Chapter 3.1
Culture, Gender, and Vulnerability in a Vietnamese Refugee Community: Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina

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Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast of the United States, including the city of New Orleans, on August 29, 2005. Although New Orleans is famous for its French Quarter, Mardi Gras celebrations, riverboats, music, and Creole culture and cuisine, few people are aware of its vibrant Vietnamese community. This paper describes how the Vietnamese community of New Orleans East, an area locally known as Versailles, was affected by Hurricane Katrina and why the task of rebuilding community in Versailles was distinct from rebuilding other areas of the city. In Vietnamese, the word for water, nuoc, also means ‘country’; this linguistic metaphor indicates the great symbolic importance of ‘water’ and ‘home’, especially for a group of displaced people. Environmental changes after the storm, particularly in access to clean water, affected key cultural components of the Versailles Vietnamese community.

Hurricane Katrina was one of the worst environmental disasters in the history of the United States, casting debris across 233,000 km$^2$ in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama (Luther 2006). An estimated 15.3 million m$^3$ of debris littered waterways in New Orleans and Mississippi, and 96%, or 13.6 million m$^3$, of remaining debris littered Orleans, St. Bernard, St. Tammany, Washington, and Plaquemines parishes (Bullard and Wright 2009:26). The daunting prospect of cleanup and recovery raised questions about which neighbourhoods would be cleaned up, in what order, and where debris dumpsites should be located. These were primarily social questions to be addressed in the political sphere, and they had great significance in individual communities of New Orleans. According to Robert Bullard and Beverly Wright, ‘What has been cleaned up, what gets left behind, and where the waste is disposed of appear to be linked to more political science and sociology than to toxicology, epidemiology, and hydrology’ (2009:26).
Like everyone else in the aftermath of Katrina, the people of Versailles required dependable access to clean water. In Versailles, however, once the immediate recovery needs were addressed (with trailers and other assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, FEMA), it was critical to re-establish the local water environment, as water is fundamental to the cultural character of the neighbourhood and its place in a reborn New Orleans. Gardening is an important feature of the Versailles community. Locals use water from its main canal to irrigate their gardens, which produce vegetables that are not easily found in American grocery stores but are essential to Vietnamese food culture. Many gardeners, who tend to be elderly members of the community, sell their vegetables at the early Saturday market, which also plays an important role in maintaining the sense of community. This example of disaster recovery in New Orleans demonstrates how water, food, culture, and community are intimately linked and how disasters may affect specific cultural groups in different ways.

3.1.1 The Vietnamese Community in Versailles, New Orleans

The Vietnamese community of Versailles is part of a broader migration of Vietnamese people who left their homeland in response to specific political-economic realities and politics. Versailles’s Vietnamese roots can be traced back to villagers from North Vietnam who migrated south after the country was divided into two states in 1954. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, having lived in South Vietnam for over 30 years, the community migrated to New Orleans. Members of the generation who came of age in Vietnam were generally born between before 1940 and 1965. Members of the second generation (the first generation born outside of Vietnam or who were under the age of ten when they left that country) were generally born between 1965 and 1990. This particular historical experience – of successive displacement in Vietnam and arrival as refugees in the United States – affected the kinds of communities Vietnamese people established in the United States and some of their collective ideas about the role of government in their lives.