The New Orleans
AVANT-GARDE©

45 Years of Women in Art

by Phyllis Parun

The 1970's was quite a different era. Activism changed the landscape forever. There was the draft and the anti-war protests, the black civil rights, women's rights movement and gay liberation and the FBI spying on its citizens. There were more women entering college and the work force with low paying wages and no prospect of advancement. Women were being steered into nursing, teaching, and motherhood while TV commercials targeted women as the new post-war consumer market. Subsequent generations know little about the inequalities women in that era faced. Women in the arts were no different. Barbara Wolanin, art historian, curator and member of Women's Caucus of Art since 1978, describes it well: (1)

"By 1972, in the second wave of feminism, the feminist art movement had been launched. When the Women's Caucus for Art (WCA) was conceived during the January 1972 College Art Association (CAA) meeting in an overflowing room in San Francisco, only a few women had ever served on the CAA board of directors, and most tenured college professors were male, even though at least half of the studio art and art history majors in colleges and graduate programs were female. Not even one female artist was included in the major art history survey textbooks.

> "Whether you succeed or not is irrelevant. Making your unknown known is the important thing."
>
> — *Georgia O'Keefe*

"In 1980, when the CAA conference was held in New Orleans, in a state that had not yet ratified the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), WCA members who attended the WCA conference endeavored to spend no money in the state, and to support ERA, conceived the whole conference as a performance under the guidance of Suzanne Lacy. Concurrently, an alternate WCA/CWAO awards program honoring feminist activists was held in Washington, D.C.

"In the forty years since the WCA was conceived in 1972, opportunities for women in the arts and knowledge about the accomplishments of women artists throughout history have expanded dramatically; this is due to the activism and the dedicated efforts of feminist organizations such as WCA, as well as of individuals, including the WCA founders, leaders, and Lifetime Achievement Award honorees. For four decades, WCA members have worked to recognize the contributions of women in the arts and to educate the public about them, as well as to expand networking, exhibition, and leadership opportunities for women."

Women artists realized the need to fight for their rights. And New Orleans was no different. Except for music, New Orleans in the late 1970's was an anti-art environment. There were only three galleries, all requiring "exclusive" gallery contracts which prevented their artists from selling out of their studio or from exhibiting in several galleries simultaneously.

The Women's Caucus for Art (WCA) was a force in New Orleans in the 1980's with over 100 women art activists. The New Orleans artists' community laid a foundation for the New Orleans of today, and for 40 years these activists continued to push New Orleans visual arts onto the world stage. As a result of our collective creativity and personal perseverance, artists from all over the world now flock to this artists' mecca, continuing to change our collective economic destiny.

When the New Orleans Women's Caucus for Art dissolved in the late 1980's because of lack of officers to run it, it left an aesthetic and political void. Feeling this void in the late 1990's, I rejoined. When the levees broke and the National WCA VP located me in Pacific Grove, CA, the result was a national tour of New Orleans women artists sponsored by participating WCA chapters. And so a

"Sargasso", acrylic on panel, 2011 *by Angela Weddle*

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HURRICANE KATRINA: TEN YEARS LATER

by Bill Warren

Ten years is a measure of time. Especially after a disaster, we all have a greater appreciation of change. An event the magnitude of Katrina forces change upon people whether they want it or not. The power of nature to upend the designs of mankind is the ultimate pronouncement of time. The shock of devastation and displacement pushes people's minds to the edge of comprehension. Overnight what once existed is now gone. The sense of loss had an overwhelming emotional effect on the city and region. Many personal relationships could not withstand the stress of the disaster. The post-traumatic stress of the storm took its toll, both emotionally and physically, on everyone. This syndrome seems especially acute in a city that prided itself as "The Big Easy."

Before the storm, New Orleans had a quirky sense of insular security. Things were relatively easy to manage. Prices of rents and houses were still affordable. This allowed the artistic and eccentric culture a place to thrive on a meager income. The mix of cultures and races truly made the city, in the words of musical historian Eluard Burt, a "Gumbolia." This local eccentric mix of people and customs had a certain charm. They knew how to have fun without all the expensive pretentions of "progress and development". One can look back with a sense of nostalgia at pre-storm New Orleans as a pinnacle of local culture in a petri dish known as the "The Big Easy."

The difficulties after the storm did not allow this city to stay the same. For better or worse, it had to change. Outside influences and money would determine the shape of the new city. The relief from devastation was in the hands of insurance companies. Disaster capitalists and developers had their designs on rebuilding the "new and improved" city.

For many who lived through the storm, post-traumatic stress was a persistent melancholy and anxiety that could not be shaken. The wave of rapid change, contrasted with the inability to fix fundamental problems, seemed to deepen the sadness of the time. Many long-time New Orleanians lost their grip and turned to alcohol and drugs for relief. Amid the whirlpool of emotional distress, many residents were questioning whether they needed to leave the city in order to preserve their sanity. They knew the old world was dead, and they felt the influx of the more artificial world arriving. Although a lot of exciting things were happening, the inner healing was not nearly complete. Katrina was the end of a chapter in the history of the city and peoples lives.

Some changes we make out of boredom, and some are forced upon us by catastrophes like Katrina. The important lesson is that we accept change in whatever form that can bring us happiness. For me personally, I felt the need to be closer to nature and the countryside. After living in cities for 35 years, towns and countryside seem to be what I needed to refresh my soul and spirit. I wanted to live in a place where pretentions and egos weren't so dominant and somewhere that power and politics were not so corrupting. I wanted a place to live that I could simply understand.

"The Breaking Point" by Bill Warren

Just before my wife Pati and I left New Orleans in May, 2008, a friend gave us a book called The 100 Best Small Art Towns of the U.S. It was very helpful in giving us a direction. One thing I learned about making a big change is to listen to your intuition.

In the final analysis, you have to ask yourself, " Did I grow as a person in a healthy way, and was the pursuit of happiness successful ?

rédaction

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Amelie's Katrina Story

by Amelie Prescott

After I had sold my house in Berkeley, but previous to coming to New Orleans, to bring my trauma work with children, I made a call out, a shout out, to the Katrina. With the encouragement of my friend, Mutima, I called to her, to her great spirit. We were on the Mesa, at Bolinas, in the Bay, of CA.
Calling out, calling up
She responded.
She came across the meadows of the Mesa.
"Hey Girl", I called out…
What's the deal? What's your deal?
"I came in response to the cry of the people. There's been
Big sacrifices made. I hit that land with fierce energy.
I left a big energy there.
Don't waste it."
Driving from Berkeley to New Orleans,
In my Volvo station wagon
On I-10
Arriving July '06, to reside in a sublet on Royal Street.
Hanging out in the Bars, The Community Centers after the Storm, I began writing poetry, and filming the Gatherings.
Dr. Doris Hicks, Principal and CEO, of the Dr. King School
In the Lower 9th Ward
Invited me to be their Art Teacher.
9 years later, Each night
I am filled with Gratitude
For the life we have made here.
Somehow, here in New Orleans
We not only make lemonade from the lemons;
BP Oil Spill… Public School take-over, etc.
We have learned to make Medicine
Medicine from the poisons.
My medicine is Mos Chukma Arts As Healing Institute.
We present at King, and now at Craig, in the Treme.
We sit in Circle, the children and the artists,
Making alters for forgiveness,
Being whisperers of the Natural World.
Here, at the 10th Year Anniversary,
Here in New Orleans,
I am happier than I have ever been.
All My Relations.

Poetry

by Carolyn Levy

It has been asked on many occasions why does New Orleans have so many poets? Indeed. Barry Ivker, a New Orleans poet, found his home flooded away in Hurricane Katrina. His family had to relocate in Birmingham, Alabama. There is not one place he can go read his poetry with other poets in Birmingham. And this the state of Faulkner? He returns frequently to the Maple Leaf on Oak Street so he can read his poetry and listen to others.

On any given Sunday, this city is replete with poetry readings in every section of the city. On week nights, private salons abound and library nights are found. Musicians fill the "City That Care Forgot." Even Katrina could not wipe out this city of the visual delights and seductive sights, sounds and aromas which could make a poet out of a dunce.

Why? What is it about this backwater city which has captured the imagination of the entire world? Do we have fogs of "poetry-producing" mists? Is it the scent of wisteria, sweet olive or night blooming jasmine? Is it the sight of crêpe myrtle trees, camellias and azaleas or perhaps hibiscus? Do magnolia trees or palm trees make one a poet? Yes!

To learn more about New Orleans poets, I would refer the reader to Nancy Dixon's landmark volume, Two Hundred Years of New Orleans Writing. See for yourself the multitude of writing for which a "filled-in swamp" has proven fertile territory. New Orleans is a creative experience in and of itself.

Don't attempt to put it under a microscope or dissect it. Go to any poetry venue (they're well advertised), and close your eyes. Allow your ears to be enveloped by the music of poetry.

KATRINA DIARIES: THE CALIFORNIA STORY

by Jennifer Colby

In the aftermath of the Katrina hurricane, Phyllis Parun took refuge in Pacific Grove. An active participant in the Woman's Caucus for Art, she asked the National WCA office to connect her with WCA members in her new temporary home. I was at the time President-Elect of the National WCA, long-time member and co-founder of the Monterey Bay WCA chapter. Phyllis and I cooked up a plan for an exhibit a year later in my gallery for women artists in San Juan Bautista, California. *Katrina Diaries* was born, an exhibit that would begin in California, travel to Saint Louis, Washington D.C., Dallas, then return to New Orleans.

When *Katrina Diaries* opened in California a year after the hurricane, I was anxious to see the artwork and watch the visual arts give voice to women who had been deeply affected by natural disaster, compounded by political disaster. I did not realize until nine New Orleans women came to the reception and week-long events that the goal of having an exhibit a year later gave hope and focus to participants living through difficult times in their personal and professional lives. I was honored to offer the gallery exhibit and ship it on to other WCA chapters, including the Dallas-based National conference.

My daughter, a jazz musician, and I were able to visit New Orleans when the exhibit returned home and were overwhelmed with the hospitality and vitality of the city and the local WCA chapter. Listening to my daughter play her alto sax with fellow musicians at the reception was a highlight. Coming to know more deeply the women of *Katrina Diaries* solidified life-long friendships.

When the women of *Katrina Diaries* came to California, they asked to dance at the San Andreas Fault Line, thinking that our earthquakes represent California's equivalent of a hurricane. That was not hard since the fault line itself is two blocks from my gallery, Galeria Tonantzin. The San Juan Bautista Mission sits on the high ledge of the Pacific plate; below it is a dramatic drop off, the actual San Andreas Fault and the Continental plate slowly moving along the Pacific one.

When the women arrived, there were activities in Pacific Grove, another exhibit and a workshop at First Night Monterey. This was a year after the Katrina hurricane, a time when many Mexican workers had arrived in New Orleans for the rebuilding, and Phyllis asked me, "Who is this Katrina doll that keeps showing up in parades?" Of course Mexican immigrants would make the connection! La Catrina of Mexico had made it to New Orleans, and for our First Night Monterey workshop, we created a life-size Katrina doll to make our march to the fault line and later to carry in the New Years Eve First Night Monterey parade. My family helped me carry it with my daughter Sarah playing the saxophone.

Who is the Mexican Katrina? In our Galeria Tonantzin, she was prominent in imagery of the Day of the Dead, the Mexican holiday at All Saints and Halloween that honors the ancestors. El Día de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead, became even more celebrated in California in the 1990's as art galleries in San Francisco and Los Angeles created mega-altars in celebration and created an art movement from this traditional feast day.

New Orleans artists of "Katrina Diaries" exhibit at Galeria Tonantzin, 2006, San Juan Bautista, CA.

Catrina dolls for sale in New Orleans by Phyllis Parun

La Catrina is the skeleton woman. Skeletons in Day of the Dead are not morbid as in Halloween. In Mexican culture, death is laughed at; the skeleton people are a way of reminding us that we all face death. The image first appears in Mexican artist Posada's woodcuts. *El Catrin* is the wealthy aristocrat, who may have wealth but is going to die like all of us. *La Catrina* is his female counterpart. Posada created skeleton images of many of the leaders he was pointing fingers at in Mexico. The image was picked up by the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera (Frida Kahlo's husband). In a mural scene of the wealthy in a park, *El Catrin* and *La Catrina* are Mexico's elite who will not survive death.

In the First Night Monterey workshop, a year after the Katrina Hurricane, women from the Women's Caucuses for Art of Monterey and of Louisiana worked together to build a life-size Katrina to accompany the artists from the Galeria Tonantzin exhibit to the fault line in a Second Line parade and dance on the San Andreas to celebrate women's survival in the face of disaster, death and destruction. The Katrina doll we created survived to guard the open basement of the gallery each celebration of Day of the Dead until the gallery closed in 2013.

The *Katrina Diaries* exhibit gave women artists hope in a transformational time. The opportunity to embrace the Mexican Katrina brought celebration in the face of death, an honoring of our ancestors and a realization that the cultural wonder that is New Orleans continues to embrace the soul of its people and nurture the arts. When I visited New Orleans for the homecoming of the *Katrina Diaries* exhibit, I found a shop selling traditional Katrina statues from Mexico in the heart of New Orleans.

Hurricane Katrina Remembrances, Then and Now

by Pati D'Amico

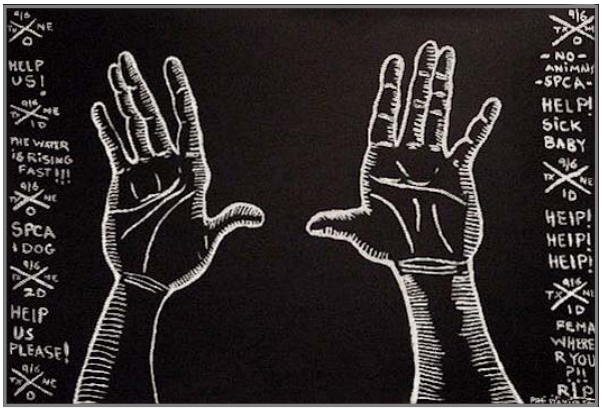
My husband and I felt extremely fortunate. We evacuated New Orleans at 3 a.m. on August 28, 2005, just hours after finishing an art opening for photographer Jonathan Traviesa around midnight at our gallery, The Waiting Room. The event was wonderful, a pretty packed house, but there was an enormous sense that something BIG was going to change our lives forever.

We ended up in Shreveport, Louisiana, with three pets. On August 29th, as we were eating breakfast in our van alongside many other evacuees camping out on a Walmart parking lot, a young woman approached, asking if we'd like to stay at a Baptist church where she was a member. The church members were wonderful and took in 50 evacuees.

After speaking with the pastor, who had just moved from New Orleans, we decided to stay. We thought it would be for a day or two. Then the levees broke. We ended up paying the church rent in donations and stayed on for 5 weeks until we could return home.

We came back on October 5th. Though the city looked ravaged, we felt so lucky to return to our Bywater neighborhood. Our roof had lost over 80% of its shingles after a mini-tornado had torn through the backyard, taking down a wall between our home and the neighbors. The railroad ties used for our garden had floated and moved around a bit. The dryer was ruined, but amazingly our home was not too seriously beaten up.

We brought a fellow evacuee, Paul, back to New Orleans to stay with us until he could get a FEMA trailer and repair his flooded home. He lived in our gallery, furnished with a bed and a CD player. He was our living "art man." He helped my husband repair our roof until our roofer could reshingle it, one and a half years later.



"Desperation" by Pati D'Amico

We helped gut homes, clean the streets, make stop signs for areas where they had blown down, organized piles of trash and found jobs immediately doing everything from floor repair, pet sitting and just helping folks sort through their belongings, a very emotional and tedious task for those who had flooded. I worked for the first two months at the Lafitte Guest house organizing the space and preparing it for reopening. In December, 2005, I began working for my former clients who had returned to the city.

I lost one of my closest friendships from the stress of the storm. My husband and I helped a friend through the evacuation, finding housing and, when we could, financial aid. Her home had suffered massive flood damage, and she had lost her beloved cats. Her anger and grief were directed at me. We haven't spoken since November, 2005, though I've tried to contact her through letters. The loss of our friendship was like a death to me.

To keep busy after the storm was to stay sane. There was a good feeling of community spirit everywhere. The Bacchanal Bar and Restaurant would have a weekly dinner with live music. It was nice to see our neighbors and friends; it made us feel sort of normal for a moment or two.

Since our neighborhood had lost its grocery stores, banks and gas stations, we traveled Uptown to shop. We bought tire insurance since it had become the norm to get flat tires from road debris. Grocery shopping became a way of letting off steam. Strangers stopped and talked in parking lots, telling stories about the storm and where they were living. The first few months felt hopeful. Then, the emotional stress started to kick in. Crime began to return in mid-2006. Many friends became ill due to physical or emotional challenges.

I actually tried to go to a therapist in May, 2006. The building where I was to have my therapy session, on Canal Street in Mid City, had been flooded. The first floor was gutted. On the second floor was an office. The secretary had just returned home and had been living in her car for three weeks. I felt wimpy and ashamed of my grief and left before my session.

I think many of us who felt lucky had this feeling. It's like folks who survive a plane crash. There is a feeling of guilt. Why did I make it? Hard to describe unless you've been through the experience.

But my husband and I continued on. We were part of many post-Katrina art shows, including the "Hurricane Katrina Blues" show, organized and curated by Phyllis Parun, which traveled to five states and ended at our gallery, The Waiting Room, in March of 2008. We had hurricane recovery parties, continued working and tried to keep a normal routine with ourselves and friends.

Our decision to move away resulted from two incidents that affected many in the community. Between December, 2006, and early 2007, we lost two members of our neighborhood to random violent crime. One of the victims was a founding member of the Hot 8 Brass Band; the other was artist Helen Hill. The murder of Helen Hill really was the last straw for both my husband and me.

Though I didn't know Helen as well as others, I liked her very much. She was incredibly bright and open. I loved her little films. There was a mysterious sweetness and goodness about her. Seeing her riding her bike with her child made me feel good. We couldn't wrap our heads around this loss. Why Helen?

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Pati D'Amico at Femme Fest, New Orleans

... D'Amico, continued from page 5

After much contemplation, we put our New Orleans home on the market in September, 2007. The house sold the following May, and we moved to a small town in northern Mississippi, not far from Oxford. We chose this area because we wanted to live "not too far" from New Orleans. Oxford is known as one of the 100 best small art towns in the U.S. Our town, Water Valley, is very affordable for artists and has beautiful old homes.

Since moving here, we helped to start The Water Valley Arts Council in 2009 with a lovely woman, Ramona Bernard. My husband, Bill Warren, is the co-director as is Ramona. We started a yearly Art Crawl that has won statewide awards. We have two very good art galleries in town, not bad for a population of 3500.

We are members of a cooperative gallery, Bozarts, which is owned by a New Orleanian from the Irish Channel and his lovely wife, who is from Germany and teaches Southern Literature at Ole Miss, Mickey Howley and Annette Trefzer. My husband Bill restarted his sign business and was awarded "Best Sign" painter in Mississippi. (Huh?!?) He makes beautiful, artful, "old school" signs for our town and throughout the state of Mississippi. I have continued making art: artist books, assemblages and paintings for our gallery and for teaching workshops at other facilities. Bill continues to paint and sculpt up a storm!

We are feeling more settled into our new life here in the "Hill Country" of northern Mississippi. It took at least three years to feel at ease here due to post-Katrina stress and change. Do we miss New Orleans? Absolutely!!! The city embraced us and gave us a rich community, friendships and magic that we will never, ever forget. We lived in Bywater for 11 years after having moved there from Providence, Rhode Island, our previous home of 22 years. We ran our gallery, The Waiting Room, the entire time. We showed some of the best artists, musicians and poets, both regionally and internationally. I was amazed by our good fortune.

"Hurricane Katrina Blues" exhibit, Pacific Grove Art Center, CA., 2006 *by Phyllis Parun*

The experience of Katrina has taught us that life can change in an instant. You have to do what is right for your soul and sanity. We visit New Orleans at least once a year, but our lives in Water Valley have become our norm, so it's not always easy to leave. We're still involved with the arts in New Orleans when time allows. We had an exhibit at Barrister's Gallery with artist and friend Michael Fedor in May, 2013. It was wonderful to see the changes in the 'hood. We'll be in another show in the winter of 2015.

May New Orleans stay creative, magical and musical. May New Orleans be safe. New Orleans is a city that will stay in our souls forever in the most wonderful and positive ways, and that's no lie.

Bill Warren's "Key to Kataclysmia" presented to Joan McCleary, Dir of PG Art Center

FACTOID: Kataclysmia®

On July 28, 2006, not wanting to leave the naming of a local art movement to chance for art historians to name inappropriately, innovative local artists and exhibit curators Pati D'Amico, Bill Warren and Phyllis Parun coined the emerging contemporary art movement, Kataclysmia®, which was catapulting onto the global stage from New Orleans, Louisiana, as a result of the water's devastation of this city and the Gulf Coast. The name has not caught on, however!

[documented in Art Lit, Fall, 2006]

No Sin in That

by Valentine Pierce

Sunday, June 26, 2006 – 12:05 am

I am not against God. I am against the ones who pretend to speak for God, the ones who say Katrina washed away the sin. The sin never left because sin and crime are not synonymous. Crime is the bastard child of sin, of an elitist society that is blind to its own ills. Sin, on the other hand, is a crime against the other members of that society. Sin is the party-line favors, politics as usual, patronage pretending to be progress. These are the fathers of poverty, the devils in red, white and blue ties, the scantily-clad women with all their good stuff exposed.

The real sin is Katrina's aftermath. Katrina, the monster storm, missed her mark. If she'd have hit Washington, D.C., or Baton Rouge, if she'd overflowed the Potomac or flooded the state capitol, she'd have done a lot to wash away sin. And we, instead of weeping at every corner, instead of looking with our jaundiced, tear-filled eyes at every perceived slight, would be too busy with our lives to cry. If Katrina had washed away the sin, our homes would be rebuilt, our schools would be up and running and providing a quality education to all our children. Our businesses would be open and prospering, and Bourbon Street would be closed because New Orleanians only work there.

Instead, ten months after our country's international disgrace, we are still wallowing in neglect by a government with polluted morals and no dignity. A government with fat pockets, full bellies and comfortable beds — all paid for by us.

We blame Katrina, racism, elitism, classism because, like those out-of-towners peeing in our alleys and vomiting on our sidewalks, we are afraid to open our bloodshot eyes, afraid of the pain the light of day will cause. The truth, however, is that we must bear all the blame. We must claim the sin of our own shortsightedness, our infighting, our lack of humanity, our apathy. Katrina did not do any of this; she merely unveiled it. No sin in that.

"Nature's Glory", 2006 *by Valentine Pierce*

... Parun, continued from page 1

second chapter was born into a changed economic environment.

From the 1950's-80's, artists entered the only art market available: wealthy collectors, museums and prestigious galleries. Then branching into mass market, artists tried to attract contracts with major department stores as a viable outlet. With the advent of home computers, social media and smartphones, more opportunity for selling to the mass market opened up. The artist entrepreneur was developing. Selling to wealthy collectors became a smaller market while the Artrepreneural market was growing. Women artists who wanted to succeed in business were no longer looking to museums and prestigious galleries; they were developing self-made market outlets. In 2013, the impact of women on the work Gross National Product is a significant with 37%, according to Harvard Business Review. (2)

By refusing to be stopped by the closed doors of the traditional markets of galleries and museums, women went around the barriers. They expanded their art opportunities by creating new marketplaces. Even if the women developing the contemporary art marketplace do not identify as arts activists per se, they certainly created new opportunities for women in the economy and new career paths for women.(3) Today, many women support themselves with their art and crafts by creating new venues, and economic equality for women was the intention of 1970's activism.

These economic opportunities are very evident in New Orleans après deluge. Two projects brought national attention to the visual arts scene in New Orleans: Prospect One and The Joan Mitchell Foundation. Locally, the Arts Council of New Orleans with Mary Lin Costa as Director and Morgana King as Director of Percentage for Art Project has amassed one of the largest public art collections by women artists of any city in the world.

Young artists continue to flood into this city, bringing with them their education, their talent and their energy. They have bought property, set up businesses, galleries and studios all along St. Claude Avenue from Elysian Fields to Poland Avenue, where women-owned art businesses are visible and thriving. New Orleans, currently a must-visit artists' mecca, is now poised to become a major art center.

(1) "Milestones over the Four Decades of the Women's Caucus for Art" by Barbara A. Wolanin. Online, from the WCA 40th Anniversary Celebration catalog. nationalwca.org/aboutwca/history.php

(2) "The Global Rise of Female Entrepreneurs" by Jackie VanderBrug. *Harvard Business Review*. Online, Sept. 2, 2013. hbr.org/2013/09/global-rise-of-female-entrepreneurs

(3) "Women in the workforce: The Importance of Sex". *The Economist*. Online, from the print edition, April 12, 2006. economist.com/node/6800723

Path Of Katrina

photo essay by Phyllis Parun

Industrial Canal, Lower 9th Ward

Lighthouse

Bucktown Shrine

Refrigerators on Royal Street

Camping at Burgundy & Elysian Fields

Cleaning up

Disaster water cans

Disaster dinner on Decatur Street

Red Cross ice bags, October, 2005

Café du Monde

Graffiti on Press Street, 2005