

New Orleans Black Diaspora: Will the Residents Come Back?

An Interview with Beverly Wright by Jesse Clarke

Dr. Beverly Wright, Director, Deep South Center for Environmental Justice

For more than 20 years, Dr. Wright has been a leading scholar, advocate, and activist in the environmental justice arena. She has directed numerous grassroots community-initiated health surveys, evaluated community buy-outs, and supervised community development initiatives around contaminated sites and serves as a strong voice of the grassroots environmental justice movement.

Dr. Wright is a professor of sociology and the founding director of the Deep South Center for Environmental

Justice (DSCEJ). Since 1992, DSCEJ has fought for the rights of residents of the Lower Mississippi River Industrial Corridor, the area commonly referred to as Cancer Alley. Dr. Wright served as chair of the Second National People of Color Leadership Summit in 2002.

In early 2006, she initiated “A Safe Way Back Home,” a pilot project with the United Steel Workers Union, in which contaminated soil was removed from yards and common areas in the Aberdeen Road neighborhood of New Orleans.

Jesse Clarke: There has been a lot of publicity over the recent struggle focused on the destruction of public housing units. What’s the general state of things in New Orleans today? Who owned the city before Katrina, who owns it now?

Beverly Wright: The white elite is fighting to bring New Orleans back, richer than it was and whiter than it was, with no concern for anybody else. It’s clear to me that they don’t want people to come back. I am not against tearing bad housing down if, in fact, the plan is replacement housing. Poor people would love to live in a beautiful community. The struggle is over the amount of replacement housing: We are drawing a line in the sand for one-to-one replacement. We are right at the height of this struggle.

Clarke: How does that play out politically?

Wright: It affects your political strength. For example, they moved six-to-eight thousand people out of public housing. What was promised, was replacement housing. What we got, was a white city council district. Now we have two white city council presidents because the deal, when there was a Black majority, was to add a second president for the

whites. That was quickly forgotten when the opportunity existed for them to take control, even though it’s not representative.

Before the storm, the white population was quite small. We had a majority Black city council. The Black population was [around] 70 percent, if you add the undercount. The mayor claims to have figures showing that we are almost back to 65 percent, but some people don’t want those numbers known. Since the storm, hundreds of Black people have been purged from the [voting] rolls, many of them unable to get back home. In this context, they held an election for city council where the one Black person that ran got 48 percent of the vote. She needed 51 percent in order to [avoid] a run-off. Those “missing voters” certainly made the difference. [At] the runoff, the Black turnout was low. The result: a majority white city council. There’s nothing about being fair in all of this. They took advantage of the situation [and] now we have a majority white city council. That could affect who owns what and where in a dramatic way and very quickly.

I’ll give you an example of [something] I saw happen that made me see what our plight could be. A Black woman who owns a daycare center in a city that has an unbelievable shortage of daycare went

before the city council to have her [business] expanded. She's in an area that didn't get a whole lot of water. The neighborhood association—made up of all white people—came out against her expanding this Black daycare center. I watched her get locked out with nobody to speak for her, and the white city council president, saying: "I hope you don't give up. We're going to go with the neighborhood association and not allow you to expand this permit." [At] a time when the city is under water, he's denying her the opportunity to expand service to Black children needing daycare because the whites in the neighborhood are against it!

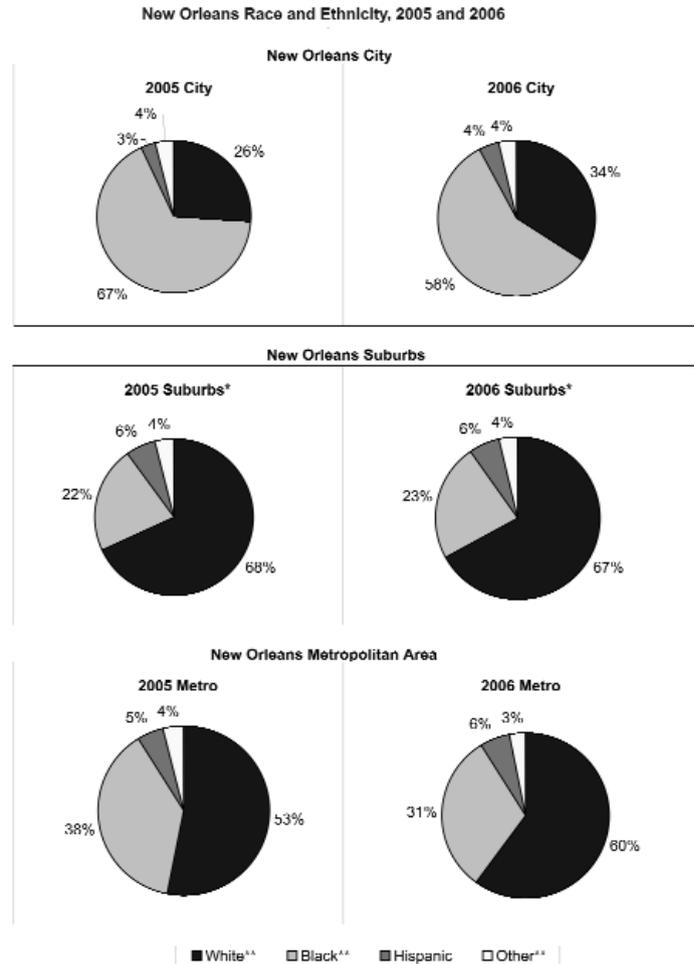
It became so clear to me [then] what political representation means. And we don't have anybody representing us.

Clarke: So, is there a general resurfacing of racism in action—without the explicit words?

Wright: Absolutely! And sometimes there's a resurgence of words. I mean, I live in Dixie! One of our legislators said the flooding of the housing project had done what the city had attempted to do for the last 20 years, and that was to get rid of the poor. One of the city council people talked about how we should never allow what happened before. That is, have so many poor people concentrated in one place.

On the other hand, maybe it's not really a resurgence. [The racism] has always been here. It's just that they have been dealt a stronger hand. Their idea of getting rid of poverty is shutting the poor out and making certain they don't come to New Orleans. Of course, the real way to deal with poverty is not to get rid of the poor people but to get rid of poverty... [with] a decent school system and living wage jobs. But that's not how they see it. And they said it openly.

They've also been talking about mixed-use housing: with condos and all of this development that [will make] young, upwardly mobile white people move to the city. What they're attempting to do is to change the political structure of this city by race. By appealing to young white people to help us rebuild, they're hoping to get the city back to being white, which it hasn't been in a very long time.



*includes the parishes of Jefferson, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Charles, St. John the Baptist, and St. Tammany
 **Non-Hispanic members of race

Clarke: I understand that there was a sizeable amount of Black and poor home ownership in New Orleans.

Wright: Yes, [there are] a lot of poor homeowners. The lower Ninth Ward was owned by Black people, and the renters oftentimes were relatives [who] weren't paying much rent.

Clarke: And what's happening to these owners as the properties continue to sit vacant?

Wright: After the storm, [people] paid their houses off with the insurance [but] they have no money to rebuild. A lot of the mortgage companies forced the poor homeowners to pay off their mortgages, which was illegal. So, these former homeowners [now] actually own the land that's just sitting there. They don't have money to fix it but they don't feel the pressure to sell. That's where Road Home [reconstruction fund

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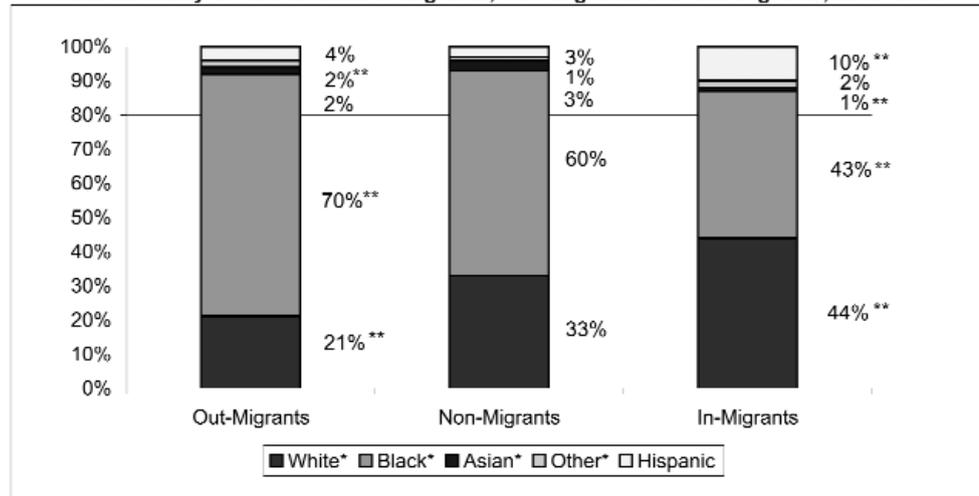
Resettling New Orleans: The First Full Picture from the Census

William H. Frey, Audrey Singer and David Park

The Brookings Institution Special Analysis in Metropolitan Policy, Washington D.C., September 2007.

Race-Ethnicity of New Orleans In-Migrants, Non-Migrants and Out-Migrants, 2005–2006

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Resettling New Orleans: The First Full Picture from the Census
 William H. Frey, Audrey Singer and David Park
 The Brookings Institution Special Analysis in Metropolitan Policy, Washington D.C., September 2007.



*Non-Hispanic members of race group
 **Significantly different from nonmigrants at 90% confidence level

for homeowners] was supposed to kick in to help people, [and they] are still waiting.

Clarke: They can still meet the tax bills, then?

Wright: Up to now, the taxes have not gone up extraordinarily, because we still have—and it might change—a homestead exemption. For example, the house that I live in now, my tax was \$457 per year; [but] with the homestead exemption, my tax bill is \$25 per year. You pay no taxes on the first \$75,000 of your house’s [value]. In a Southern town like this, where a majority of the houses cost less than \$75,000, most people pay zero. That’s why poor people could keep their homes. But when they reassess the houses, [their value] will go up. It still [would not be] like California and some other places, but it [may be] enough for poor people to not be able to [afford] them.

This hasn’t happened yet, but it’s coming, and people are bracing themselves for it. The city council has been talking about programs for people under certain incomes so they wouldn’t lose their homes. That’s going to be a big issue that we’re going to have to push for.

Clarke: When you look downtown you see new hotels, casinos, and entertainment centers; are the new owners getting a bonanza?

Wright: Oh, we’re getting some new owners. Donald Trump is coming in. We [also] have the Uptown

area—the Warehouse District apartments and condos are extremely expensive. The Krauss Building on Canal Street—I understand it’s already sold out and they just started construction.

Some of this was going on before the storm and the storm just hastened [things]. For instance, Uptown was built on a grid with super-houses on the main street. The houses for workers are placed with slave quarters on the Inner Circle, so you still have some relatively small houses off the main streets... owned by Black people. [But] houses around them are selling for a half million dollars, so these little wooden shotguns are now being appraised for an unbelievable amount of money. That’s one of the things that we’re real concerned about.

I think it’s a way to get rid of the poor people who own houses Uptown—by increasing the value of the property all around them, [so] they can’t afford the taxes.

Clarke: Are you trying to get new affordable housing built?

Wright: Well, that’s what’s going on now through the Office of Recovery Management. Two huge contracts for building affordable housing were given to two organizations—Providence, which has been around a long time and is a part of the Council of Charities, and another [newer] group. It still is nowhere near the number of housing units we’ve lost or will lose, with the destruction of the projects, but there is an attempt to make certain that we extract as much of



the land as we can for public housing. [When] they got rid of the St. Thomas Housing Project, they included some low-income housing, but it's nowhere near [meeting the needs of] the 6,000 people who were displaced.

Clarke: How far has the rebuilding of the levees come? Who is benefiting?

Wright: I think that the majority of the energy and monies for rebuilding have gone into the areas that have had the least amount of damage. [That is] sections of the city where white people, rich people live, [rather] than where poor and Black people live.

The Army Corps of Engineers has, in fact, [already] secured the property of the wealthy white people. Their last report basically shows that [wealthy, white] Lakeview and Old Metairie are the only sectors of this city that have increased levee protection. They got five-and-a-half feet more protection, so they probably won't get any water at all.

Where I live, we have gotten zero increased levee protection. The lower Ninth [Ward] has gotten only two feet of increased protection. If we get another hurricane like Katrina, we can expect approximately the same amount of water and damage and loss of life [according to a] chart from the Army Corps of Engineers. If that's not the most racist thing that I've ever seen in my life... people were so upset, they said it was a mistake.

Clarke: So, who is doing this work?

Wright: Bottom line, outside contractors. For the most part, the work is going to big firms that have long-term relationships with the Army Corps. There are a small number of local contractors who have gotten some money—to appease the masses. The local and minority contractors are locked out.

Clarke: So they haven't quite got the political will to actually bulldoze, or rather re-asses and tax and expropriate the Black homeowners?

Wright: Not yet. [But] I believe, it's coming. They know they can buy this land for ten cents if we get another hurricane.

I think they're getting a lot more resistance than what they expected. The fact that there was so much Black home ownership is the thing that's hindering their process, and they're trying to figure out how to get that land from us. If they are successful, then they can move forward with everything. But we're holding on, you know, we're holding on.

In the Seventh Ward—the ward that I'm from—there is a real vocal group [that is] adjudicating old properties and turning them into low- to moderate-income housing in my old neighborhood. I believe that that's going to be our only hope—the tenacity of the people themselves who are determined to keep their land like me and many, many, others. ■

Photo:

Downtown New Orleans by night, as portrayed in Delta Airlines *In-Flight Magazine* under the slogan "The New Normal."

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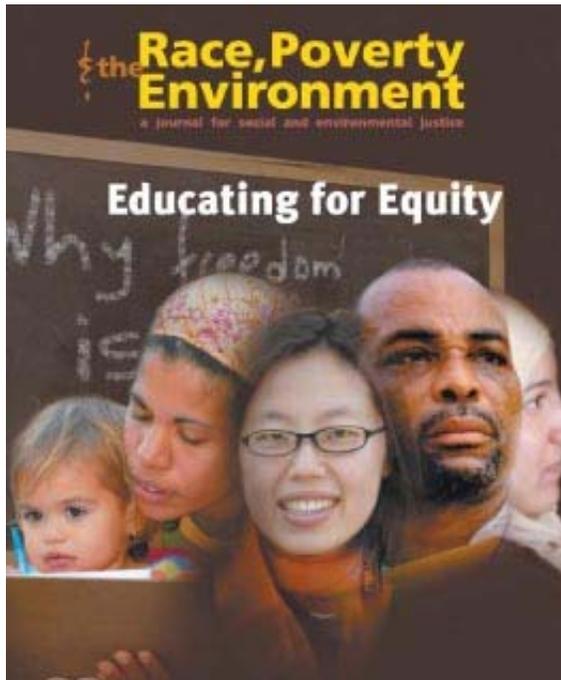
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