

# How's Your House?: Portraits of Spiritual Dwelling in post-Katrina New Orleans

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In early 2007 I returned to New Orleans, for the first time since Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, to visit family and friends. We drove around areas that had been damaged, traveling through neighborhoods across most of the city. In hard-hit communities such as Lakeview and the Lower Ninth Ward, we slowed down and fell silent, stunned by the ruin. Later we stopped and walked around the vacant lot where my father and stepmother's house used to be on Napoleon Avenue; the house was destroyed in the floods and fires that occurred just after the storm. In these and in other parts of the city were whole neighborhoods upturned, debris piled in the street, the hollow shells of buildings and houses, and recently razed lots of dirt and concrete. Even at this time, nearly a year and a half after the storm, the primary signs of life were from dazed observers like us, the few returned residents living in FEMA trailers that dotted the region, and swarms of birds circling over a nearly unrecognizable landscape.

Katrina was a powerful storm, with winds exceeding 140 mph and a storm surge that crested at over 27 feet. Region-wide, the storm spread nearly 93,000 square miles across 138 parishes and counties. It caused over 96 billion dollars of damage to housing, consumer durable goods, and business and government property. Over 350,000 homes were destroyed, with more than 280,000 lost in the state of Louisiana alone. Thousands more suffered damage and as a result, more than 800,000 individuals were displaced.<sup>1</sup> The loss of life was equally massive; in Louisiana the death toll as of August 2006 was 1,464, with 135 people still reported missing.<sup>2</sup>



*Figure 1. Site of My Father's House (photo by author)*

As my family and I made our way through the city that day, our eyes were opened to the scope of this tragedy, and in particular its human impact. Katrina drastically altered the physical as well as the social landscape, affecting individuals, families, and broader networks. Everyone we met had a story to tell. They talked about their experiences, the whereabouts of family, friends, and neighbors, and the status of their recovery. Standard greetings of “how are you?” and “how's the family?” were followed by the new and particularly relevant “how's your house?” In essence, people asked and spoke about themselves, their relationship to these changed surroundings, and their efforts to reclaim and maintain some degree of social and physical grounding.

More deeply, they spoke of their ability, or inability, to live fully in their environments. They spoke of the nature and experience of human dwelling in this particular time and place.

This paper examines human dwelling in post-Katrina New Orleans, focusing on the role that religious beliefs and practices play in the way that some residents become emplaced within their

<sup>1</sup> Red Cross Disaster Operations Summary Report #64, September 25, 2005, <http://www.redcross.org>

<sup>2</sup> Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals  
<http://www.dhh.louisiana.gov/offices/page.asp?ID=192&Detail=5248>

immediate surroundings and engaged with the larger world. The concept of spiritual dwelling has not been fully explored in scholarly analyses of local urban life. In the wake of Katrina, however, as people struggle to reposition themselves in home and society, the inquiry is particularly relevant. This paper begins with a review of the existing social science literature on houses and house-life, and a summary of the historic and local religious dimensions of houses and house-life in New Orleans. It calls for a theoretical expansion of the dwelling perspective within people-environment studies, with increased attention to the domestic setting and the spiritual and religious dimensions therein. Similarly, it calls for the continued inclusion of issues of place within religious studies.



Figure 2. Houses in the Lower Ninth Ward (photo by author)

In addition to an expanded theoretical perspective, this paper also presents ethnographic examples of spiritual dwelling in the form of local narratives and photographs of domestic religious practice.<sup>3</sup> These are personal stories from post-Katrina New Orleans, portraits of people whose processes of recovery and sustainability are closely intertwined with religious faith and devotion. In these accounts, religious practice is directed towards the development of familial, social, and spiritual relationships, and towards the reestablishment and securing of one's social and spiritual position, particularly given the ongoing instability of the surrounding environment. These narratives provide evidence of a deep level of spiritual engagement with the built space and structure of the house, which guides a broader engagement with, and stable place within, the community and world at large.

### Human dwelling and the study of houses and house-life

Theories of human dwelling in anthropology and related fields consider the close relationship between persons and their environments, and stem from a particular focus on their reciprocal constitution (Ingold 1996:115). In relation to the built environment, the founding principle of dwelling is that, "the forms that people build, whether in the imagination or on the ground, arise within the current of their involved activity, in the specific relational contexts of their practical engagement with their surroundings" (Ingold 2002:186). Dwelling is thus a continuous process and "every act of building is but a moment" within that process (Ingold 1996:115). In post-Katrina New Orleans, physical acts of building and re-building are at the center of daily life, and are primarily focused on the house. In this setting, therefore, the house should be considered as an important site of dwelling, a site where the integration and mutual (re)constitution of person and place occurs. The examination of houses and house-life in New Orleans can shed light on the mechanisms of emplacement and engagement, given current social and environmental conditions, and within this extended period of recovery.

Theoretical investigations of the built environment originate within diverse scholarly disciplines. Anthropologists working in North America made early and important contributions, expanding knowledge on the physical and social structures of society. Lewis Henry Morgan

<sup>3</sup> All photographs © Rebecca L. Carter; August 2008

approached the study by investigating diverse forms of social being and dwelling, conducting for example field studies of beavers and beaver dams in the Great Lakes region (Morgan 1868, Feeley-Harnik 1999). This work “alerted [Morgan] to the importance of architecture in the organization of society” (Longacre 2003:ix), a topic he further explored in his research and subsequent publication of *Houses and House life Among the American Aborigines* (Morgan 2003[1881]). Morgan describes social and governmental organization, subsistence and land use, house structures, and social practices, identifying practices of “hospitality” and “communism in living” as being key to the interpretation of house architecture for this Native North American society (Morgan 2003[1881]:276). His pioneering study demonstrates the close integration of physical structures and social systems.<sup>4</sup> Understandings of the built social environment have broadened considerably, and there are new analytical and cross disciplinary frameworks with which to explore the multiple and current dimensions of contemporary houses and house-life in the U.S., as well as in other locales. In particular, the inquiry has progressed alongside the development of new theory within the study of kinship, and has matured also as conceptualizations of space, place, property, and sensory and embodied experience, have broadened.

Critiques of kinship as an analytic category took shape in the 1970s. Scholars challenged the prominence of assumptions of unity and consanguinity within kinship theory, asserting that the overall category is at best a theoretical notion existing in the mind of the anthropologist and not within culture itself (Schneider 1972). The discipline has also been influenced by feminist theory, with scholars challenging the assumption of naturalized difference and moving to wider conceptions of kinship systems “outside [of the] ruling sign of biology,” as well as outside of traditional analytic domains, such as “primitive,” or “domestic” (Franklin and McKinnon 2001:6, 8). The expanded focus draws important attention to the links between ideologies of kinship, race, and gender; processes of inclusion and exclusion; and relations of power.

One important concept that emerges from the reconfiguration of kinship studies, with particular relevance for the study of houses and house-life, is the concept of “relatedness.” The term is intended to “signal an openness to indigenous idioms of being related,” move away from pre-given definitions of kinship and analytic oppositions, and create open and more flexible space to explore the relatedness of seemingly unrelated people, things, and places (Carsten 2000:4). The reconfigured discipline of kinship provides new avenues to explore the various types of bonds that people form, for example within and between familial, social, physical and even metaphysical systems and structures. In specific regards to houses and house-life, it provokes a “careful examination of the symbolic and social significance of the house...as well as a reappraisal of what constitutes ‘the domestic’ and the boundary between the domestic and the political...” (Carsten 2000:18).

The concept of the house, however, is not limited in scope to its social and practical meaning. Rather, it operates also as a key symbolic structure (Bahloul 1999:239). Claude Lévi-Strauss, for example, explored the symbolic concept of the house in his theoretical analysis of *sociétés à maison*, symbolically associating the structure of the house with the structure of the family (Lévi-Strauss 1987). Lévi-Strauss argued that in certain house societies, organized by downward descent and the inheritance of names and property, the house has an ability to reunite or transcend incompatible principles and solidify unstable unions and tensions within the family system (Carsten 1995:105-106). Thus the house is an entity that structures social relations. More recent analyses, however, have tested the applicability of this theory, concluding that house-life is better understood

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<sup>4</sup> Other influential contributions to the anthropological investigation of houses and house-life in the U.S. include Boas (Boas 1888, 1889, 1921), Du Bois (1908), Hallowell (fieldwork from 1930-1940), Powdermaker (1939), and E. Franklin Frazier (1939).

as a fluid and dynamic process of internal social relations and external lateral continuity (Carsten 1995:120).

Conceptualizations of space and place also have an important influence on the symbolic study of houses and house-life. Using concepts of embodiment and analyses of cosmic and sensory experience, they focus on the lived experience of house-life and the nature of human being and dwelling therein. In Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of the Kabyle house, for example, the house is a metaphor for the organization of the universe. Homologous divisions and oppositions such as male:female, human:animal, and light:dark, are built into the structure of the house, and are the same divisions and oppositions that exist between the house and the rest of the world (Bourdieu 1970:140). As Bourdieu explained, "All the symbolic manipulations of body experience, starting with displacements within a mythically structured space, e.g. the movements of going in and coming out, tend to impose the integration of the body space with cosmic space" (Bourdieu 1972:91). As people dwell within the house, therefore, they are fully engaged, internally and externally, with the multiple dimensions and realms of the world.

Other scholars have focused on the experience of place through sensory perception and participation. Moving away from a prioritization of space over place within anthropology and other disciplines, new theories focus on the dimensions of a particular locale, for instance the configuration and ordered arrangement of the people, animal, and things that are found in the same place (Casey 1996: 25). Additional scholarly attention has also been given to the processes and practices "through which places are rendered meaningful – through which, one might say, places are actively sensed" (Feld and Basso 1996:7). This process of sensing is a "doubly reciprocated motion... as place is sensed, senses are placed; as places make sense, senses make place" (Feld 1996:91). This idea of embodied, sensory experience is not far removed from broader concerns explored in fields such as cultural geography, that have to do with struggle, resistance and power, the relation between social identities and place, and processes of difference and displacement (Feld and Basso 1996).

Finally, investigations of houses and house-life have broadened along with recent scholarly analysis and attention to property and property rights. While some scholars question the utility of property as an analytical category altogether (Humphrey and Verdery 2004:11), new theories shed light on various understandings and experiences of property, or what property *does* as opposed to what it *is* (Nadasdy 2002:251). These theories illustrate, for example, the diverse conceptualizations and experiences of houses and land, and the differences between formal/institutional and informal/local approaches to property and property use. These theories also shed light on the dominant legal understandings of property, particularly in regards to the possession of objects, land, houses, and people, and the tremendous impact these conceptualizations have had on human life, particularly for indigenous, marginalized, and vulnerable populations and communities (Rose 1994, Cattellino 2006). Finally, new approaches to the study of property reveal the everyday understandings and experiences of property, and show how it is often deeply personal and bound up with issues of identity and personhood (Radin 1993).

### **Social and spiritual dwelling in New Orleans**

The above approaches to the study of houses and house-life are very useful for investigations of human dwelling in post-Katrina New Orleans. In particular they help us to understand the close and historically grounded interconnection between the physical, social, and spiritual dimensions of daily life in this locale. New Orleans' urban landscape developed in relation to the local geography, with settlement extending outwards from the highest points along the Mississippi River. This geographic expansion was also an economic and social one, fueled by the

growth of a plantation-based economy, the forced migration of African slaves, and immigration from primarily European and Caribbean countries. By the mid nineteenth century New Orleans was home to more ethnic groups than any other U.S. city (Campanella 2006). People settled in distinct areas and groupings, which eventually corresponded to parish and city ward designations. While immigrant groups tended to cluster together, settlement patterns also followed certain rules of urban expansion that typically forced working-class and poor families into peripheral and low-lying areas vulnerable to crime, poverty, environmental hazard, and natural disaster (Campanella 2006:93). As a result, distinct physical and social boundaries formed around populations and communities, and the people within these jurisdictions formed close affiliations to the specific houses, businesses, schools, and religious institutions within the vicinity (Campanella 2006). Even the local cemeteries were built with reference to the surrounding neighborhood, with immigrant and family groups placed together in house-shaped mausoleums (Upton 2007).

The dimensions and diversity of religious practice in New Orleans have been well studied, with a good portion of the existing research focused on the beliefs, practices, and objectives of specific groups and denominations, such as Catholicism (Fessenden 2000, Clark 2007), Spiritualism (Estes 1987, Jacobs and Kaslow 1991), and Voodoo (Fandrich 2007, Ward 2004, Long 2002). However, there is comparatively less research on the lived experience and meaning of local religious practice, particularly in relation to the recurring conditions of vulnerability, disaster, and recovery. To what extent is religion a part of human dwelling in this place? How do religious practices relate to the ongoing preservation of one's social and physical environment? Questions such as these fit in with a recent call for the comprehensive inclusion of religion in people-environment studies. Scholars suggest that this take place at three levels: at the level of society, where "the beliefs, values and customs of people continue to be interpreted and mediated by religion;" at an intermediate level, where "religious and sacred spaces in the neighborhood provide spaces for participation in religion and religious activities;" and at the micro or domestic level, "where religious activities, rituals, ceremonies and prayers are conducted...[and] where religious instruction and learning takes place" (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 1999:160).

The influence and reach of religion in New Orleans is evident at each of these levels. During the founding and development of the local society, religion played a key role. Catholic missionaries traveled with early European settlers who explored the region; their mission focused on the religious conversion of Native peoples and the establishment of the Church in the New World (Dolan 1985). The diverse populations that subsequently settled the area maintained their religious traditions, which often merged into new and localized forms. As a result there developed a diverse religious society in New Orleans, which extended into other parts of the Gulf South.

Scholars have characterized the history and development of religion in southern U.S. society as a process based on "conflict... between the ideals of honor and gospel, citizenship and religion, hierarchy and democracy, [and] individual expressiveness and evangelical self-restraint" (Mathews 1998:314). After the Civil War, religion played a particularly important role in emancipation, reconstruction, modernization, and segregation. Religious participation merged with civic participation as people fought for civil rights and political and social change (Wilson 1980, Mathews 1998). Scholars remain cautious, however, about depictions of a unified religion or ethos of the South. Given the complexity and diversity of social life in places like New Orleans, for example, research should be mindful of "a tension [that has] persisted between, on the one hand, the South as an analytically undifferentiated whole (despite conceded internal conflict and variety) with its own peculiar religion, and, on the other, the South as a large, varied, and complex area in which religion played important roles that might not have characterized the whole so much as defined the parts" (Mathews 1998: 316-317).

At the intermediate and more localized level, religion in New Orleans developed through the establishment and growth of diverse community structures and spaces for religious practice and participation. While a complete survey of local religious sites and practices is beyond the scope of this paper, one important and fairly widespread local phenomenon among Catholics and others is devotion to the Virgin Mary, the veneration of saints, and the building and use of local saint shrines. The local history of Marian devotion dates back to the colonial period. French Ursuline nuns arrived in New Orleans in 1727 to found a convent and grow a ministry focused on the education of women. The Ursulines “were bent on extending the spirit of the French Counter-Reformation to Louisiana and transforming every woman there into an agent for the propagation of the faith (Clark 2007:60).” Devoted to the Virgin Mary under the title of Our Lady of Prompt Succor, the Ursulines grew a community of devotees through their prayers for the protection of the city, their accounts of miracles and divine intervention, and their educational and charitable activities. Over time it became customary for Catholics and others to pray to Our Lady of Prompt Succor for protection and relief from crises and disasters, such as hurricanes. Each hurricane season, the Archdiocese of New Orleans directs parishes to include prayers such as the following:

*Our Father in Heaven through the intercession of Our Lady of Prompt Succor, spare us during this hurricane season from all harm. Protect us and our homes from all disasters of nature. Our Lady of Prompt Succor, hasten to help us. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

The veneration of saints has diversified beyond the Catholic community to other religious groups, such as Spiritualists and Voodoo practitioners. Within the general public they are viewed more broadly as important cultural symbols, and sources of aid and comfort in times of need.

Finally, at the micro level, devotional practices extend from neighborhood churches and religious sites into domestic settings. Marian icons, statues, and shrines are placed in businesses,



Figure 3. Front Door of a House in Lakeview  
(photo by author)

yards, vehicles, and homes. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, it is not uncommon to find such objects in front of flood-ravaged homes and devastated property. Scholars of religion describe a similarly complex proliferation of images in other locales. For example, Eric Wolf describes the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico as adorning “house fronts and interiors, churches and home altars, bull rings and gambling dens, taxis and buses, restaurants and house of ill repute” (Wolf 1958:34).

While thorough historical and theological studies of Marian devotion exist, there are fewer ethnographic studies of such devotion in domestic settings. The studies that do exist describe the importance of home altars and shrines in identity formation (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2003, Orsi 1996a), social relationships (Wolf 1958), and in the expression of larger community ethnic, religious, and aesthetic values (Sciorra 1989:185, Orsi 1996b). These studies reveal the everyday practices and informal mechanisms of religious socialization. They also make clear the links between family, politics, and religion, and the collective representations of particular communities and societies.

Ethnographic data on these links and processes is important to collect, especially in post-Katrina New Orleans as familial, spiritual, and community identities and relationships reform. The following narratives are excerpts from ethnographic interviews conducted in New Orleans in 2007. Three local residents, each devoted to the Virgin Mary, give descriptions of their homes and accounts of their experiences with faith and recovery. These narratives, and the accompanying photographs, are portraits and local perspectives on spiritual dwelling in home, neighborhood, and society.<sup>5</sup>

### Portraits of spiritual dwelling

Marilyn



Figure 5. Marilyn at Home (photo by author)

*I can't remember if I did anything special to prepare for Katrina. Right over there I have Our Lady of Prompt Succor, and of course a statue of the Blessed Mother in the yard. And we might have done some things, I know I did for one hurricane, but I don't know if I did it for Katrina. For one hurricane, I stood the statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor here on the table, facing the window. This time I didn't feel like anything was going to happen and it didn't. My fence blew over and some trees fell, of course I always thank God as I know there are no coincidences. I had a big Bradford pear out there. That little one has taken its place. It*

*fell, it cracked right at the bottom and fell, but it fell across the driveway and not this way. And I had trees out there that broke and they fell in the yard. Nothing touched the house. Well when this tree came down there was a little nick, which cost 75 dollars to get it fixed. The ceiling took on a little water right there. My insurance company gave me 18,000 dollars because three rooms had stains, but because of my asthma I can't stand the smell of paint, so I just had the fence restored and this carpet redone. So I was very blessed, not at all like some other people.*

*There's nothing you can do about these things. We are all going to die sometime and the world is in such bad shape right now with all this sin, I mean they celebrate decadence on Canal Street! Human beings can't control this; we blew it. So I think, Lord just send me the grace to handle this. If you want my house take it, if you want my dog take it. Just give me the strength to bear it. And that's the only prayer that I can say. I don't live in fear. I can't live in fear. I even bought a new car knowing full well that I might only be able to enjoy it for a little while and then the waters will take it away. My friend has a big car and we will evacuate in that with the animals if the time comes. And I find that it's so much calmer that way.*

<sup>5</sup> This work is part of the ongoing doctoral dissertation research that I am conducting in cultural anthropology at the University of Michigan. Interview questions and responses covered a wide range of topics; these excerpts were selected for their focus on spiritual dwelling, houses, and house-life in post-Katrina New Orleans. Minimal grammatical editing was performed in the transcription of these interviews, however the content was not changed. Most participants chose to be identified by first name and agreed to be photographed, however, in one case a pseudonym is used at the interviewee's request.

*Over here is my altar. This is a crucifix I bought in the year 2000 and I got it through the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. It came out for the Jubilee; I don't think you can buy this anymore. This, I got from Father Seelos' chapel, and I'm also... let me see the back of this, yes I was enrolled in the perpetual mass league, which I always need. There's a statue of Father Seelos in St. Catherine's church and I asked for his intercession when I was having that trouble with my eyes. My mother had named my middle name Lucille and so that's St. Lucy who's the patron saint of the eyesight, so she was my patron saint. And of course this is a miniature statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor. I called the shrine and I ordered it.*

*I just love Our Lady of Prompt Succor because of how she protects the city. The original statue came from France, if I know my history, and it's in the shrine at Ursuline. When you go in and you see that statue, well you could sit there for hours and just stare at it, it's gorgeous. This little one does not do it justice. Sometimes I light the candles, but not these two, because they're so pretty. This one comes from Lourdes, and this is a bottle of the Lourdes water.*



Figure 6. Marilyn's Altar (photo by author)

*This pin I'm wearing is because I'm a child of Mary. They have this special little thing where you can become a child of Mary. If you donate, they take ten dollars a month out of your credit card. That way I am constantly supporting them. I wear it every day. Now when I was expecting the hurricane, I did pack it. I should have been wearing it, but I didn't want to lose it, that was the problem. And more people have asked me about it. When I wear this pin, which is blessed, I feel a sense of security. It feels like I have some protection, it feels like wherever the Blessed Mother is, Jesus is, and Mary will lead us to Jesus. It's like having the picture of the Sacred Heart and the Immaculate Heart up there are on the wall. This house feels... I have a sense of security in it. When I was raised in my mother's house, there were crucifixes on the wall, but no pictures. There was all this screaming and yelling and gossiping, just a lot of stuff. I never felt good about myself there. But here it's peaceful, there's a sense of peace. And I like that. There's just that sense.*



Figure 7. Marilyn's Nightstand (photo by author)

*Catholics are asked to display the sacred heart of Jesus and the immaculate heart of Mary. It's, how can I say it, I don't want it to sound superstitious because it's not. But the Devil is a very powerful and real force and unless you have devotional materials around, even holy salt or holy water, the Devil can creep in. Now not all temptation comes from the Devil but I just feel a sense of security and peace knowing that the picture of the Sacred Heart is there. No one really knew what Katrina was going to do, but I guess that's why I have the picture facing the window. I don't think I consciously placed it there, I think I just needed something over the TV! But now that it's there I'm happy! (laughter) It's not that we adore statues, pictures, or pins themselves; it's what they stand for. It's like having a picture of someone you love very, very much and it gives you a sense of security or peace to look at that picture.*

*Outside I had the deck built. The previous owner had done a lot to the inside but she hadn't done anything to the outside. Now after Katrina the deck was OK, but this whole fence came down. But it didn't damage anything. And the one thing I promised after Katrina was that I was going to build this arbor, so I*



*put that together. And I took the statue of the Blessed Mother, which was over here, and I put that there. And in certain times of the year, like in the spring, the Gerber daisies, oh those aren't Gerber daisies, what are they called? I forgot. Beautiful plant, and the rose bushes are beautiful too, but right now it's too hot for anything. But that's my arbor. I really, really enjoy sitting out here. And even though I had trees come down in the storm, that tall birdhouse stayed right there. There were lots of roofs around here that were damaged and had the blue tarp afterwards, but not me. Praise God.*

## Renée

*I've had a lot of things happen to me with the Blessed Mother and with the Lord. A lot of miracles, and a lot of dreams also, especially when they want to give me a message. Like before Hurricane Katrina. I remember that for Hurricane Ivan I didn't evacuate. It was back a few years ago. My son was driving and he said, "the van's not going to make it, I think we have to turn back" and I told him to go ahead because God was letting me know that it was OK for us to turn back. I said we're going to be fine. Later on I was watching the news and the storm was almost coming straight at us. I went outside and I just prayed and I knew that God was going to protect us because we couldn't evacuate. Sure enough, I went back in and the guy came on the TV and said it was just like God put out his hand and stopped it. And I know that he did.*

*With Katrina, the Lord kept giving me signs that something big was going to happen. I had dreams and I got a few messages. This was at the end of July. In my dream I was in a shelter and there were a lot of people there including this beautiful young lady. She kept going out into the disaster and getting people and bringing them into the shelter. She had her arms out like this [outstretched] and a beautiful white robe, neatly folded, was given to each of us. It had rainbows on it. She proceeded to put it on, so I put on my robe, and I thought she was going back out into the disaster to get more people so I followed her. But instead she crossed over the disaster and there was a door slightly open on the other side, and she walked through it and so I walked through and followed her and the door slammed shut [claps her hands]. I woke up, and the Lord said to me, do not look back, remember Lot's wife. And I said Lord, what's happening? And I didn't get a reply.*



Figure 8. Renée's Garden Shrine  
(photo by author)

*Then in early August the Lord told me to give my two weeks notice. I did, even though I didn't understand why. But by the second week, we all knew about Katrina. I was praying every night. And people asked me, are you going to evacuate for Katrina, because you didn't for Ivan? And I said yes, and I told them do not stay. Under any circumstances, I said you get out. You get out as fast as you can. I told them a little story. The one about the lady and the storm was coming and people were knocking on her door and saying come out the water's getting higher and she said, God's going to save me. Well the water kept rising and she went up to the roof and a helicopter came and she said no, God's going to save me. Well she didn't make it and when she got to heaven she asked God why didn't you save me, and he said, I sent the people to your door, I sent you the boat, and I sent you the helicopter! (laughter) I said you've got to listen!*

*As it happened, God told me what to take before we evacuated, the rosary, some of my prayer books, relics, and these were the things God wanted me to take and he did tell me my bible but it was so big and I told him, Lord I'll just have to get another bible. Because I just had a little box like this. I knew I wasn't coming back but I couldn't tell everyone else that.*

*About twenty years ago, God put it in my heart that he wanted me to open up a religious shop. I opened it in 1987. I had no money but I put a third mortgage on my house. There was a place for rent at \$500/month and I said I can't afford this, but they can surely give it to us for \$200/month. So I went to the bank and they said, there's no way. And I said if God wants this, then he will get me the money. And sure enough the lady from the bank called me and said, well we're going to do it, but if you miss any payments the house belongs to us. And the landlord agreed to reduce the rent. And so I got the place I wanted. One day this man came and gave me a life-sized statue of the Blessed Mother. When they brought it to me, it was painted one way and I kept staring at it and I said that's Our Lady of Prompt Succor. I painted the robes gold. People would come from all over and they would kneel in front of the statue and pray, and their prayers were always answered.*

*In Hurricane Katrina she [the statue] went under water. Everything flooded. But by Katrina I had already sold the shop. The Lord told me one day to sell it, he said, you will do greater things than this. I took the statue home to my house. So she was in the flood but she was in my house. My sons went in the house afterwards and told me that nothing, none of my statues had moved. Even though everything was destroyed in the house, the statues were all just like they had never moved. Including the one in the front of this house now. The pictures that my friend took of the statue are so lifelike, her face is like glowing and she doesn't look like a statue. I wish I had those pictures; I need to get those pictures from my son. I had to use them to prove to the oil companies what had happened, because she was covered with oil. We had water and oil from the oil spill in St. Bernard Parish.<sup>6</sup> I just had the house torn down. I wouldn't even sell it to anybody, because I wouldn't want anyone to get a disease. I just had them demolish it. They did take my religious things and statues out. My son wanted to go back and get Our Lady of Prompt Succor but I said no, I don't want you to catch a disease or anything so I wouldn't let him go back into the house. I wanted to give it to the church so I told the father that if he could get some people to come and get it out they could have it for the church. But my friend ended up taking it for the new church being built out by her.*

Sal

*I know you're going to ask about the water. We actually had around my house four feet of water but my house is on piers. I'm five feet off the ground. Here's what I believe happened. I believe that my mother interceded with the Blessed Mother and saved my house. Not that the house would have been destroyed but it would have been more damaged than it was, I would have had water in it. A year before Katrina my mother passed away. Two things occurred, and I believe this now looking back. When she passed away my brother and sister and I decided not to do anything until after we sold the house and the property, but we had a few dollars in cash left around and we took that out of the checking account and used it to pay the bills. With this money, at that particular time my son was actually living with me and he looked under the house and he said, "Dad there's something wrong with the bricks under the house." My piers are made out of bricks and almost half the mortar of all the bricks had turned back into sand. I said, "my God." So I took these few dollars that my mother gave me and I hired somebody. He went in there and re-did the bricks and did all that. And this is going to bring me to the part about Katrina. I believe if that didn't happen, with all the water that we had, it would have washed the bricks completely out from under my house and my house could have caved in. So I believe that after my mother died she must have did this, I don't know, to take care of me. My mother was also doing things like that anyway. She was a wonderful person. So that was one.*

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<sup>6</sup> The flooding that resulted from Hurricane Katrina dislodged a storage tank at the Murphy Oil facility in St. Bernard Parish. Approximately 25,110 barrels (1,050,000 gallons) of oil spilled into the surrounding residential neighborhood impacting over 1700 homes. Several local canals and waterways were also impacted. Source: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, <http://www.epa.gov/katrina/testresults/murphy/>

*And then, Katrina came. In the meantime, we had sold the house; we went to act of sale on her house one month before Katrina. And if we had waited another month we probably never would have gone to act of sale. It wasn't so much the damage, it was the idea of who would be buying and why at that particular point. So we took care of all the stuff out of that. She had a statue of the Blessed Mother and I took that and brought it to my house, I wouldn't sell it. I just wanted to have a part of her, and I wanted the statue also.*

*The street I live on is in City Park, there's sort of a ridge that divides my area of Orleans Avenue and the lakeside of Orleans Avenue. On the lakeside of Orleans where the levees broke there was massive flooding. On my side our water didn't come, it started with no water on what is called Metairie road, which is the dividing line for the ridge. There was actually no water on that ridge. The water on my side of that ridge flowing down to my house, which is about 5 blocks, was zero and it kept getting deeper and deeper and deeper until my house was 4 feet and by the time it got another 4 or 5 blocks more it was up to 8-10 feet.*

*What they have on these canals are these small levees with a fence. And you know what happens with a fence when one part of it falls the whole fence falls. I'm not surprised that the levees broke but I am surprised that they turned the pumps off and with all the flooding that happened. Obviously some of the levees that they had were just terrible. The ones that broke on this canal were really not the type of levees that were needed. I shouldn't even get into this but I blame our elected officials of the last 20, 30, 40 years for not supervising the Federal government on what they were doing to us.*

*Anyway, the statue was out in my mother's yard and now I have it in my yard. It was sitting there, and I came back after Katrina and there had been four feet of water, and I've got five feet [of height] and I looked at the statue and everything else. Debris had floated all over the place. And the water line, where the pedestal was, where the Blessed Mother was sitting, was four feet. The water line had stopped there. I really believe that if the water had gone higher and had wet the Blessed Mother's feet, it would have gone in the house.*

*I tell this story to anyone who will listen. They believe that what I'm saying is sincere and they believe it too. And I guess it's what all religious people say, you've got to have faith. Obviously I'm not that religious where I go to church and do all the sacraments and whatever but I do have faith. And I have faith in what happened to me because of my mother who interceded with the Blessed Mother and I believe sincerely that it's true. Now, when I pass by the statue I thank her. I do. I just acknowledge. And when people come to my house I tell them about the story, and I show the statue to them.*

*There was also flooding in the cemeteries and I had damage on both tombs. It wasn't so bad at my dad's tomb, the cross on top broke, and I had that replaced. My sister and my brother and I paid a third each. And I took the broken cross and I cemented it back together again and I have that in my yard, in front of the statue of the blessed Mother. On my mother's tomb, she's in her parent's family tomb, the door actually busted out; they had about 8–10 feet of water. And that cost almost about \$3000. So there were five of us who chipped in. I tried to get more cousins to do it because it's a family tomb and anybody that's a descendant of my grandparents can go in there. We got five of us together and that was OK. And I took the old door and brought it to my house afterward, so now I have that in my back yard. I might have my own cemetery before too long! (laughter). My mother was always scared of water. So I think when the water rose about 8-10 feet*



Figure 9. Sal's Shrine (photo by author)

*at the tomb she kicked the door out and went and sat up on the roof until it came back down again, and then went back inside. I like to tell that story.*

## Conclusion

Together, these narratives shed light on the nature and experience of spiritual dwelling in post-Katrina New Orleans. Demonstrating the close connection between people and their environments, particularly at the micro level of domestic space, they reveal the spiritual dimensions that ground and sustain life for these and other residents. They also give evidence of the relevance and reach of religious practice in this locale, especially in relation to social, environmental, and political conditions.

One important dimension of spiritual dwelling that stands out within these narratives is the integration and cross-inhabitation of the physical, social, and spiritual realms. Embedded, for example, within the above descriptions of the location, history, structure, and contents of the home are references to family members, home communities, and historic and current events. In many instances, these connections are mediated through religious practice, devotion, the use and placement of sacred objects, and the spiritual networks that extend outside of the home. In the narratives above, it is religious devotion to the Virgin Mary that guides human dwelling for these residents, and the reestablishment of their social and spiritual grounding in post-Katrina New Orleans.

To fully understand spiritual dwelling in this context, it is helpful to incorporate emerging and expanded theory from within the study of kinship and other related fields. As the above narratives demonstrate, one's emplacement within the world extends from and through social and spiritual relations and networks. Recent theories of relatedness offer a deeper understanding of these types of bonds, based for example on affinity, the links between humans and their physical/material surroundings, and the close relation and spiritual kinship felt with priests, saints, shrines, and other religious entities. These relationships extend from within the home to the surrounding social, physical, and cosmic realms.

These narratives also give some important evidence of the embodied and sensory processes that constitute the experience of dwelling. Through ritual, devotion, the creation of sacred space, and the use of religious objects, devotees bodily invest and participate in the day-to-day management of the home, cope with daily stressors as well as large-scale disasters, and focus on the preservation and restoration of house and social life. For example, Sal's collection of cemetery articles keeps him closely connected to his ancestors, and his placement and interaction with his homemade shrine to the Blessed Mother reinforces his belief in the divine intervention that keeps himself and his home safe from harm. René's relationship with the Blessed Mother permeates through all facets of her life, from dreams and prophetic visions experienced in the mind and body, to her relationships with family members and the larger community, to the physical presence and use of statues and sacred objects in her business, home, and church. Marilyn, in her narrative, describes in detail the strategic placement of objects in locations around her home and on her own person, and the bodily and spiritual sense of comfort, security, and peace that this instills. In each of these narratives, there is also an emphasis on divine intervention and the role of saints and the Virgin Mary as intermediaries, able to hear requests and respond to prayers and petitions.

The sense of security that Marilyn describes is an especially interesting component of spiritual dwelling in New Orleans, a city that continues to be vulnerable to crisis and disaster, from the daily impact of poverty, crime, and violence, to catastrophic events such as tropical storms and hurricanes. By the above accounts, religious practices seem to play an important role for these residents in fostering a sense of security and stability in times of uncertainty. Devotional practices preserve the structure and sanctity of the house against damage or loss, and extend beyond the

home to help secure a sense of ownership and membership in the broader community. By asking the saints for the protection and restoration of one's house and social life, residents strengthen their membership within the society at large. They reaffirm their dwelling place in a city where dwelling has been severely disrupted, and reassert their position in social networks and neighborhoods where debates about recovery and revitalization continue to unfold.

The events connected to Hurricane Katrina provide a rare view of some of the most personal, private, and painful dimensions of human life. The storm winds and floods literally turned the city inside out, tearing off windows, roofs, and doors and spewing the contents of flooded houses across the landscape. Search and rescue teams entered most every structure looking for survivors and finding far too many victims. Previously private spaces were thus ripped wide open, becoming public and political domains exposed to the world. It is in the aftermath of this tragedy, in the midst of reconstruction and rebuilding, that the opportunity for a deeper understanding and analysis of human dwelling exists. Within this setting, expanded theories of religion can also emerge, to consider the local social and spiritual processes of dwelling as they occur in this critical time and place, and the role of religious practice in the reconstruction and continued habitation of physical, social, and other worlds.

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