



Bearing Witness: Assumptions, Realities, and the Otherizing of Katrina

ABSTRACT As post-Katrina rebuilding of Louisiana and Mississippi proceeds, we should heed the lessons from anthropologists and others studying aid and development in other parts of the world who point out that aid is often predicated on poorly examined assumptions about beneficiaries and local conditions. Hence, as the recovery after Katrina continues, assumptions about the U.S. South and about poverty, race, and class in the United States must be exposed and examined as well as assumptions about disaster victims and relief. Drawing on personal experiences, I examine here some of the assumptions with which I operated as a small group of friends and I organized an unofficial relief team to provide whatever aid we could to people on the Mississippi Gulf coast in the first few weeks after Hurricane Katrina. I recount the disconnections between my assumptions and the local conditions as relayed by Katrina survivors or that members of the team and I witnessed firsthand. [Keywords: Hurricane Katrina, Mississippi Gulf coast, relief work]

IN ALL MY LIFE, I never dreamed that I would be close to a disaster of the magnitude of Hurricane Katrina. I live in Oxford, Mississippi, approximately 200 miles directly north of the Mississippi and Louisiana Gulf coast (see Figure 1). I am an associate professor of anthropology and Southern studies at the University of Mississippi. I am not a disaster expert, nor am I a development or aid expert. My areas of expertise are environmental and cultural anthropology and the historic Southeastern Indians, and I have thought long about the U.S. South and its place in the world, both historically and in the present times. I understand the U.S. South to be a region that, although situated in the world system's center of industry, banking, and capital, resembles peripheries more than core countries (e.g., Dunaway 1996; Ethridge 2003; Lewis 1998; Peacock et al. 2005). Like the histories of other peripheries, the history of the U.S. South since the colonial era has been one of extractive economies, poverty, wide discrepancies in wealth, strict class lines, and racial and ethnic conflicts.

Most U.S. citizens acknowledge this history, but one of the surprises about Katrina was the fact that most of these factors are still in play (Wright 2006). Time and again one heard news commentators and public officials exclaiming how conditions in the aftermath of the storm were like those in a "third world country." One reason for such comparisons was certainly the delay in getting relief into the worst-hit areas, resulting in the wretched scenes we all saw on TV. Another reason was that Katrina washed away the

veneer of U.S. prosperity to reveal deep poverty and entrenched class lines that the larger U.S. public took to be vanishing if not gone. In the aftermath of the storm, for instance, government officials, reporters, and others puzzled over why people did not evacuate. Mississippi governor Haley Barbour even lamented the loss of life in these terms, repeating many times how he had beseeched people to leave. I think we now understand why some "chose" to stay. Many underestimated the strength of the storm. More often, however, people simply did not have the resources to leave. Leaving required funds, connections, and transportation, things the working poor, unemployed poor, ill, and elderly did not have and could not muster. The majority of Katrina victims shown on TV screens around the world, then, were the U.S. poor.

Once the poverty was exposed, observers, also severely jarred by the scenes of thousands of African Americans stranded in New Orleans, drew the conclusion that in the U.S. South, poverty and wealth coincide with race. However, along the Gulf coast of Mississippi, class lines do not neatly overlay race lines. In Mississippi's coastal counties—Hancock, Harrison, and Jackson—the population is overwhelmingly white (75 percent to 90 percent). African Americans constitute the majority of the remaining 25 to 10 percent, along with small populations of Latinos, Vietnamese, and other immigrant populations. In 1999, the per capita income for these counties was around 18,000 dollars (compared with a 1999 national per capita income of 21,587



FIGURE 1. Map of Mississippi and eastern Louisiana, showing Gulf coast towns and counties mentioned in the text. (Map by Clifford Holley, Center for Population Studies, University of Mississippi)

dollars), and the 2003 poverty rates for the counties' populations as a whole ranged from 15.0 to 16.5 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 2006). The survivors whose stories are recounted in this article are all white and mostly from lower-income families.

The questions of poverty and race that Katrina poses no doubt will be analyzed and debated in years to come. As we begin these sorts of analyses and others, we must examine our own assumptions about the U.S. South that we, as researchers and as U.S. citizens, may hold. We must also examine the assumptions we have about bringing aid and relief to a stricken area that, in the public imagination, is like "a third world country." Anthropologists have thoroughly exposed the colonial logic behind constructing indigenous and non-Western peoples as "Other." But that such "Otherizing" occurs on our own doorsteps may be another Katrina surprise. As I became involved in the relief efforts in the weeks after the storm, I was surprised by my own "otherizing" of Katrina. I now realize that as I worked alongside many other local citizens, I structured my efforts around a set of unquestioned assumptions that not only denied self-reliance and power to Katrina survivors but that also misconstrued much about the disaster itself. Even at the time I realized that most of my ways of understanding were not matching the on-the-ground realities that I was encountering during those few weeks. My experiences on

the Mississippi Gulf coast then may offer some insights into the unquestioned assumptions that we have about disaster survivors and the poor of the southern United States.

ASSUMPTION 1: SOCIAL CONTRACTS ARE BINDING

On Saturday, August 27, 2005, I woke up to National Public Radio relating that Hurricane Katrina was over the Gulf of Mexico, a Category 3 storm and strengthening. It was headed for New Orleans. When I had last checked the news, Katrina had passed over the lower Florida peninsula as a Category 1. I had put it out of my mind as just another mild, late-summer hurricane. Hearing the newscast, I jumped out of bed and turned on the TV to the weather channel, then flipped to CNN and any other channel with continuous coverage of what reporters had already dubbed "the perfect storm." The radar showed a massive storm spanning the entire Gulf of Mexico and predicted to be a Category 5 within a few hours. My husband, Denton Marcotte, and I went about our Saturday affairs, with one eye on the storm.

Growing up in the South, I had heard since childhood the predictions of chaos and disaster if New Orleans ever took a direct blow from a large and forceful hurricane. The predictions were so well known and regular that they had taken on the proportions of an urban myth. After all it had not happened in recorded history. The year before, Hurricane Ivan had headed straight for New Orleans, and then it took that jag northeast and hit Alabama and the Florida panhandle instead. So when the weather forecasters mapped Katrina's path, I, undoubtedly like many others, waited for the 11th-hour northeast jag, confident that it was coming. Even with the jag, though, we all knew that the landfall would be bad no matter where it occurred because of the sheer size and strength of the storm. Later that day, Mayor Nagin called a voluntary evacuation for New Orleans and Governor Barbour called a mandatory evacuation for Hancock County (Brookings Institution 2005).

By Sunday morning Katrina was a full-blown Category 5 storm, and the forecasters still had Katrina making a slow beeline for New Orleans. Mayor Nagin upgraded the evacuation to mandatory and opened shelters around the city for those unable to leave. We stayed glued to the TV the whole day, watching the evacuation of New Orleans and the Gulf coast, hearing the newscasters make the inevitable comparisons to Hurricane Camille, the only other Category 5 storm known to make landfall on the Gulf coast. The freeways were clogged with evacuees. As the day wore on, people who had opted to stay or who could not leave began to line up at the Super Dome, one of the "refuges of last resort," as dubbed by Mayor Nagin. Not covered on TV were the hundreds of people in numerous communities along the Mississippi Gulf coast also making their way to their refuges of last resort—high schools, churches, city halls, or any other public building with enough elevation to withstand the predicted 28-foot storm surge. I found out later after talking with survivors in Bay St. Louis and Waveland,

Mississippi, that once these shelters were full, officials could only advise people to return to their homes.

By Sunday evening, we had been keeping tabs on the storm for over 30 hours. A direct hit on New Orleans seemed imminent. We finally retired around midnight but awoke at 5:00 a.m. to watch the storm make landfall. Live feeds were still coming through on the TV. In these wee hours of the morning as Katrina bore down on the coastline, the streets of New Orleans and the Gulf coast were empty except for the news crews and first responders. We watched the early morning broadcast of the pouring rain and the wind whipping around everything in sight. Katrina made that last minute jag to the northeast, ever so slightly, to make landfall at Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana, at 6:10 a.m. (CDT) then again around 10:00 a.m. (CDT) across Lake Borgne at Hancock County, Mississippi, near Bay St. Louis–Waveland.¹ We did not see the landfall as the TV feeds were knocked out by then. So, with a sense of impending doom and dread and very little information, Denton and I, like thousands of others, went about our day.

The storm was moving slowly north–northeast, which put Oxford directly in its path. High winds and drenching rain were predicted, so before heading to work, we took down our birdhouses and chimes and pulled in our porch furniture and plants and otherwise prepared our property for a milder version of Katrina. Throughout the morning of August 29th, very little information on the damage was coming through, but we heard rumors that New Orleans was spared, except for the Ninth Ward, which was severely flooded. Another rumor circulated that Bay St. Louis–Waveland was destroyed. Then around 1:00 p.m. we heard that one of the levees in New Orleans was breached, and then another. New Orleans was filling with water. Things did not look good for the city. We also heard that much of Biloxi, Mississippi, about 40 miles east of Bay St. Louis–Waveland was also destroyed. None of these were official reports, but all of them proved to be fairly accurate. The next day I sent the following e-mail to a friend:

Hey Paige,

Wow, that was scary. Katrina came through Oxford last night—actually around 4:00 p.m. the winds started picking up. I was in a meeting, of course, and we all finally couldn't pay any more attention cause stuff was flying and slamming around so we called it quits and everyone headed home. Then, the storm got increasingly worse until around 11:00 p.m., which is when we finally got on the back side of it. We lost electricity around 8:00, but sometime in the middle of the night it came back on. So, lucky us, we are one of the few in the whole state that have electricity. That's about the closest I ever want to be to a real hurricane. I think all the students were having hurricane parties, but the wind scared the hell out of me—trees bending over, shingles flying off rooftops, rain swirling and pounding, pressure suction so severe that we could hardly open the doors, and our whole house was creaking for hours (and we live in a brick house). At one point, Denton and I were in the attic with flashlights trying to take care of some leaks and a huge gust of wind somehow pried opened the garage door and shot up

the attic stairs. I really thought that our roof was going to come off and take us with it! I haven't been out and about yet so I don't know if Oxford had any real damage—I heard that some windows were blown out at school, trees are down, and that there has been some flooding. Still, we only had a glancing blow. We are still getting strong winds this morning. The reports coming out of the Gulf are horrifying. It looks like Katrina will probably make its way all the way up to you guys [in New York]. That's all to report for now. Classes resume tomorrow. Take care, Robbie. [personal correspondence, August 30, 2005]

Over the next days, we went to work and carried on, but our hearts and minds could not be budged from concern over the devastation that was Katrina. Oxford and Lafayette County restored electricity to almost all residents within 24 hours, but the TV cable was out, and although local phone service was more or less intact, long-distance service was erratic and mostly unavailable. All of our news came over the Internet. The Tuesday after the storm the university cancelled classes, but I went to my office to get online as the mainframe was up and running. The news reporters were using terms such as “complete devastation,” “utter ruin,” and “unimaginable destruction.” I saw pictures of the Super Dome roof where pieces had sheered off, the breach in the levee on the 17th Street canal, and the beginning of what would become a five-day nightmare of people stranded on rooftops, on highways, at the New Orleans Convention Center, and at the Super Dome.

I also saw the first footage of the damage along the Mississippi Gulf coast. Coyt Bailey, a helicopter pilot for Mercury Aviation, and photographer Joe Root, reported for the NBC affiliate, WLBT-TV, Channel 3, in Jackson, Mississippi, providing an incredible flyover of the entire Mississippi Gulf coast.² For almost 30 minutes, as Root shot footage, Bailey narrated, in a calm but clearly shaken voice, where they were and what they were seeing versus what experience told him they should have been seeing from their aerial perspective. Of course, it was all either simply gone or in ruin, but Bailey's narration of what should have been there, juxtaposed by scenes of huge piles of debris, buildings knocked off their foundations, and whole towns obliterated transfixed all of us as we hovered over our departmental secretary's shoulder to look at her monitor.

The scope of the disaster along the Gulf coast is difficult to convey. Bailey's flyover perhaps conveyed it best because for 30 minutes the viewer moved along miles and miles of total devastation. A snapshot cannot capture the magnitude because a photograph is framed in space, and the Katrina disaster covered almost a full 75 to 100 miles, including, of course, at least one major U.S. city and countless smaller communities throughout Mississippi and Louisiana. What even Bailey's flyover did not capture and what was not covered by the national or local news were the throngs of survivors on the Mississippi Gulf coast stranded in their destroyed homes, in official shelters, or in innumerable makeshift ones. Here, they, like their counterparts in New Orleans, fought for their lives for five days, while they waited, expected, and counted on governmental aid.

On Thursday, September 1, 2005, I wrote this e-mail:

Hey Paul,

Thanks for the e-mail. We are okay, although we had a dreadful night when Katrina came through Oxford. We are all just in shock. The Gulf region was one of the most populated regions in the state, and everyone has either family or friends down there or from there. Everyone we know has refugees staying with them. It's just awful, awful, awful. New Orleans is a nightmare, and I'm getting madder and madder that no federal aid (or not much to speak of anyway) has arrived. Our poor states and local officials are doing the best they can, but we are simply overwhelmed. Denton and I are trying to volunteer, but can't even get through to volunteer agencies. It is amazing that our country can't handle this—we thought we could, I guess. Our esteemed leaders (Bush, Lott, Cochran) are no where to be seen, except Bush looking out his airplane window on his way home from vacation. What a fucking joke. As you can see I am pissed, and everyone down here is pissed. The folks in the regions that were hit are at their breaking point. Something has gotta give and quick. But, Denton and I are fine, and only lost a crepe myrtle tree, electricity, and cable. Don't you have a sister down there? Love, Robbie. P.S. Our home is open to anyone who needs a place to stay, in case you know of anyone. [personal correspondence, September 1, 2005]

As we all know now, little federal aid got through in that first week. Only through the heroic efforts of local police, fire, and medical workers, the tireless efforts of the Coast Guard, as well as the stupendous efforts of everyday citizens to help others did the storm not leave more death and destruction in its wake. Frustrated and angry after watching those awful days unfold, Denton, several of our friends, and I channeled our anger and disappointment into action. In a way, I think we inadvertently tested the idea that citizen action and committed individual NGO relief would be enough. But we found that it was not, and it is not.

U.S. citizens as well as people around the world were stunned at the failure of FEMA and other federal agencies to bring prompt relief to the area. Again, this failure will be debated and analyzed in the coming years, but the shock of the failure can be attributed to shock of the failure of our social contract. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1800) argued in 1763, one of the glues that holds a people together is the contract between a government and the people—a contract that stipulates that a government is for the goodwill of the people, that it will protect and aid the people, and that the people will give over decision making and sovereignty to that government. In the United States, we assume that if disaster strikes, we have a social contract to which a responsible government will abide. We were shocked when it did not.

ASSUMPTION 2: INFRASTRUCTURES ARE DURABLE

On the Saturday following the storm, Denton and I gathered with our friends Kirsten Dellinger, Scott Kreeger, and Jeffrey Jackson with one goal in mind: We were going to the stricken area to take water and food and to bring out

as many people as we could transport. None of us had ever been in a disaster zone before, and none of us had any experience in relief work. We started calling local, county, and state emergency agencies to see if such an idea was feasible, but our attitude was not to take “no” for an answer. Organizing, planning, and implementing this relief mission proved surprisingly difficult. It had not fully dawned on me that one of the many implications of an almost totally disabled infrastructure was that we could not simply get into our vans and cars and drive to the coast.

After speaking with the local Red Cross and a few others it became clear that two of our main problems were fuel and the route down there. It was now five days after the storm and there was little gas available south of Oxford. So we would need enough fuel to get to the coast and back—over 400 miles—and we would have to carry it with us. Phone communication was also down: One could make local calls but long-distance calls on either cell phones or land lines were nearly impossible. Electricity was still out in much of the state. Of course, there was no place to stay on the coast, and there was a strict sundown curfew, so we would have to get back to Oxford the same day. Many of the roads were torn up and many of the intact ones were impassable because of downed trees, utility poles, and wires, so all routes were uncertain. Also, we were hearing rumors that the National Guard, who were now down there, were stopping all people from entering the disaster zone. After many calls, I finally got through to the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) who informed us that the travel restrictions had been relaxed just that morning and that we could get through, but only if we had enough gas to get back out. His instructions were blunt, we had to “get in there, do our business, and get out” (conversation with author, September 3, 2005). He also said that we would be stopped on Mississippi Highway 49 at a check point and that they would want to verify that we had enough gas to get back out.

We planned on taking four vehicles down: three vans and a pickup truck to carry the gasoline. We had begun our planning with the goal of getting to Interstate 10 (I-10) north of New Orleans. But after Kirsten spoke with a Red Cross volunteer who suggested “unofficially” that we go to Bay St. Louis–Waveland and after I spoke with someone at the McComb County Civil Defense whom I had called to inquire about road openings also said that Bay St. Louis–Waveland needed aid, Bay St. Louis–Waveland became our destination. It was a good suggestion. Of course the whole area needed help, but this way we would stay in Mississippi and we might find some folks who had family in north Mississippi and needed a way to get to them. When I further inquired of the woman at the McComb County Civil Defense whether or not such a citizen convoy was a good idea, she said that the area needed help and that as far as she knew little federal or other aid had arrived; she concluded, “At this point, I am not gonna tell anybody to not go down there and help” (conversation with author, September 3, 2005).

We then turned to the problem of gasoline. We were hearing rumors of gas rationing at Oxford service stations; in addition, even if we could purchase it, we could not find containers large enough to transport that much fuel. So we moved to what was by then “Plan C,” which was to call everyone we knew and ask to borrow their household gas containers. Kirsten then hit on the idea of asking them to donate full cans of gas. We drew up a list, and all of us started calling. Within a few hours we had enough pledges. We instructed everyone to fill their containers and to bring them by Kirsten and Jeff’s house.

Around 6:00 p.m. Saturday, people started bringing their gas. They also donated money, water, food, diapers, dog food, flashlights, batteries, and anything else they thought that people might need. Kirsten and I later went to Kroger and bought more supplies—water, canned food, diapers, feminine hygiene products, and so on. Jeff and Denton went to fill some containers that did not have gas and to get a few things at Wal-Mart. We met back at Kirsten and Jeff’s house. When we returned, their walkway was full of small red gas cans.

I am still confounded by my assumption that infrastructures are durable. I have written extensively about the 18th-century Creek Indian infrastructure in the U.S. South (Ethridge 2003), and I know that communication and transportation networks are predicated on historical and environmental particulars and that an infrastructure cannot be assumed to be permanent nor stable over the long term. Reflecting on it now, I see that I had applied this understanding to “other” places—but not to the modern United States. I mistakenly assumed that the infrastructure on which I was dependent, the U.S. infrastructure, was durable.

ASSUMPTION 3: DISASTER ZONES ARE FATHOMABLE

Wrangling with the problems of a disabled infrastructure also made it apparent that other things in the stricken area most likely would also be unfamiliar and difficult. Even so, I continued to assume that I would be able to comprehend at some basic level the physical and social conditions in the disaster zone. As our team readied to go to the coast, I was apprehensive about what we would find, yet I admit to a sense of adventure as well. When we crossed into the disaster zone, however, my sense of adventure gave way to anxiety, and I became increasingly and profoundly confused by what I was seeing and experiencing. Anthropology teaches us how to understand people and cultural traits different from ourselves; it does not necessarily prepare us for when our own social order is rendered nearly unrecognizable.

On September 5, 2005, Kirsten Dellinger (2005) wrote the following e-mail:³

My mind is racing as I try to pull together the details of yesterday’s trip to the Mississippi coast. I’ll try to give you a brief report of the major events of the trip, but impressions and interpretations of what we saw on the journey from Oxford through Hattiesburg to Bay St Louis, MS will have to wait for another time. On Saturday, Sept. 3rd after responding to a call by Scott Kreeger suggesting that we

take a trip to the coast to pick up those needing to evacuate, we secured over 100 gallons of gas (thanks to all of our Oxford friends and colleagues), supplies, including bottled water, canned goods, toothbrushes, diapers, etc. (thanks to all of you), and 20 donated sandwich meals from McCallister’s. With numerous phone calls to official agencies (Red Cross, MEMA, etc.), university officials, and many others we were able to sketch out a solid plan by midnight. At 7 a.m. Sunday, Robbie Ethridge, Denton Marcotte, Jeff Jackson, Scott Kreeger, and I convened to load the supplies into three vans and one truck. We were able to leave Oxford at 8:20 a.m. The . . . van, driven by Robbie Ethridge and Kirsten Dellinger, took the lead. We were followed by the fuel supply truck driven by Jeff Jackson. Denton Marcotte took up the third position and Scott Kreeger held up the rear. The caravan kept in contact through cell phone (in Northern MS when we could get a connection) and by walkie talkies in the lead and rear cars (“Roger that” turned out to be Robbie’s favorite phrase). Our Oxford support team was led by David and Rita Swanson. Laurie Cozad and Cliff Ochs were also in the wings for back up support.

Just so you have a sense of the route: We drove from Oxford via Batesville to Jackson on 55 and then took 49 to Hattiesburg. From Hattiesburg, we took 59 south to state Hwy 53/603 past I10 all the way to 90. Our first stop was in Canton, MS, just North of Jackson. We had heard that fuel was available there and had planned to top off our tanks if possible. Every caravan on the road had the same plan and we soon found (as expected) that most gas stations were out of gas or there were 2 hour waits. This was not a problem for us as we had plenty of fuel for the trip. I think the first caravan we passed was near Grenada, MS. It was a line of about 30 (or more) Illinois police patrol cars and a boat. Later we passed a long caravan of military police/national guard. There were other smaller caravans like us with homemade “Red Cross volunteer” signs taped to the side of the car or “Katrina Aid Relief Supplies” handwritten across the back of small trailers. There were semi-trailers full of supplies, many utility trucks, three buses from Ohio, etc. Most of these caravans seemed to be headed to New Orleans. Just outside of Bay St. Louis, we were passed by an impressive series of mobile hospital units from North Carolina.

The destruction from Hattiesburg down to the coast was mind-numbing. On 59 there were trees down or snapped in half, guard rails crushed, highway signs twisted and toppled, and a few abandoned cars on the side of the road. We drove by a few people who stood on overpasses waving (one holding an American flag) and thanking the oncoming traffic for the help they hoped we were bringing. Just off of 59 on 53, we refilled our gas tanks on the side of the road and got information from two local men in an MDOT [Mississippi Department of Transportation] truck that 53/603 were now clear to the coast. These back roads gave us a glimpse of the destruction in rural, small town MS that is not likely to be covered by the national media. Houses and trailer homes were windowless, roofless, crushed by trees. All power lines were down. There were poles leaning precariously close to the road and loose wires [lying] across the road. Homemade spray painted signs outside of homes like, “Stop-Farm Bureau Help Us Please, FEMA MEMA welcome” and “Thank Y’all for your help” were stark reminders of the needs in this area. We passed a small distribution center north of Kiln, MS, where cars lined up down the highway waiting

for aid. A church sign read, "No Church Today." As we passed I10, we saw mud in the road, cars strewn about in the median and on the side of the highway, cars and boats piled up on top of one another. For brevity's sake, I can't give the full description here. Suffice it to say, that all five of us said that we felt like we were on another planet. Disorder and destruction at this magnitude are completely disorienting.

Our first stop in Bay St. Louis was at the intersection of 90 and 603. We pulled off to re-group and to plan our attempt to find a place to distribute the supplies and to get information on the location of the shelters. Robbie and Denton walked over to a Rite Aid parking lot that was set up with a line of official-looking tents. Although we had all initially thought that the tents might be for shelter, it was sobering to find out that this was the place to bring the dead. A plywood sign just outside the area read: DECON (we're assuming this means decontamination area?). The guy that Robbie and Denton talked to suggested that we head across the street to the K-Mart parking lot where he said that people had been camped out for days without supplies (I noticed later that there was a ragged sheet announcing "Camp Katrina" staked at the edge of the parking lot). We talked to 4 National Guard guys standing near what appeared to be a supply distribution point in the parking lot and asked them if they had directions to the shelter in a nearby school. They reported that while they patrolled the area, they had no maps and did not know where it was. It turns out that a religious group was handing out supplies and that all of the people in the parking lot were well stocked with water, etc. at the moment. We drove by the make-shift shelters at the edge of the parking lot where people had gathered any belongings that they might have and asked if anyone needed any water, food, other supplies, or a ride to Oxford. One man asked if we had any gas as he was trying to get out of town. Others, too, said they didn't need any supplies or a ride to a shelter in Oxford at the moment. Their home was in Bay St. Louis.

We successfully found the shelter at Bay St. Louis High School and dropped off all of our supplies there. We unloaded the vans along with others who were delivering water, ice, and supplies. Cases of water were stacked outside the building, while other supplies were handed through a window in a central kitchen or cafeteria area to volunteers (or other shelter residents) who helped stack them in the middle of the room. Donated clothes were piled high in an outside "courtyard" area. I want to emphasize that this "shelter" had no resemblance to the "neat cots in a row" kind of place that often comes to mind. During and after the storm people had broken into the high school for refuge. Most people had staked out areas on the sidewalks outside under covered walkways. They had thin pieces of blue plastic to sleep on and each family or small group of individuals cobbled together chairs or other bedding to make a living space for themselves on the ground. The school hallways were dark and filled with streaks of mud. The odor was horrendous. Raw sewage, I think. Eerie reminders of routine high school life such as a bright red "Freshman Frenzy" spirit sign painted on glass windows and colorful plastic notebooks stacked in hallway lockers were interspersed with twisted metal and downed wires. As of Saturday, there were still 600 people staying there. Several church buses arrived and took most of the evacuees to Anniston, AL and West Point, MS. We have a list of names for people looking

for loved ones. Robbie also copied down a list of the dead and missing compiled by a woman in the area. According to a Salvation Army volunteer, no outside help (neither National Guard nor Salvation Army or Red Cross) had any major presence until Friday or Saturday (Sept. 2 or 3rd). He explained that the Salvation Army was warned that it was too dangerous to go in. He seemed doubtful of this claim and finally insisted that they go serve meals there. On Sunday they handed out a meal of chicken breast, wheat bread, carrots, and peaches. In addition to delivering supplies, we each fanned out in the shelter and asked people if they wanted a ride to Oxford. Along the way we helped an unsteady older woman back to her sleeping area so that she could eat her meal, found an oxygen tank at an EMT station to aid a man with cancer [whose] tank was on low, offered the use of a cell phone to make contact with family member via cell phone (no luck), and just listened to people's unbelievable stories of tragedy and strength.

In the end, three people wanted to head North to the Red Cross shelter at First Baptist in Oxford: a single woman, [Tony] (lived her whole life in Bay St. Louis and wanted to get to family in Grenada, MS) and [Jean] and [Mark] (a 53 year old mother and her 25 year old son) originally from Toka, LA (Chalmette) with an incredible story of escape which included being separated during the storm, finding each other again, beating flood waters and all odds, being transported by barge to the New Orleans causeway on I-10, waiting 20 hours for a bus to the Astrodome, deciding to leave the Astrodome to make their way back to Picayune, MS with a new-found friend and then being dropped off in Bay St. Louis shelter the day before we arrived. After leaving the shelter, we went to a bombed out apartment complex where we had been told there was an older man ("grandpa") with a serious infection (some said a spider bite). Robbie, Denton, and Jeff found "Mr. [Jimmy]" with the aid of a few men still living in their devastated apartments, but he decided to stay. We left Bay St. Louis at 6:30 pm and on our way home, we stopped at a small shelter in an elementary school in Hancock County in Kiln, MS where a nurse named [Marie] seemed to have single-handedly maintained a shelter for older patients with medical needs. When she announced that we were driving to Oxford, we didn't have any takers. She asked if we would stop by again. Most of these individuals have family members who are also older, with medical conditions which prevented them from coming to pick them up.

After a long journey home (and a group meal at Wendy's where we met many, many others who were leaving the coast or who had just come back to see the condition of their homes), we arrived at the Red Cross shelter in Oxford at 2 am to be greeted by 4 volunteers. We were unbelievably relieved to find out this morning that [Tony] is staying with a local family and plans to settle in Oxford or nearby to be close to her children in Grenada. A volunteer at the shelter did amazing work to find [Jean] and [Mark's] adopted family in a small town outside of Pittsburgh, PA. They will fly out of Memphis on Tuesday to meet them.

It sounds cliché, but it is impossible to capture the scope of this disaster. There's much more to say about the conditions in Southern MS and on the Gulf coast and many more discussions we need to have about how best to bring aid to the area and to ask the people who have been affected what they need most. For tonight, please know

that all of your support has made a huge difference in the lives of at least three. [Dellinger 2005]⁴

Kirsten's memoir captures much about that weekend—our anxiety, our fear, our confusion, our determination. Reflecting on it now, I can see that, although we all knew it to be a dangerous endeavor, we were still naive about being in a disaster zone. I certainly did not realize that much about being there would be unfathomable. I expected some semblance of regular life, but everything seemed new, incomprehensible, strange, which confounded my understanding of day-to-day existence in a Southern community, something I thought I knew intuitively. Confronted with my own confusion, I proceeded to frame the disaster zone as exotic, different. Once framed in this way, I easily moved to assumptions about the survivors.

ASSUMPTION 4: SOCIAL ORDERS DISINTEGRATE IN DISASTERS

Once I began to think of the disaster zone as exotic, I also began to operate with the stereotypical assumption that, in a disaster zone, social orders disintegrate. However, in talking to survivors and learning how they managed to survive that first week, I came to see that this was not necessarily the case. They certainly lost much of their social order and social networks, but they quickly rebuilt these and forged new ones, as some of the survivors' stories about the Bay St. Louis High School shelter indicate.

The week following our first trip to the coast, more friends and colleagues began to organize relief efforts. My friend and colleague, Maureen Meyers, a graduate student in anthropology at the University of Kentucky, along with several other graduate students collected a van load of supplies and drove it to Oxford so that we could distribute it. Another van full of supplies also arrived from Purdue University, through contacts with the chair of the University of Mississippi Department of Sociology and Anthropology, David Swanson. As these supplies began to arrive, we decided to make another trip to Bay St. Louis–Waveland that weekend. Frazzled and emotionally strained from the first trip, I opted to stay in Oxford and coordinate the support from there; this time Denton Marcotte, Jeff Jackson, David Swanson, and his wife, Rita Swanson, made the trip. As to be expected, conditions were changing rapidly. There was more of a National Guard presence in the area. Mostly, though, the relief efforts were being spearheaded by the NGOs, particularly the churches and the Salvation Army.

While scouting for a facility in which to deposit their supplies, the team came across an extended family living on the side of the road in Bay St. Louis. There were ten people in all, representing three separate households from three destroyed homes. One household was composed of Rose, the matriarch of the group who was probably in her late 50s but in poor health. She was with her 30-something son, Jay, who was mentally challenged and blind. A second household consisted of Rose's eldest daughter, Melissa, in her thirties, and her three teenaged children, two boys

and one girl. The third household was composed of Rose's youngest daughter, Tina, and her husband, both in their late twenties or early thirties, and their children—two daughters, about eight and six years old, and a baby son, two years old. Tina and her husband had evacuated to Atlanta, but after the storm, unable to contact anyone on the coast and worried to the point of despair over their family, they drove back home. Miraculously they not only successfully navigated treacherous roads all the way to Bay St. Louis–Waveland, but once there they also found their family. They also found their home in ruins, and they quickly ran out of gas. Because gas would not be available for weeks, they, too, were now homeless.

The family had been living in the high-school shelter mentioned above. When the National Guard deemed the high school shelter unfit for habitation and closed it, the family moved to a sidewalk, under a tarp. After much negotiation, the entire family except for the young husband decided to take the team's offer of shelter in Oxford. Their goal was to get to Wisconsin, where a family friend had offered them a place to stay. Tina's husband, meanwhile, would try to find work in Bay St. Louis–Waveland and start rebuilding the homes. The departing group hoped to return to Bay St. Louis–Waveland by Christmas.⁵

I spent much time with this extended family, as they stayed in the Methodist Church shelter in Oxford for five days. Although theirs is only one story out of hundreds of thousands, this family's tale is probably typical. As Katrina approached, the family had few options. Rose and Jay are disabled, and the other adults were employed at low-wage jobs. Most of their extended family (aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.) also lived in the immediate vicinity, which made evacuating to relatives' homes unreasonable. They had long-distance friends who volunteered to take them in, but, except for Tina and her family, they did not have the resources to get to these places. They had been turned away at the local shelters which had filled up quickly; therefore, Rose and Melissa decided to ride out the storm at Rose's house because it was the sturdiest and most elevated of their homes. So Rose and Melissa, along with Jay, Melissa's two teenaged boys, and their two small dogs, were in Rose's house when Katrina came ashore.

In addition to 145 mph winds, Katrina brought with her a 20- to 30-foot storm surge that moved inland up to ten miles in places, and the water did not recede for almost 18 hours.⁶ The surge also had an unbelievable force. It obliterated most everything in its path. The surge pushed down large and small homes, washed away businesses of all shapes and sizes, moved giant casinos off their concrete pilings several hundred feet, tore up concrete and steel bridges, and tossed around any cars and boats that it had not already smashed to smithereens. Then as the surge receded, it deposited debris into huge piles and in unlikely places such as in power lines, on roofs, in trees, or just scattered helter-skelter across the landscape.

As Rose and Melissa told it, after the storm had been raging for several hours, the water started to rise. Little by

little the house around them started to disintegrate. First, the porch floated off. The boys waded through the turbulent water to retrieve it when it lodged against a fence. Unable to drag it back to the house, they tried to tether it to the fence so that it would not be completely lost. The water first seeped into and then rushed into the house breaking windows and tearing doors off their hinges. The water washed furniture and household items around the rooms. Melissa and Rose put the dogs on top of the refrigerator, which was anchored down by its weight. The water continued to rise, reaching waist, chest, and then shoulder level. At chest level, Rose believed that she and Jay would die in the water. Melissa confided later that she was not at all sure how she would get them out of the house if they had to evacuate it. She surveyed the window and back door openings, they could escape through them, but the outside waters were violently turbulent and also now full of large pieces of debris. She said she was calm but not confident that they would all make it out alive. They all prayed.

Then the water stopped rising; Rose's house was elevated enough so that the water only reached shoulder level. They stood in shoulder-level water for over five hours, waiting for it to recede enough to get out of the house.⁷ Once the water had receded enough to be able to venture outside, the group and their dogs left the now devastated house, and, along with neighbors who also had not been able to evacuate, they began to wade through water full of large and small debris toward a shelter that other survivors along the way told them about. They eventually made their way to an elevated road bed that was not under water, and they walked 15 miles to the Bay St. Louis High School shelter. Walking long distances mostly through water was a common experience for those at the Bay St. Louis High School shelter. Most everyone at this shelter were those whose homes were in the path of the storm surge and who had stayed in their homes during the storm. With their homes now gone, they had no choice but to make their way to whatever shelter they could find. Many found their way to the Bay St. Louis High School shelter, where, according to Melissa and Rose, at least 1,000 survivors endured an arduous, life-threatening week.

No one with whom I spoke said anything about "leaders" (group or individual) emerging as primary decision makers at Bay St. Louis High School. Rather, decisions were made on an individual level or at most by small groups of changing compositions. But even at these levels the well-being of the group seems to have been uppermost in everyone's mind. My understanding of this sense of community is that, in this situation, most understood that the good of one hinged on the good of all. To my mind, this was a forging of new social contracts and new social networks in the face of the loss of most existing ones. (Jeff first made this point; see Jackson 2006.) I also interpret in this way the numerous stories of survivors helping each other. For instance, because everyone at the Bay St. Louis High School shelter had waded through water and rain to get there, most arrived wet and in wet clothes. After several hours of wear,

the wet clothes had begun to chafe and rub raw areas on people's skin. The risk of infection was high, which meant that they needed dry clothes. Tony related that as a group they had decided to break into the high school band room where there were some dry uniforms. They also found a box of dry Bay St. Louis High School T-shirts, which they distributed amongst themselves. In fact, I have one of those T-shirts in front of me as I write this article. I found it later when cleaning out one of the vans; someone had left it.

Social order at the high school began to cohere in other ways as well. One story that Tony relayed reveals how people negotiated some of the important day-to-day details. According to Tony, as survivors began arriving at the shelter, it became clear to all that the bathroom facilities were insufficient. At first, they continued using the regular toilet facilities, although there was no running water, of course. They even tried for a few days to keep these facilities as clean as possible. They found some large squeegees, which made this task a little less onerous, but eventually as the shelter filled, they recognized that the regular bathrooms would not work. They then designated another larger room as the "toilet" that people then used. When I heard this story, I remember thinking, when this room is discovered by the outside world, people will most likely think that the survivors in the shelter were relieving themselves just anywhere, and they will not understand that this room was the toilet, and that people used it according to the usual rules.

This is not to say that all adhered to the rules of conduct. At the shelter, I struck up a conversation with one of the survivors as we unloaded ice off a truck that had just arrived. According to this person, a few days after the storm, some of the survivors at the high school had gotten some alcohol and had been drinking. This man considered such behavior ridiculous and vented his frustration to me over their behavior. He understood that those who had been drinking put everyone at risk. According to him, because no aid had arrived for days, the group had grown increasingly uncertain about what the outside world knew about their situation. They also began to understand that they would have to rely on themselves for an indefinite period of time, and by his standards, those who were getting inebriated could not be counted on to help. Furthermore, to him, one of the most egregious transgression about the drinking was the fact that those who were drinking were loud in the evenings, thus depriving the other exhausted survivors of much-needed rest. Still, he admitted that the shelter never dissolved into chaos and danger.

By all accounts, the prevailing sentiment was to help one another. Another example comes from the fact that many at the shelter were not ambulatory. As already noted, people had walked for miles and for hours through turbulent water filled with all kinds of debris such as broken glass, splintered two-by-fours, cars, furniture, electrical wires, broken utility poles, and so on. The water also had become a hazardous muck because the sediments that washed ashore with the surge became mixed with all sorts of stuff washing in. Almost all of the survivors at Bay St. Louis High School

had scrapes and cuts on their legs and feet, arms and hands. With neither clean water nor medicines, even the most minor abrasion had become infected. Hence, many people could not walk. At times, even being there did not make this reality sink in for me. When I was evaluating the medical needs of an elderly man, I mentioned to his daughter that she could get medicine at the mobile medical unit that had just set up about a mile away. She showed me her infected foot and patiently explained that she could not walk that far.

According to some of the survivors at the high school, because most everyone had infections on their extremities, only the teenagers and younger men and women were resilient enough to physically withstand their own injuries. In other words, they still could get around. The adults, temporarily disabled, directed the youths in what to do. They instructed them to get supplies from wherever they could find them. The young people fanned out through the vicinity, going into the Wal-Mart, the Kmart, the Kroger, and any other place to which they could get access. They retrieved food, water, any dry clothing and shoes they could find, bicycles for transportation, and medical supplies. Over the five days they were in the shelter, the young people ventured out regularly to collect supplies and brought them back to the shelter, where, by all accounts, they were distributed according to need and in an orderly way. The young people ministered to the sick, injured, and elderly, running various errands for them and taking and executing with meticulous care their elders' instructions on exactly what medicines to get from whatever pharmacies they could get into. Somewhere the youths found a workable outdoor grill, which they brought back to the high school. A middle-aged man was soon boiling water for coffee. Melissa later told us that she pitched in and together they kept the grill going for hours as they served, by her estimation, over 200 cups of hot coffee in Styrofoam cups that they had found in the high-school cafeteria.

Melissa also related the tale of her youngest son who, on request, simply sat in a broken car with an elderly woman at the high school. The elderly woman had most likely chosen to sit in the car because of the relatively comfortable seating, and she had asked the teenager to just sit with her. Melissa and her son were initially wary of the request; as Melissa put it later, it was "all new to them" and they did not know how to gauge people's intentions. She finally agreed to the old woman's request, but she stationed herself nearby to keep an eye on her son. The teenager and the old woman sat together for some time, chatting and just being together. Later, Melissa and her son figured that the elderly woman was "freaked out" and needed the comfort and safety of someone being with her. They also told us that some of the elderly at the shelter had died in those first days.⁸

Those blue pieces of plastic that Kirsten mentioned in her memoir also tell a larger story about rebuilding social order. At one point, some of the youths brought to the shelter a large roll of blue plastic. They then proceeded to cut it into small rectangular pieces which they passed out to

everyone. These were for people to sleep on, for everyone up to that point had been sleeping directly on the concrete walkways or asphalt parking lot. The youths espied this resource while scouting for supplies, and they recognized that even a slip of a blue plastic could help relieve some of the suffering they were witnessing. We all know that the media were calling acts such as this "looting," and that the governors of Louisiana and Mississippi in the first confused hours issued "shoot-to-kill" orders for looters, which were later rescinded. We can now see that journalists and public officials applying the term *looting* to these kinds of activities reveals a national disconnect between assumptions and realities in such of a situation. With no aid coming for days, the survivors had no choice but to "loot." To look on this behavior as somehow lawless and exploitative is to miss the incredible story of resilience, organization, and the forging of new social contracts, new social networks, and new social orders by people surviving in a disaster zone. The survivors improvised, fell back on conventional standards of behavior, and invented new ones. The small rectangular pieces of blue plastic strewn over a high school parking lot and its corridors represent not looting, but that amazing human capacity to reorder in the worst of conditions.

ASSUMPTION 5: "VICTIMS" ARE PASSIVE

I also assumed that the survivors of Katrina would be passive victims, waiting and desperate for aid of any sort. Once in Bay St. Louis–Waveland, and later when working with the extended family in Oxford, I was struck by the fact that people were very specific about their needs and that the things our team offered were often not what was needed. I know now that local conditions change rapidly in a disaster, and that what is true for one minute may not be true for the next minute. Other than food, water, shelter, and medical supplies, needs are hard to know and certainly unpredictable. The story of "Mr. Jimmy" is a good case in point.

The apartment complex in which Mr. Jimmy lived was a wreck. It was obvious that the storm surge had swelled over it, as debris was everywhere and windows were blown out throughout the complex. Although we did not go inside any apartments, I figured that everything inside had to be at least damp if not saturated and hence probably unsanitary. Still, Mr. Jimmy and several others were living there and apparently looking out for one another. They had somehow rigged the plumbing and had running water, certainly not potable, but good enough for bathing. Mr. Jimmy's infection turned out not to be a spider bite but most likely an injury sustained while escaping the storm. We offered to take him somewhere to have it looked after or to Oxford where he could get both medical attention and clean accommodations. He had a small dog and was worried about taking his dog with him. Finally he asked, "Are ya'll going to Florida? I need a ride to Florida." We told him our destination was north, toward Oxford, and he declined our offer, stating that he needed to take a shower anyway. With assurances from one young man that he would continue to

watch after him, we left, giving Mr. Jimmy some antibiotic ointment. At this same complex, we encountered another household consisting of two young men, maybe more. They were working on a generator. Again, we offered our assistance, but they replied that all they needed was some gas for the generator that they were on the brink of repairing. They explained that once they got it repaired, they could cook for everyone. Although a police officer at the high school had instructed us to not give out gasoline for fear of a riot, we left them with some of our gas.

Another example is the story of Jean and Mark. As Kirsten's memoir relates, their story is about beating all odds to not only survive but also find each other. It is also a story of self reliance and determination in one of the worst natural disasters in our country's history. Jean and Mark's saga speaks to the fact that in a disaster people are not passive victims waiting to be administered to by relief workers—Jean and Mark made calculated decisions based on the information they had to keep control over their lives.⁹

Jean and Mark did not evacuate for many of the same reasons that others did not leave. They did not have the resources, and their extended family lived in the area. Their friends in Pennsylvania, whom they called their "adopted family," were too far away, and they could not afford to evacuate there. And, according to Mark, they had been through many hurricanes. Mark's sentiments are not unusual in Hurricane Alley. People who live on the Gulf coast can typically recall each hurricane by name as well as death counts and destruction costs. Many had made it through Camille, their only point of reference for a hurricane with the strength of Katrina, and they battened down for this one like they had for all the others. In fact, Mark was not with Jean at the time of the storm because he was helping some newcomers to the coast hurricane-proof their house.

For Jean and Mark, who lived in lower Saint Bernard Parish, Louisiana, the storm surge came suddenly and ferociously. According to Jean, during the lull that is the eye of the storm, she had gone outside to smoke a cigarette and assess the damage. She recalled thinking, "This ain't so bad," and returned inside (conversation with author, September 5, 2005). After closing her front door, she turned around just in time to see an immense wave come crashing through her plate-glass window. She instinctually snatched her pink rope rosary off the table and fled out the back door with the water on her heels. Jean scrambled onto a neighbor's porch as her own home was engulfed in water. Other survivors who had scavenged a boat soon picked her up. Together they made their way to a high school in Chalmette where they broke into the second floor windows. Meanwhile, Mark and his friends also escaped the sudden massive wave by fleeing outside and also finding a boat. In this case, the boat was small and Mark and another young man let others sit inside while they hung onto the sides, occasionally pulling the boat by a rope. They made their way to the local city hall, one of the official shelters and where the local police force was headquartered. A few hours later, seriously

worried about his mother, Mark determined to find her. He ignored orders to not leave the city hall and eluded the watch guards by diving into the water from a back door and swimming underwater for several feet. Then, after hours of walking and searching and following leads about possible shelters from other survivors he met along the way, Mark made his way to the high school in Chalmette, where he found Jean.

Soon after Mark had found Jean, the city officials of Chalmette commandeered a flat barge to take people out of the flooded town. According to Mark, the barge floated down the main street, rescuing survivors from rooftops, attics, and other places where people had sought refuge. The barge was headed to the high ground of I-10 where buses reportedly were waiting to transport people to the Astrodome in Houston. This was the same segment of I-10 that became a notorious example of the bungled relief efforts in the first week after the storm.

Jean's story of I-10 is hair-raising. After the Chalmette group disembarked at I-10, they were immediately aware that it was a seriously dangerous place. Like the Chalmette group, survivors from all over had heard rumors that buses were lined up there to take people to shelters, and survivors from New Orleans and the surrounding areas had made their way to this piece of high ground. However, the buses coming in were much too few to accommodate the thousands of people now crowded onto the freeway. Neither was there food or water except for a small amount of provisions that a few government helicopters were bringing. According to Jean, the helicopters did not land, and the soldiers threw the provisions from the air; as she put it, they threw out bottles of water "like Mardi Gras beads" (conversation with author, September 5, 2005). When there was a rush to collect the water, Jean recalled that many people, herself included, snatched bottles out of able-bodied people's hands as a group consensus grew that the water should be for the children and infants who were by now showing serious symptoms of dehydration.

Most of the people on I-10 had to wait a full five to six days to be evacuated. Jean and Mark, however, got onto a bus after 20 hours when they did not correct a guard's mistaken assumption that they were with an elderly wheelchair-bound man. They were allowed to accompany him because only the elderly and sick and their families were being evacuated. That is how they found themselves at the Houston Astrodome. When we met them, Jean was still wearing her plastic ID bracelet from the Astrodome shelter as well as her pink rosary. But Houston was not where they wanted to be. They soon found a ride back to the Gulf coast with an evacuee whose uncle from Mississippi had driven to Houston to get her. So, why did Jean and Mark not stay at the Astrodome, a place of supposed refuge and safety? They later told us that one reason they did not want to stay was because they did not believe it to be safe. On their arrival, they had heard stories of lawlessness (most of which later turned out to be rumors according to the national media). More importantly, Jean's mother lived in

Bay St. Louis–Waveland, and they not only wanted to check on her and other family members but also hoped that they could stay with some of them.

This was only a few days after the storm, hence, Jean and Mark did not yet know the extent of the destruction, so they optimistically believed that their relatives in Bay St. Louis–Waveland might be able to take them in. Jean related that they did not realize that Bay St. Louis–Waveland was gone until their Mississippi friend who had taken them from Houston drove them there a day or two later. Needless to say, they were all shocked at what they saw as they approached the town. They made their way to the Bay St. Louis High School where they looked for Jean's mother and other relatives, and when they could not find them, their Mississippi friend pleaded with them to return with him to Picayune, but they declined the offer. They wanted to stay in Bay St. Louis–Waveland. By the time we arrived at the shelter, on Sunday, Jean and Mark had realized the fruitlessness of their efforts and that even if they found family members, the prospect that their homes would be undamaged was slim at best. When they heard we were offering a ride to Oxford they took it. Once in Oxford, they intended to somehow make their way to their friends in Pennsylvania, which they did as Kirsten relates above.

But Jean and Mark did not stay long in Pennsylvania. About two weeks after arriving there, Jean received a phone call from the Bay St. Louis–Waveland authorities notifying her that her mother had been killed in the storm. Jean's presence was required to identify her mother's body and to take care of her burial. Jean and Mark then made the sad journey back to the Gulf coast. I spoke with Jean in early December 2005, and as of that date, her mother still had not been buried because the local county coroner's office was apparently months behind in certifying deaths. She told me that after identifying her mother and realizing not only that they would not be able to bury her for some time but that her mother's house was demolished, as well, that she and Mark had made their way to Baton Rouge, where they were now housed in a FEMA trailer park. She praised FEMA for the housing but admitted that they had problems getting many household items. I had asked Jean when last we met to call if she ever needed anything; she had called to ask if we could send her some blankets.

When Jean and Mark shared their story with us, I recall being astonished that they chose to reenter the heart of the disaster zone when they had at least two chances to evacuate (once to the Astrodome and once to Picayune). I remember doubting their abilities to make good decisions, attributing this to their being in such a stressful and uncertain situation for so long. I applied this doubt to other survivors. A few days later, when working in other relief efforts, I found myself jumping in to make decisions for survivors, only to be corrected when they expressed other ideas about how to proceed on something. I slowly began to realize that the survivors of this storm were not necessarily passive victims. They were fully capable of making decisions for themselves, and my job was to help implement those de-

cisions. Only then did Jean's and Mark's decisions become intelligible to me.

ASSUMPTION 6: EVERY LITTLE BIT HELPS

The second week after Katrina hit, Jay Johnson, the senior archaeologist at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, received a call from Kate. She asked if the department could send an archaeological crew to their artist compound, Shearwater Pottery, in Ocean Springs, Mississippi, to help retrieve art pieces that they believed to be under the debris. Jay assembled a team that included me, archaeology graduate student Erin Stevens, Old World archaeologist Mathew Murray, and his wife Nancy Wicker, who is also the chair of the Department of Art at the University of Mississippi.

Kate is the granddaughter of one of the Anderson brothers, all famed Mississippi artists. In the early 20th century, Walter Anderson and his brothers, Peter and James, returned to live on a beautiful point in Ocean Springs where they had grown up. The point overlooks the Mississippi Sound, from where one can see Walter's beloved Horn Island in the Gulf. Their parents had lived an artist's life and they made the property into a sort of artists' colony during their lives. When the brothers returned, they continued the artist's haven by building ceramic kilns and other art studios where they made tourist knickknacks as well as many pieces of fine art in a variety of media—ceramics, water colors, oils, block prints, murals, drawings, and carvings. They named the property Shearwater Pottery (Maurer 2000; Maurer and Iglesias 2003; Shearwater Pottery 2006a). Walter died in 1965, and Peter and James passed away in 1984 and 1998, respectively. The Anderson brothers—and Walter Anderson, in particular—are considered important U.S. artists. The Walter Anderson Museum of Art is in Ocean Springs and houses the most valuable pieces of their art. The museum sustained some damage, but most of their collection survived (Walter Anderson Museum of Art 2005). Today, the Anderson family is a well-known extended family of artists, many of whom lived in the Anderson brothers' original homes at Shearwater or nearby. In addition to their homes, the Shearwater compound also contained their studios, gallery spaces, and a show room. Fortunately the family had evacuated from Shearwater because Katrina flattened the whole compound, washing away their homes and the show room, as well as most of the studio spaces and kilns. Only three of the 15 buildings were not completely destroyed (Shearwater Pottery 2006b).

Preparing for this trip was less difficult than the first one as conditions had improved somewhat in the 14 days since the storm. An army of unsung utility workers had been laboring day and night to restore electricity to many areas of the Mississippi Gulf coast. Although most of the bridges and many of the roads had been washed away, the intact roads were mostly cleared. Phone service was still quite erratic, and there was still no potable water not in a bottle. But by and large the skeleton of the infrastructure was getting

back in place. We also had housing, thanks to the offer of a professional contact Jay had in Gautier, Mississippi, about ten miles east of Ocean Springs.

En route to Gautier, the mood in the van turned grim as we passed into the disaster zone more or less demarcated at Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Scenes of tent communities around church yards, blue tarps on almost all roofs, trees snapped in half, houses and businesses with roofs and walls sheered off, and other scenes of destruction sobered all of us for the tasks ahead. Our mood turned to stunned silence when we drove into the neighborhood of our hosts at Gautier and saw houses knocked off their foundations and set askew or some simply gone, only a foundation remaining, if even that. Debris was everywhere. At the edge of many debris piles were small caches of items that people had found as they had begun to pick through the debris of their homes—photographs, mementos, unbroken vases, pots and pans, toys, utensils, and so on. Our hosts greeted us with good cheer, though, and made room for us in their already crowded home. Our hosts were much too gracious and humble to have mentioned it, so unbeknownst to us, they already had opened their home to not only us, but to several neighbors whose homes had been washed away. Theirs was the only undamaged house in their neighborhood.

The next morning we went to the Shearwater compound. Kate, too, greeted us with smiles and thanks. She and the Anderson family and friends had been hard at work for two weeks now, clearing debris, assessing the damage of their property (almost total) and recovering artwork and Anderson valuables. They did not want to bring bulldozers into the compound to clear debris because they hoped to recover as much artwork as possible. She had asked us down as possible consultants on how to systematically “excavate” the debris piles to not further damage any artwork that may be buried in them. She showed us around the compound, which took up the full 24 acres of the point. After just one look, we all knew that our archaeological skills were pretty useless here. Debris from Shearwater was mixed with debris from who knew where and scattered over not only the entire point but across the marsh, into a small bay, and over several acres of an Ocean Springs neighborhood on the other side of the bay, where debris piles stood ten, 20, or even 30 feet high in some places. After surveying the area, Jay told Kate what she undoubtedly already knew: that what they were doing—carefully moving debris by hand—was probably the best way to proceed. We then offered our help in whatever tasks she wanted us to do.

Kate directed us to the neighborhood across the bay. She was fearful that the city bulldozers would come soon into that area, and she wanted to look through the debris as much as possible before then. We spent that Saturday in near-hundred-degree heat clamoring over and through large piles of debris, gingerly moving bits and pieces of demolished homes to look for hidden artwork, and generally looking long and hard for any art, intact or in pieces. At the end of a very hot, grimy, and disheartening day, we had

found only a few pieces—small but significant victories for hours of work.

As evening fell, we convened for dinner with other family members and their friends who had been working throughout the day as well. We grilled hamburgers and veggie burgers at the end of the point where many were camping and from where we could view Horn Island in the distance as well as the ruins of both the Biloxi casino district and the Biloxi–Ocean Springs Bridge. The ocean breeze felt wonderful. Everyone tried to keep convivial conversations going, but physically and emotionally exhausted, most of us slipped into silent reflections. One of the Andersons strummed his guitar and sang a song he had written about Katrina.

The next day, Kate directed us to the remains of the Shearwater Pottery show room. Three walls of the show room were barely left standing, and the back wall had been blown out by the storm surge. The surge had washed out the entire contents of the show room save for a rubble of brightly painted bricks that had been a fireplace. The surge had strewn the contents to the marsh. Kate handed us over to Richard, a man who had been laboring in the show room for over a week. Richard was an artist from Biloxi who had lost nearly everything of his own but who had come to the compound in the days after the storm because he “heard they had been hit pretty hard” (conversation with author, September 18, 2005). Richard told us that in the first few days after Katrina, his truck had gas, and he stayed in Biloxi bringing ice and water to his neighbors in the working-class neighborhood in which he had lived. The neighborhood had been decimated by the storm. Once city officials condemned and then bulldozed his severely damaged home along with the rest of the neighborhood, he made his way to Shearwater. Richard said that working there helped him “to keep his mind off things” (conversation with author, September 18, 2005).

Richard had been working in the show room area for about a week when we arrived. He had surmised that Katrina had not washed the ceramics in the show room very far. He thought they were buried in about two feet of sand and muck that was under a huge roof that lay on the backside of the show room remains. Our team worked with Richard in taking apart the roof, by hand. Soon after starting, we realized to our dismay that two other wooden structures lay under the roof (most likely floors of some kind) and that we would also have to dismantle them with our crowbars and hammers to get to the layer of sand. By late afternoon, we were down to the sand. We then began to trowel through the sand, and sure enough, we immediately began to recover ceramic pieces. Many of them were broken, but some were intact. All of us were pulling out not only replicas and items for the tourist trade but also priceless Anderson originals. We laid out our finds on a makeshift table that Richard had assembled where other helpers periodically sorted through the pieces. They carefully wrapped them and moved them to a facility at the Walter Anderson Museum where they would be evaluated for possible restoration.

I had many profound personal moments over this weekend. Once, as I stood atop an unstable pile of debris on a day topping 95 degrees, I found myself shaking my head, tears brimming in my eyes. There, finding my footing on top of the ruins of peoples' homes, jobs, communities, and lives, and knowing that this kind of ruin extended for almost a hundred miles, I had to frankly admit that if I lived there, if this were my community, I was not sure that I would return. I was not sure that I would not just walk away from it all. The thought immediately put me in mind of those who we had come to help, those who had chosen to stay, those who had chosen to return to rebuild. It seemed surreal that I could simply get in the van, travel only 200 miles north, and be in the safety of my home in a community that still offered me a house, a grocery store, water, sewage control, a job, friends, family, and security. I was awed by the strength and determination of the survivors. They seem superhuman, still, even as I write this, almost a year after the disaster.

At that moment, I also realized the insignificance of what I, an individual, was doing. I still believe that every little bit helps, but standing in the middle of that kind of devastation, I also knew that it is too much for individuals or local- and state-level governments to handle. The piles of debris are just too large; too many lives have been affected; too many people have been displaced; too much has been damaged and destroyed. Relief on a massive scale is necessary for a full recovery. I do not underestimate the strength and determination of those who are now rebuilding their communities and lives, but I believe that it is too much for them, even with the aid of concerned individuals and small teams such as ours and those organized by Habitat for Humanity, Salvation Army, churches, and other small NGOs. Rather, a full recovery will take aid on a massive level from both federal agencies as well as from large international NGOs.

BEARING WITNESS

It is too soon to adequately assess the current relief situation on the Gulf coast. Early reports indicate that the relief is not moving smoothly, though. Rebuilding contracts have been awarded mostly to large conglomerates rather than to local contractors. Early spending reports indicate that much of the relief money is not making it to the local level (Project on Government Oversight 2005–06). Many locals are lodging complaints about not being taken into consideration as rebuilding plans get underway. Almost a year after Katrina, things still resemble “a third-world country.”

Many scholarly and bureaucratic analyses have been done over the past few decades examining the poor articulation between the local and the global when it comes to governmental-organization and NGO development aid to periphery countries. Anthropologists have documented time and again that aid workers and agencies approach their tasks with many misleading assumptions about underdeveloped countries and the local people. At worst, they ignore

local ideologies, understandings, and conditions, but more often aid workers view local knowledge as naive, simple, or just plain wrongheaded (e.g., Bicker et al. 2003; Sillitoe et al. 2002; Smith 1990; West 2006). The upshot is that the local is sidelined in project development and implementation, resulting in local disengagement in the projects and disillusionment in their benefits. Oftentimes, the projects themselves end in failure because aid agencies did not seriously consider local conditions. Recent work by Jeffery T. Jackson (2005), the friend and sociologist who worked alongside me and others after Katrina, demonstrates that although aid is often cloaked in a “veneer of beneficence,” it is often used in service to the goals and needs of the donor countries by generating and maintaining dependency.

As the rebuilding after Katrina proceeds, we would do well to heed the lessons from social scientists who emphasize the disconnection between the local and the global and who insist that aid is predicated on assumptions about the beneficiaries that must be challenged. Likewise, assumptions about the U.S. South and poverty, race, and class in the United States as well as disaster victims and relief worldwide must be exposed and examined. As an anthropologist, I have been trained to observe human behavior, to understand social contracts, to pay attention to local conditions, to respect local knowledge, and to be alert to constructions of the “Other.” It is not surprising, then, that of all the things commanding my attention in those first weeks, I noted the disconnect between relief efforts (ours and others) and local conditions, which forced me later to question deeply my motives and assumptions about what I did to “help” and to reevaluate my ideas about the survivors of this disaster. I have enumerated and attempted to be self-reflexive here about some of my assumptions that did not match the on-the-ground realities that Katrina survivors relayed to me or that I witnessed firsthand. No doubt, there are other assumptions of which I remain unaware or have not been able to examine. But I do have one example of an assumption that may have matched the on-the-ground reality.

When a teenaged boy at the Bay St. Louis High School shelter asked me to copy down his and his aunt's list of the dead and missing, I asked him what he wanted me to do with it. He only said, “Could you let someone know?” I asked no other questions, took his list, and, fighting back my own sense of desperation and tears, I carefully copied the names. We later posted the names on one of the websites for missing people, acknowledging that it was not an official list and asking people to contact Kirsten for further information. Within days, people were contacting Kirsten, inquiring about people on the list. Her one success at reconnecting family members was momentous for her and for the family involved.

Perhaps in this one case, my assumptions about what this young man wanted matched the on-the-ground reality. In those first horrendous days after the storm, he and his aunt had been out surveying the damage in the nearby neighborhoods, and they had taken it on themselves to

check in on people they knew to have stayed in their homes. They had also taken it on themselves to report back on those they found that “didn’t make it” as well as those whom may have survived but whom they could not locate. I assumed that he wanted some relief from a task that, to me, seemed too heavy for a person of such youth to bear. I assumed that he needed some connection to the world, that he needed someone to know what they had endured, that he needed someone to know that it was so horrible that people had died. I believe that by copying down a list of names on a sweaty sheet of paper, I addressed this need in some small way. I bore witness and I continue to bear witness to his suffering.

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NOTES

Acknowledgments. I would like to express a deep gratitude to all of the Katrina survivors who shared their stories with us. Despite their enormous losses, they met their challenges with awesome strength and courage; they and all of the others affected by this disaster have taught and continue to teach us much about humanity. This article is dedicated to them. I also would like to thank Kirsten Dellinger, Denton Marcotte, Scott Kreeger, Jeffrey Jackson, Paige West, and J. C. Saylor for helping me to articulate these experiences and to begin to see a larger context for them. I am grateful to Kirsten Dellinger for lending me the language that I use in the closing episode and in the title, and to her and Charles Hudson, Katie McKee, and Denton Marcotte for their careful reading and comments. Jeffrey Jackson (2006) has also reflected on his own experiences and assumptions in these efforts; his paper is the inspiration for my article here.

1. Bay St. Louis and Waveland are two small communities that blend at their town borders, hence, I refer to them as Bay St. Louis–Waveland.
2. This footage, entitled “Gulf Coast Devastation,” is available at the MSNBC website. Electronic document, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9120777>, accessed June 8, 2006.
3. Kirsten sent this e-mail to friends and family. A few days later, she sent a copy to the Sociologists for Women in Society listserve in response to a dialogue about Katrina that seemed to overlook the destruction in Mississippi. The e-mail eventually made its way onto the websites of the Society for the Study of Social Problems and the American Sociological Association.
4. I have used pseudonyms for all of the Katrina survivors with whom we interacted, and, therefore, I have changed the names in Kirsten’s e-mail to match those in the rest of the text.
5. Through the donations of many of our friends and colleagues, we secured transportation and funds for the family to make the trip to Wisconsin. At last word from them, they had arrived safely at their destination.
6. These are estimates of the depth of the storm surge; the full strength of the Katrina storm surge is still under evaluation by many agencies and institutions, including the U.S. Geological Survey, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and several academic institutions. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has posted on their website maps of the Katrina storm surge damage by state and county (see Federal Emergency Management Agency 2006).
7. Estimates vary as to how long it took the storm surge to recede; generally the reports put it at about 16 to 20 hours.
8. I have not verified their statement, but I believe it to be true.

9. Reporter Lucy Schultze interviewed these survivors and published a shorter version of their story in our local newspaper *The Oxford Eagle* (Schultze 2005). This story is available online at *The Oxford Eagle Online Edition* archives: Electronic document, <http://www.oxfordeagle.com>, accessed July 26, 2006.

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