

Planned Failure: The Business and Politics Behind New Orleans Public Schools

Markus Daniel Reneau

Advisors: Professor Gerald Jaynes and Professor Talya Zemach-Bersin  
African American Studies and Education Studies Program  
Yale University

April 17, 2019

## Introduction

“Education is ground zero in the systemic exploitation of black people in New Orleans—ground zero because public schools are the direct feeder for the necessary, albeit unskilled, labor needed for the tourist-oriented economy...In New Orleans they are building more hotels every day. Where will the bellhops and maids come from? Our schools are the way they are because the economy...continues to require a labor force to clean, cook and serve.”

Kalamu ya Salaam, New Orleans poet and teacher<sup>1</sup>

Kalamu ya Salaam’s indictment enunciates the deep-rooted historical belief held by many native Black New Orleanians that public schools only serve to train poor Black children to be the cogs of the city’s tourism/hospitality industry, which employs 50% of all New Orleanians, and 60% of Black residents<sup>2</sup>. The people feel like the city’s schools do not provide children with a quality education, one that adequately prepares students for the workforce at all levels of production, while also fostering the seeds of being an informed citizen within the nation. This includes but is not limited to: critical thinking and effective writing skills. Instead, linking poor educational quality to local industrial needs, it is believed that the charter school system merely teaches what is required for children to work for poverty wages in unskilled service sector jobs at the bottom of New Orleans’ multi-billion-dollar tourism industry. These seasonal, temporary positions account for the lack of family-sustaining wages<sup>3</sup> that Black New Orleans currently experiences, an example of the enduring economic oppression the community suffers.

The charter schools, all operating under the umbrella of Louisiana’s Recovery School District, have now replaced the New Orleans Public School System. Ninety percent of the public schools operate under charters, a system designers promised would begin a new era of education in New Orleans and create a college-ready student population, progressing forward from the

---

<sup>1</sup> Kristen L. Buras, *Charter Schools, Race, and Urban Space: Where the Market Meets Grassroots Resistance* (New York: Taylor and Francis 2015).

<sup>2</sup> The (Greater New Orleans Community) Data Center, *The New Orleans Prosperity Index: Tricentennial Edition* (New Orleans: 2018).

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

“blank state” provided by Hurricane Katrina<sup>4</sup>. However, the charter schools have continued a historic trend of providing limited educational opportunities despite their promise because as a system, New Orleans’ K-12 education pipeline is not preparing many African-American children with the skills needed to succeed in college as evidenced by average ACT scores below 20<sup>5</sup>.

The historiography of education in New Orleans generally reveals a system that has long been inadequate, and it wouldn’t be a logical stretch to wonder if it is deficient by design. These substandard ACT scores are part of a body of evidence that begs further consideration of the success of New Orleans schools. As more concrete data is released revealing stagnant educational evolution, it raises a question of if there is incentive for policymakers to change the situation. The city economy has remained dominated by tourism for at least half a century and as it shows no signs of shifting away from this scheme it makes one wonder if Kalamu ya Salaam is correct in his assertion that New Orleans schools are intentionally performing as they do.

The charter schools and their establishment are salient to this research not in the mainstream sense that they have been analyzed and lauded in contemporary research in the field of education, but because they represent the second time that the New Orleans public school system was overhauled since Reconstruction. When the desegregation of New Orleans public schools began in 1960 and during the tumultuous years that followed, Black residents’ opinions and sentiments about education were considered important, in part because the courts had forced the hand of conservative white residents and they were forced to accept Black children in classes with their children. However, when the charter schools were established in late 2005 and early 2006, this time the opinions and sentiments of Black residents were ignored as their children

---

<sup>4</sup> Buras, 2015

<sup>5</sup> The Data Center, 2018

were yet again forced to be the guinea pigs of another educational experiment ostensibly seeking to improve their experience with the system.

Tourism in New Orleans has been an interest of academics, with there being a multitude essays, books and documentaries concerning the topic. Likewise, there has been a demonstrated affinity for scholarship concerning the peculiarity of New Orleans' fully chartered public-school district, both critiques and praises inclusive. Interestingly enough, the aggregated conclusion reached from these studies is that in sum, New Orleans is suffering, and Black New Orleans bears the brunt of these woes. However, in the fervor to solve the problems attached to observed issues, the academy seems to have ignored the possibility of conceptualizing the New Orleans question as a combination of the consequences of both the tourism and education industries. These two facets of society should be simultaneously scrutinized because they are intricately connected. New Orleans is located in the United States of America, which for all intents and purposes is a capitalist society, therefore the economy of this society impacts the lives of citizens<sup>6</sup>.

One of the debated purposes of education is to create future employees<sup>7</sup>: in the New Orleans case, because the type of employees most needed is in unskilled positions in the tourism service sector, schools do not have a need to over-educate students. Why create a professor when only a high school graduate is enough?<sup>8</sup> Living history shows that in New Orleans, life for native Black residents is cyclical. They have shown resilience in the face of systemic oppression especially, but not exclusively, apropos of education and tourism. These two spheres were

---

<sup>6</sup> Cedric Robinson. *Black Marxism* (London: Zed Press, 1983)

<sup>7</sup> Bela H Banathy. *Systems design of education: A journey to create the future* (Englewood Cliffs: Educational Technology Press, 1991)

<sup>8</sup> Lynell Thomas, *Desire and Disaster in New Orleans: Race, Tourism and Historical Memory*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

chosen because they are both highly investigated by academics in addition to being topics that Black residents have strong opinions on and are happy to speak about at length.

For the purposes of this project, this investigation is broken into three chapters reflecting the different segments of New Orleans politics: Race in Education, where I begin by first briefly explaining the history of the education system in New Orleans, starting during Reconstruction, including public school desegregation, and ending with decades before Hurricane Katrina. Then in the next chapter, Enduring the Economy, I briefly describe the economic history of the city from Reconstruction to the present, discussing the development of the tourism industry to contextualize how much the industry dominates and informs the persistence of injustice for Black residents. In the third chapter, Resilience during Recovery, in context of the city's contemporary political economy I examine the education climate to understand how historic trends either have been sustained or ceased with the presence of the neoliberal charter school system. Throughout this project, I report on the demonstrated resilience of Black New Orleans as that response is part of the thread that ties tourism to education. To exhibit this resilience, I present oral histories with different residents of New Orleans to allow the voices of the community to be heard and to give them space to speak for themselves instead of speaking for them.

It is important to use history as the means for driving this project because, as it is famously advertised, New Orleans is a city seeped in history. Every piece of the culture has a historical significance; likewise, every contemporary issue has seeds buried deep in the shared consciousness of historians. My project is located at the intersection of education history, economic history, Black history, the history of New Orleans, and contemporary education studies literature on charter school education. It is necessary to call upon these separate

disciplines because my topic is dealing with society, and society itself is constructed as a sum of different parts. So, it would be incomplete to approach this topic from only one angle. There have been a couple forays into this intersection, mainly in the form of reports done to analyze issues of education or economics in the city. One such report is the recent *2018 New Orleans Prosperity Index* that was conducted by the Data Center. This report is one example of successfully mentioning the multifaceted nature of New Orleans issues while still giving each side of the issues their deserved deference. However, this report is solely focused on data, and even though the analysis provided is salient, clear and helpful to understanding some of the nuance of these issues there is still a lot of room left for the reader to connect the dots. Apart from this recently published Data Center document, and any earlier iterations of it, I could not find any academic work that sufficiently simultaneously considered the economy and education when dealing with problems facing New Orleans, specifically inequality. Indeed, my project rests upon ideological intersections of race, economy and education which have not been fully explored at length, and accordingly, it is necessary for me to fill this gap in knowledge. By bringing together the educational and economic histories and placing them in conversation with oral histories featuring Black residents, this essay seeks to explain why the issues New Orleans faces are all connected, allowing us to have a more full understanding of why racialized economic and educational inequalities persist.

**Author's Note**

Growing up in New Orleans, I never got a chance to thoroughly understand the history of the city, nor was I able to evaluate current events to understand what they meant as a result. Money was a concern, not specifically because I grew up in crippling poverty, but because there was money all around me growing up, I just didn't know it. The tourism industry was always a looming shadow during my childhood, and I've always wanted to know the truth behind and about it. But, in school they don't teach you about the tourism industry. They don't teach you that you can start out as a bellhop and then move up and become a hotel manager. They don't even explain what the different positions in a hotel mean. Instead, in math class your word problem examples involve mopping floors, folding clothes, carrying trays, mowing lawns, etc. Researching and writing this thesis project has allowed me a chance to tap into the living history of my home and understand my people's experience by hearing it from their own mouths. While it simultaneously allows me to compare our version of our reality with the observed findings of academics who study us. I don't even see my memories as the same anymore.

For instance, one of the first school field trips I can clearly remember was a day trip to the French Quarter during second grade. It began at Café Du Monde, where as a class, we ate beignets and drank orange juice before strolling through the French Market led by a tour guide. He would explain many things to us, point at a building and explain the history behind the architecture, mentioning the architect and the style it was designed in. We stopped at Jackson Square and gazed up at the statue of Andrew Jackson riding a horse to commemorate his heroism at the Battle of New Orleans. We were told about lavish balls that took place along the riverfront and also were able to see some of the same buildings where they were held. I always thought of this memory as a wholly positive experience in my life until I learned the truth.

Those lavish “quadroon” balls were events where Black people granted an elevated social standing as a result of their proximity to whiteness, would exclude anyone from entrance who didn’t pass a skin color test<sup>9</sup>—and my dark ancestors would have been denied. General Andrew Jackson “saved” New Orleans for the United States in part by bribing pirate captain Jean Laffite with pardons for his men in exchange for their assistance<sup>10</sup>, and later as president, he abused his powers to create the notorious “trail of tears”<sup>11</sup>. The majority of the French Quarter’s beautifully designed historical architecture was built by slaves<sup>12</sup>. You cannot separate the history of Black people and the history of tourism in New Orleans because they built a new industry by commodifying and commercializing our culture once they had to abolish the other industry, transforming us from slaves to servers.

When I look back on my own education growing up, I have questions about the pedagogy I experienced. Why was it the case that teachers give you flashcards with different buzzwords they want to hear you using when discussing your ideas, attempting to teach you what they (or the administrators who created the curriculum) believe is the proper way to explain yourself, but scoff when you create your own method of presentation for your ideas, a clear example of successfully thinking creatively? Why would teachers ignore your calmly raised hand if you’re not sitting in the proper “scholar position”? Why were students given detention for asking too many questions in class? Was it necessary that teachers punished you for “willful disobedience” proven by your walking out to use the restroom after you’ve repeatedly politely asked? What did it mean for teachers to call your parents when you fall asleep in class and after they denied the validity of your explanation, dubbing it an excuse, about having to wake up two hours early

---

<sup>9</sup> Caroline, Dillman. *Southern Women*. (New York: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> Jack C, Ramsay, *Jean Laffite: Prince of Pirates*, (Eakin Press, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Alfred A. Cave, "Abuse of power: Andrew Jackson and the Indian removal act of 1830," in *Historian* 65.6 (2003), 1330-1353.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas, 2014.

because you have to be bussed across the city? What should be thought of gun-carrying policemen called “School Resource Officers” who break up fights and arrest you for disturbing the peace, entering you into the slippery slope that is the Louisiana Correctional System, where it is said they build a jail cell for every Black boy that reads below grade level? It wasn’t until I began the process of writing this senior essay that I began to see how these different experiences reflected overarching trends in charter schools of harsh, punitive discipline and a push to follow directions.

Although I was always a good, hardworking student, I can remember beginning to question the reason for school around the age of eight. I left my mom’s house one Friday evening after school to go stay the weekend with my dad who was staying by my aunt’s house. My aunt was a nurse at a local hospital, and my dad was scheduled to get surgery that Monday, August 29, 2005. However, that Saturday, my aunt was called in to the hospital to shelter in place because Hurricane Katrina was scheduled to make landfall on Monday. My dad and I went to the hospital with my aunt because he convinced my mom that the hospital would be a safe place to ride out the storm. No one in my family thought the hurricane would be as devastating as the flood that followed was. Eight-year-old me didn’t really understand what was going on, and all I knew was that Saturday became Sunday became Monday, and I wanted to know when I’d go back to school. At that time, I was determined to get the “Perfect Attendance” award for that quarter, not because I loved school or because I felt that school was preferable to my single parent home: I just wanted the autographed New Orleans Saints football that came with it. So, when I woke up Monday morning still in the hospital, I was worried since I would be missing school. My dad looked me in the eyes and said something along the lines of, “Son, some things

are more important than school—right now we’re trying to survive. This is where and when you learn about life.”

The safety of the hospital walls are why I remember Katrina’s winds sounding like a giant train rushing towards you, instead of remembering the stinging sensation of being whipped the wind. I can recall seeing floating objects and swimming animals in the water from above in the hospital parking garage, instead of being frozen with fear as a snake or something scarier, slithers past my ankle as I wade through the water towards a hospital that turns me away. Perhaps it’s because I didn’t experience the most painful aches of Hurricane Katrina that an English teacher later told me I couldn’t write a story about the hurricane for a grit-building exercise. The assignment was to relate to a character in the class novel by discussing a time in your life you had talking about overcome trials and obstacles. She said something like, “Markus, that’s just not showing how you were being strong and *resilient*. Try to think of something else.” I remember returning to the teacher later talking about how I struggled to get my times tables down pat, so I made flash cards and asked my mom to randomly ask me to multiply, so I could learn them. My teacher smiled and commended me on my effort, perseverance and grit.

My relationship to New Orleans makes my topic very important to me. I want to be able to share what I learn with those back home, especially my non-academic family members who have taught me so much to supplement my formal education.

## Chapter 1: Race in Education

The focus of this chapter is educational models and their effects on the experience for Black people in New Orleans from the 1850s to the 1960s, the century between reconstruction and public school desegregation, as well as the period of resegregation that took place in the 1980s through 2000. In the specific time periods described hereafter, it is clear that for most of the time, the three models offered to Black residents in the city were either: no schooling, substandard schooling or schooling under duress. The unique experience of schools in the Tremé neighborhood shortly before and during Reconstruction make it a microcosm of native Black New Orleanians in resistance through resilience. When considering the idea of educating former slaves we first see the introduction of the push against over-education and this in itself highlights the connection between education and economy. The link between education and economy is extended and strengthened as the reconstruction era turned into the civil rights era, underscoring the cyclical nature of oppression in the city.

Race's impact on education in New Orleans should be obvious from the outset as African slaves were completely denied the ability to receive an education. A Black female veteran teacher from New Orleans described that the field slaves were not taught how to read nor to write, because their masters did not see any practical reason for them possessing these skills. Even the "most humane" slave masters deprived their chattel of the ability to formulate thoughts from the written word because it is reasonable to believe that they understood the danger in such uncontrolled free thinking. These were religious men who read their slaves the bible and no doubt they could remember their own thoughts flying as they were first taught how to read with the bible.

Pivoting from this beginning, the rest of the education history of New Orleans is essentially a game of catch up while trying to right the wrong committed — and failing. Historians have been able to comfortably place New Orleans in conversation with the rest of the south when they do work discussing the history of Black education in the south. General historical knowledge reveals that following the fall of the Confederacy, the Freedmen’s Bureau was set up to basically be the administrative body that would handle the reparations that Black people were owed—except the Freedmen’s Bureau failed to actually grant many former slaves the land titles to confiscated Confederate land by the Union Army; schools were another promise made but never granted to former slaves<sup>13</sup>.

Historian James Anderson undertook the task of laying out the story behind schools in the South following the end of the Civil War, and he describes how it is unclear what freed people expected - if they desired an education equal to that of the whites, which taught them how to be good thinking citizens, or if they wanted the vocational training they were first offered in the normal schools set up via the Freedmen’s Bureau<sup>14</sup>. Essentially, former slaves were taught how to do exactly what they already knew how to do via generations of being forced to do the work, but the certification provided allowed them to begin to carve out a somewhat livable life in the Reconstruction Era insofar that they could make wages from contracting out their services, even being able to argue for higher pay due to certification documents.

Historian Louis Harlan connects what took place in the 1870s when New Orleans desegregated schools during reconstruction to the city’s efforts to desegregate following *Brown v Board*. Harlan opines that the 19<sup>th</sup> century desegregation worked precisely because

---

<sup>13</sup> James Anderson, *Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

<sup>14</sup> Anderson, 1988

reconstruction failed<sup>15</sup>. The bigoted whites who were defeated in the Civil War managed, at least in New Orleans, to maintain a lot of influence, specifically over the media, and as such they were able to launch a campaign against desegregation that created an atmosphere of resistance and fear, advocated mass school desertion by whites, the establishment of private schools, refusal to pay school taxes, predicted the destruction of public schools and a race war<sup>16</sup>. Interestingly enough, similar tactics were used in 1961 by the whites who fought the desegregation due to *Brown v Board*<sup>17</sup>.

The mention of desegregation in Reconstruction presents an opportune time to introduce The Tremé. The importance of this neighborhood will be expounded upon in greater detail in the following chapter, however in terms of education, the Tremé represents a break from the norm. Faubourg Tremé, or “The Tremé” as residents refer to it, was the site of the first Black neighborhood in the United States<sup>18</sup>. When built, it was populated by both white and Black residents, with most of its homeowners being Black. Writer Lolis Elie explains that Tremé was a hotbed for social and political activism from the beginning, and during the pre-Reconstruction Era, the residents had made many strides that still have not been equaled to this day<sup>19</sup>. Elie explains that there were desegregated schools in the neighborhood where Black teachers taught students of both races without much trouble<sup>20</sup>. Tremé is significant because as the city of New Orleans was being built up further inland, away from the French Quarter by the Mississippi riverfront and deeper into the swamps, Tremé was where Black residents lived by choice before they were moved elsewhere by force. This will be elaborated upon more later, but the Tremé is

---

<sup>15</sup> Louis Harlan, “Desegregation in New Orleans Public Schools During Reconstruction,” *The American Historical Review* 67 (1962).

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*

<sup>17</sup> Donald E. DeVore & Joseph Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools: Public Education in New Orleans, 1841-1991*, (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> Lolis Elie, *Faubourg Tremé: The Untold Story of Black New Orleans*, Directed by Dawn Logsdon, (2008).

<sup>19</sup> Elie, 2008

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*

also where jazz was birthed after the plan to fight the resegregation of public transportation resulted in the infamous *Plessy v Ferguson* Supreme Court case, which upheld segregation as constitutional. So, needless to say Tremé has played a significant role in overall US history, but especially New Orleans history—however there is usually not a unit on Tremé in New Orleans schools.

Like much of the South, “for most of their history, public schools in New Orleans were not intended to support children of color or their Black teachers but were instead considered the property of southern whites”<sup>21</sup>. When local wealthy slaveholder John McDonogh died in 1850, he left half of his estate “for the establishment and support of Free Schools... wherein the poor, (and the poor only) of both sexes and all classes and castes of color, shall have admittance, free of expense”<sup>22</sup>. McDonogh donated this money to both Baltimore and New Orleans, and of the thirty plus schools built in New Orleans, “only a small number of new public schools were [eventually] built for Black students from the McDonogh School Fund”<sup>23</sup>. This white claim to sole ownership of education is first demonstrated simply by the fact that it was illegal to teach a slave to read and write, which is the objective foundation to education. So, when slavery was formally ended, “former slaves were the first among native southerners to depart from the planters’ ideology of education and society, campaigning for universal, state-supported public education”<sup>24</sup>. To make this desire of public education a reality, these former slaves relied heavily on help from northern missionaries, the Union army, Republican politicians and the Freedman’s Bureau. This push for public education angered many of the wealthy planters in the South who tolerated the “charitable act” of educating the poor white children only to the extent necessary

---

<sup>21</sup> Buras, 2015

<sup>22</sup> DeVore & Logsdon, 1991

<sup>23</sup> Buras, 2015

<sup>24</sup> Anderson, 2014

for them to complete their tasks<sup>25</sup>. Essentially, overeducating someone would be a disservice to them because they would be unable to utilize the knowledge due to their station in life. If one simply lived out their days cutting sugar cane, knowing a foreign language would be less useful to them than knowing enough math to make sure their daily cane count was correct. Planters were of the belief that state government had no right to intervene in children's education nor the social arrangement. "Active [government] intervention into the social hierarchy through education violated the natural evolution of society, upset the reciprocal relations and duties of owners to laborers, and usurped the functions of the church"<sup>26</sup>. After all, the church itself was often used to justify the existence of slavery, and "fair" slave owners would often cite the bible as their reason for treating their slaves better than their harsher counterparts.

Regardless of their personal reasons, poor southern whites actively supported this system of education promoted by wealthy planters, and "indeed, specific economic, political, social, and psychological relationships bound southern whites to the ideological position of the planter regime"<sup>27</sup>. For the sake of recapitulation, many of these relationships revolved around and were focused on the systemic creation of whiteness as property, meaning the legal codification of whiteness and also the subjugation of Blackness during slavery in America and in the badges of the system that existed following its abolition. For conclusive evidence, we can look to Chief Justice Roger B. Taney's deliverance of the majority opinion in the 1856 *Dred Scott v. Sanford* case where Dred Scott, a slave, was brought to a free territory and subsequently sued for his freedom. While justifying the Court's ruling that Scott did not deserve to be freed, as he was a

---

<sup>25</sup> Anderson, 2014

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*

slave and not a citizen, Justice Taney states that “Blacks had been regarded as beings of the inferior order with no rights which the white man was bound to respect”<sup>28</sup>.

Although in 1868 the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment granted birthright citizenship to Americans, Justice Taney’s statement was still true in the de facto sense of law, and this truth is clear from the retribution that white southerners inflicted upon Black people during the Reconstruction Era, including extrajudicial lynching, Klu Klux Klan aggression and intimidation, and political moves made to undo the gains made by former slaves. In order to rejoin the Union, in 1867 the Louisiana constitution included a clause that prohibited racial segregation of public facilities. This clause would lead to an 1870 court decision that formally began the attempts to integrate New Orleans schools<sup>29</sup>. In 1874, a Louisiana congress bill removed the segregation prohibition clause from the state constitution<sup>30</sup>. Also during this period in the 1870s, there was a law passed that only allowed Black children to attend school up to the fifth grade.<sup>31</sup> The Louisiana constitution was rewritten in 1879 and allowed for segregated institutions, a 1898 amendment banned desegregated facilities outright<sup>32</sup>.

However, across the South but specifically in New Orleans, “Black people [continued to] pursue education with unfaltering commitment... students would go on to study at one of three Black colleges established in New Orleans during Reconstruction—Straight, Leland, and New Orleans universities. Together these colleges produced the majority of Black teachers, lawyers, and physicians in New Orleans from 1869 to 1930”<sup>33</sup>. Black folk emerged from slavery with a

---

<sup>28</sup>*Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. 393 (1856)

<sup>29</sup> Howard A. White, *The Freedmen's Bureau in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970)

<sup>30</sup> John W. Blassingame, *Black New Orleans 1860-1880* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973)

<sup>31</sup> Walter C. Stern, *Race and Education in New Orleans: Creating the Segregated City 1764-1960*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2018).

<sup>32</sup> Dale A. Somers, "Black and White in New Orleans: A Study in Urban Race Relations, 1865-1900," *The Journal of Southern History* 40 (Feb., 1974): 23-24.

<sup>33</sup> Devore & Logsdon, 1991

strong desire to be educated and “this belief was expressed in the pride with which they talked of ex-slaves who learned to read or write in slavery and in the esteem in which they held literate Blacks”<sup>34</sup>. New Orleanians were taking full advantage of general and higher education opportunities. Journalist Charles Nordhoff reported that New Orleans’ ex-slaves were “almost universally anxious to send their children to school”,<sup>35</sup> even though “Black public schools were few in number and located in poor facilities; they were grossly underfunded; Black teachers were unequally paid in comparison to white teachers; and school days were often part-time due to overcrowding”<sup>36</sup>. Thus, the funding of African American schools largely fell to Black community organizations within neighborhoods, which began the connection between public school and surrounding neighborhood that endured until the creation of charter schools following Hurricane Katrina. During the first decade of the 1900s, the average amount spent on building Black public schools in New Orleans was \$21,500; for white public schools, it was \$42,500” (Buras, 20). Black residents in New Orleans understood that they would have to fight for their educational rights into their own hands, and this was not a very uncommon reality for freedmen in the south. William Channing Gannet, a white American Missionary Association teacher from New England, reported that “they have a natural praiseworthy pride in keeping their educational institutions in their own hands. There is jealousy of the superintendence of the white man in this matter. What they desire is assistance without control”<sup>37</sup>. Achieving this self-determinative education proved difficult for freed people, especially in New Orleans. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, “fewer than 20 of the city’s 86 public schools served Black students. The city’s

---

<sup>34</sup> Anderson, 2014

<sup>35</sup> *ibid*

<sup>36</sup> Devore & Logsdon, 1991

<sup>37</sup> Anderson, 2014

first Black public high school, McDonogh No. 35 was established in 1917 and was the result of African American demands”<sup>38</sup>.

During 1938-1939, the Citizens’ Planning Committee for Public Education in New Orleans completed a study of New Orleans public schools in order to report their findings to the school board for the sake of school improvement. The report was headed by Dr. Alonzo G. Grace and released in 1940, entitled: *Tomorrow’s Citizens: A Study and Program for the Improvement of the New Orleans Public Schools*. At the time, Dr. Grace was the Connecticut Commissioner of education and formed a research staff of “professionals” to conduct the investigative task requested by The Citizens’ Planning Committee. The Planning Committee itself was birthed out of “increasing public sentiment for a comprehensive school study expressed by citizens, teachers, parents and civic groups” prior to 1935<sup>39</sup>. Following this heightened public sentiment, the Orleans Parish School Board formed a survey committee to draw up a plan for the study; this original survey committee was “composed of representatives of the School Board, the New Orleans Council of Parents and Teachers, the Young Men’s Business Club, teacher organizations and the general public”<sup>40</sup>. This survey committee was transformed into the Citizens’ Planning Committee once their study plan was approved, and each of the six following groups nominated outstanding citizens of New Orleans to be members of the Committee: two members from the Orleans Parish School Board, two Teacher representatives on the Survey Committee, one member of the New Orleans Council of Parents and Teachers, one member of the Presidents’ Cooperative Club, two members of the New Orleans Association of

---

<sup>38</sup> Devore & Logsdon, 1991

<sup>39</sup> Alonzo G. Grace and Citizen’s Planning Committee for Public Education in New Orleans, *Tomorrow’s citizens: A study and program for the improvement of the New Orleans public schools*, (New Orleans: Orleans Parish School Board, 1940).

<sup>40</sup> *ibid*

Commerce and two members of the Bureau of Governmental Research.<sup>41</sup> This committee composition was started in December 1937 and approved in January 1938, Dr. Alonzo G. Grace, who was the Connecticut Commissioner of Education at the time was selected as the “Director of Studies” and he assembled his research staff that began the study in February 1938 by gathering suggestions for the study from school officials, teachers, citizens and organizations.

Much of this Committee’s composition makes sense. It is almost required of any educational study, especially one concerned with an entire municipality to have teachers, school board members, parents and government researchers. However, the presence of the two members of the New Orleans Association of Commerce and the fact that they had as many members on the committee as the School Board, teachers and government researchers indicates that it was important for this study of New Orleans public schools to have the input of economic interests. Perhaps in the late 1930s it was clear that at least in New Orleans, education and economics worked together—perhaps in the same way they did during slavery and Reconstruction.

The study was conducted with the express purpose of “study[ing] a particular social institution but also as an opportunity, through observation, collation of data and the exchange of ideas to plan for the future—it embraces the thinking of many,” according to Dr. Grace.<sup>42</sup> The Citizens’ Planning Committee explained that “the purpose of our study and report, the entire school system, parents, and citizens who financially support public education, is to see that our school children shall have the best instruction and training available, so their preparation will lead to their happiness, contentment and success as citizens”.<sup>43</sup> It would appear that these two purposes are aligned with one another, Dr. Grace saw his role as providing insight that can help the citizens of New Orleans guide their school system into the future, and the Citizens’ Planning

---

<sup>41</sup> Grace, 1940

<sup>42</sup> *ibid*

<sup>43</sup> *ibid*

Committee echoes this goal, broadening the responsibility to all who have a stake in the public education of New Orleans children—which then explains the presence of the New Orleans Association of Commerce within the committee itself as business leaders are reasonably concerned with the abilities of their future laborers.

In the study, 23 of the 25 Black elementary schools were visited and the report stated: “four of the buildings are fairly new but the others (19) are quite poor, some of them serving merely as shelters in which children may be collected for a minimum of academic instruction”.<sup>44</sup> The report determined that most of the schools needed to be completely replaced. Despite neglect from the state, the report indicated that the community still deserved credit: “although only eleven schools maintain school gardens, the work that has been done is most commendable. The cooperative work of the principal, teachers, children, and supervisors of school gardening to beautify the school grounds has stimulated similar activity in the neighborhood and in the homes of the children”.<sup>45</sup> Here it is clear once again that there was a connection between the neighborhood and the school itself. In fact, the existence of a rift between elementary and secondary schooling options resulted in the creation of McDonogh 35 Senior High School as there were previously no public-school options for those Black citizens wishing to continue their education beyond the eighth grade. In 1917, 35 was “founded on the belief that all pupils are preparing for college,” so “practically every pupil studies two years of English, history, mathematics, science, music, art and physical education”<sup>46</sup>. However, only one-fourth of the graduates could continue to college, and McDonogh 35 was the only public high school in New Orleans until 1942.

---

<sup>44</sup> Grace, 1940

<sup>45</sup> *ibid*

<sup>46</sup> *ibid*

In regard to teacher training, the Grace Report showed that 78 percent of the 73 Black teachers enrolled in Valena C. Jones Normal School in April 1938 came from McDonogh 35. The faculty at Jones had experience ranging from 15 to 30 years. Jones offered a two-year curriculum with 35 courses, but the campus lacked “a library, laboratories, recreation rooms, gymnasium, auditorium, and other essential facilities for the adequate preparation of teachers,”<sup>47</sup>. For those who taught in Black high schools, the median length of experience was 12 years, with female high school teachers at 17 years and female elementary principals at 22 years<sup>48</sup>, revealing the central role of veteran teachers in sustaining Black public schools in New Orleans. In New Orleans, “the late 1930s and 1940s would see the development of the first black teacher union in as well as struggles for salary equalization in the city and state”<sup>49</sup>. Following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to desegregate public schools, New Orleans schools were one area where the decision “led to massive resistance by local and state authorities as well as white citizens”<sup>50</sup>.

The 1961 study of the New Orleans public school desegregation process that the authors dubbed “The New Orleans school crisis” was conducted by the Louisiana Advisory Committee of the United States Commission on Civil Rights; the Commission was established as part of the Civil Rights Act of 1957. “Its membership consists of interested citizens who serve without compensation.”<sup>51</sup> The chairman was Hon. J.D. DeBlieux, a democratic Louisiana State Senator who is remembered as a crusader for civil rights in Louisiana politics during the segregation era; the vice chairman was Dr. Albert W. Dent, the president of Dillard University, a historically

---

<sup>47</sup>Grace, 1940

<sup>48</sup> *ibid*

<sup>49</sup> Buras, 2015

<sup>50</sup> *ibid*

<sup>51</sup> Louisiana State Advisory Committee, *The New Orleans school crisis [Report of the Louisiana State Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights]*, (Baton Rouge, 1961).

Black university in New Orleans; the secretary was Mrs. Moise Cahn, a Jewish woman; the remaining members were a couple local clergymen, Reverends William T. Handy, Jr. and Alexander O. Sigur of Baton Rouge and Lafayette, respectively; Dr. Harold I. Lief, a psychiatry professor at Tulane who controversially advocated sex education in Medical school; Mr. John P. Nelson, Jr., a local civil rights attorney who litigated the case to desegregate Tulane University, and also Mr. Bernard Raynal Ariatti, a researcher at the Institute of Human Relations. There was a subcommittee on Education comprised of Dr. Lief; two Tulane Assistant Professors of Theatre and Speech, Paul Hostetler and Edward Rogge; Daniel Thompson, professor and Chairman of the Dillard University Department of Sociology, and Mrs. Betty Wisdom and Mrs. Kathryn Wright, two members of the Board of Directors of “Save our Schools” a local New Orleans community organization that formed around the desegregation era that represented the sentiments of many moderate New Orleans whites. The composition of the Louisiana State Advisory Committee and Subcommittee on education seems sensible, although it is noteworthy that there were only two Black members of the committee and subcommittee and both of these men held top positions at Dillard University, which could be interpreted to mean that they were seen by the Black community as educational leaders. This is different from the fact that the white members of the committee and subcommittee seemed to require less credentials in order to be granted membership, as two members were assistant theatre and speech professors.

The purpose of the document was to inform the Commission on Civil Rights about the desegregation process in New Orleans, importantly, the impact on the local community including the psychological effects of the process in New Orleans. The Committee stressed that “the conflict over desegregating the public schools has important legal, social, political, and economic

implications; but these are actually overshadowed by the psychological aspects.”<sup>52</sup> The Committee was also careful to indicate the importance of national interference, including the negative impact on nationwide public opinion the city suffered with media coverage of the unfolding events, which would ultimately result in the National Guard being activated and the famous Ruby Bridges escort into Frantz Elementary.

The report allows entry (albeit from a biased desegregationist standpoint) into the events that took place. What is special about the Advisory Committee’s presentation of events is how it strives to maintain objectivity in reporting what happens, although from the start it loses by referring to the events as a crisis. Likewise, it provides insight into the thoughts of White New Orleans around these events, which is salient due to the realities of the racial make-up of New Orleans, which at one time, forced white and Black citizens to live in close proximity to each other. In one contemporary neighborhood uptown, freshly paved streets, Tulane and Loyola Universities, an expensive private school and a new state of the art Starbucks are separated from crumbling streets, dilapidated houses and a three failing charter schools by one avenue. Furthermore, this report contains insights that the US Commission on Civil Rights obviously ignored, for instance information about the dangers of conflating the concepts of integration and desegregation, a tactic that was used by bigoted white politicians to rile angsty white citizens into a frenzy as they believed their schools would be drowned in a mudslide of Black children<sup>53</sup>. If this conflation information was properly utilized, then the past fifty years of school desegregation could have been much more effective as we have yet to achieve integration in many places.

---

<sup>52</sup> Louisiana State Advisory Committee, 1961

<sup>53</sup> *ibid*

The Committee's report was written after the *Brown v Board* decision, and during a contested Louisiana Governor's race. The two frontrunners were Morrison and Davis, Morrison was the former mayor of New Orleans and viewed as being "soft on the race issue,"<sup>54</sup> while Davis was a segregationist businessman who was not "seen as a threat to the power structure":

"Davis sounded the keynote for his second primary campaign when he said, 24 hours after [he lost] the first primary election, 'I do not want any NAACP votes. There has been one sinister and disturbing element injected into this campaign which is clearly apparent after an analysis of the precincts in this State dominated by minority elements—there are forces at work which will undermine, by tactics fair or foul, the right of an overwhelming majority of our citizens.' Clearly, the minority elements Davis referred to were Negro voters, although Morrison later claimed that he *also* meant Catholics and Jews."<sup>55</sup>

This governor's race would have changed history if Morrison would have won as he believed that closing schools was a less favorable option than integration, so he was not totally against desegregation for "pragmatic" reasons<sup>56</sup>. Furthermore, the report analyzes the psychological effects New Orleans School desegregation had on white citizens:

"Prejudice also has different implications for different people. With many, it is a learned but essentially imitative attitude in which the child identifies with and mimics the attitudes of his parents and teachers; it is not a deeply integrated part of the personality. With others, however, it serves as an outlet for deeply-felt feelings of inferiority and aggression towards a suitable scape goat. For these people, prejudice is a necessary part of their personalities, a defense against without which they would stand naked and afraid. By analogy, prejudice in the former group is like a glove which can be peeled off; while in the latter group, prejudice is like the skin itself, which if stripped off, leaves them dangerously exposed."<sup>57</sup>

Here, the Committee is outright revealing the crux of this entire issue: deep-seated white inferiority that spurs them into aggression. This inferiority is passed down through successive generations and with it the prejudice as well. This long-lasting prejudice turns into an obsession, which we can see from the extensive amount of time and effort required to craft policy that attacks Black people, such as the legislation that allowed the governor to take over and cut off

---

<sup>54</sup> Louisiana State Advisory Committee, 1961

<sup>55</sup> *ibid*

<sup>56</sup> *ibid*

<sup>57</sup> *ibid*

funding to any school that complied with federal desegregation law. This analysis allows one to better understand the context that the Black citizens existed in. Since the white citizens had much more social and political capital throughout history, they were able to pivot this advantage into carving out a society that they found comfortable. They were rattled by the violence that accompanied desegregation in New Orleans, and they seemed to have been shaken into fear of action against the seemingly racist minority that somehow controlled the majority of the political office<sup>58</sup>. The moderate whites were previously uninvolved in the desegregation efforts finally choosing to become involved once it affected “their children or their pocket book”<sup>59</sup>. When talk of closing *all* of the public schools to stop desegregation efforts, organizations like Save Our Schools (SOS) New Orleans were created and the moderate whites found their political strength to fight back against a “violent, racist, minority.”<sup>60</sup> Save Our Schools is an interesting organization because the materials they would release, which were meant to combat the waves of conservative anti-desegregationist rhetoric were often seen as pandering to these conservatives. One flyer that was distributed with a copy of the *Times-Picayune* explained that if all New Orleans public schools were allowed to close, then not only would Black citizens suffer but also poor white citizens would suffer as well.<sup>61</sup> Save Our Schools also would go on to be one of the first groups to push the idea that the New Orleans economy would suffer from a loss of all of its public schools. In sum, the message this press release was that a New Orleans without any public schools would shout to the rest of the country that the bigots had won, and this declaration would be off-putting for nonwhite, non-conservative potential tourists.<sup>62</sup> It is also worth mentioning briefly that following the public school desegregation push in New Orleans, the economy began

---

<sup>58</sup> Louisiana State Advisory Committee, 1961

<sup>59</sup> *ibid*

<sup>60</sup> *ibid*

<sup>61</sup> Save Our Schools, *Save Our Schools!*, (New Orleans, 1960)

<sup>62</sup> Save Our Schools, *Save Our Schools!*, (New Orleans, 1960)

its slide towards a tourism service sector dominated situation we see today, however this will be expanded upon in the next chapter.

By May of 1960, Federal Judge Skelly Wright still hadn't received plans to desegregate from the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), so he gave a proposal to desegregate one grade per year. Louisiana's governor Jimmie Davis and the legislature quickly passed laws against desegregation going as far as "including a bill that authorized closing all the state's public schools to avoid desegregation and another prohibiting the provision of state funds to desegregated schools"<sup>63</sup>. The federal court prevented the governor from interfering with New Orleans public schools, declared state segregation acts unconstitutional and ordered that the OPSB follow Judge Wright's ruling. The state's superintendent of education threatened to fire Black teachers and force Black students to lose educational opportunities if desegregation continued. OPSB followed Judge Wright's plan and then the governor called a special legislative session where laws were again passed against desegregation and appointed a legislative committee to run New Orleans schools. Judge Wright stepped in again and prevented the committee from interfering with the New Orleans public schools. The legislature then removed several school board members, fired the local school superintendent and board attorney. The Louisiana legislature had already seized OPSB funds and forbade banks from lending to the board. When two all-white schools—William Frantz Elementary and McDonogh 19—were set to be desegregated in November 1960, white parents quickly withdrew their children. The legislature authorized payment to all Orleans Parish school employees, with the exception of those at Frantz and McDonogh 19<sup>64</sup>. William Frantz is the school that Ruby Bridges famously desegregated, where she was escorted by the National Guard into the building, while angry

---

<sup>63</sup> Louisiana State Advisory Committee, 1961

<sup>64</sup> *ibid*

whites protested the sight of a little Black girl entering their elementary school. Ruby would later recall that walk into Frantz, stating that hearing the shouts reminded her of Mardi Gras parades.

The history of race and education establishes the fact that white supremacy, not Black deficiencies, accounts for the challenging conditions of Black public schools in New Orleans. This fact can be seen expressly in the stories of those Black residents whose parents received letters informing them that their household was chosen to desegregate a white school. I conducted an oral history with one such person who received this letter. He is my Uncle and he was born in 1952. He describes how because he was poor and Black, he was born at Charity hospital. This specific hospital was started by a group of nuns in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and over time it became the main hospital in New Orleans. Doctors from Tulane and Louisiana State University medical schools would do their residencies at Charity because it was the s and was important to rich and poor because it was known as the best trauma hospital. It handled all sorts of cases: “having babies, broken arms, after they got shot, Charity handled all of that”.<sup>65</sup>

My Uncle’s first memory of racism is when he was riding a city bus to visit one of my grandmother’s friends, who was like an aunt, out in St. Bernard Parish. At the time, the New Orleans public bus system was already desegregated, but he remembers that the bar separating the white front from the Black back still remained because the bus route included stops in neighboring parishes that were not desegregated. For the sake of context, St. Bernard Parish has long been considered by New Orleanians to be the “welcome mat for the rest of Louisiana” in that even though it is geographically close to New Orleans, it is politically on the other end of the spectrum. So, regardless of whatever social progress made in New Orleans, St. Bernard Parish and for most intents and purposes the rest of Louisiana still lagged behind the times.

---

<sup>65</sup> Jesse Wallace, Oral History by Markus Reneau, March 21, 2019, audio

My Uncle was only eight years as he rode this bus and as it passed through the Ninth Ward<sup>66</sup> people began to exit. It got to the point where it was only him and the driver left on the bus. He was sitting up front in the bus, close to the driver for reasons he described as “safety, since I was a little kid and would get scared of strangers sometimes”<sup>67</sup>. The bus passed the line into St. Bernard Parish, where the public transportation system was still segregated. He recalls the bus driver barking at him to get to the back after pulling to the side of the road. Confused, my Uncle asked what he did wrong. Refusing to explain the driver commanded him again to the back. This time my Uncle says he refused to move, saying he had no reason to when he had been sitting in his same seat for over thirty minutes. Next:

“The driver did something, so he was able to exit the bus, but he locked the doors from the outside, so I was trapped inside. At this point I started freaking out because I felt bad and scared since I aint know what to expect next. After a while the driver returns with a St. Bernard Sheriff’s deputy. The deputy storms onto the bus and looks at me: ‘Boy didn’t he tell you to move to the back?’ Yes sir, I said. ‘Then why the f\*ck didn’t you move?’ And before I could answer he pulled out his pistol and stuck the barrel in my face. ‘N\*gger if you don’t get the f\*ck off this bus I’ll blow your black n\*gger ass away. Don’t ever let me catch you in St. Bernard again.’ Some things you just don’t forget. I was a lil kid yea, but you never forget your first time.”

My Uncle also remembers his first day desegregating Abramson Sr. High School in New Orleans East. He was advancing to the 11<sup>th</sup> grade and over summer my grandmother had moved into a new home in the Ninth Ward by the Desire (Housing Development)<sup>68</sup>.steps away from the back gate behind the football field of George Washington Carver Sr. High School, the school that was built buy the New Orleans School Board in the late 1950s as a separate, but ”equal” facility for Black students<sup>69</sup>. The Housing Development and high school were both a part of an “educational village” idea that essentially took segregation to another level by attempting to

---

<sup>66</sup> The closest neighborhood to St. Bernard Parish, and in fact part of the section of the city that sits on lower ground and was the location where many Black residents were forced to move as a result different urbanization efforts, which will be explained in further detail in the next chapter

<sup>67</sup> *ibid*

<sup>68</sup> The “Desire” was a housing project that was built

<sup>69</sup> Charles Roussève, Letters to the Carver Planning Committee, 1951-1954

center Black life and education in the Ninth Ward, separated from the rest of city by industrial canals and railroad tracks.<sup>70</sup>

In 1966, the School Board sent a letter to my grandmother stating that her son was to catch the bus on Louisa street and attend Abramson High School. The letter listed a time that my Uncle's bus would arrive. The letter indicated that it was mandatory for my Uncle to get on this bus, otherwise my grandmother would be breaking the law. My Uncle describes his first day:

“Some things you just remember. Now, that morning, I think it was a Thursday, walked out my mother's house on the corner of Metropolitan and Acacia Streets, down Acacia to Louisa, which is split down the middle by the neutral ground, so you got cars going one way on one side and another on the other. I remember standing against the fence of a parking lot for a warehouse and seeing other kids come up, there was about ten of us total. The bus pulled up and the doors opened to a steely faced white man. He frowned as we walked up the steps, didn't say good morning or nothing. Go to find a seat and you find out the bus is already full of kids. We had to sit three to a seat and some had to stand up. This was back before they built the I-10 so getting to the East meant we had to go down Chef [Mentour] Highway, which at the time was only thin, one car lane road. So, we had to sit in traffic, for most us bigger boys that meant we had to stand. You have to understand this is early in the morning, we tired. So, we sleep, and we ride to this white school.

I remember hearing a lil girl scream and that woke me up. As the bus turned into the parking lot, we see a big ole crowd of white kids, mad, red-faced, carrying weapons, shouting. The bus driver don't say nothing and that's when I knew it was gonna be a fight. So, I tell the boys around me, hell, everyone just knows to get ready. The crowd moves around the bus as it comes to a stop. But the door don't open, I look around and saw other busses in front, with crowds waiting for them. When the last bus came, the door opens and the bus driver shouts: “GET OFF! GET OFF THE BUS!” The little girls sitting in the front scream and cry. Soon you go to get off the bus they grab you and pull you into the crowd. They was getting the best of some of them girls, they was whooping em good. When they grab me, I'm fighting as many as I can before they get me to the ground and beat me silly. Eventually they stop--maybe the bell rings, I don't know.

I know one thing though. Them damn teachers didn't care. You pick yourself up off the parking lot cement after that “welcome” and you damn near drag your body into this damn school. Sit in the classroom and just sit. You can't think straight after getting beat like that. You just sat there through class as long as you could until some teacher sent you to the nurse. The nurse would patch you up and send you back to class, but it wasn't no different, they still ignored you. You could raise your hand if you wanted huh, but they wouldn't see it. If you ain't catch it the first time you'd better, try and cheat off of somebody or just guess.

When I went home after that first day my mama hugged me the same way she did after I came home from that first St. Bernard bus ride. She said, “I'm so sorry this happened to you son”. But I knew again, like I knew then, that there was nothing she could do. I knew there was something I could do though. I could fight back, and she knew I was a fighter, so she knew that if I looked how I did coming back, well the other person probably looked worse.

After that first day, us students, we decided instead of carrying books to school, we would bring lil short pieces of pipe, brass knuckles made out of hex head bolt nuts, two sets since you got two hands,

---

<sup>70</sup> Ibid; Stern, 2018

knives. So, when the bus door open, we come off fighting. And when a couple of the white kids got stabbed, and jaws broken and eyes gouged, knocked out—like we was getting—the school decided to have security when the busses come. I know that when we was getting whooped, we ain't have no security, but once we got together and we decided enough is enough. Then we start making weapons, no guns, but everything else you could think of, to meet the crowd. Jump out the back door of the bus biting, scratching, stabbing, kicking, till they got out the way.

These were the same kids who were in class with me later. Once enough of them got sent to the nurse the principal called me and maybe five other black kids into the office. Said we were the trouble makers and that if we got in one more fight, they would ban us from all public schools in the state of Louisiana. Well, soon as I walked out that office, on my way back to class two white boys jumped me and I whooped em good. So, you know I was sent home later that day.

The thing that still gets me, to this day is that it was like they were punishing us for following the rules. They act like we wanted this anymore than they did. I had to leave my school, with all my friends and teammates—I was good at baseball you know and basketball, yeah had a nice jumpshot, not as good as my brother Danny, though. He actually got a scholarship to go to Dillard and play ball, he graduated from Abramson—and they loved him. The same white folk who hated me cause I kicked in the door they told me to kick in, embraced him I guess cause he made them look good on the court.”<sup>71</sup>

My Uncle's experience desegregating this school demonstrates a prime example of how the races have related in New Orleans. The dynamic is created by some outside force that compels the two groups to interact, upset at this interaction the whites then attack feeling as if they are being forced to do something and that they are being robbed of something. Perhaps this feeling of being robbed can help to explain the actions that took place concerning the New Orleans public school system following its desegregation.

There were a number of bonds that the School Board had to take out in the late 50s and early 60s in order to finance the construction of new schools<sup>72</sup>. The bill for this school construction would eventually fall on the shoulders of citizens who repeatedly voted against property tax increases in order to offset the cost of these new schools<sup>73</sup>. Perhaps it was an expression of the sentiment that allowing Black citizens usage of the school weakened their value. We can see that during the desegregation moment often schools slighted to become Black

---

<sup>71</sup> Wallace, oral history

<sup>72</sup> Stern, 2018

<sup>73</sup> Chris Adams, “The Burden of Waste”, in *The Times Picayune*, (New Orleans, 1992)

would see the neighborhoods around them lose investment (in terms of bank loans for home ownership)<sup>74</sup> and also an exodus of white residents from the area.

Almost mirroring their reaction to a specific desegregated school, white residents fled a desegregated public school system following the 1960s. Private schools began to open all over the city, many located in wealthier white neighborhoods, many were religiously affiliated with a neighborhood church often opening a day school, as seen with the prevalence of Christian Academies throughout the city. What is most salient however, is that when white parents left the public school system they no longer felt that it was something that effected them. This was the same exact mindset of moderate white citizens during the desegregation efforts in the 1960s, many did not directly involve themselves because their neighborhood school was not slighted to desegregate. However, once the entire public school system was threatened moderate whites clamored to “save our schools”.

Due to the removal of wealthier students and their families, the student population of New Orleans public schools eventually became poorer and Blacker. This changing student population made it necessary to change the focus of the schools that served them, and as a result schools increasingly became concerned with nonacademic issues like crime, poverty and safety<sup>75</sup>. This new look took the form of a strong emphasis on after school activities, such as sports and marching band, as an alternative to “unproductive” even criminal after-school activities students could have found themselves involved in.

Teachers were given a large task in these public schools during the 80s and 90s as they usually led classes of close to 30 students, often without enough books. Many schools did not allow students to take text books home because they would not be able to cover the cost of

---

<sup>74</sup> Stern, 2018

<sup>75</sup> Adams, 1991

replacing them<sup>76</sup>. Parents of students who would come home without books were worried because they knew that without a book to focus their child, they would not think about school from the time they left the building until they got on the bus the next day, as there were too many “distractions”<sup>77</sup>. Students seemed to also know that their prospects after school were slim. If they did not get a scholarship to play sports or an instrument somewhere, many were reported to settle themselves with the idea of working on the riverfront, at a restaurant, or looking for a “front”, meaning a legal past time to cover up illegal activity.<sup>78</sup>

The situation that schools faced in the late twentieth century came in part as a result of economic shifts that came to a close during this century. The New Orleans economy was suffering as whole during this century due to initially having to pivot and refocus itself after the abolition of slavery. Additionally, the economic situation informed the situation in schools because the school system was unable to pull itself out of the debts it accrued during the civil rights era. The public school system in New Orleans which began as a solely white institution for all intents and purposes was transformed into a Black sphere due to the mass exodus of white residents.

The public school system that Black residents made the majority of was not like that which white residents enjoyed as a majority. The system of the 1980s was underfunded and in crippling debt with a school board that was plagued with corruption. There were multiple scandals in this era and they almost all involved misappropriations of funds by board members, who would often treat themselves to lavish lunch and dinner meetings, luxurious hotel stays and travel arrangements all on taxpayer’s dime<sup>79</sup>. So, perhaps the mistrust these decisionmakers

---

<sup>76</sup> *ibid*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>78</sup> *ibid*

<sup>79</sup> Adams, 1991

fostered with their behavior explains why residents refused to pay more taxes to bail out the public school system. Regardless of the reasons why, the pre-Katrina state of public education in New Orleans was struggling and the need for change was undoubtedly present.

## **Chapter 2: Enduring the Economy**

The second chapter is concerned with the historical evolution of the New Orleans economy, and uncovering the role that Black people have played there within, in addition to understanding the function of the tourism industry both in terms of the capital accumulation and the social and cultural experiences of Black people in the city. This chapter contends with these questions utilizing secondary literature from the fields of economic, Black and tourism history with a regional focus on New Orleans, as well as primary sources including statistical research and oral histories from those who worked in and around the tourism industry. It seeks to argue that the city has built an economy which profits off the backs of Black residents and sustains itself through their subjugation.

Regardless of what many textbooks may say, many Black residents of New Orleans staunchly declare Native American heritage instead of accepting that they all got to the city through slavery. The ability of this cohort to pinpoint the exact tribe to which they owe their heritage varies, with some being able to say “both of my grandmaws is Indian, forreal. Got Sioux from my mama side and Houma from my daddy side”<sup>80</sup>. While others can only identify that they have “Indian” in their family. This knowledge of Black native past, even for those who do not have such heritage or are unaware, seem to be inspired by it. Many indicate that they feel comfort in knowing that their people have been here before and gotten through it. Their “people”

---

<sup>80</sup> Big Chief, Oral history by Markus Reneau, March 15, 2019, audio

describing the Black community in the unifying sense of the identity. This unified declaration is salient because of the story of Faubourg Tremé, known as America's oldest Black neighborhood, was originally where Black residents lived in New Orleans and is where others migrated or were moved from.

In *Faubourg Tremé: The Untold Story of Black New Orleans*, Lolis Elie describes that the story is that as a French colony, before the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, New Orleans was a French and Spanish city made up of mostly the French quarter ("Vieux Carré"), which was built upon the high ground along the Mississippi River's edge. It served mainly as the quarters for French soldiers and sailors, which may explain why a lot of the architecture resembled itself in the sense that it was extremely uniform and uniquely French.<sup>81</sup> Due to the mixture of Latin and urban attitudes in the region, the style of slavery featured in New Orleans was markedly different than that of British North America. A major difference is that it was common for slaves to free walk about the city and also work in order to buy their freedom after saving their wages. Another difference is that the children of master and slave were often freed and educated as Spanish laws especially and specifically codified society based into Iberian, creole and slave. This set up was different than those mulatto children in the British system who were often not freed and subsequently occupied an awkward position on the plantation, working in the house while their mother's other children worked in the fields alongside her.<sup>82</sup> As a result of their treatment, creoles in Louisiana, specifically in New Orleans operated as a third race. It's unknown if they considered themselves to be outrightly better than their darker counterparts, however these creoles would eventually strive alongside Black residents to agitate for better treatment when the Americans arrived.

---

<sup>81</sup>Elie, 2008

<sup>82</sup> ibid

During the French colonial period of New Orleans, apart from the Quarter, the rest of the land was swamp, a portion of which was purchased by Claude Tremé a Frenchman who made hats. He saw an opening to make money by building a suburb, or “faubourg” in French, in order to help the colony, grow. His land was now known as “Faubourg Tremé”, simply stating whose it was, and it stood out due to its residents. Both Black and white people moved in as the subdivided land was relatively affordable, however most of those who actually owned land were Black. The land owners would build homes on their plots, the colorful and unique designs in the neighborhood are a focal point of New Orleans tourism to this day. In Tremé, Black people thrived, being able to express themselves and pushing the limits of their freedom. The highly acclaimed Congo Square was located in Tremé. It was the spot where different cultures within the Black neighborhood would meet and exchange information and practices. African drum circles would start, and dances were regularly held that featured different aspects of different African tribes melding together to form something new<sup>83</sup>. As New Orleans grew, Tremé stood out because it was a neighborhood of mostly free people of color. St. Augustine Church began in Tremé and it is home to the oldest predominately Black catholic parish in America, this is salient as throughout history Black Catholics in New Orleans provided many services to Black residents that the government deprived them of, regardless of their religious convictions. Of course, many people converted to Catholicism as a way to show appreciation for the assistance<sup>84</sup>.

Things took a darker turn as the Americans settled into New Orleans following the Louisiana Purchase as they began to impose subordinate expectations on a group of people who were used to operating with more freedom. Charles Barthelemy Roussève, one of the first

---

<sup>83</sup> Elie, 2008

<sup>84</sup> Archivist, Oral history conducted by Markus Reneau, March 17, 2019, audio

scholars of Black life in Louisiana (he himself a Black man)<sup>85</sup> described in his 1937 *The Negro in Louisiana* his opinion on why the characteristics of slavery shifted as Louisiana became an American state. Roussève describes how with the insurrections in the Antilles still fresh in the minds of all slavers<sup>86</sup>. For the French, the slave state in St. Domingue had actively been in the midst of being overthrown by slaves since a successful 1791 began the war. With the war not going his way, Napoleon Bonaparte sold the Louisiana territory to the United States in 1803, which of course included the highly profitable port city of New Orleans. Roussève claims that treatment of slaves worsened in Louisiana as a result of a tendency that free people of color had to urge slaves to follow the footsteps of their brothers in the Caribbean and violently revolt. Due to the totality of these circumstances, the Louisiana slaveholder imposed more restrictions on his slaves. And the industrial revolution in the South, brought about through the invention of the cotton gin would bring down production prices, increase demand and necessitate large scale production which required large shipments of slaves. The slave port of New Orleans was now busier than ever, and the rhetoric declaring the “innate inferiority of the Negro was enunciated with greater insistence”<sup>87</sup>.

As the nineteenth century churned onward the degradation of Black people in Louisiana elevated, especially as the Civil War began. In the face of these conditions, a man named Paul Trévigne started a francophone newspaper, *L'Union*. The paper began in 1862, when northern troops took the city of New Orleans and “liberated it” from the Confederacy. In his paper, Trévigne declared that slavery was an evil that needed to be ended, and he called for his Black

---

<sup>85</sup> Archivist, oral history; he described that long before ethnic studies was a concept, and before anthropologists “cared about Black people enough to treat them as human subjects instead of animalistic observation objects,” Black academics or interested individuals would buy works concerning Black life and house this information in personal libraries. Many of these individuals would bequeath their libraries to local HBCUs like Dillard or Xavier in their wills.

<sup>86</sup> Charles Roussève, *The Negro in Louisiana*, (New Orleans: Xavier University Press, 1935)

<sup>87</sup> *ibid*

brothers and sisters to demand their freedom. Later he and the publisher of *L'Union* started *The Tribune*, which was also published in English during the 1860s, making it the first Black-owned daily newspaper in the United States<sup>88</sup>. In this new paper, Trévigne continued his antislavery rhetoric, with it gaining more traction as the English print had a wider readership than when it was solely in French. It was around this time that Tremé became the staging ground for the creation of the Citizen's Planning Committee, which was founded to help Black New Orleanians figure out exactly what to do/how to do it in order to better their lives. This Committee, along with *The Tribune* became strong voices in the civil rights movement before these issues hit mainstream America<sup>89</sup>.

Since the mid 1850s to the end of Louisiana Reconstruction in 1877, Black New Orleans residents in the Tremé held what would be considered sit-ins, organized boycotts and exercised marches, calling for the right to enlist in the military, suffrage and desegregation of schools and public transport<sup>90</sup>. Historian Eric Foner describes how it was common for a protestor to commandeer a horse drawn street car by knocking the driver off his seat and demanding every citizen have equal access to any seat in the car<sup>91</sup>. When white bigots regained control of New Orleans in, they quickly worked to undo all of the gains made in the 1850s and 1860s by Trévigne and others out of the Tremé. The Ku Klux Klan ran rampant, terrorizing people and forming lynch mobs. Desegregated schools in Tremé were closed, even if they were private, and the public transportation system in the city was once again segregated<sup>92</sup>. This prompted the Tremé activists in the Citizen's Planning Committee to organize another action when they recruited the help of resident Homer Plessy.

---

<sup>88</sup> Elie, 2008

<sup>89</sup> *ibid*

<sup>90</sup> *ibid*

<sup>91</sup> *ibid*

<sup>92</sup> Elie, 2008

Plessy was a French speaking creole man who for all intents and purposes *looked* white and the Committee selected him for just this reason, because he was an example of how illogical the segregated cars rule was. The Committee paid off the conductor so that he would get Plessy into the whites only car and accost him specifically to create a scene. Plessy went to Press Street station and as soon as he sat in the seat, the events which culminated in the Supreme Court case ensued. The Court ruled that segregation of public facilities based on race was a constitutional act as long as the facilities in question were “separate, but equal”. This legal codification of white supremacy would cast a shadow over race relations in New Orleans that still has yet to be fully removed. When this ruling was handed down, the residents of Tremé seemed to have lost all hope for gaining the ability to fully enjoy their freedom. Around this time, in the late nineteenth century, renown Tremé-born musician Wynton Marsalis explains that jazz developed as into a form of expression and freedom that transcended the restraints and inequalities of American society at the time; its musical style is imbued with the resilient spirit of those original participants of the civil rights movement in Tremé<sup>93</sup>. One feature of jazz is how separate improvisations can sound harmoniously beautiful when they come together, rising above the limitations of sheet music.

In this way, jazz is a perfect example of the resiliency of Black New Orleans. It grew out of a neighborhood that spearheaded a people’s fight for humanity in a political economy that commodified them and sought to reduce them to property—especially after the intensification of slavery profits with the technological advances provided with the cotton gin. It is was created to serve a subversive, powerful purpose that rises above what it offers at face value. Tremé is a microcosm of New Orleans in terms of the cyclical nature of racial relations with the economic system. Currently, tourists to Tremé visit in part off the strength of the HBO series of the same

---

<sup>93</sup> Elie, 2008

name, and the HBO series operated off the strength of jazz and New Orleans, read Black, culture as a whole (from the second lines, to the prominence of Black masking crews, to the foods featured). Or perhaps they go to take in the unique architecture, as the homes that weren't destroyed in the flood following Hurricane Katrina or that have been preserved offer some of the city's most intricate and unique and beautiful aesthetics. However, tour groups rarely, if ever hear about the history of Tremé, they only see it in its current state, which is a shell of its former glory, due in large part to the economic shifts the city has experienced over time.

The history of race in New Orleans is the city's economic history. Leading up to the Civil War, like the rest of the American South, Louisiana was a slave state, and New Orleans was a major port for moving all types of cargo, notably cotton and the humans who were bought and sold to pick it<sup>94</sup>. Charles Roussève describes how the labor force in New Orleans functioned during this period:

“Throughout the South, ‘where the majority of white men were too lazy to work’ (he quotes Carter G. Woodson) by far the largest proportion of labor, skilled and unskilled, was performed by Negroes, both the freemen and the slaves. In many instances the slaves brought their skill with them from Africa. This is particularly so with reference to ironwork, rug-making, weaving, pottery, and wood carving. The Vieux Carré abounds with delicate metal work displaying the iron craftsmanship of slave artisans. The convent of the Ursuline Sisters, in Chartres Street, the oldest building in New Orleans (and probably the oldest in the Mississippi Valley), completed in 1794, offers many beautiful specimens of this hand-hammered ironwork by slave blacksmiths. The Pontalba buildings, flanking Jackson Square, present similar evidence of slave handiwork. Accounts during the slavery period indicate that the slaves, as well as the free Negroes were equally as skilled in numerous trades. In 1844, Wesley Methodist Episcopal Church, the first place of worship for Negroes in New Orleans was built entirely by slave labor, even to the making of the bricks.”<sup>95</sup>

It is crucially important that Roussève provided the above description of the labor force in antebellum New Orleans. He not only connects two tourist destinations lauded for their architecture directly to slave labor, but inverts the stereotype of lazy Negro on its head by insinuating that the slaves possessed these skills before they reached America—which essentially

---

<sup>94</sup> Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863–1923*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991)

<sup>95</sup> Roussève, 1935

means that white residents did nothing in terms of providing training for the labor New Orleans slaves participated in. This information is salient because it raises new questions about why white residents sought to punish Black residents so harshly for the civil war following the end of reconstruction. For example, if they were aware of the fact that these skilled former slaves could out compete them fairly, for jobs why would they not attempt to capitalize on this opportunity to re-oppress Black New Orleans? From the inception of America in New Orleans, it is evident that one cohort of residents provided the labor, and in a sense, the culture that earned the profits as the artisan craftsmanship would have brought in both commercial and specified income. On the other hand, the other cohort, did not provide much in terms of sustaining the economy, save for causing the political unrest that created conditions for the civil war which upended the New Orleans slave economy, yet they still benefited exclusively from all of the profits earned in the city economy. In this manner it is clear that the economic injustice that Black New Orleans citizens still contend with to this day first began with slavery.

After the civil war, the New Orleans economy was able to rebound slightly, however there was a large need for more investment as the port now needed to replace their human imports and exports<sup>96</sup>. Tourism in New Orleans arguably began in 1867 when members of the New Orleans City Council commissioned a photographer to create a photographic survey of the city to be presented to Emperor Napoleon III for display at that year's Paris Exposition. The survey contained 150 photographs with the explicit purpose to present New Orleans as a city of investment and to encourage "the capitalist, the artist, the artisan and the mechanic and the laborer" to move there<sup>97</sup>. City leaders began promotional efforts to gain commercial and agricultural investments in the area while increasing population growth. This could be

---

<sup>96</sup> Arnesen, 1991

<sup>97</sup> Kevin Fox Gotham, "Marketing Mardi Gras: Commodification, Spectacle and the Political Economy of Tourism in New Orleans", in *Urban Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 10, (2002): 1735–1756

considered the beginning of tourism in the sense that it marks the first time that New Orleans was advertised as somewhere to go for its aesthetic benefits on the one hand, while at the same time hoping to squeeze labor out of the immigrants who would arrive. At the same time, these new arrivals would only add to the diversity of the city, which would also serve to attract Americans to the city so they could marvel at the varieties that were unavailable back at their hometowns.

By the early 1900s, the three-pronged economy emerged, divided into river-based commerce, cotton trade and a growing market for leisure and amusement. Around this time, sections of the city became dedicated to leisure in the form of public parks, sports grounds, theatres, art galleries and shopping districts. The city's "red light" district and jazz culture left an indelible image in the minds of travelers and served for decades as a magnet to draw people to experience the "sin" industry<sup>98</sup>.

Throughout the 1930s to the present, the tourism industry began to dominate the New Orleans economy as the amusement sector took over the river-based commerce and agriculture industries<sup>99</sup>. In the 1960s, as the civil rights era swept through the South, there was a sense of interracial cooperation as New Orleans citizens clawed their way towards the Great Society that Lyndon B. Johnson promised<sup>100</sup>. Part of this reach for the promises of Johnson's society was the transition towards a tourism based economy, that was seen as less physically demanding than a manufacturing economy. However, in recent years Professor Lynell Thomas, who was born and raised in New Orleans, has begun to question if the transition actually brought progress for those who needed it most—poor Black people in the city. She expresses that the way in which New

---

<sup>98</sup> Gotham, 2002

<sup>99</sup> Robert K. Wheelan, Alma H Young, "New Orleans: The Ambivalent City, in: H.V. Savitch and T. J. Clayton" (Eds) *Big City Politics in Transition*, pp. 132–148. (Newbury Park: Sage, 1991).

<sup>100</sup> Kent B. Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises: Poverty, Citizenship, and the Search for the Great Society*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007)

Orleans is presented to tourists downplays the importance and integralness of African heritage in the city's history<sup>101</sup>, likewise she explains that the history that is admired and promoted is a white supremacist understanding of culture. She highlights that how today the majority of service sector jobs in the city's tourism industry are occupied by Black bodies, and as a result tourists can come to New Orleans and experience a time warp<sup>102</sup>: they are surrounded by colonial architecture that was built by slaves being served by the descendants of those slaves who would have served them had they visited New Orleans when the historical architecture was modern.

The tourism and hospitality industries in New Orleans work in tandem, as the hospitality is set up to keep the tourists entertained and happy during their visit. As of 2018, exactly 50% of the city's population is employed by this combined sector, 60% of Black residents are employed within<sup>103</sup>. There are over 15,000 tourism jobs in the city but the average wages, including tips, are only \$34,220—failing to provide family sustaining wages<sup>104</sup>. Two reports were published in 2018 concerning the economic gains from New Orleans tourism. One was compiled by the Hospitality Research Center at the University of New Orleans (UNO) and another by D.K. Shifflet & Associates (DKSA), an independent research firm contracted by the New Orleans Convention and Visitor's Bureau and the New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation. The UNO report found that the city made \$7.51B from tourism in 2017, while DKSA found the city economy gained \$8.7B. Convention and Visitor's Bureau president and CEO Stephen Perry explained that the discrepancy in data is a result of different methodology between DKSA and UNO; DKSA is contracted by "competitor cities" like Atlanta, Chicago, New York and Orlando. Though billions are annually being made from this industry, the rate of poverty in the Black

---

<sup>101</sup> Lynell Thomas, "Roots Run Deep Here": The Construction of Black New Orleans in Post-Katrina Tourism Narratives," *American Quarterly* 61.3 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, Sep.2009)

<sup>102</sup> Thomas, 2014

<sup>103</sup> The Data Center, 2018

<sup>104</sup> *ibid*

community has not changed much over the twentieth century. In Metro New Orleans, white income has held steady since 1979—while Black household incomes have actually fallen 7 percent. Black households earned 63 percent less than white households in New Orleans in 2016. Half of all Black families in New Orleans earned less than \$25,324. Child poverty rates have not changed much since 1979 for Black and white children, nearly half of all Black children live in poverty while only 9 percent of white children are poor<sup>105</sup>. Black children are more likely to live in rented homes where their parents are paying unaffordable costs as nearly 60 percent of Black residents rent and more than half pay 35% of pre-tax household income on rent alone. These figures are compared to a 54% of home ownership for white citizens and 41% of national renters pay unaffordable prices.

These economic realities that Black citizens face are starkly different from the situation that existed back when the Tremé was a neighborhood of predominately Black owned homes. A couple theories exist to explain how these economic challenges came to be created. A major theme is the transformation of the Port of New Orleans on the riverfront of the Mississippi River. The port used to be a place where a man could “walk up to the gate, give the foreman your social security card and be hired on the spot”<sup>106</sup>. The type of jobs that one could get on the riverfront in this manner were usually positions as longshoremen, moving cargo from ships docking in the port, down a gangway to the ground where the cargo was sorted into different trucks to be dispersed appropriately. There was a brawn premium on this type of work, as one was judged moreso on their potential to successfully perform the back breaking tasks and less of an emphasis on one’s mental capacity. However, race still played a role in who was selected for the jobs. The composition of the longshoreman crews resembled classical plantations in that the foreman was

---

<sup>105</sup> The Data Center

<sup>106</sup> Wallace, Oral History

almost always a white man, the crew was usually a number of large bodied Black men who all passed the eye test of being able to move weight<sup>107</sup>.

As mechanization reached the port when industries became more modern, the need for crews of unskilled laboring longshoremen was lessened. A new premium was placed on crane operators and forklift drivers. There was definitely a learning curve that took place as many Black men were unprepared for this change of labor and saw themselves lose a stable means of making money in the port. My uncle was one man who saw his livelihood put at risk as the mechanization of the port began, however, from a previous job working in a warehouse he knew how to drive a forklift and as such he was able to stay on the riverfront for almost 35 years. But for those men who were not lucky enough to just so happen to know how to drive a lift or operate a crane their time on the river came to an end.

While the port was becoming dominated by machines, the city began to emphasize softer sector jobs, such as those in the tourism and hospitality industry , as a superior alternative to the back breaking work at the port. Even for those who had no prior interest in working in a hotel or restaurant now had no choice but to as other industrial options dried up. It is no wonder then, why the tourism industry employs more New Orleans residents than any other sector. Although these jobs are plentiful, they are not sustainable. Many are seasonal jobs unskilled jobs meaning that one person may have a good standard of living while hired through the winter but after the Christmas they have to work multiple jobs to barely make ends meet.

Despite the harsh realities of life in New Orleans, there seems to always be a looming threat of a hurricane, as people in the city often discuss THE flood, the one to end all floods, essentially the beginning of the end. Some argue that the flood following Hurricane Katrina was THE flood due to the wave of rebirth rhetoric the residents were drowned in. What this flood

---

<sup>107</sup> Wallace, Oral History

brought was the loss of resident control over the public school system, further splintering of the Black community as economic inequities became even more entrenched. For some Hurricane Katrina was a chance at a blank slate, a second chance to rebuild the city and to do it right, read white, this time. While for Black residents the flood simply indicated that oppression cycle was making another rotation, and as Lolis Elie described, “once again we have to fight for voting rights, education and economic justice—eerily familiar”<sup>108</sup>.

### **Chapter 3: Resilience During Recovery**

Gloria Ladson-Billings, in her 2006 presidential address to the American Educational Research Association stated that although there has been much talk about the achievement gap in American education, the gap cannot be closed without dealing with what she calls this country’s “education debt”. For Ladson-Billings, this debt is the resources that could (should) have been invested in educating low income students, and because there was a lack of investment, there is also a lack of returns upon it. The return would be the closing of the achievement gap, which she highlights that although it was pointed out in the 80s by *A Nation at Risk*, other education historians such as James Anderson, had been uncovering the true sources of it through their discussion of the reasons behind inequalities that exist in this country’s system of education. These inequalities obviously began with slavery and the subsequent denial of quality education to African-Americans following emancipation through de jure segregation of the Jim Crow era and the de facto segregation that followed the forced integration during the 70s. Ladson-Billings represents a strain of education scholar aware of the sociopolitical influences on our country’s

---

<sup>108</sup> Elie, 2008

education system instead of being one of the many who discuss the achievement gap focusing only on the data showing the divide instead of getting at the reasons why the rift exists.

This final chapter is concerned with uncovering the relationship between today's charter schools in New Orleans and the historical patterns outlined in Chapters 1 & 2, as well as understanding the educational and economic outcomes for Black students who attend and graduate from these schools. It seeks to explain that there is a link between the pedagogies and educational theories (like grit education and “no excuses programming” employed at KIPP schools) that are popular in New Orleans charter schools and the labor needs of the local economy, featuring high-stress, low-wage jobs that need employees who can follow directions with no excuses. The theory of grit needs to be examined because it is an educational trend that is quickly becoming popular and it has problematic effects when utilized in charter schools serving poor Black children.

Like many consequences of policy decisions, the effects of the charter schools in New Orleans are not wholly positive and not wholly negative. Simple things are true: more students now graduate high school in the city, more students pass end of course state tests indicating they have grade level understanding of the material, more students are thinking about and conceiving off the possibility of them attending college due to a college prep curriculum. Other simple things are also true: Black public school students who take the ACT more times a year than their white private school counterparts on average score below the college readiness marker of a composite score of 20. Likewise, Black students are suspended seven times as much as white students and while 85% of white women and men have some college education, the same can be said about only 55% of Black women and 42% of Black men<sup>109</sup>.

---

<sup>109</sup> The Data Center

The Recovery School District is by no means perfect, and one of its main problems is that it allows public space to become privatized, and not only that, it is the privatization of something that should inherently be public and easily accessible, stripping a crucial service away from people who badly desired to control it<sup>110</sup>. In New Orleans, the general history of the city and especially the spatial history makes it clear that the removal of public education from citizen control was not merely a coincidence—throughout history, policy decisions that affect space are not taken lightly<sup>111</sup>. For instance, an entire section of the Tremé was once flooded solely so that a neighboring white community would be spared by an incoming hurricane. The Black former residents were relocated, and a large part of their community was never rebuilt and would later be completely destroyed in order to build a bridge system that connected to the interstate<sup>112</sup>. Professor Kristen Buras is one of those at the head of the pack fighting against the successful RSD rhetoric, along the intersectional lines of critical race studies and economic analysis. She explains that if one follows the theory of “whiteness as property”, then it is easy to see how a land grab like that, which was needed to establish the RSD, is an example of this theory. By collecting as much property as possible, one is able to develop a certain amount of social capital akin to that granted to whites—of course, if said individual has a large amount of property and *is* white, then they can enjoy all of the benefits of their whiteness<sup>113</sup>.

When the rollout began, charter schools in New Orleans were by a private, outside entity. In addition, they were not based on neighborhood, but rather they were based on the Recovery School District (RSD)’s School Facilities Master Plan (SFMP). The SFMP was the blueprint used by the district to rebuild New Orleans schools:

---

<sup>110</sup> Pauline Lipman. *The new political economy of urban education: Neoliberalism, race, and the right to the city*. (Taylor & Francis, 2013).

<sup>111</sup> Bond Graham, 2007

<sup>112</sup> *ibid*

<sup>113</sup> Buras, 2015

“The SFMP determines which schools remain open, merit renovation, or get closed—decisions with clear implications for working class and middle-class communities of color who resided where destruction from the hurricane was most substantial. It land banks more than 60 existing schools; that is, the schools are either to be “retained” (remained closed indefinitely), “redeveloped,” or “converted” for public or private uses”<sup>114</sup>

This SFMP was conceived and executed without the consent or participation of the affected families. Those whose schools were to be retained by the district had no choice but to enter into the lottery for their child to attend a redeveloping school, regardless of where it was located or how difficult it would be for them to reach. One oral history contributor who attended a charter school in the early days of the RSD describes how:

“Right after the storm, they ain’t have no RTA back yet for real for real, so you know they ain’t have no school bus service. I remember my momma scrambling every night to make sure she had her work clothes ready and I had my school clothes laid out because we wouldn’t have enough time in the morning. I lived in the East, off Reed Blvd, and I went to KIPP in Mid City. I’d have to wake up like two, almost three hours in advance, just to rush out the house and sit in traffic.”<sup>115</sup>

There is no disputing the fact that New Orleans students were underperforming in underfunded schools, for 2004-2005 school year, the graduation rate was 54%<sup>116</sup>. Historically, but especially since the late 1980’s, the Orleans Parish public school system saw steadily declining graduation rates, standardized tests scores, and ACT averages, while the suspension/expulsion rates and percentage of student dropouts continually increased. It could be said that this three decades long trend began as a result of the massive white resident exodus from the public schools to private schools in their wealthy neighborhoods. Regardless of if a causation exists, since these things happened coincidentally, it is safe to say that there is a correlation between these two events. It is no secret that middle class white parents usually have the ability to agitate for better school environments for their children because, amongst other things, they do not have to miss work in order to volunteer for events, or meet with teachers or

---

<sup>114</sup> Recovery School District (RSD) & New Orleans Public Schools (NOPS). “Superintendent’s amendments: Recommendations to the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.” (New Orleans, 2008).

<sup>115</sup> Student, Oral history conducted by Markus Reneau, March 1, 2019

<sup>116</sup> Louisiana Department of Education (LA DOE), *Louisiana Believes Report: 2015*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana Department of Education, 2015)

other activities that schools consider in determining an “interested/invested” parent from an “uninterested” one in need of motivation. So, after decades of educational struggles, a new hope for New Orleans seemed to emerge.

Shortly after Hurricane Katrina made landfall, Kristen Buras explains how Louisiana state officials felt they were given a blessing in the curse of Katrina; New Orleans was now given a chance to rebuild their education system and with the right maneuvering, the state could access funding through No Child Left Behind.

“In November 2005, governor Kathleen Blanco called a special legislative session in Baton Rouge that became the occasion for passing Act 35, which redefined what constituted a “failing” school so that most of the New Orleans public schools could be deemed failing and placed in a state-run Recover School District. Act 35 enabled 107 of the 128 schools to be folded into the RSD, whereas only 13 schools could have been assumed before the legislation was passed<sup>117</sup>. On the floor of the state legislature the denotation of failure had shifted upward, with the School Performance Score (SPS) cut point now just below the state average (i.e., shifting from 60 to 87.4). Around this same period in 2005, Blanco signed Executive Orders 58 and 79 suspending certain provisions of charter school law, such as the need to consult and obtain the votes of affected faculty, staff, and parents before converting a public school into a charter school<sup>118</sup>. On November 30, 2005, the announcement went out that 7,500 New Orleans teachers and school employees would be fired and lose health insurance on January 31, 2006<sup>119</sup>. Veteran teachers effectively lost all protections and entitlements guaranteed by UTNO’s collective bargaining agreement because the district with which the agreement was negotiated no longer existed.”<sup>120</sup>

The plans for the district were publicized as being noble, humanitarian actions. New Orleans was to be the proving ground for charter schools, the experiment and its results could lead to drastic improvements to education in the United States. New Orleans would be celebrated as a pioneer and a model for other cities, but no one in New Orleans signed up to be the guinea pigs. Teachers returned home from displacement hoping to step back into their old jobs only to learn that the new district was not in the business of cultivating a career in education for teachers. If veteran teachers wished to continue in this new district, they would have to reapply for their

---

<sup>117</sup> United Teaches of New Orleans (UTNO) et al. in Buras, 2015

<sup>118</sup> Louisiana Federation of Teachers (LFT) & American Federation of Teachers (AFT) in Buras, 2015

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, UTNO et al.

<sup>120</sup> Buras, 2015

jobs to teach in New Orleans' schools<sup>121</sup>. To charter district orchestrators, the school system of pre-Katrina New Orleans was a failure and so was every detail of it. Performance-wise, the evidence shows that the New Orleans experiment produced positive results. The percentage of New Orleans students in failing high schools dropped from 66 percent prior to Hurricane Katrina, to 10 percent in the fall of 2014. Since 2004, New Orleans' graduation rate increased from 54 percent to 73 percent and 57 percent of New Orleans' students scored proficient on the state graduate exit exams. The average ACT score in New Orleans was 18.4, which is a 1.4-point increase from 2005, while the state average dropped<sup>122</sup>. The results have only continued to improve in recent years, so much so that there is current conversation about handing more schools over to the Orleans Parish School Board, the community is in favor of the transition because it would mean that the city's schools would once again be run by a body that answers to the citizens. On the opposite side of the debate, charter operators want to make sure that they are still allowed to run schools under their models that they believe have been working<sup>123</sup>. In order to ensure that schools will have the same freedom, the current bill doesn't clearly define what requires a school to be transitioned, effectively meaning the school would not be run by the Parish School Board. The sample schools are generally viewed as successful, but disagreement arises about the context of their success.

An important critique of New Orleans charter schools is the culture of the schools themselves. Many schools operate under a "no-excuses" charter model, or a strict focus on

---

<sup>121</sup> Cowen Institute, *The state of public education in New Orleans: 2015 report*, (New Orleans: Tulane University, 2015).

<sup>122</sup> LA DOE, 2015

<sup>123</sup> Editorial. "Don't Be Fooled By a Trojan Horse." *The New Orleans Tribune*. The New Orleans Tribune, (2016), <<http://www.theneworleantribune.com/main/dont-be-fooled-by-a-trojan-horse-other-bill-to-return-schools-is-just-a-ploy-to-maintain-the-status-quo/>>.

standardized tests or, in the worst cases, both<sup>124</sup>. There are scholars who highlight the fact that the no-excuses model is unnecessarily punitive and has the effect of reinforcing the school-to-prison pipeline as it introduces children to the concept of being labeled a “problem child”<sup>125</sup>. From this label, the student is assumed to be disobedient and “unreachable”, which then causes teachers to give up on them, and then the student gives up on themselves as well only to slip into crime after being kicked out of school for good<sup>126</sup>. In the decade between 2000 and 2013, the trend for discipline rates shows that in this vein, the charter schools seem to be upholding the historic trend of a school to prison pipeline for Black students. In 2000, 17% of Black students in Orleans Parish schools received out of school suspensions that year, as opposed to only 4% of white and 5% of Hispanic students. In 2004, 19% of Black students were suspended compared to 5% white and 7% Hispanic. In 2009, 21% of Black students were given out of school suspensions while 3% of white students and 1% Hispanic. In 2011, once again 21% of Black students were suspended, as were 6% white and 1% Hispanic students. Finally, in 2013, the number of Black students suspended dropped to 17%, while both 3% of white and Hispanic students were suspended<sup>127</sup>.

While some may look at these data and laud the fact that suspension rates have returned to their pre-Katrina numbers, many more should notice that the disparity between Black and white has persisted. Over this period of time, from 2000-2013, which includes some of the years that the charter schools were “in their prime” in terms of achievement data, Black students were being expelled at a rate three to eight times that of their white counterparts. This is facially

---

<sup>124</sup> Sarah Carr, *Hope Against Hope: Three Schools, One City, and the Struggle to Educate America's Children*, (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013).

<sup>125</sup> Tuzzolo, Ellen and Hewitt, Damon T, *Rebuilding Inequity: The Reemergence of the School-to-Prison Pipeline in New Orleans*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

<sup>126</sup> *ibid*

<sup>127</sup> Data Center, 2018

pertinent, however when these statistics are contextualized with the fact that the majority of students enrolled in charter schools are poor and Black, the statistics are even more alarming. This means that the same sect of the city who has experienced the most extensive historical, educational injustice is once again receiving it in another manner: punishment. Many education scholars recognize that these racial disparities in punishment may have painful consequences, and it could even be argued that these hyper-suspensions can acclimatize a student to punitively interact with authority figures, meaning they get used to being penalized by those they should respect. Perhaps the cause of much of the disrespect young white teachers face in New Orleans classrooms come from students being adapted to seeing authority figures as combative instead of cooperative allies. Some in the city hoped that the discipline rates in schools would change when a new mayoral administration began in 2018, hopefully one led by somebody Black who understands the plight of common folk in New Orleans<sup>128</sup>. Evidence from this past 2018-2019 school year is still being collected and analyzed so perhaps in the future, as Mayor LaToya Cantrell's administration rolls along the discipline rates of RSD schools will trend more positively in the eyes of the community.

In June 2005, the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) was granted the first charter for a school in New Orleans. This move had the support of the both the faculty and families of the school they planned to take over. The community at the school was tired of students underperforming and they were willing to try something different. With KIPP, the curriculum is very standardized, it adheres to the guidelines of state standardized tests for the obvious benefit of being able to score better on the test by teaching to it. As for culture, KIPP's is one of compliance, as they believe strongly that discipline will lead to educational success. KIPP was poised to be used as the model for school change in New Orleans. However, this KIPP school

---

<sup>128</sup> Whelan, Young and Lauria, 1991

never got the chance to prove itself because the hurricane hit early into the school year. KIPP Central City Academy was founded in 2008, well after KIPP developed a strong presence in New Orleans. KIPP promises longer school days, innovative teaching, and a motivating learning environment to ensure that all students are prepared for college and beyond<sup>129</sup>. Students are assigned homework every night, and KIPP teachers are supposed to be available by cell phone to assist as necessary. The school promises to embrace the spirit of New Orleans with band, visual and other fine arts available at every school along with an athletic and physical education program. KIPP desires to be a partnership among parents, students, and teachers that puts learning first; all three parties sign a learning pledge called the “Commitment to Excellence,” which ensures that each will do whatever it takes to help the student learn<sup>130</sup>.

KIPP quickly became a household name as people returned to the city mainly not only because it was more organized than the Orleans Parish schools, but also because students were given homework nightly and were taught by energetic teachers. This convinced many residents that this type of no excuses model might be the answer, but the lived experience of their students under it changed their minds. Although many charter supporters believe ignorance of poverty is a positive mental ability for inner city students, issues from home can stop them from completing their work. For consideration, behold an oral history conducted with a student who attended KIPP Central City Academy since a fifth grade and stayed all the way through the eighth grade.

“KIPP was different. First of all, there was stuff about college everywhere on the walls, flags would line the hall listing different universities, I think some of the teachers even went to these different colleges. We were divided up into colleges for homeroom and so for that whole year we called ourselves students of that university and our teachers would do the same. I think what stood out the most to me was how hard up the teachers were about their whole ‘no excuses’ thing. I mean, yeah sometimes kids just make up excuses for being lazy but sometimes teachers just didn’t understand what it was like for us out of school. I remember that a lot of us struggled to get to the internet after school. Maybe it had something to do with the storm, but I think it was just most of us were poor, well I think we all were. There was this one white kid from Metairie who

---

<sup>129</sup> “About KIPP New Orleans”, KIPP New Orleans, accessed November 2, 2018, <https://www.kippneworleans.org/apps/pages/KNOShandbook>

<sup>130</sup> “About KIPP New Orleans”

came to KIPP with us. I thought me having to come from the 9 was a crazy ask. Could've been different for him though since he didn't take the bus—his momma drove him in daily. But yeah, so you go up to a teacher and you say straight up: 'I couldn't do the homework cause I don't have any internet at home' they snap back: 'well, I don't think you tried hard enough. You could've gone to the library!' I mean that's a cool idea and all but I'm from the nine and I don't know no libraries that they got round there. First time you say something like that to a teacher they bark: 'no excuses! You have to find a way!' I mean that's great yeah, I'm all for fighting and overcoming obstacles but that's ridiculous. If you got a bunch of students coming in saying they can't get to internet, then WHY assign internet work? They'd say something about curriculum or something like that. I know that I just graduated from high school and now I'm working my way up at the Ritz, but bruh I swear I remember my KIPP days like it was yesterday. Those teachers would say that WE stubborn, but they were the real stubborn ones. Yelling at you for not sitting up straight in a good 'scholar's pose', and if you didn't hit it right, they'd ignore your hand, yet get mad at you for yelling the answer. Like how you gonna skip over me just because I didn't do something the way you wanted me to? And then, you could ask questions, but it couldn't be something like...big, if that makes sense. Say you were talking about a book—the *Color Purple*, you could ask your teacher something like, oh why did Celie think writing letters was a good way to tell her story? And the teacher would respond with some long, starry eyed explanation. But if you asked, 'why are we reading this?' they'd get mad quick. Of course, even if you were being serious, you know they got class clowns who laugh at everything. The teacher would be upset cause they felt like you was tryna play them and they'd hit you with that: 'this book is on the curriculum, that's why we read it.'

I learned quick at KIPP that asking too many questions is a bad thing. I had to get up out of there though man, I couldn't do it anymore. You know they use to make us walk in a single file line down the hallway? Hands at our sides, quiet, following a taped line? It felt like prison. You know little kids, lil middle schoolers love having fun. I get you want us still in class, but we can't even bust loose ever? We had like twenty minutes for recess and it'd be being taken away for the littlest stuff at lunch. Like oh, someone ain't throw they tray away right or they stood up without raising they hand, or they laughed too loud—whatever, we'd steady be getting silent lunch which would turn into silent recess inside. I can still remember feeling my whole body shake with anger cause I couldn't sneak the kid who cost me my chance to run around that day. I knew I had at least an hour bus ride after school and once I got home I ain't wanna go outside cause, snakes.

But 35 was great. I loved 35, I *love* 35. Roneagle for life yaheardme? You don't know how good it felt to see a Black lady teaching me Black books in English. Now I'm not even all deep into the Black stuff you know? Ahh ha it's not like I can talk to tourists about it at the Ritz. I remember my momma asked me when they opened that KIPP high school if I wanted to go. I screamed 'no' cause I loved 35, I *love* 35. I see why them old folks go so hard about it ha-ha. I played tuba and D-end so needless to say I was bucked from September to March. Football and parade season back to back. Then I'd chill out in the spring, got my first job as a junior. After school, on my non practice days I bussed tables at Deanie's in the quarter. It was a chill job, but nothing like this Ritz gig I got. I started at the door, but you know I'm the type I gotta make moves. I couldn't get comfortable at that door. Not when I saw how much was to be made on the inside. I know dudes who worked at the Ritz for decades man, now they out in China bringing bags to rooms. Can you believe it? A dude straight outta the nine, like me, in China? College woulda never got me that. And it's not like 35 ain't want me to go, I just didn't. Like why would I take out loans and all when I can finesse a couple jobs in the quarter, maybe cut grass or whatever on the weekends, man I don't know. I got that diploma though, so Delgado is always an option. My uncle an electrician and he got his own business, might have to look into that if this Ritz thing don't work out. My bad bruh we was talking bout schools, right? Yeah, 35 over KIPP any day. Black is where it's at. You wouldn't know though man, you wasn't no Roneagle so I'm sorry ha-ha. You missed out. But no. In all seriousness. 35 is where it's at. We had some teachers been teaching for like 40, 50 years man. Old, wise Black men and women. Seen a whole lot, been through a whole lot more man. All that wisdom, knowledge, experience? You can't beat that. They taught us well at KIPP yeah, it definitely prepared me for high school, but I mean, I have friends who ain't go to KIPP who smarter than me, so I don't know. Look though, I know KIPP say they're no excuses, but they teachers ain't stick around long enough to learn the difference between an excuse and an explanation."<sup>131</sup>

---

<sup>131</sup> KIPP Alumnus, Oral History conducted by Markus Reneau, February 28, 2019

This student's story echoes some of what is already known about "no-excuses" charter schools like KIPP. They seem to employ a technique that forces students to conform to their vision and they often see questioning as disrespect, mistaking inquiry for insubordination.<sup>132</sup> Also, they seem very determined to prove to students (or maybe to their shareholders/administration) that a child's poverty level does not have to hold them back from success. Yet perhaps their method of doing this is incorrect and ignores any personal strength that the child already has. Ignoring what's already there and forcing it to be replaced with whatever YOU thought of is extremely paternalistic and paternalism does not spark creativity, often. However, paternalism is exactly what you need when you need to gently train your students to follow directions without questioning it and ignore their own needs in order to accomplish YOUR goals that you've convinced them to believe as their own or forced them into this train of thought. Furthermore, this student's mentioning of the presence of Black veteran teachers at McDonogh 35 who just seemed to get it, highlights a crucial part of the current charter network that is missing: community connection. Arguably, these ties to the community were severed when the veteran teachers were fired following Hurricane Katrina. We have seen that throughout history, there has always been a significant population of Black teachers in New Orleans. At first out of necessity because they weren't allowed to attend white schools and needed some learned Black folks to lead Reconstructed schools, but later this Black educator emphasis was by choice, perhaps it arose out of a communal consciousness around the importance of education, which can be proven by how staunchly whites have sought to deny access to Black citizens.

---

<sup>132</sup> Judith Kafka. *The History of "Zero Tolerance" in American Public Schooling*. (New York: Springer, 2011).

Some of the things that they were doing in the old school district, they were doing right. One aspect that should have carried over to the new would be the incredibly important and crucial community aspect. As previously mentioned, the community aspect of schools in New Orleans was a highlight of life. Charter school networks were wise enough to tell families that community would be a major part of the new schools. In fact, that promise came from the new district itself.

The RSD's motto is: "Excellence. Equity. Community." But this motto is complicated by the actions that were taken to establish this district. How is it excellent to fire veteran teachers who know the students of the New Orleans: know how they learn and best ways to reach them, only because these teachers would demand to the benefits that they earned? Who is this action *excellent* for? Not the students. Especially since these veteran teachers were replaced with inexperienced new teachers who were thrown into a high pressure urban classroom. "Both the RSD and many charters decided to hire new teachers enrolled in alternative certification and some teachers with no certification at all"<sup>133</sup>. Then Nelson explains that "New Orleans' low-achieving poor and minority students attend schools with the least experienced teachers"<sup>134</sup>. These transient teachers are more cost effective for the district than veteran teachers as they would only have to be paid salaries for a few years before leaving upon expiration of their short term contracts. The thinking should have been towards the students, who formed relationships with these teachers only to have those relationships severed and the teachers replaced by another inexperienced, transient cohort. In a similar vein, how equitable is the action of replacing open access neighborhood public schools with selective admissions charter schools?

---

<sup>133</sup> F.Howard Nelson, "High-Quality Research on Post-Katrina School Effectiveness in New Orleans". Annual Conference of the Association for Education Finance and Policy. Washington DC, 2015)

<sup>134</sup> *ibid*

The argument can be made that since there are so many open enrollment charter schools, the system is essentially like a public one. “Open enrollment” meaning that any student can apply to the school, regardless of what neighborhood they live in. However, an argument of this type ignores the demographics of the population. Most students in the RSD come from working class families. Before the amalgamated OneApp application, applying to multiple RSD charter schools required a lot of time and effort. A family would have to set up a visit at the school, then meet with the principal for a meeting, next they would have to fill out paperwork, finally they would have to submit the application at a very specific window to be considered. The student’s record would then have to survive competition with the other applicants, unless it was entered into a lottery which comes with even more uncertainty. To complicate things further, different schools had different application procedures so the family would have to repeat and alter the process for each school they are interested in. The time required to undertake such a task is often unavailable to working class families, also the transportation to get to the schools is another hassle. For example, a family living in the historically Black Lower Ninth Ward would have had only one school in the neighborhood to apply to in 2006, King Elementary. King was already at capacity with a long waiting list, so then the family would have to travel to New Orleans East to apply to more charter schools. If they had no luck in the East, then they would have to travel across the Industrial Canal to the Upper Ninth Ward where there was one school available. This process would continue until either the family lucked up and was admitted into a school, or the family would eventually give up and place their child in a direct run school because alternatives were so scarce.

The Orleans Parish School Board initially directly kept control over a few schools, these “direct run” schools were small in number grossly overcrowded and understaffed. They were

supervised by what was left of the board itself and these schools as a group were underfunded because much of the money went to the RSD. What this meant was that tax paying New Orleans citizens were funding charter schools that were not able to serve them due to sheer lack of numbers. This desire to access these schools, which as they rolled out in 2006-2008 looked like an obvious better alternative to the few Orleans parish schools for previously stated reasons. However, it would be erroneous to compare the two types of schools. One, was a brand new charter school with a wide-eyed operator firm who supplied families with big promises and could point to a surplus of funding to achieve these goals. On the other hand, there was a struggling public school housed in crumbling, dilapidated storm-battered buildings or even worse class was held in a series of trailers connected by wooden walkways (if connected at all).

Finally, and most importantly, the “community” part in the RSD’s motto is concerning because it leaves more questions to be answered than it solves. For starters, how is the district creating and cultivating community when they are forcing students to catch multiple buses to get to school across the city? Communities thrive from shared space to form a sense of communal, connected relations. It is hard to believe an organization supposedly invested in the future and well-being of a place would take a direct hand in destroying the center of community in this place. Even though the schools were historically struggling academically, they served as a means for the neighborhood children to envision a way out. As one alum of the RSD, who graduated in 2007, describes:

“School was cool, because whenever I was there, there was no limit to what I could imagine. I could run up and down the football field or basketball court and picture my name in bright lights. Or I could pick up a horn and learn my music so I know at the end of the day I could always eat. Or I could even hit them books and get into college and become a doctor or professor or something, anything.”<sup>135</sup>

---

<sup>135</sup> RSD Alumnus, Oral History conducted by Markus Reneau, March 3, 2019, audio

To add insult to injury, the organization then has the audacity to claim to be focused on community in their motto. Ironically, the only way that the RSD is strengthening community in New Orleans is by being something for the people to rally against. There has been a fight to return control of the schools to the locally-elected board since the very beginning because in part, people are upset about having no say in what their children are taught.

In a similar vein, one particularly problematic feature of the city's charter schools are their heavy emphasis on grit education, and moral education in general. While it is admirable and essentially expected that schools improve their students' moral compasses by teaching them right and wrong, this education should start at home, while being reinforced at school instead of the inverse. This indicates an issue with pedagogies that aim to teach students to be grittier, with intentions to make them better people, because it asserts that the culture students receive at home is inadequate for serving them in their educational endeavors. This is particularly salient in New Orleans, where the tourism industry casts such a large shadow on life, constantly reminding students that they can find work in the service sector. These are seasonal, unskilled, low wage jobs, such as being as busboy, that require employees to be able to stay focused on their task at hand while overcoming obstacles such as noise, crowds and multiple responsibilities related to customer service. Grit and accompanying inculcation are staples of New Orleans charter schools, hence better understanding this concept and its critiques through the lens of race, economics and education will show that instead of being a part of a student's toolkit for success, grit is seen as a deciding factor for poor children.

The concept of "grit" was first identified by psychologist Angela Duckworth while she was a part of a team that conducted research around what was the key to the achievement of successful people. Her subjects were cadets at the United States Military Academy who had not

yet gone through the physical exam that all cadets must, known as the “barracks beast”.

Duckworth describes this test as the deciding factor in whether or not a cadet is allowed to enter the academy and she hypothesized that the cadets who were the most successful possessed more grit than those who failed. She defines grit as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals” and in order to test her hypothesis, she conducts a survey that she refers to as “the grit scale”, filled with questions like “I give up easily”. This survey is given to cadets before they begin the barracks beast and based on how they scored, Duckworth determines that the cadets who scored higher have more grit and therefore should perform better on the barracks beast.

As it would turn out, Duckworth’s hypothesis based on her scale was correct and the cadets who scored higher in fact did perform better than their counterparts on the beast. With these results in mind, Duckworth then extended the scope of her focus to include other people who are objectively seen as successful, including national spelling bee contestants, ivy league graduates, CEOs, and coach Pete Carroll of the Seattle Seahawks. In 2013, Duckworth delivered a TED talk on grit that amassed hundreds of thousands of views and thereby introduced her theories to a large mixed audience of educators, scholars and regular adults alike. Spring boarding from the success of her TED talk, Duckworth’s 2016 book, *Grit: Perseverance and Passion for Long Term Goals* included her findings from conversations with and investigations of all these aforementioned successful individuals and in each person she found that the common denominator was that they all had large amounts of grit and they followed through on it by harnessing that gritty potential into success. Her book quickly became a best seller as the same composition of the audience at her TED talk ran to buy her book off the shelves. It had the same name as her TED talk, but the medium of a book allowed her to dive deeper into the concept of grit and extend the conversation beyond the time constraints imposed by TED. Around the same

time, other books and scholarship began popping up discussing grit, and soon education reformers still in need of a magic bullet to fix the achievement gap<sup>136</sup> and undo mediocrity in schools seemed to have found their answer in grit.

An essay in the *Journal of Educational Research* by Aaron Hochanadel and Dora Finamore investigated how grit along with a “growth” instead of a “fixed” mindset can help students overcome adversity in the classroom. The Hochanadel and Finamore project helped cement grit as a truly educational idea that work in tandem with other ideas that were becoming popular, particularly the focus on a growth mindset that was purported to allow students the ability to evolve through and adapt to change so they can take control of their own educational success instead of seeing their educational outcomes as predetermined.

Educators who bought into grit were at first unsure of how exactly to train students to attain this quality and how to nurture it in students who already have it. To help, Paul Tough authored *How Students Succeed* in 2012 to explain that noncognitive abilities, like hope, toughness, faith and grit are as important to student success and pure intellect is. In a sense, grit is thought to enable students to achieve their potential by activating their intellect so they can overcome the trials associated with completing school. Tough suggests using activities with the students that force them to sustain a goal over multiple obstacles, such as a group project assignment where the teacher applies different constraints to the group, for example making a rule where the students cannot verbally communicate with each other. Tough highlights activities along these lines so that students learn that they must be crafty to figure out ways to succeed in spite of setbacks. More recently there have been books written specifically for teachers that

---

<sup>136</sup> In 1983 the Reagan Administration’s National Commission on Excellence in Education released its *A Nation At Risk Report* that discovered the existence of a gap in achievement between Black and white students and they claimed that the cause of this rift was an air of mediocrity that characterized American schools. For the three decades that followed the release of this report, education scholars scrambled to figure out a way to close this racialized achievement gap that would be lasting and also have the effect of stamping out mediocrity in our schools.

function as both teacher education and classroom instructional materials, like Laila Sanguras' 2017 *Grit in the Classroom: Building Perseverance for Excellence in Today's Classroom*. Sanguras' book is easily accessible and written in a way that any teacher regardless of their familiarity with academia can understand and utilize it. She lays out the research around grit and then has a story in each chapter to show how the research can be put into practice in the classroom. The stories themselves serve as a means of reassurance to remind the teacher that the methods mentioned have been tried, at least once, so they ideally can be replicated again and again. Books like Sanguras' and Tough's serve as an entry point for education reformers such as charter school managers and principals who want to extend the acquisition of grit to the entire school instead of focusing it in on one specific classroom because they set the stage for implementation by providing readers with techniques to use that can be instituted in the school building and classroom.

Simon Cassidy published a 2015 essay in the *Frontiers in Psychology Journal* titled "Resilience Building in Students: The Role of Academic Self-Efficacy" where he posits that academic resilience, the ability to withstand obstacles and roadblocks without giving up, and self-efficacy, the ability to produce a desired result on your own are major predictors of future success for students. Cassidy claims that these two traits are related and therefore can both be taught to students using the constructs of grit and a growth mindset. Even before publishing her 2016 book and delivering her 2013 TED talk, Duckworth was claiming grit to be "perseverance and passion for long term goals, as this is the title of a 2007 essay, she co-authored with psychologist Christopher Peterson and West Point Behavioral Analysts Michael Matthews and Dennis Kelly. This essay by these four authors provide more background for the study that was conducted as well as it offers readers an understanding, from the authors' perspective, of how

grit compares to other psychological concepts like hope and faith. The authors settle on the sentiment that grit is superior to these other concepts and they indicate that this is evidenced by the grit scale successfully predicting which cadets would pass the barracks beast and which would not. This essay can be seen as the birth of grit into academia, as it was written for an academic audience with clear ruminations on the state of the field at that time, which was concerned with the achievement gap and how to fix it.

Haigen Huang published a 2015 essay in which he discusses if students themselves can close the achievement gap, which by 2015 was redefined by education scholars to also include socioeconomic status as a dividing factor in addition to race<sup>137</sup>. He found that students who thought of themselves as persistent performed better than those students who didn't see themselves as persistent. He further declares that even though this is seen to be true, students cannot be held responsible for teaching themselves how to persistent, and that it is in part on the school to give students the tools to do so. His work seems to be evaluating the usefulness of grit in closing the achievement gap and even though he is not fully critiquing the utility of Duckworth's concept, his work is a good segue into critiques of grit.

In contrast of sheer numbers, the scholarship around the critique of grit is much smaller and seemingly less impactful. Perhaps this is because the concept of grit itself is new, Duckworth's popular book was only published in 2016, the concept first introduced in 2007, but the past decade has seen a large increase in the amount of critiques on her concept. The critiques usually approach this issue from one of two entry points. Sometimes psychologists attack the "pop psych" of Duckworth's work, commenting on the fact that her study was conducted on individuals who already have to possess large amounts of grit to get into West Point from the

---

<sup>137</sup>which in turn began a trend of scholars conflating class and race status to having the same or similar effects, essentially causing them to consciously substitute one for the other instead of understanding that they work in tandem.

jump: they have to have top notch grades and be in peak physical condition as well as leadership skills.<sup>138</sup> Essentially all Duckworth's West Point study proved was that successful cadets have even *more* grit, which doesn't provide anything worthwhile for the average American.

Additionally, psychological critiques of grit also take issue with the fact that she is ignoring previous scholarship that already proved that noncognitive traits work in tandem with each other and that no one single trait trumps them all.<sup>139</sup> Especially not grit, which is defined by two noncognitive traits of perseverance and passion that both require other noncognitive traits as their foundation, such as faith and hope. Essentially, Duckworth's work doesn't psychologically hold because it ignores what's required for it to work.

The other strain of criticism comes from sociologists who realize that Duckworth's grit is being applied in schools that suffer from societal issues that must be addressed if any solution will be lasting.<sup>140</sup> They take issue with grit because it is held up as the all in one solution, yet it is applied by people who ignore the grit that already exists in the students they teach. Due to this willful ignorance, sociologists critique that grit is truly meant for all students. They attack Duckworth's examples in her book, talking about knitting sweaters for friends and other stereotypically wealthier white activities that have no actual applicable lessons for anyone other than students who will one day see knitting sweaters for friends as something that needs grit. The same cannot be said for students who have to show tremendous grit just to get to school by waking up hours before other classmates to take public transportation from another part of the

---

<sup>138</sup> David Denby. *The Limits of "Grit"*, *The New Yorker*, (New York, 2018).

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-limits-of-grit>

<sup>139</sup> C. Anderson, A.C. Turner, R.D. Heath, et al. *On the Meaning of Grit...and Hope...and Fate Control...and Alienation...and Locus of Control...and...Self-Efficacy...and...Effort Optimism...and...* *Urban Rev* (2016) 48: 198. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-016-0351-3>.

<sup>140</sup> HW Kwon, "The sociology of grit: Exploring grit as a sociological variable and its potential role in social stratification", *Sociology Compass*, (2017):11:e12544. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12544>.; K. Fosnacht,, K Copridge, and S.A., Sarraf, How Valid is Grit in the Postsecondary Context? A Construct and Concurrent Validity Analysis. *Res High Educ* (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-018-9524-0>

city, or those who have to come to school hungry or those who have to balance after school employment with academics. Sociologists like Alfie Kohn, HW Kwon and Fosnacht, et al,<sup>141</sup> do not like that Duckworth's grit ignores grit itself, which only highlights the fact that it is a faulty concept that cannot be applied on a sociologically unequal playing field. To them, the theory is incomplete, by either ignorance of the issues that currently nuance the education system in America or by willful disregarding of them. Either action is detrimental to the students who are subjected to this type of pedagogy because they are being set up to fail if they are unable to navigate the world truly aware of the issues and obstacles stacked against them.

New Orleans charter schools are the perfect arena to highlight the critiques Duckworth's grit theory. To prove this, two different oral histories will be compared. The first oral history, which was presented earlier was conducted by a student who attended KIPP Central City but left for high school to attend McDonogh 35. KIPP is seen almost as the quintessential New Orleans charter school as it features all of the elements one expects from a charter school, from transient teachers, a no excuses model to high racial disparity in discipline. Lusher however defies expectations and stands out as a break from the norm in New Orleans. So, the second oral history is one conducted with a student who graduated from Lusher Charter school, arguably the *best* charter in New Orleans and one of the schools previously mentioned where students have to pass a test to enroll, as well as parents still physically have to pick up application materials.

For starters, Lusher is a predominately white school was started by the Lusher School which had been an elementary and middle school in New Orleans since 1917. In 2005, before the storm they applied for a charter and were denied, but they were granted a charter from the state immediately following the storm. Before its charter, Lusher was already known as a relatively

---

<sup>141</sup> Alfie Kohn, "Grit: A Skeptical Look at the Latest Education Fad"  
<https://www.alfiekohn.org/article/grit/?print=pdf>

good school with an arts-based focus. The mission at Lusher Charter School is to provide a developmentally appropriate learning environment in which high academics, comprehensive arts education, and the celebration of individuality and diversity enable each child to achieve as a learner, a person, and a valuable member of our society<sup>142</sup>. Lusher's core beliefs include providing an inviting, supportive, and safe environment, a curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory, multiple learning and teaching approaches that are research-based and respond to student diversity, assessment and evaluation programs that promote quality learning, high expectations for every member of the learning community, students and teachers engaged in meaningful relationships and active learning, procedures and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety, multifaceted guidance and support services, school-initiated family and community partnerships, and collaborative leadership and teaming.<sup>143</sup>

What set Lusher apart from other charters was their admissions model. While most charter schools in New Orleans were open enrollment through a lottery system, Lusher restricted enrollment based on three levels: siblings of current students had first priority, residents of the attendance zone had second priority, and third priority equally went to students who test in and children of Tulane staff.<sup>144</sup>. Although the admissions protocol was changed in more recent years to grant wider access to students, the three-priority levels are relevant in the minds of those who apply<sup>145</sup>. Lusher is located in Uptown New Orleans, but in the neighborhood next to Tulane, so the area is higher income than the rest of Uptown. Due to the attendance zone being based off the neighborhood where the school is located, the student population is much whiter and wealthier

---

<sup>142</sup>“Mission Statement”, Lusher Charter School, accessed November 3, 2018, <http://www.lusherschool.org/mission-statement/>

<sup>143</sup> Lusher Charter School, “Mission Statement”

<sup>144</sup> Danielle Dreilinger, “How 3 top New Orleans public schools keep students out”, The Times-Picayune, (2015). [https://www.nola.com/education/2016/05/exclusive\\_public\\_schools\\_nola.html](https://www.nola.com/education/2016/05/exclusive_public_schools_nola.html)

<sup>145</sup> Danielle Dreilinger, “Orleans charter policies level the field for families seeking top schools”. The Times-Picayune, (2015). [https://www.nola.com/education/2015/09/opsb\\_policies\\_lusher\\_district.html](https://www.nola.com/education/2015/09/opsb_policies_lusher_district.html)

than the rest of New Orleans public charter schools. In short, if you don't belong it's noticed, and if you look like you don't belong AND you do not, it is a problem. This air acts a deterrent for many deemed "undesirable" but for some Lusher students themselves, it causes issues for them with how they relate to their school.

"I graduated from Lusher, yea, started back when I was in the sixth grade. I can remember always been an artsy kid in elementary school, like I would always be drawing on anything I could. Of course this use to make my teachers real mad because instead of being like, a good student and helping those who needed it, I'd just do my thing and draw. Which I thought was cool cause I wasn't distracting nobody, except for the teacher I guess. But that all changed when I got to Lusher. See, I'm from Pigeon Town so kids from my neighborhood would always joke that I ain't go to no public school, they'd always say I went to the private charter school. I'd try and fight for Lusher you know? Cause I had some pride for getting in since, one I don't have a sibling who attended, two I don't live off Jefferson or Freret or any of them other Tulane streets. I swear my test is the reason I got this Lusher diploma. I remember my momma drilled me for months before I went to go take the test, she really wanted me to get in cause she knew that it would be a good thing for me. I could continue my drawing and still get a good education. I'll be the first to admit that I got lucky. I mean it's crazy to think that I beat out some Tulane professor's kid to get in. Knowing we gotta compete with them is what made beaucoup of my classmates decide against Lusher. I thought about applying to Ben Franklin too but, who wants to go all the way to the Lakefront for school, when I got Lusher right here?

At school though I was definitely the exception and not the example. I struggled hard when I first got there, I can remember going home crying and on the way to my house I'd see dudes in the neighborhood they'd stop me tell me wipe them tears and get my education—cause I was gonna be something. Them first couple years, P Town D boys and my momma nem gave me much more support than my teachers. I think they had me, a Black girl and maybe another Black boy in my class in sixth. We all felt left behind and lied to. I remember everybody at my elementary school called me smart, I was top of the class, no cap. But I get to Lusher and you got kids in class like: 'y'all don't know this stuff? I thought y'all was smart'. Then teachers man, they cared like you could tell but they didn't straight up offer help. All I had to do was ask then they'd stay late with me. I think that that help really paid off because by the time high school came around, I was caught up and I could identify with the new kids who transferred in from other middle schools from around the city.

High school was a whole nother issue though. I remember one time walking home from football practice, New Orleans Private Patrol stopped me. You know those dudes, right? They drive around in them little white pickup trucks with the orange lights on the top, kind of like mall security. Long story short, I had my earphones in, so I didn't hear this rent a cop telling me to stop. I guess the lion on my Lusher hoodie scared him because he drew on me. I couldn't tell if it was a taser or a gun, but I wasn't gonna find out you know? I begged him to let me get my Lusher ID out. He did and then he let me go but that shook me up you know? Like what woulda happened if I wasn't a Lusher kid and if I went to like Math and Science, which is just right behind us but it's a whole different school completely. Anyway, I get back to school the next day, still shook up from the previous night's events and my classmates were like: 'nah bro no

way that happened'. I couldn't believe it! But then when I thought about it, I could. I talked to other Black kids and they expressed similar sentiments of feeling misunderstood and isolated and just bad about Lusher. So me and a couple other older kids started a Black Student Union, and we even got our history teacher to sponsor. Ms. J was always a cool white lady, she gets it, I think she took Black studies in college or something. She helped us understand that our BSU was a good thing that Lusher needed, and she helped us craft a constitution that made the administration happy, if they claimed to love diversity for real for real then it shouldn't be no problem to have a BSU. Of course though once we had one, other minorities got them too, Latino, Asian, Arab all that. Lusher is diverse, more so than the city itself it seems. And I think that's served me well in college. I wasn't at all culture shocked by Tulane and I don't think I'll be culture shocked once I leave. I gotta get outta New Orleans though, there's not much here for me to do. I still draw, yeah but not good enough to get noticed. Maybe Wall Street will be receptive, I don't know. All I know is there's nothing here, I don't wanna work in the quarter or on an oil rig and I definitely don't wanna be no teacher. Are you serious? These kids are BAD. BAD. Kids at McMinn beat up a teacher apparently. I'm not sure if that's true though, but that's what I heard. They're not that far from Lusher and you know kids talk. I mean I'd work for Lusher, but I don't know about anywhere else."<sup>146</sup>

This student's experience with charter schools was different from his KIPP counterpart. It seems that creativity was encouraged at Lusher. Not only was he able to feed his artistic desires, he was able to play sports and have a direct hand in changing the dynamics of his school through the creation of a Black Student Union that was met with a receptive administration that eventually allowed the creation of other affinity groups. Furthermore, this student is on the verge of graduating from Tulane with what sounds like no plans to return to New Orleans after graduation. Also it is insightful that this student seems to be acutely aware of the differences between his school and others in the city. Perhaps, this insight comes from his occupation of a status that exists between two worlds. On the one hand he is a P-Town resident who just got "lucky" and on the other he is a Lusher alum who understands that his educational journey is different than that of others in the city. He represents a majority of college educated native Black New Orleans residents, who are aware of the issues facing the city but feel like they personally are ill-equipped to make the necessary changes to forge a better society.

---

<sup>146</sup> Lusher Alumnus, Oral History Conducted by Markus Reneau, March 22, 2019, audio

The umbrella critique of the charter school system is that it has made promises that it may not be able to keep. This places the education of current and future New Orleans students at risk as it is unknown what actually will happen<sup>147</sup>. There are not that many veteran teachers, due to the destruction of the teacher's unions, along with a preference for recent college graduates signed to short-term contracts. This is in part why residents want control of the schools returned to the elected school board; at least with a board holding control, they would be able to have a say in what happens with their child's education. However, residents are not naïve, and as such, they know better than to just trust whatever the RSD says or any rhetoric spun by a figurehead official, for that matter<sup>148</sup>. For instance, this is why at present, citizens are enraged that the City Council supports the move to award a charter to take over McDonough 35, one of the last public schools in the city and one of the first Black senior high schools. One woman who attended the meeting was recorded by the news commenting that she couldn't believe that they had Black people sitting on the council who were letting this happen to 35.

The fact that the New Orleans City Council, an entity that is supposed to be representative of the citizens and their needs, decided to allow the city's oldest Black public high school to become privatized screams that it is truly a new era in New Orleans. One that Black residents are not in control of, instead the system is seeking to take control of them. The tide of education in New Orleans is turning to exclusivity. Only those who are lucky enough to win the lottery will enjoy whatever benefits charter schools can bring. The few schools who are "doing it right" and producing college ready students are few and far between. Many schools seemed to be more concerned with test scores, discipline and having hardworking students who follow commands instead of those who are inquisitive critical thinkers, one doesn't need to

---

<sup>147</sup> Raynard Sanders, David Stovall, and Terrenda White, *Twenty-First Century Jim Crow Schools: The Impact of Charters on Public Education*. (Beacon Press, 2018)

<sup>148</sup> New Orleans Tribune, 2016

wonder why this is however. The economic needs of New Orleans demand a workforce that charter schools are happy to create as it upholds the status quo.

## **Conclusion**

When the charter schools were rolled out in New Orleans, it was a part of the flood of rebirth rhetoric that engulfed the city following the storm seeking to help the city revitalize itself and rebuild in a new direction. Standard evaluation of the results produced through New Orleans charter schools leads one to call them a success based off of improved high school graduation rates, but when they promised to produce college ready students, improved graduation rates should have been expected—to congratulate New Orleans charters for these improvements is akin to applauding an able bodied adult for being able to walk in a straight line. The Data Center reports that as of 2017, although the ACT average has increased in New Orleans, it is still at an 18 average for Black students, which is below the benchmark composite score denoting college readiness<sup>149</sup>. For Louisiana state schools, a score of 20 qualifies a student to begin receiving scholarship funds. Conversely, the average ACT score for Hispanic students is 21, and it is 25 for white students. Furthermore, even though there are more Black public school students taking the ACT per year (on average about two in-school test days, including multiple practice test for no credit), they are being out performed by their white private school counterparts. For illustration, in 2017 1,785 Black public school students took the ACT and their average score (including Black students in private schools) was 18; while 1,049 white private school students

---

<sup>149</sup> Data Center, 2018

took the ACT in 2017 and their average score was 25 (including the few white public schools students)<sup>150</sup>.

So, it is clear that in terms of keeping their college ready student body promise, the RSD has fallen short. In 2016, for the New Orleans adult population (18+), 42% of Black males had attended “some college or more” along with 55% of Black females<sup>151</sup>. For the same year, 86% of white males and 88% of white females had attended “some college or more”<sup>152</sup>. What does this matter? This then proves that, yet another promise was unfulfilled, a promise that wasn’t explicitly stated but was implied throughout the rhetoric of renewal. The charter schools were supposed to finally break the cycle and give Black residents a chance to truly compete. No longer would they have to be relegated to the lowest paying wage sectors in New Orleans, filling out the service sector of the city’s multi-billion dollar tourism/hospitality industry, and the performing arts industry, where respectively, 50% and 54% of the employed citizens are Black<sup>153</sup>. However, the fact that Black residents go to college roughly about as half as much as their white counterparts screams of a sociological dilemma that has existed since the Americans first came to New Orleans.

White residents were given the tools and assets necessary to take control of the city and subjugate Black citizens. They first orchestrated the subjugation through the system of chattel slavery, literally making thousands of dollars off the backs of Black folk while depriving them of a proper education to make use of the opportunities presented to them. During Reconstruction, when Black residents successfully agitated for the pleasures of full citizenship, through KKK racial aggression and political whipping they beat Black New Orleanians into a state of

---

<sup>150</sup> The Data Center, 2018

<sup>151</sup> *ibid*

<sup>152</sup> *ibid*

<sup>153</sup> *ibid*

submission, entrenching them in a system of economic oppression that only exacerbated the injustice that began with slavery. The center of Black economic prosperity, the heart of Tremé, was dismantled and replaced with an Interstate highway. The neighborhood was broken up, socially splintered so that never again could Black New Orleans residents achieve the levels of power they enjoyed during Reconstruction, and there was a forced exodus to the outskirts of the city to be kenneled in public housing projects, dotting the ninth ward in particular, because of its low elevation.

During the height of the Civil Rights Era, in the 1950s and 60s, Black New Orleanians once again rose up and refused to silently take the discrimination in schools. Black students who were bussed to white schools did not hold their tongues or cower in fear when met with white aggression at the bus ramps, they came out swinging demanding the respect of a people who historically struggled to see them as human. During this time, the 1960s, the tourism industry grew like wild fire and engulfed the other two local industries of the port and the oil fields. The strain of tourism that was focused on was strategic as well. By focusing on the time of “peaceful slavery” in New Orleans that existed during the French and Spanish Louisiana, an image of exotic, one of a kind, interesting, noteworthy Black residents was propped up.

This image is powerful and to this day still accounts for much of the touristic draw to the city. People come to New Orleans to take in the lovely, unique architecture that employs up to three styles on one street: French, Spanish and Colonial English—these famous buildings were built by slaves. Those in the French Quarter as well as the more expressive, colorful constructions found in the Tremé. Visitors come in to enjoy the one of a kind food, whose spices and herbal seasoning formulas were concocted by Black people who had limited other ways to express themselves or find enjoyment in life. The jazz music that is so hotly requested at bars

and from street corner brass bands and musicians, started from a neighborhood whose spirit had been broken, and by bucking against the accepted musical conventions were able to have a revolt of their own kind. Historically, Black citizens in New Orleans have provided the means for the city to make money, and this trend continued following the flood after Hurricane Katrina.

With rhetoric of renewal and rebirth and revitalization, the Orleans Parish Public School System was swiftly dismantled and replaced with a charter district. 97% of New Orleans schools operate under charters and this district is the first of its kind. It's no wonder then that millions were received over this past decade in the form of government funding through No Child Left Behind or private donations and grants in order to conduct the lauded New Orleans Experiment. The fees associated with applying for charters and out of pocket management costs, combined with the outside funding and taxes collected from New Orleans residents have safely transformed education in New Orleans into a standalone industry. Once again, the cycle of exclusion from the spoils exists for Black citizens. The charter schools who use their children as test dummies does not benefit them, despite lofty promises. Some students who are lucky enough, can benefit from the lottery's draw and achieve their collegiate dreams. Other less fortunate students who are forced to make do with what they have, a city where the main industry involves serving others in some way, most likely in someone's restaurant.

Black citizens are relatively in a similar place to that which they have been already. The resilience displayed by those before us is resounding and we have ample access to the records of their struggle, as long as we take advantage of opportunities to do so. This resiliency caveat, combined with the observed statistics contemporarily available lead me to conclude confidently that the issues facing New Orleans will only be solved more sensibly, responsibly and to a greater lasting effect if the issues facing the city and its residents are conceived as three parts of a

whole, buckets cycled around a well, if you will. One part, of course is race. Any analysis of any social condition in any part of America is fully incomplete without even a just a mere passing consideration of the racial realities of the place. The next bucket is economics, since in a capitalist country such as the United States of America, the economic system at play determines much of the social interactions that take place. This is in part why it's debated if economics or racial animus caused the US institution of Chattel slavery. Finally, the last bucket and equally important, is education. Though America is a racist capitalist country, we still have common good ideals—one being education. While a *quality* education may not be a constitutional right, education itself is a state's right and access to it is guaranteed. *Some* education is expected, and the contention comes in when deciding who gets what type of education.

In the New Orleans case, it is difficult to even ponder what type of education is necessary without also considering how race and the economy will affect any plans. These three pillars of society have been manipulated to oppress and subjugate Black citizens throughout history. Perhaps though with a new conception of our issues, the future will be brighter, we will learn from the strife of our ancestors and finally dismantle the connected, historical, oppressive system which plagued our ancestors and us to this day. In this way our descendants may one day get to enjoy life in a truly revitalized, reborn, renewed New Orleans.

## Works Cited

- Adams, Chris. "The Burden of Waste". in *The Times Picayune*. (New Orleans, 1992).
- Anderson, C., Turner, A.C., Heath, R.D. et al. *On the Meaning of Grit...and Hope...and Fate Control...and Alienation...and Locus of Control...and...Self-Efficacy...and...Effort Optimism...and...* *Urban Rev* (2016) 48: 198. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-016-0351-3>.
- Anderson, James. *Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).
- Archivist. Oral history conducted by Markus Reneau. March 17, 2019. Audio.
- Arnesen, Eric. *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863–1923*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991)
- Banathy, Bela H. *Systems design of education: A journey to create the future*. (Englewood Cliffs: Educational Technology Press, 1991)
- Big Chief, Oral history by Markus Reneau, March 15, 2019, audio
- Blassingame, John W. *Black New Orleans 1860-1880* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973).
- Buras, Kristen L. *Charter Schools, Race, and Urban Space: Where the Market Meets Grassroots Resistance* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2015).
- Carr, Sarah. *Hope Against Hope: Three Schools, One City, and the Struggle to Educate America's Children*. (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013).
- Cave, Alfred A. "Abuse of power: Andrew Jackson and the Indian removal act of 1830," in *Historian* 65.6 (2003), 1330-1353.
- Cowen Institute. *The state of public education in New Orleans: 2015 report*. (New Orleans: Tulane University, 2015).
- Denby, David. *The Limits of "Grit". The New Yorker*. (New York, 2018). <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-limits-of-grit>
- DeVore, D.E., & Logsdon, J. *Crescent City Schools: Public Education in New Orleans, 1841-1991*. (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1991).
- Dillman, Caroline. *Southern Women*. (New York: Routledge, 1988).
- Dreilinger, Danielle. "How 3 top New Orleans public schools keep students out". *The Times-Picayune*, (2015). [https://www.nola.com/education/2016/05/exclusive\\_public\\_schools\\_nola.html](https://www.nola.com/education/2016/05/exclusive_public_schools_nola.html)
- Dreilinger, Danielle. "Orleans charter policies level the field for families seeking top schools". *The Times-Picayune*, (2015) [https://www.nola.com/education/2015/09/opsb\\_policies\\_lusher\\_district.html](https://www.nola.com/education/2015/09/opsb_policies_lusher_district.html)
- Editorial. "Don't Be Fooled By a Trojan Horse." *The New Orleans Tribune*. *The New Orleans Tribune*, (2016). <http://www.theneworleanstribune.com/main/dont-be-fooled-by-a-trojan-horse-other-bill-to-return-schools-is-just-a-ploy-to-maintain-the-status-quo/>.
- Elie, Lolis. *Faubourg Tremé: The Untold Story of Black New Orleans*, Directed by Dawn Logsdon, (2008).
- Fosnacht, K., Copridge, K. & Sarraf, S.A. "How Valid is Grit in the Postsecondary Context? A Construct and Concurrent Validity Analysis." *Res High Educ* (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-018-9524-0>.
- Fussell, Elizabeth. "Constructing New Orleans, Constructing Race: A Population History of New Orleans." *The Journal of American History*, vol. 94, no. 3, 2007, pp. 846–855. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/25095147](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25095147).
- Germany, Kent B. *New Orleans After the Promises: Poverty, Citizenship, and the Search for the Great Society*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007).
- Gotham, Kevin F. "Marketing Mardi Gras: Commodification, Spectacle and the Political Economy of Tourism in New Orleans", in *Urban Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 10, (2002): 1735–1756 Grace, Grace, Alonzo G. and Citizen's Planning Committee for Public Education in New Orleans. *Tomorrow's citizens: A study and program for the improvement of the New Orleans public schools*. (New Orleans: Orleans Parish School Board, 1940).
- Harlan, Louis. "Desegregation in New Orleans Public Schools During Reconstruction," *The American Historical Review* 67 (Apr. 1962).
- Kafka, Judith. *The History of "Zero Tolerance" in American Public Schooling*. (New York: Springer, 2011).
- KIPP Alumnus. Oral History conducted by Markus Reneau. February 28, 2019. Audio.
- KIPP New Orleans. "About KIPP New Orleans". Accessed November 2, 2018. <https://www.kippneworleans.org/apps/pages/KNOShandbook>.
- Kohn, Alfie. "Grit: A Skeptical Look at the Latest Education Fad" <https://www.alfiekohn.org/article/grit/?print=pdf>
- Kwon, HW. "The sociology of grit: Exploring grit as a sociological variable and its potential role in social stratification." *Sociology Compass*. 2017;11:e12544. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12544>.

- Lipman, Pauline. *The new political economy of urban education: Neoliberalism, race, and the right to the city*. (Taylor & Francis, 2013).
- Louisiana Department of Education. *Louisiana Believes Report: 2015*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana Department of Education, 2015)
- Louisiana State Advisory Committee. *The New Orleans school crisis [Report of the Louisiana State Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights]*. (Baton Rouge, 1961).
- Lusher Alumnus. Oral History Conducted by Markus Reneau. March 22, 2019. Audio.
- Lusher Charter School. "Mission Statement". Accessed November 3, 2018, <http://www.lusherschool.org/mission-statement/>.
- Nelson, F. Howard, "High-Quality Research on Post-Katrina School Effectiveness in New Orleans". Annual Conference of the Association for Education Finance and Policy. Washington DC, 2015).
- Ramsay, Jack C. *Jean Laffite: Prince of Pirates*. (Eakin Press, 1996).
- Recovery School District (RSD) & New Orleans Public Schools (NOPS). "Superintendent's amendments: Recommendations to the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education." (New Orleans, 2008).
- Robinson, Cedric. *Black Marxism* (London: Zed Press, 1983)
- Roussève, Charles. *The Negro in Louisiana*. (New Orleans: Xavier University Press, 1935)
- RSD Alumnus, Oral History conducted by Markus Reneau, March 3, 2019, audio.
- Sanders, Raynard, Stovall, David, and White, Terrenda. *Twenty-First Century Jim Crow Schools: The Impact of Charters on Public Education*. (Beacon Press, 2018)
- Save Our Schools. *Save Our Schools!*. (New Orleans, 1960).
- Somers, Dale A. "Black and White in New Orleans: A Study in Urban Race Relations, 1865-1900," *The Journal of Southern History* 40 (Feb., 1974): 23-24.
- Stern, Walter C. *Race and Education in New Orleans: Creating the Segregated City 1764-1960*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2018).
- The (Greater New Orleans Community) Data Center, *The New Orleans Prosperity Index: Tricentennial Edition* (New Orleans: 2018).
- Thomas, Lynell. *Desire and Disaster in New Orleans: Race, Tourism and Historical Memory*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).
- Thomas, Lynell. "'Roots Run Deep Here': The Construction of Black New Orleans in Post-Katrina Tourism Narratives," *American Quarterly* 61.3 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, Sep. 2009): 749-768.
- Tuzzolo, Ellen and Hewitt, Damon T. *Rebuilding Inequity: The Reemergence of the School-to-Prison Pipeline in New Orleans*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).
- Wallace, Jesse. Oral History by Markus Reneau. March 21, 2019, audio.
- Wheelan, Robert K. and Young, Alma H. "New Orleans: The Ambivalent City, in: H.V. Savitch and T. J. Clayton" (Eds) *Big City Politics in Transition*, pp. 132-148. (Newbury Park: Sage, 1991).
- Whelan, Robert K.; Young, Alma H.; and Lauria, Mickey, "Urban regimes and racial politics: New Orleans during the Barthelemy years" (1991). College of Urban and Public Affairs (CUPA) Working Papers, 1991-2000. Paper 25. [http://scholarworks.uno.edu/cupa\\_wp/25](http://scholarworks.uno.edu/cupa_wp/25)
- White, Howard A. *The Freedmen's Bureau in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970).