
SOCIAL THOUGHT & COMMENTARY

The Hand of God: Capitalism, Inequality, and Moral Geographies in Mississippi After Hurricane Katrina

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Abstract

Within the United States, Mississippi often represents all that the country is not. However, within the state, the cultural geography is more complex and the area most affected by Hurricane Katrina is seen as least like the state as a whole. After Katrina, the state symbolically reincorporated the coast while aligning itself with the values of the nation. Ironically, it was the destruction of the space/time of modernity characterizing the country that made this possible. As reconstruction progresses, differences within communities by class and between regions have been reconstituted along with the market and the space of modernity. [Keywords: place, modernity, Hurricane Katrina, narrative, Mississippi]

The metonymic quality of our everyday concept of place has parallels in the characterization of place in myth. In mythical thought, necessary connections link events and their locations, and the subjective and objective are weakly differentiated. Places take on the meanings of events and objects that occur there, and their descriptions are fused with human goals, values, and intentions. Places and their contents are seen as wholes. (Entrikin 1991:11)

Place is lived through myths (cf. Hirsch 2006:151) that naturalize particular understandings of space, time, and identity or community. If, as Entrikin suggests, there is a necessary link between the stories we tell of a place and the events that occur in it, what happens when a place is destroyed? What “goals, values, and intentions” are reconstructed when the contents of a place are gone? How do understandings of space and time inform the experience of place destroyed? This essay begins to address these questions with reference to the narrative that emerged after Hurricane Katrina in Mississippi. There is a growing body of work on the aftermath of this storm, however it has largely focused on the case of New Orleans, with relatively little attention directed to the state of Mississippi. The work that has been done has also paid more attention to social structures, such as race and poverty, and representations of these in the media than to the underlying narratives of the nation and place (with the exception of some work on the distinctiveness of New Orleans) that shaped the representations themselves or the narratives mobilized by the people in the affected areas.

Anthropological insight suggests that cultural myths represent core truths of societies, truths that may be at least partially or potentially independent of objectively verifiable truth. What I have in mind here is what Rappaport called “ultimate sacred postulates” (1999:287-290), those things that represent core truths of a culture that are not objectively verifiable or falsifiable. Christ’s divinity would be an example of an ultimate sacred postulate in Christianity. However, it is not only in religion that we can have sacred postulates. I would suggest that the beliefs in maximizing individualism and progress might be thought of as fundamental postulates of capitalism and the US social order. In other words, I am interested in narratives, which I am calling “myths” here not to imply that they are objectively false, but because they convey core values. It would make sense then that places destroyed would be rebuilt in the image of the

myths that motivate the societies that create them and that control the reconstruction. In the case of the United States, this involves attention to the myths that give meaning to the understandings of capitalism and the United States as a nation. These narratives of belonging, place, space, and time are part of what is understood by modernity and are integral to what it means to be a part of this country.

In this paper, I begin to trace some of the discourses mobilized by Mississippians to give meaning to the lived space and time of the Mississippi Coast, paying particular attention to the ways in which the time-space of capitalism and United States nationalism informed representations and expectations of events after Hurricane Katrina. This essay is based on what I have learned in nearly five years living in South Mississippi, conversations with Mississippians after Hurricane Katrina, discussions with students in my classes at the University of Southern Mississippi (USM), public discourse found in the press, and oral histories archived at USM. I will organize my presentation of place and space temporally into before, Katrina, and after; while recognizing that those temporal categories are as constructed as the spatial ones I want to explore. For example, one of the most important post-Katrina divides may be between those for whom life is back to normal and those for whom the hurricane is not yet over. I first turn to the moral and cultural geography of Mississippi prior to Hurricane Katrina in order to better understand the politics of place after the disaster.

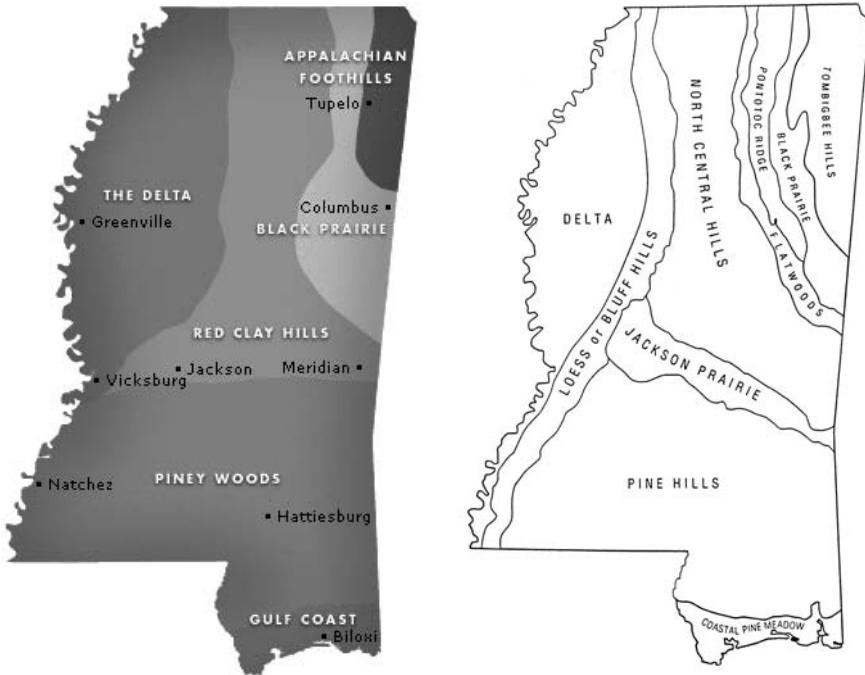
Moral Geographies of Belonging Before the Storm

Countries have their factual and their mythical geographies. It is not always easy to tell them apart, nor even to say which is more important, because the way people act depends on their comprehension of reality, and that comprehension, since it can never be complete, is necessarily imbued with myths. (Tuan 1977:98)

Mississippi stands for something in the United States, where national myths narrate history through stories and discourses that grant broadly and directionally defined regions cultural characters or identities rooted in different historical epochs. Although Tuan argues that in the United States, unlike some traditional cultures, cardinal directions are not the “stage set for the

enactment of cosmic drama” (1977:99), they are associated with different historical events and epochs in our national history and with different values and characters. The founding of the country is primarily narrated in the space of the eastern seaboard, particularly the northeast, which acts as the center of deep-seated national origins and remains the site of national power. In contrast, the South is associated with the Civil War, forces that threatened to break the country apart, and the violence of racial oppression. The stories tell how the West was settled by pioneers who worked hard and gambled much in search of dreams for a better future. The old Northwest, now the Midwest, narratively became a place of stolid and reliable yeoman farmers and workers, the solid (if boring) core and backbone of a country: the location of the country’s “breadbasket” farms, factories, and “hog capital of the world.” East and West are contrasted in time, with the East being the site of the original founding of the nation and the West representing the future of Manifest Destiny and dreams. This is true in the historical construction of the nation and the contrast between Washington, DC and Hollywood. North and South are similarly paired as sites of opposed character traits, with the North symbolizing industry and equality, progress and rationality, and the South “backwardness,” poverty, racism, and inequality (c.f. Jansson 2003). The ascription of these traits to the South make that region less “American” and permits the rest of the country to project negative traits onto an internal other.¹ The mythical and factual geographies are intertwined, as Tuan suggests, with the mythical as well as the factual shaping perception and action. In the national mythos and psyche, Mississippi often figures as the apotheosis of southernness. Sometimes this is positive, as in the belief that the South is more hospitable than the North, but more often it is negative in the perception that the state is racist, ignorant, and “underdeveloped.”

Within the state, a more nuanced cultural geography distinguishes the southern part of the state from several other regions. A person is not just from Mississippi. He or she is from a particular part of the state that carries distinctive geographical, historical, demographic, economic, and cultural connotations.² The state is divided into approximately six to eight regions, which reflect a rough correlation between geological zones and the economic and settlement history. The following map³ from the Mississippi Arts Commission will help clarify the brief discussion of this regionalism that follows.

Figures 1 & 2: Cultural and Geographical Regions of Mississippi

Map on left courtesy of Sheffield Publishing Company. Map on right courtesy of the Mississippi Arts Commission.

Although the precise number of regions varies between sources, there is a rough agreement and no serious discrepancies. To the right of the map of cultural regions recognized by the Arts Commission, you will find a map of the geographical regions of the state (from Waltman 2001:15). The maps clearly show a rough correspondence between geographical and cultural regions, a correspondence that stems from the relationship between geology and the historical settlement and economy of the regions.⁴ The two most distinctive and consistently identified regions are the Delta and the Gulf Coast.⁵ The Piney Woods or Pine Belt is composed of South Mississippi with the exception of the Coast itself. The northeast section of the state is called the Hills. The remaining central portion of the state is sometimes called the Heartland, sometimes the Capital area, and sometimes is incorporated into the Hills. Although the exact borders of many of these regions are variable and the designations for them also varies somewhat, there is, as mentioned before, complete consistency in distinguishing the Delta, the

Coast, and the northeastern hills from the center of the state, as well as a recognition of the Natchez district and the Pine Belt.

These regions correspond to zones that have risen to prominence in the state during different historical epochs of economic development. The Delta occupies roughly the northwestern quadrant of the state between the Mississippi and Yazoo rivers. An alluvial plain, this area has fertile soils and had an economy largely based on cotton plantations and farms from the early nineteenth century through the 1950s. Eventually the most important cotton producing region, it was not the first area planted because of the dense forest, frequent flooding, and unhealthy environment. Instead, it was increasingly planted as the soils of the hills were depleted and the levee system was improved in the 1890s (Giles 1973:183-4, WPA 1949:99). It was also in the 1890s that the railroad system expanded, facilitating the extraction of lumber. This region is flanked to the west by a ridge of low bluffs or hills that run the length of the state where much of the original plantation economy of the state resided. The lower portion of the Mississippi, along the bluffs, contains the River Cities of Natchez and Vicksburg, with their archetypical genteel ante-bellum plantations. The northeast portion of the state is called the hill country and it too was settled and developed relatively early. The center of the state includes a wedge called the Jackson Prairie running from the bluff hills to Alabama. This area was dominated by smaller farms, and truck farming became an important industry there in the first part of the twentieth century, particularly as the railroads increased transportation options.

The Piney Woods are named for the dense pine forests that covered it. Lumbering was the focus of the economy when this area developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Under the trees, the topsoil was thin, making farming a precarious endeavor after the forests were cleared, although new forestry industries eventually emerged. The WPA travel guide to Mississippi describes this southern region in these terms: "Strong men and women have been reared here, but the earth has been neither fecund enough to facilitate their getting away from it nor sterile enough to drive them away (1949:6)." However, in the 1890s lumber became Mississippi's most important economic resource. By 1908, Mississippi ranked third in the country for lumber production (McLemore 1973:39). At the same time that lumbering was gaining economic importance in the state, cotton was losing it as a result of soil depletion, boll weevils (Giles 1973:197-8), and

some wetter-than-usual years. Many of the towns in the Pinebelt, including Hattiesburg, were built in this post Civil War era. Gulfport, on the coast, grew as a port to move the lumber, and a system of railroads was built connecting the coast to the lumber-producing areas.

Finally, the Coast is the region south of I-10. I-10 is the most southern of the US coast-to-coast interstate highways, running parallel to the coast through the three most southern of Mississippi's counties, approximately five miles inland. It is parallel to US-90, which lies right along the beach, but is a safer highway for evacuations since it is unlikely to flood or be destroyed by hurricanes, as US-90 was. The Coast is spoken of as less distinctively Mississippian by people above that line of demarcation. Often this may come up in good-natured joking, but the ribbing gains meaning from the cultural geography that marks the Coast as distinctive. The singularity of the coast dates to a history that created a cultural region from Mobile to New Orleans. For example, it is a place where Mardi Gras is celebrated (Biloxi was the capital of 18th century French Louisiana before New Orleans), while it is not in the rest of the state.⁶ Prior to the Civil War, the Mississippi coast served as a resort for New Orleanians and planters from other parts of Mississippi, since it was cooler in the summer and less affected by yellow fever. After the Civil War, the tourist economy served the coast well, and it recovered more quickly than other parts of the state. In the 1880s, the seafood industry began to flourish with the export of shrimp and oysters to other parts of the country. The economy of the coast continued in this vein until prohibition, when it enjoyed a competitive advantage in illegal entertainment. Coastal communities could transport alcohol from the Caribbean (especially Cuba), and the 1920s and '30s saw the growth of an economy based on gambling and alcohol. This continued until a 1951 US Senate investigation of organized crime led to a crackdown (Nuwer and O'Brien 2006:20). Gambling continued however, but in an altered form in less ostentatious venues. Hurricane Camille destroyed the coast in 1969, and during the reconstruction of the 1970s, there was an effort to market the coast as a wholesome, family-oriented resort area (ibid:23). Nelson and Mason describe the coast of 1990, when a new law was passed to make gambling legal under restricted conditions, as "down-at-the-heels vacation destinations" (2006:27).

The 1990s were marked by the intensification of a symbolic alignment of the Coast with New Orleans, with the legalization of gambling as a development strategy. At the time, the Coast had not recovered from Camille, and

the Delta was the poorest area of the poorest state in the country. Legislators from the two areas joined forces to pass a law legalizing casinos, as long as they remained on water and the citizens of a county voted to legalize them.⁷ Placing casinos on water or Native American lands displaces vice while leaving it readily accessible. Originally, the casinos would have cruised in Mississippi waters, but one of the sponsors removed the words “under way” from the description of casino vessels at the last minute (Nelson and Mason 2006:32), and it passed, clearing the way for casinos to be located on barges located just off shore and connected to related on-shore buildings, such as hotels. In the Coast and Delta (north Mississippi River) areas, casinos led to higher than state average employment growth (Von Herrmann 2006:76).⁸ In 1999, Mississippi ranked third in the country for the size of its casino industry (Richard 2006:156).

Coastians take pride in being different from people north of them, but also talk of feeling neglected by the more northern centers of state power. People from both above and below Highway 10 have commented to me on the cultural difference, either commiserating with me for being so close but not actually on the coast, or telling me I am fortunate to be north of the cultural divide. “They” are different, of questionable political, moral, or social character: socially either too liberal or too conservative. In this moral geography, the Mississippi Gulf Coast is a place caught between the lure of a licentious New Orleans to the west and, to the north, the Mississippi proud to be located in the Bible Belt. Religiously, the Coast is understood by South Mississippians to have a stronger Catholic presence than the rest of the state. It is said by residents to be socially freer and less conservative than other parts of the state. The sense I get from talking to Mississippians in the almost five years I have lived there, and confirmed in conversation with some of my students, who could not recall studying it in their state history curriculum, is that the Coast is deemed less “Mississippi” than other parts of the state. Images and narrative constructions of the history of the state are more closely tied to the cotton plantations farther north in the Delta than the history of trade in the Gulf. In contrast, the Delta is, in the title of one book, “the most southern place on earth” (Cobb 1992). In Mississippi, then, the Delta plays a representational role similar to that of Mississippi for the nation in being the archetype of the South. This is reflected in the way in which both Mississippi and the Delta are represented as poor and black.⁹ In contrast, there is a clear similarity in the representational roles of the Coast and New Orleans for other Mississippians.

Hurricane Katrina thus hit at a time of change in Mississippi, but one in which the traditional cultural geography remained intact...until the storm destroyed much of the landscape south of the railroad running between I-10 and the coastline, decimated a large area north of the tracks, and caused major damages far inland through the southern part of the state. In the next section, I examine the first narrative reconstructions of Mississippi within the state in the immediate aftermath of the storm. In these stories, the state's cultural geography was reconfigured in dialogue with that of the nation itself. The narrative that emerged in those first months reflected the experience of place destroyed, but also served to rhetorically unite the state and present it and its citizens as truly national citizens. The moral geographies that separate Mississippi from the nation and the Coast from Mississippi were temporarily washed away by the winds and waters of the storm.

Moral Geographies Transformed by the Storm

It is rather the very gaps and proportions of meaning, space, and temporality that allow locality itself to emerge at all. (Weiner 2002:25)

The damage of the hurricane led to realignments in cultural geographies at three levels. It fractured social distinctions within communities, symbolically incorporated the Coast into the rest of the state, and Mississippi (a state accustomed to national disparagement) aligned itself with the nation. The governor, Haley Barbour, in the following quote from the first speech he gave after the storm, acts as a state representative in echoing the narrative mobilized by people throughout the affected area:

From Pascagoula to Pass Christian, from Waveland to Waynesboro, from Meridian to Moss Point, from Pearlton to Petal, Mississippians consistently display resilience and self-reliance. Our people aren't whining or moping around; they're not into victimhood. From the very beginning Mississippians have been helping themselves, and God bless them, helping their neighbors. The unselfish, even selfless attitude of people who've lost everything is awe-inspiring to me. Katrina did not discriminate. It leveled rich neighborhoods and poor neighborhoods. It knocked down the mighty as hard as it clob-

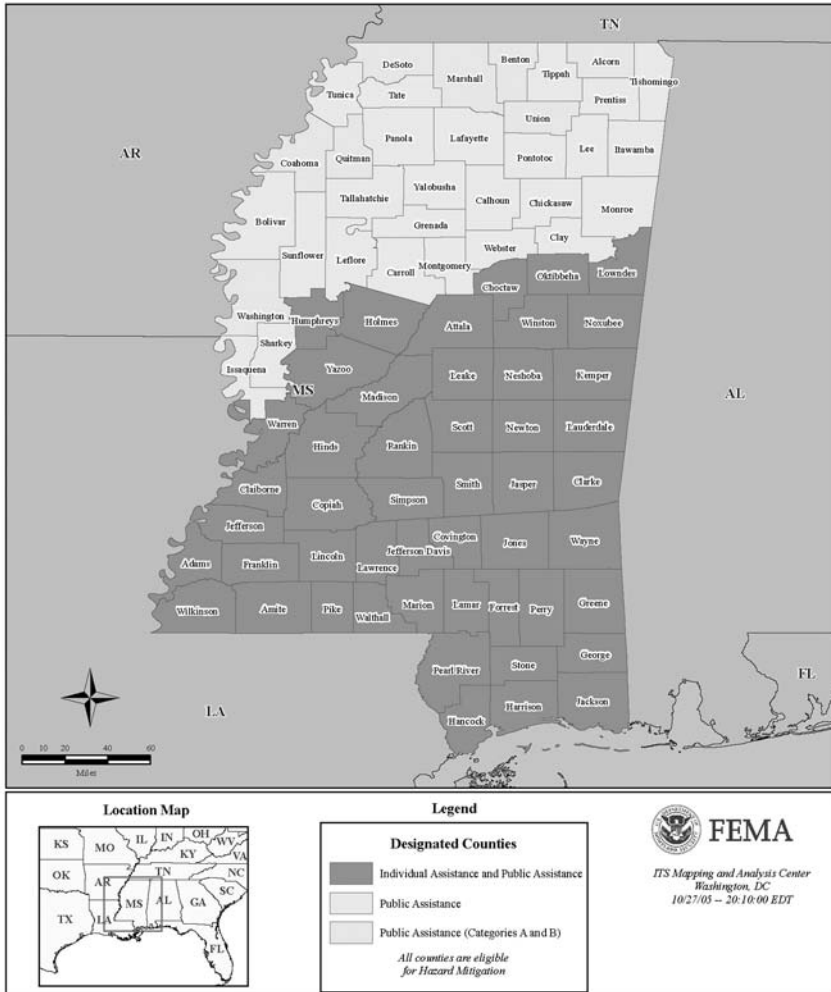
bered the lowly. Black or white, Vietnamese or Hispanics, Katrina leveled them all. (Barbour 2005)

A great deal of representational work is happening in this, which summarizes in one short paragraph a host of common understandings in the state. In particular, we see the recurrent themes of southern “resilience,” “self-reliance,” and “community.”

First is the creation of community. Barbour repeats a common theme in the state after the storm: “Katrina did not discriminate.” This observation perhaps takes on particular salience in the state that is so often equated with discrimination on the national stage. The truism that forces of nature cannot deliberately single out one race or class of people meant that the differences of class and race could be represented as wiped away by the winds of the storm. So, for example, a professor whose house was damaged made this observation when he told me that he had to borrow money and a car from someone in his church in order to leave town after his house was damaged. It is not hard to find relatively affluent and powerful people, including state representatives, affected by the storm. For example, Senator Trent Lott lost his home in Pascagoula. The fact that he had three homes has been less salient in stories of Katrina than the loss of the one. A focus on the one house puts him in the same situation as all the other people who were affected by the storm.

Not only did the storm not discriminate, the devastation and lack of resources in the most affected areas brought people together. When everyone was affected, the only way to survive or recover was to rely on each other. The narrative after the hurricane emphasized the role of neighbors and civil sector institutions such as churches that mobilized to help those affected by the storm while FEMA and the Red Cross, formal institutions sanctioned by the government to do that job, were disorganized and tardy.¹⁰ Stories about the days after the storm are peopled by neighbors and strangers who offered assistance.

Barbour also emphasized the unification of the state through calamity. In the quote that opens this section, the state is unified into a single imagined community through the alliterative listing of towns that maps the entire length and breadth of the part of the state that Katrina passed through. In fact, a large part of the state was affected, and the governor, as we might expect, emphasized this, for example in the same address about a month after the storm he states:

Figure 3: FEMA-1604-DR, Mississippi Disaster Declaration as of 10/27/2005

MapID e1a6e431194

I never thought there could be a storm worse than Camille, but this hurricane was far, far worse—spreading decimation not only across the entire Coast but extending its wrath more than 150 miles inland. Katrina is not just a calamity on the Coast; it is a major disaster for so much of South Mississippi.

After Hurricane Katrina, the entirety of Mississippi was eligible for what FEMA calls “Hazard Mitigation.” Forty-nine counties were declared a

disaster area eligible for individual assistance and the entire state (eighty-two counties) was eligible for public assistance (FEMA 2005). The map produced by FEMA, in which the darker shading indicates the area designated for individual assistance, illustrates the way in which the disaster was constructed as a state-wide calamity.

Although the Coast was more affected than areas in the center and north, in this map there is no distinction made between the area south of I-10 and the rest of the state. On the ground (and in the pace of recovery after), the difference between the damages, sometimes substantial, suffered by people farther inland and those of residents of the coast was much clearer, but this map and the Governor's words project a "we're all in this together" sentiment of inclusiveness. In doing so, they subverted the old moral geography of coastal difference.

This state unification was reflected in the placement of the Biloxi lighthouse on the first license plate design to come out after the storm, in October 2007.¹¹ The Mississippi State Tax Commission (2007) announcement of this newest design echoes the themes of citizen valor while also introducing the idea that the storm integrated the state into the nation. After a brief history of the lighthouse, the press release continues:

And, on August 29, 2005, it stood defiant against the wind and surge of Katrina. Today, it is no longer just a beacon to seafarers, but a tangible testament of resilience. The Biloxi Lighthouse stands proud and tall representing those who weathered the storm.

Joe Blount, Commissioner of Revenue, said "this tag design is intended to be a reminder to us of all those who lost so much from Katrina, to serve as a symbol of our citizens' commitment to recovery as well as a symbol of our gratitude to all Americans for their prayers and generous support."

Just as the classification and mapping of counties into a disaster area blurred the difference between the coast and the rest of the state, the stories of how Mississippians responded to the disaster blurred the difference that normally sets the state apart from the country. Feeling abandoned by government agencies, those affected helped themselves and each other, identifying as Mississippians with a "can-do" attitude that didn't wait for handouts. As Barbour put it, "Mississippians consistently display resilience and self-reliance." Those traits, with community involve-

ment, frequently recur in Mississippian narratives of the aftermath of the storm. Self-reliance and a positive attitude based on hard work, rather than self-pity or a sense of entitlement, are signs of good citizenship in the United States, as is civic responsibility and reaching out to the deserving who are in need. Mississippians' self-representation after the storm then highlighted the ways in which they proved meritorious in the face of disaster and the failure of the national government. Symbolically, Mississippians repositioned the state to be more truly a part of the country through the exemplary character and citizenship of the affected population. Ironically, then, it was through the destruction of the state physically that it was able to claim a place in the nation rhetorically.

The hurricane re-incorporated the Coast into Mississippi and Mississippi into the nation by narrating the leveling of difference and a coming together of a community of self-reliant citizens. In doing so, Mississippians tended to displace the usual otherness of the Coast in the state and the state in the country onto Louisiana. For example, in a recent editorial on the coincidence of Mississippi ranking first in religiosity and third in use of on-line pornography, Rogers (2009) begins with the invisibility of the state in national consciousness of Hurricane Katrina and the churches' role after the storm. He lives in Washington, DC and makes people guess where he is from when they hear his Southern accent. His favorite clue is "I come from the state that was hit the hardest by Hurricane Katrina," to which people guess Louisiana. He continues: "We know they are wrong about that one, and we know why: Mississippi pulled itself together during Katrina in a way that minimized the attention it received." "The state stepped up." The story of Mississippian resourcefulness, mobilized by citizens and government of the state alike,¹² is in clear contradistinction to the representations of New Orleans in the media in the days after the Katrina. Mississippians (at least those who do not have close ties to New Orleans) reflect those familiar images in commonly representing Louisiana and Louisianans as waiting for help, "with their hands out," unable to pull together to help themselves and their community. In contrast, Mississippians represent themselves as fitting the model of the "worthy American" who pulls himself up by his bootstraps while placing Louisianans in the role of the unworthy who required rescue. The contrast extended beyond the level of individual citizens and communities to the states themselves, since the elected representatives of Mississippi were perceived as handling the crisis well, while Louisiana was seen as ineffective.

This narrative is implicitly and sometimes explicitly racialized, since the tragedy of New Orleans stands metonymically for the effects of the hurricane on Louisiana (little was heard or reported on places that were affected outside New Orleans). Yet while New Orleans is represented as African-American, Mississippi's coast in contrast is not the most "Black" region of that state. This perception has some basis in demographic facts, as compiled by the 2007 US Census estimates. The percentage of Blacks in the United States as a whole is 12.8, but in Mississippi it is 37.2. The percentages in the three coastal counties vary, but are lower: Hancock County 6.9, Harrison 22.5, and Jackson 22.3, although this varies by town within the counties. In contrast, in the seventeen counties of the Delta, the percentage of Blacks ranges from 20.2 (DeSoto County) to 80.8 (Holmes County). In comparison, the percentage of Blacks in Louisiana is 31.9, roughly similar to Mississippi. However, the percentage of Blacks in New Orleans in the US 2000 census was 67.3. Thus, although the percentage of Blacks on the Mississippi Coast is high compared to the country as a whole, the effect within the state is to make the coast seem relatively white.

The images of New Orleans in the national media, which informed perceptions within Mississippi of what was happening in Louisiana, often drew on the representational strategies that Koptiuch (1992) calls "third worlding at home."¹³ Marginalized citizens, particularly urban African Americans, are frequently represented as distant from national norms of citizenship and consequently less deserving of assistance because they are not perceived as helping themselves. In the process, Koptiuch argues, a "third world" or non-modern and under-developed place is created within the space of the United States. In many ways, Mississippi has long played this role within the country. It has been an "underdeveloped" state with an economy that was primarily based on the extraction of primary resources until industrialization picked up in the last decades of the twentieth century, drawn by labor that was cheaper than in the north. The poorest state in the nation, it has been represented as the antithesis of all that the country wants to believe that it is.¹⁴ After Hurricane Katrina, however, the state and its citizens represented themselves as part of the nation and many people from the rest of the country continue to contribute to that reintegration materially by coming to South Mississippi to offer their volunteer labor in reconstruction. The United States takes much of its character from the idea of being a modern, developed place.

So, ironically, although Mississippians implicitly represented their state and themselves as exemplary citizens after the storm, they did this in a context in which the modernity that characterizes the country was destroyed. In the next section, I consider how this destruction was viewed and the reconstruction of the Coast.

The Destruction and Reconstruction of Modernity

The cosmological space of God's dominion was usurped with the space of increasing privatization and commercialization of land. Eschatological time was replaced with an increasing sense of market time, technological time, productive time. (Wood 2004:516)

When the governor of Mississippi first visited the coast after Katrina, his impression was that it "looked like the hand of God had wiped away the coast." Barbour has continued to resort to this image of God's hand in the years since (e.g., Henderson 2006 and Barbour 2007), so it clearly resonates with him, and he must feel that it will with others as well. For example, a 2007 campaign ad featured his voice declaiming:

Katrina turned out to be so much worse than Camille. It looked like the hand of God had wiped away the Coast. As strange as it seems, one of the biggest outcomes of Katrina is that it has tremendously helped the image of Mississippi. Our people are strong, resilient, self-reliant. How can you not be optimistic about Mississippi? We're not only recovering, but Mississippi's image has never been better, because people saw after Katrina the spirit and character of the people of Mississippi, and all the world and all of America liked what they saw. Governor Barbour. (Campaign ad)

We understand the present through stories of the past. Camille, the hurricane that devastated the Coast in 1969, provided a recurrent historical reference point for understanding Hurricane Katrina.¹⁵ Apart from the governor's use of the disaster for political ends in his campaign, we again see the elements of the larger narrative with the implicit reincorporation of the state into the moral nation made explicit here: "and all of America liked what they saw." It is not clear this was the case, since as

Rogers noted in the editorial discussed earlier, the effects of the storm on Mississippi were nearly invisible to the national audience in the face of the tragedy of New Orleans. Mississippians, with the apparent exception of those with personal connections to New Orleans, resented that invisibility (c.f. Warneka 2007:8).¹⁶

The image of God's hand destroying the Coast was potentially, and I presume unintentionally, freighted, given the association of the coast with vice and social liberalism. It eerily echoes the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah as well as those who suggested that Hurricane Katrina was God's retribution for the vice of either New Orleans or the country. Franklin Graham, for example, explained Hurricane Katrina with these words: "There's been satanic worship. There's been sexual perversion. God is going to use that storm to bring revival. God has a plan. God has a purpose" (cited in Reyes 2005). Similarly, David Crowe, Executive Director of the organization Restore America, quoted Psalm 107:25-33:

He raiseth the stormy wind which lifted up the waves of the sea...He turns rivers into a desert, and springs of water into a thirsty groups; a fruitful land into a salt waste, because of the wickedness of those who dwell in it.

And then he asked "[w]as there 'wickedness' in New Orleans, Alabama, and Mississippi?" (2005) and answered, yes. He specifically cites the Gulf Coast gambling industry in Mississippi, noting that a new casino was to open that Labor Day weekend. He, with others such as the organization Repent America (2005), also cites the association of homosexuality with New Orleans and the planned "Southern Decadence" celebration in that city.¹⁷ Although Barbour may have only been awe-struck by the immensity of the destruction, without intending to invoke an image of God's wrath and agency, his choice to emphasize complete destruction that seems to leave no trace of the past conveniently clears the way to refashion the Coast in a new way. If God wiped the Coast away, Mississippians would rebuild it "bigger and better," to use the phrase I began to hear just weeks after the storm hit.

What Barbour seems to have intended to evoke by his metaphor was not God's wrath, but rather to highlight the fact that Hurricane Katrina erased much of the built environment of the coast, removing from the landscape the places that marked people's lives. The destruction of infrastructure also distorted the time and space of modernity. It was nearly

impossible—and for some people who were blocked in by downed trees, completely impossible,—to move. This was true in some places and for some individuals even distant from the coast, for example in Hattiesburg, sixty-some miles from the coast, there were stories of people who had to saw their way out of their houses. It took first responders seven and a half hours to go sixty miles south from Hattiesburg down highway 49 to the coast. Narratives of the time after the storm contain frequent discussions of the difficulties of movement: people stuck in their homes, roads that were impassable, the difficulty of obtaining fuel.

This distortion of space and time was reflected discursively in the fact that for many people it seemed that the Coast destroyed could only be described with reference to other places. An analogy often used to describe first impressions was that it looked like “a third world country,” which largely seemed to mean that the amenities and infrastructure thought to accompany life in a “developed” capitalist economy and modernity were destroyed. This was not simply a spatial displacement, but also a temporal one given the common practice of representing the “third world” and “less developed” countries and cultures as living in the past (c.f. Hayden 2006). As space and time were altered, so too was place.

Modernity is often noted for destroying place (c.f. Entrikin 1991 *passim*) because it leads to a decrease in the marked differences between places and because increased mobility means the ties between a person and place come to be contingent rather than necessary. The storm, in temporarily destroying the space/time of modernity, regenerated, at least for some, a remembered place. In other words, the place became pre-modern in both positive and negative ways for some people. For a time, one woman told me, the Coast reminded her physically of the place of her childhood, before the construction of the casinos, with an unobstructed view of the beach that defines the place.¹⁸ Despite the fact that even this “natural” feature is not quite what it seems, since the twenty-six miles of white sands had been distributed by human hands, not God’s, it is the most salient and significant marker of place that Coastians talk about in describing life there. The aftermath of the storm also restored the coast socially to an idyllic, pre-modern, place torn from the mythic past when neighbor knew neighbor. As noted above, a recurrent theme when Mississippians talk about their experiences of the days after the storm is the way neighbors came together. In fact, people frequently say that it is when they got to know their neighbors, as a consequence of the enforced immobility and

mutual dependence. This recreated place and community from a pre-modern past, albeit one that was in other ways nightmarish for the people most cut off from what we have come to think of as modern amenities such as functioning sewage systems, clean water, and air-conditioning.

Reconstruction after the storm meant restoring not just the place, but also—and more importantly—the space/time of modernism after a period first of apocalypse (and in certain respects “primitive utopia” for some, at least in retrospect), as the world seemed to be coming to an end (or at least was represented that way in national media) during the crisis, and then community. With the Enlightenment and the expansion of capitalism, time became measurable, divided into even units, rational. Harvey (1990:424) notes that the mathematical conceptions of space and time were necessary concomitants of “Enlightenment doctrines of political equality and social progress.” For example, Jeffersonian democracy was accompanied and facilitated by overlaying a grid on newly acquired land as the United States expanded. However, this separating and then parceling out of time and space into uniform units also facilitated their expropriation and use in a capitalist system that depends upon the production of inequalities that are spatially (in addition to socially) distributed in order to ensure the production of profits.

It is not simply that experiential or social time is replaced with a linear and measured time that can be bought and sold in modernity. In capitalism, the linear narrative of progress has assumed mythic power, and this is accordingly an important underlying theme in representations of reconstruction. Immediately people asserted, in defiance of nature, that the Coast would come back “bigger and better,” an exemplar of progress. If the time of capitalism is progressive, linear, and homogeneously measurable, the space of capitalism is similarly smooth—an empty container to be measured, discovered, privatized, and developed. In fact, of course, historically space had to be emptied before development could happen. This was done, for example, through the enclosure of common lands and the removal of indigenous populations. In the process, a workforce and new forms of inequality were created.

Governor Barbour’s image of the “hand of God” wiping the Coast away emphasized the devastation, but also restored the Coast to an imagined time when it was empty space to be developed by entrepreneurs. Historical landmarks, including ones that survived Camille, were wiped away; leaving a site without markers, a placelessness that left many peo-

ple unable even to locate where things used to be when they returned to their former homes on the Coast. Major historical sites such as Jefferson Davis's house,¹⁹ Beauvoir, and countless other significant landmarks and architectural treasures along the beach either disappeared or suffered major damage, as had more personal landmarks like houses and trees. Gone too were the restaurants, churches, and other places that marked people's lives. When a student from the coast brought me photographs that fall, her explanation of them was filled with stories of where she used to go and things she used to do with her friends and family. In the aftermath of the storm, when I met people and asked where they were from, it was common for Coastians to phrase their answer in the past tense. The possibilities this emptying of space through the destruction of place would create were captured in the words of Billy Guice, a lawyer from a prominent Biloxi family, in the days after Katrina: "Why zone the historical district if there's no history left?" And: "This storm just means you don't have to clear off the site" (Boyer 2005). In both the Coast and New Orleans, there were reports and rumors of people who spoke about the storm as having conveniently eliminated inconvenient people who seemed to get in the way of progress. Enkidu (2005), for example, reports conversations shortly after Katrina saying that it was God's way to eliminate Blacks from the city. I heard of people making similar observations for both New Orleans and the Coast since then, although on the Coast the examples I heard were not racialized, but rather put in terms of class. The details of eligibility for grants also tended to favor the middle and upper class (Petterson et al. 2006:659).²⁰ Petterson et al. noted in 2006 that the hurricane had intensified gentrification and predicted that it would lead to what they called "casinofication," as the large corporations owning the casinos would have the resources to rebuild when independent non-casino tourist hotels would not (2006:660-661).

The Coast is being rebuilt at a time when it seems impossible to think about a place outside of the demands and invisible hand of the Market, as reflected, for example, in the centrality that attracting jobs takes in local politics. One man from the Coast that I spoke with in 2007 believed that tourism was the reason for the reconstruction that had taken place, although it also benefits Coastians who need jobs. He expressed difficulty answering my questions regarding recovery, telling me that he does not really know much about economics, although I had not phrased my questions in terms of economic development, which was not my primary interest. More generally,

there has been a pervasive fear that it is being built, more than *rebuilt*, and that there will be no place for Coastians. That is, the reconstruction is changing the face of the Coast because those who can afford to build are those with money. As one resident said a year after the storm:

So it'll come back. But, I think one thing we ought to keep an eye on is, who's going to come back with it? There are a lot of people who have invested generations of heart and soul into this beach. And it may just look like a beach to people watching on TV, but it's more than that to people who've grown up here, whose grandparents were here, and lived through Camille. (Shepard Smith quoted in Tattersall 2006)

In particular, large buildings of condominiums rose where family homes had been. Geographies of power, including the difficulty of obtaining affordable insurance, are reshaping the Coast into a place that seems to be dominated by tourists and capital, with both constructed as necessary for the economic well-being of the locale. Waugh and Smith (2006:214) argue that this reshaping, or “redeveloping,” of the Coast was always the goal, although official rhetoric focused on rebuilding communities, pointing to the inclusion of radically new types of “community” development based on the model of “new urbanism,²¹” and the inclusion of new resorts and condominiums.

The rhetorical erasure of social difference in the aftermath of Katrina was accompanied by a social incorporation of hurricane survivors into the rest of the country through a massive outpouring of private aid and volunteer assistance that continues still. Similarly, the Coast was incorporated into Mississippi, and social differences on the Coast muted. National coverage of Hurricane Katrina, focused primarily on the city of New Orleans, included recognition of the great inequalities in our society. However, the story told of Katrina in Mississippi served to dissolve distinctions and reunite communities that had been divided. The destruction of place and homogenizing of space was reflected in the social leveling found in the re-creation of community, the unification of Mississippi, and the rhetorical incorporation of the state into full national citizenship. Ironically, that work of re-incorporation into the nation was not reciprocated by the national media, and Mississippians felt, and continue to feel, neglected in comparison to New Orleans. In practice, however, the state continues to receive large numbers of volunteers from all over the coun-

try who are assisting in reconstruction. Their presence continually revitalizes the connection of south Mississippi to the national community.

However, that time of community has now been replaced partially by a participation of the Coast in the national system through the capitalist economy, tourism, and immigration that reconstitute it as a place of exclusions and inequalities. As reconstruction has continued, that sense of community and togetherness that emerged in the days after the storm has dissolved. Now there are at least two coasts, that of the relatively affluent who have been able to rebuild despite the difficulties of uncertain building codes and the insurance woes, and that of those who cannot mobilize the necessary resources or were either renters or homeless. This outcome reflects the fact that the allocation of resources after a disaster reflects the power dynamics of who can make their projects and needs heard in the years following a disaster (Pettersen et al. 2006:646). In the process, some “preexisting trends are amplified and others are diminished” (*idem*).

Conclusion: the Perennial Gale of Creative Destruction

Place, then, can be read as a geographical expression of modernity’s paradox—that tension between progress and loss—a creative yet ambivalent space carved out somewhere between the oppressiveness of the new order and the imprisonments of tradition. (Oakes 1997:511)

Capitalism and hurricanes turn out to have a lot in common. Schumpeter (1950) caught the nature of capitalism and its relationship to place nicely in the memorable phrase “perennial gale of creative destruction” and the warning that there is no “perennial lull.” Both natural disasters and capitalism are social products understood through mythic narratives of invisible hands guiding forces outside our control. In order to understand either, we need to take into consideration the geographies of power and discourses of space and time that shape regional landscapes and forge competing places out of larger geographies. In both cases, also, social inequalities may be refracted through a lens of individual equality that makes the inequities either more or less visible. In national coverage, particularly of New Orleans, the storm was said to make inequality visible, as if this had been a well-kept secret. In Mississippi, a state notorious for inequality, the storm was said to create equality and community that

echo myths of an earlier, pre-modern, time. However, while that may have been true in some regards after the storm, in the long-run it has been clear that everyone was not affected equally and that the preexistent inequalities greatly impacted people's ability to recover from disaster. Capitalism, too, is a system of social and spatial inequality that is intricately tied to an ideology of individual equality inherited from the Enlightenment. Myths linked to the Enlightenment of progress and individualism then shaped the reconstruction of the Coast.

Myths not only give shape to our understandings of the form taken by the time and space that shapes our understandings of place, they also define the nature of society and belonging. They are the stories that form a kind of cultural constitution, defining core truths about where we come from and the nature of the world. I began this paper by asking what kind of space/time and what values are reconstituted as a place destroyed is reconstructed. The answer seems to be that the fragmented spaces and capitalist values that were shaping lives before the storm gain strength in the commitment to a "bigger and better" future. The storm briefly destroyed modernity, and in the midst of the pain, residents recreated an imagined place. Since then, reconstruction has not been simply rebuilding physical infrastructure and buildings, but also reconstituting modernity in a place caught between progress and loss.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was originally presented for a panel at the 2007 American Anthropological Association meetings. I am grateful to Deborah Jackson and Bilinda Straight for organizing that panel, the other panelists for a collegial and intellectually stimulating morning, and Ruth Behar for her commentary. I thank Amy Young and Chimene Gecewicz for reading a draft of the conference presentation and Barbara Hester and Mark Miller for their readings of an expanded version. I am particularly indebted to Deb and Bilinda for their insightful assistance and encouragement on both the conference presentation and my first effort to expand on it, and Beth Notar, whose comments and suggestions significantly improved the final version.

ENDNOTES

¹Jansson (2003) analyzes this phenomenon as a form of "internal orientalism."

²This is, of course, true of many and possibly most or all of the states in the country. Louisiana and Alabama have similar north/south distinctions.

³The map can be found at <http://www.arts.state.ms.us/folklife/view-by-region.php>.

⁴Interestingly, the state's congressional districts conform quite closely to this same set of regions.

⁵The borders dividing the rest of the state are somewhat less consistent between sources I have examined. The lower part of the state along the Mississippi river is often separated off into the River Cities or the Natchez District (e.g. Higginbotham and Monti 1995, WPA 1949:5). The Mississippi tourism website extends that region over to the center of the state and calls it Capital/River. That site, like Kirkpatrick (1997) also combines the next region, the Piney Woods, into the Coastal area, to form South Mississippi. In other cases, the Piney Woods run over to the River Cities and the Capital, central, area of the state is incorporated into the Hills.

⁶In the spring 2009 semester one of my students from Jackson, 160 miles from the Coast, asked what Mardi Gras and the parades were. The rest of the class concurred that people there would not typically know about Mardi Gras.

⁷Nelson and Mason (2006) argue that part of how the bill could pass is that its sponsors snuck it through with little publicity while the state was focused on a bill that would have created a lottery.

⁸These areas, unlike the south river area (Natchez, Vicksburg, and Greenville), are within driving distance of large population centers that increase their draw (Von Herrmann 2006:71).

⁹The truth is that both Mississippi and the Delta within the state have higher concentrations of poverty and Black citizens. However, the creation of an absolute difference out of relative ones serves to essentialize identities and inscribe them in space. As Jansson says: "In the process, the commonalities and kinship are obscured by the signification of difference (2003:365)." As southerners like to point out, racism also exists in the North.

¹⁰Although it was presented as a critique of government failure, in fact this reflects the move over the past two decades to privatize government functions. It also presaged the way that reconstruction would be largely decentralized and organized by corporations and, particularly religious, non-profit relief organizations (c.f. Lassahn 2006).

¹¹The design on the state license plate changes every five years.

¹²Some scholars have examined the difference between Mississippi and Louisiana state government responses after Katrina. Jurkiewicz (2007) looks at Louisiana's "ethical culture" and how this led to communication problems between groups. Waugh (2007) focuses on the different levels of experience that state officials had with The Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC), an organization that structures inter-state mutual aid during disasters. Others have highlighted the fact that Governor Barbour of Mississippi is a Republican with national ties, including rapport with President Bush while Governor Blanco of Louisiana was a Democrat who was not on good terms with Mayor Nagin of New Orleans.

¹³For some analyses of the media and Hurricane Katrina, see Grismore (2007), Littlefield & Quenette (2007), Stock (2007), and Tierney et al. (2006).

¹⁴After Hurricane Katrina, many commentators suggested that the tragedy of New Orleans served to bring to light the ways in which race and class fragment our country and create vulnerabilities that go against our image of the United States as a country. Howard Zinn suggested (1964) that the South represented the essence of US society, a place where the nation could see its "blemishes magnified."

¹⁵Some people who chose not to evacuate made that decision based on the reasoning that would surely be safe in buildings that had survived that earlier "once in a lifetime" hurricane—and nobody believed another could be worse.

¹⁶This relative invisibility of Mississippi seems to be continuing in the academic literature that is coming out on Hurricane Katrina. For example, of the eleven articles in the 2006 special issue on the storm of the *American Anthropologist* (Paredes 2006), only one is about Mississippi (Ethridge 2006). Another very rough indication of this is that a search of Google Scholar for “Hurricane Katrina” yields 27,700 results, which diminishes to just 1,810 when both “river” and “New Orleans” are excluded. A non-exhaustive inspection of edited volumes yields similar results even when “the Gulf Coast” is in the title.

¹⁷Others’ suggestions for why God would either strike the Gulf Coast or permit nature to do so included U.S. support for Israeli withdrawal and evacuation of the Gaza Strip (Klein 2005) and abortion (Media Matters 2005).

¹⁸We should not over-romanticize this, however, because she also spoke to me of horrors of the days after the storm, for example of some people who were drinking sewer water before aid and fresh water began arriving.

¹⁹Beauvoir was the focus of a rapid and very high profile repair and reconstruction effort. Restoration was completed in May of 2008.

²⁰This need not be conscious class bias. For example, new building codes required greater construction costs, poorer people are less likely to have insurance, and often poorer neighborhoods are in more vulnerable locations.

²¹Petterson et al. (2006:659) include a similar critique of New Urbanism in the recovery plans for New Orleans: that it favors a romantic vision of community over the more complex, pre-existing, historical communities.

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