both our courses complicate restoration by acknowledging current spatial and temporal instability and loss. New Orleans is not the "Mona Lisa," but "painting over" Katrina's damages without accounting for the changes that the storm has brought is not only a cultural denial, but also risks the very life of New Orleans should another storm hit.

<sup>5</sup> Most notable is the Lower Ninth Ward, which received substantial media attention in the immediate aftermath of Katrina. Despite determined efforts by local residents and outside benefactors such as Brad Pitt, the Lower Ninth Ward's return rate has stalled at eleven percent of pre-Katrina numbers. See the Greater New Orleans Data



Center's August 21, 2008 press release for an estimate of return rates for all neighborhoods in the New Orleans.

<sup>6</sup> Estimates of damages to the university campus have continued to rise in the post-Katrina period. This estimate comes from Tulane University President's report for the FY 2007. Universities across the city and region likewise suffered catastrophic damage, with Dillard University and Southern University of New Orleans experiencing flooding that damaged most of their buildings.

<sup>7</sup> Tulane's new service learning graduation requirement is part of a concentrated effort by university officials to redress historical divisions between campus and the surrounding community while increasing civic commitment among students.

<sup>8</sup> See Ellen Cushman's "The Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change" for an early, detailed analysis of the physical and cultural barriers that separate universities from their surrounding communities as well as a clear discussion of how these separations inform service-learning pedagogies.

<sup>9</sup> See Nedra Reynolds's "Composition's Imagined Geographies: The Politics of Space in the Frontier, City, and Cyberspace" for an examination of geographic metaphors in composition studies. Reynolds's analysis focuses on the material space of university classrooms and writing activities in order to examine their impact on students' writing efforts. Our course design builds on Reynolds's analysis by foregrounding the multiple spaces that students inhabit and analyzing the links between these different spaces.

<sup>10</sup> The post-Katrina planning process in New Orleans has attracted national and international experts in urban planning and design. At the same time, these planning efforts produced few obvious successes and, instead, left many residents bewildered and additionally traumatized. Critics of the process single out the planners' logical, "white board"



approach to rebuilding the city as disconnected from both the material realities and the desires of the residents needing help.

<sup>11</sup> See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. Anderson's work focuses on the development of nations and nationalism in the nineteenth century, but it also has interesting resonances for how other communities, for example "discourse communities" or campus communities, are imagined as homogeneous and atemporal.

<sup>12</sup> Though we both advocate new media formats, like wikis, we also structure assignments in ways that allow us to meet the more traditional essay requirements of our writing program. For example, students are required to submit hard copies for each assignment before they modify their work to suit the online format. This offers the additional benefit of reinforcing rhetorical discussion of the differences between traditional academic discourse and the discursive possibilities of new media.

<sup>13</sup> See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other* for an in-depth theoretical discussion of the "ideological uses of time" primarily in the field of anthropology. Fabian's work also complicates any discussion of "objective" documentation of service-learning experiences. For more discussion of Fabian in the context of post-Katrina New Orleans see "Floating Foundations: Kairos, Community, and a Composition Program in Post-Katrina New Orleans," *College English* 72.1 (Sept. 2009): 676-694.

<sup>14</sup> To view all of the City Park assignments for the course on temporality and the links to final projects, see <<http://tulane263.wikispaces.com/>>.



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