How do we understand the racial and ethnic recomposition of New Orleans’s diminished population in the year following Hurricane Katrina? Optimists viewing the influx of Latino migrants see in it a revival of the multicultural past of New Orleans, while skeptics suspect that delays in government assistance for residents to return to the city are an attempt to keep out low-income blacks and make the city whiter and wealthier. The shifts in the population of New Orleans are familiar to sociologists and economists who study labor-market demand for low-skill, inexpensive, and flexible workers. The low-prestige jobs they do are reserved for those at the bottom of the social hierarchy, most often immigrants or members of stigmatized minorities. The sociodemographic characteristics of workers building and rebuilding the city shift only when social and market forces combine to make one group less expensive and more flexible than the other. I use this sociological insight to analyze New Orleans’s population history and the way race has been socially constructed and reconstructed there.

The population history of New Orleans falls into three distinct periods. In the first, from the city’s founding until the end of the nineteenth century (1718–1899), migration-driven population growth provided the city with the labor of African slaves, their descendants, and the Irish and Italian migrants who replaced them. The second period (1900–2005) was characterized by slower growth, driven by births and longer life expectancy rather than net in-migration, and the consolidation of a biracial society. The last period (2005–present) began after New Orleans’s population vacated the city in the wake of Katrina, pre-Katrina residents selectively returned to the city, and an influx of largely undocumented Latino migrant workers arrived. The incorporation of that last group into New Orleans’s society will depend on the continued demand for low-wage construction and service workers, the degree to which the federal and state governments facilitate the return of the pre-Katrina population that made up the previously majority-black labor force, and the enforcement of anti-immigrant policies such as employer sanctions and deportations of undocumented workers—all factors that affect the construction of a low-wage, low-skill, and disposable labor force. (See figure 1.)

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Population of New Orleans by race, legal status, and nativity, in percentages, 1769–2000

Figure 1. As New Orleans grew, the racial and ethnic mix of its population and the ways of characterizing that mix underwent changes. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the in-migration of Africans and their descendants and of Europeans accounted for rapid growth and an increasingly white population. In the twentieth, as natural increase, longer lives, and suburbanization drove population trends, the proportion of blacks in a more slowly growing population rose. Note: The geographic boundaries of New Orleans changed with each census year. From 1950 to 2000, the population is reported for the Metropolitan Statistical Area. People included in the foreign-born category are not included in the other, racial, categories. Due to rounding, percentages may not equal 100.

New Orleans’s Builders: Slaves, Convicts, and Migrants

New Orleans’s origin story is often told as a cultural gumbo recipe that ignores the social forces mixing Spanish and French colonists, English mercantilists, African slaves, and later waves of German, Irish, Italian, and other migrants. Throughout the period of settlement and growth, the commercial elite routinely relied on force and coercion to get the work of building New Orleans performed. In 1718 Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, sieur de Bienville, selected a natural levee as the site for New Orleans. A large labor force was necessary to make that piece of land, subject to regular flooding and endemic waterborne...

disease, habitable. In 1719 the French colonial Compagnie des Indes imported one thousand European criminals and contract laborers to fortify New Orleans's natural levees. They soon died of disease and starvation, and the company immediately undertook to import African captives. Though mortality rates were high for the slaves, those who survived built levees, dug drainage ditches, cleared forests, and prepared timber for building boats and houses. Without the institution of slavery, New Orleans would not exist, since only force could keep these workers at their labor, while European contract farmers and workers arriving in the city moved on to more hospitable territory further inland.2

When the U.S. government took ownership of cosmopolitan New Orleans on December 20, 1803, it acquired a city that immediately ranked as the ninth largest in the country and a port with extensive trade networks throughout Europe, North America, the Caribbean region, and Latin America. At the time only one-ninth of the city's population was of African origin. The city more than doubled in size after ten thousand refugees from the 1794–1804 rebellion in Haiti found a new home in New Orleans in 1809. The Saint Domingue refugees included French colonists, free Creoles of color, and ex-slaves, many of whom were returned to bondage after setting foot on American shores. (See figure 2.) Their arrival consolidated the tripartite racial order. The 1810 census records the city's population as about one-third white, one-third free people of color, and one-third African slaves, who constituted the bottom of the labor market and the socioeconomic ladder.3

Throughout its early history, immigration drove population growth in New Orleans, and the city grew exceptionally fast—by 366 percent—between 1830 and 1860. Most of the new immigrants arrived from Germany and Ireland, with smaller streams coming from other countries, most of them European. No longer replenished by slave imports after 1808, the slave population was outstripped by that of the Irish, who quickly formed the bulk of New Orleans's working class. The construction company that in 1838 dug the New Basin Canal with wheelbarrows and shovels to connect the Central Business District and Lake Ponchartrain and to expand trade routes in the Gulf South deemed slaves too valuable to expose to the risk of malaria, cholera, and yellow fever. The company hired cheap Irish labor instead; at least six thousand, but perhaps many more, of those workers perished as a result.4

After the Civil War Louisiana's business elite had two concerns regarding the labor force: Who would maintain the levees on whose safety the commercial port depended? And who would perform the agricultural labor on the sugar and cotton plantations? In the past only slaves and desperately poor immigrants had done the dangerous work necessary to keep a low-lying, saturated city dry. Few Louisianians believed that they could attract a free labor force to undertake such work. So in 1867 the state legislature authorized the use of convict labor on levee work, arguing it would save the state money and repair the morals of the mostly black or Irish men so engaged. Finding a sufficient number of

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Figure 2. The arrival of ten thousand refugees in New Orleans after the 1794–1804 slave rebellion in Haiti contributed to the doubling of New Orleans’s population between 1805 and 1810 and increased the size of the city’s black population relative to the populations of other groups. Free blacks in Saint Domingue (modern-day Haiti) are represented in this hand-colored engraving by J. Laroque, after a drawing by J. F. Labrousse, *Negre & Negresse de St. Domingue*, in Jacques Grasset Saint-Sauveur, *Encyclopédia des voyages, contenant l’abrégeé historique des moeurs, usages, habitudes domestiques, religions, fêtes* . . . (An encyclopedia of travel, containing a historical abstract of the manners, customs, domestic habits, religions, festivals . . .)(Paris, Deroy, 1796). Courtesy Louisiana State Museum.

laborers remained a problem until the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers took over the work in 1882 and soon after replaced unskilled laborers with machines.5

To attract new agricultural laborers, the Louisiana state legislature in 1866 passed a law establishing a commissioner of immigration. State agents tried to recruit migrants from Germany, Belgium, Mexico, and Italy and even among the Chinese in Cuba. But postbellum Louisiana could not compete with the industrial magnets of the Northeast or the homesteads of the West. In the end, whites continued to rely on subordinated black sharecroppers and casual laborers. Lynching and intimidation, plus the lack of a

free market for mobile wage labor, effectively confined black laborers to agricultural occupations in the Deep South from emancipation through the beginning of the twentieth century.6

As migration to New Orleans slacked off, its foreign-born stock was replenished mostly by those who already had family and friends in the city. Few new migrant streams developed; instead the extensive social networks of the Irish and Italians continued to draw newcomers to the city. However, by the late 1880s the flow of Irish migrants shifted from New Orleans to industrializing cities in the northern United States. Sicilian migrants, in contrast, were arriving in unprecedented numbers as political and economic changes in Italy drove them away. Merchants who had been plying the trade routes connecting Sicily and New Orleans since the early nineteenth century found it easy to recruit them as agricultural workers and urban laborers. The Sicilians supplanted the Irish as the stigmatized working class, who, along with blacks, did much of the menial labor of the city. By 1910 Sicilian migrants and their descendants formed 39 percent of Louisiana's population. Nevertheless, the era of migration-driven population growth in New Orleans had come to a close: Between 1850 and 1900 New Orleans fell from fifth to twelfth rank in population in the national urban hierarchy.7

New Orleans Becomes a Biracial City

In contrast to the fast-industrializing northeastern and midwestern economies, with their burgeoning factories, New Orleans's agro-export economy required few urban laborers but rather depended on the region's agricultural productivity for its profits. Consequently, the population of New Orleans grew more slowly than those of Chicago, St. Louis, Cleveland, Detroit, and Milwaukee, dropping New Orleans from twelfth to sixteenth place in the urban hierarchy between 1900 and 1950. New Orleans maintained its position only by connecting the railways that ended there to the ocean freighters.8

Simultaneously, New Orleans shifted from a tripartite to a biracial society, in which people were socially and legally categorized as either white or black, much earlier than other American cities by dint of the consolidation of Jim Crow segregation.9 As in many northern cities today, the explicitly unequal treatment of those racial groups has been re-

produced through an interlocking system of unequal educational opportunities, residential segregation, and employment discrimination. Even as school attendance rates rose steeply across the United States in the first half of the twentieth century, in New Orleans blacks were consistently far less likely than whites to complete secondary school, even to the present. The effect of racial educational inequality during “the human capital century” has been to diminish the labor-market opportunities and life chances of the individuals that lag behind. Blacks became the low-skill, low-wage labor force on which New Orleans’s tourist-based economy has increasingly relied since the oil industry collapsed in the 1980s.10

The residential segregation of New Orleans occurred in stages in the course of the twentieth century. Before then, New Orleanians lived in mixed neighborhoods since black domestic servants and workers often live in the blocks between the grand avenues of the wealthy whites. During the Jim Crow era, whites moved to the new neighborhoods that were created by draining the swampland around the edges of the city. The expansion of the streetcar system also allowed blacks to live in neighborhoods farther from their employers. But the creation of racially segregated New Deal public housing developments was the first implementation of legally enforced residential segregation in the city. When the civil rights movement integrated public elementary and secondary schools, the flight of the white middle class to the suburbs accelerated both residential and educational segregation and set in motion the social forces that contributed to the city’s population loss after 1960. (See figure 3.)11

This out-migration was racially selective, and after 1980 the city of New Orleans (Orleans Parish) had a black majority, although the metropolitan area, which includes suburbs, did not. The biracial dynamic of the city was hardly challenged by the small numbers of Latin American migrants—mostly Cubans, Hondurans, Mexicans, and Nicaraguans—that arrived in the city at distinct moments in the mid-twentieth century and the Vietnamese migrants that arrived in the late 1970s.12 The new Asian and Latino migrants, as well as some European migrants, were welcomed and incorporated into New Orleans society at a time when native-born blacks were still struggling to gain their civil rights.

Although the shift in population from city to suburb did not retard the growth of the metropolitan area overall, between 1950 and 2000, New Orleans fell from sixteenth to thirty-fifth place among metropolitan statistical areas in population. The port, oil, and tourist enterprises in New Orleans lacked the generative power of the technology industries that boomed elsewhere in the United States in the late twentieth century. As a result, the city was unable to attract new residents or to keep many of its current residents.13


12 Campanella, Geographies of New Orleans.

Growth of New Orleans's population, 1769–2000

Figure 3. For over two centuries, the population of New Orleans grew. After 1960, in the wake of school integration, the flight of the white middle class to the suburbs set in motion changes that led to a decline in population. Note: The geographic boundaries of New Orleans changed with each census year. From 1950 to 2000, the population is reported for the Metropolitan Statistical Area. Sources: Data for 1769 to 1860 are calculated from Richard Campanella, Geographies of New Orleans: Urban Fabrics before the Storm (Lafayette, 2006), 193–203. Data for 1850 to 2000 are calculated from Steven Ruggles et al., Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 3.0 (Minneapolis, 2004), http://usa.ipums.org/usa/. For 1850 and 1860, data from both sources are combined to estimate distribution since IPUMS data include only the free population and Campanella does not report nativity.

On the eve of Katrina, New Orleans laid claim to a host of dubious records. In 2005, 24.5 percent of residents lived below the poverty level compared with 13.3 percent for the United States as a whole; 17.7 percent had less than a complete high school education compared with 15.8 percent for the United States; the median household income was $30,711 compared with $46,242 for the United States. Those figures were even worse for the city's black residents. New Orleans's history of racial differentiation had created a class of residents who were exceptionally vulnerable to the catastrophe that occurred on August 29, 2005. Consequently, race and class powerfully conditioned not only how New Orleanians evacuated but also how and whether they would ever return.14

The Post-Katrina Population of New Orleans: Newcomers, Returnees, and Evacuees

While the Army Corps of Engineers and the employees of Jefferson and Orleans parishes drained the flooded city, the demand for laborers to clean up the soggy mess surged. Foreign-born Hispanic migrants were the first to respond to that demand, just as they have followed the construction boom throughout the New South. That is not surprising, since workers born in Mexico and Central America make up about 21 percent of the U.S. construction labor force. Although many New Orleanians were unprepared to see those unfamiliar faces and hear strange languages in their nearly empty city, the newcomer Latino migrants were the rapid-response labor force that was necessary to reconstruct New Orleans.¹⁵

Nevertheless, the migrants received a mixed reception. The federal government welcomed the labor force by suspending the Davis-Bacon Act mandating that federal contractors pay prevailing wages and by waiving sanctions against employers who hired undocumented workers, thereby letting market forces reign.¹⁶ New Orleanians able to return home were pleased to find workers to clean out their moldy belongings, gut houses and other buildings, repair and replace roofs, and paint over the cryptic markings left on their doors by search-and-rescue crews. Displaced New Orleanians in the newly formed diaspora, many of them former renters, resented the speedy arrival of Hispanic workers while they waited to find out when they could return home or receive assistance or whether the city would devise a plan for rebuilding the most devastated neighborhoods. Such New Orleanians, many of them working-class blacks, understood that they would not be part of New Orleans’s reconstruction labor force, at least not unless they accepted the conditions—dangerous work without adequate protection, lack of housing, low wages—that migrants tolerated. New Orleans’s history with race and class shaped the experience of the flood and evacuation. Low-income black neighborhoods in low-lying areas suffered a disproportionate share of the floodwater, while wealthier, whiter neighborhoods on higher land stayed dry. Those disadvantages accumulated more rapidly for those who were already disadvantaged—mostly low-income blacks—creating more obstacles to their return.¹⁷

The repopulation of the city has disproportionately drawn those with more resources. Resources in this case are defined by what you had before the storm—a home, job, savings, and insurance—and whether it survived. The return rate has been highest among the 34 percent of the city’s households deemed to have minor or no damage, while a much smaller percentage of the population from the 66 percent of households that experienced serious and severe damage returned. Those returning to homes in the damaged areas were


Population of New Orleans in mid-2005 and mid-2006, (in numbers) and by race (percentages)


Those with the financial resources to rebuild. The largest federal source of rebuilding aid to low-income homeowners, the Road Home program, proved too little, too late for most. On the second anniversary of Katrina, the city of New Orleans is only 67.6 percent of its pre-Katrina size, with little promise of regaining its pre-storm numbers.18

The demographic composition of the city is difficult to pin down given the state of flux of the population. It is widely held that the city is “older, whiter, and more affluent” than before Katrina, since black and poor residents were more likely to have lived in devastated areas and in ruined rental property. Many thought residents with children were less likely to return because schools were so slow to open. Statistics produced since Katrina are subject to large margins of error, but they confirm those impressions. By summer 2006 New Orleans had gone from having a population that was two-thirds black and less than a third white, with small Asian and Hispanic minorities, to having nearly equal proportions of blacks and whites (47 percent and 42.7 percent respectively) and somewhat larger Asian (3.5 percent) and particularly Hispanic (9.6 percent) minorities. At the time of that survey, the city was less than half its pre-Katrina size, and a larger proportion of whites had returned than blacks. Furthermore, the proportion of Hispanics had grown, no doubt as a result of the reconstruction labor force. (See figure 4.)19

19 Coleman Warner, “Census Tallies Katrina Changes: But the Changing New Orleans Area Is a Moving Target,”
The evacuation for Hurricane Katrina forced a recomposition of the population, but factors that drove population decline in the past continue to operate. Hurricane Katrina merely accelerated the city’s population loss to the suburbs and beyond underway since the 1960s. The factors driving that trend—the loss of high-skill, high-wage employment, poor public schools, a bifurcated housing market, and crime—have been exacerbated since the storm and continue to discourage displaced residents from returning. New Orleans’s population loss will continue. The increased demand for low-skill, low-wage workers has not increased blacks’ representation in the city, as it had done in the recent past, since many displaced New Orleanians from that segment of the labor force lost their homes or apartments and cannot find affordable rental property. They can find both work and housing in the communities where they have temporarily settled.

Instead the Hispanic migrant labor force has fulfilled this demand without the expectation of housing assistance, functioning schools, or any other support from the city. Those migrants serve much the same purpose as the nineteenth-century Irish and Italian migrants did, though it is doubtful that the newcomers will grow as populous. Today’s illegal migrants, who make up a large portion of the influx into New Orleans, typically pursue a temporary and marginal existence in U.S. society and often face insurmountable legal obstacles to incorporation, in stark contrast to their nineteenth-century counterparts. As long as there is demand, Hispanic migrants will complement the low-skill, low-wage labor force that has returned to New Orleans. The factors that influence whether these migrants stay are similar to those that influence whether low-income, black New Orleanians, as well as others, return: sustained economic growth and labor demand, new stocks of affordable housing, functioning schools, safe neighborhoods, and renewed investment in storm protection. In addition, however, the newcomers require at least tolerance for their undocumented status and at best a pathway to citizenship. Hurricane Katrina created a moment in which the reconstruction of the city allowed for a reconstruction of the racial order, but it is too soon to say whether a tripartite white-black-brown society reminiscent of the society of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries will emerge or whether the biracial division of the twentieth century will prevail.

New Orleans Times-Picayune, June 7, 2006, national section, p. 1; Logan, “Impact of Katrina”; “General Characteristics for Orleans Parish, Louisiana,” 2005, U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, http://www.census.gov/acs/www/; Louisiana Public Health Institute, “2006 Louisiana Health and Population Survey: Survey Report, January 17, 2007, Orleans Parish,” Louisiana Health and Population Survey, http://www.popest.org/popesta2006/files/popest_Orleans_SurveyReport.pdf. Percentages do not sum to 100 because Hispanics are counted separately, as an ethnic group rather than a racial group. The total racial distribution is: 42.7% white only; 47.0% black only; 3.5% Asian only; 6.7% others (including American Indian, Alaska native, Native Hawaiian, other Pacific Islander, multiracial, and no answer). The ethnic distribution (Latino/non-Latino) is: 9.6% Latino (of any race); 86.2% non-Latino (of any race); 4.2% not indicated.
