

# Surviving Sandy

Changing Views and (American) Dreams  
in Times of Vulnerability

WALK A  
MILE IN  
OUR SHOES

Lilja Anna Perdijk



# Surviving Sandy

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## Changing Views and (American) Dreams in Times of Vulnerability.

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## **Abstract**

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When hurricane Sandy struck the coasts of New York City, people's houses and lives were lifted off their foundations. This study tells the story of Sandy survivors in one of the most hard hit areas of New York City – the East Shore of Staten Island. It investigates the impact of hurricane Sandy on people's lives, worldviews, and (American) dreams. In the aftermath of the hurricane, governmental and voluntary relief efforts have revealed flaws and strengths in society. These flaws and strengths as well as their underlying ideologies are examined. Local grassroots and volunteer organizations have come into being when governmental aid was perceived as too little too late. When neighbors reached out to help one another, they realized that they had missed a sense of community before the hurricane. This revealed the basic structure of society, a concept that will be explained throughout this thesis. In times of (financial) vulnerability, the American dream of social upward mobility seems less attainable. People's experiences have made them reflect upon these aspects and have changed or reinforced their perspectives. This qualitative research study is inspired by the methodology of engaged anthropology. To canvas the various different situations people are dealing with, East Shore residents and volunteers have been approached by participant observation. To see how the hurricane has impacted the worldviews and dreams of the future generation – students at the College of Staten Island – open interviews have been applied. These data collection methods have been supplemented with relevant social scientific literature.



## **Acknowledgments**

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Many people have contributed to this thesis. First of all, I would like to thank the Sandy survivors of Staten Island for sharing their stories. Without them, I would not have been able to write this thesis. Their openness and enthusiasm were inspiring and empowering. I owe the Gospel Choir of the College of Staten Island a special thanks. They were open and caring to a non-religious girl from the Netherlands and embraced me with their joyful music. The rehearsals I had with the choir were an uplifting and heartwarming interruption of the research study.

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## GRAND CENTRAL

The city orbits around eight million  
centers of the universe

and turns around the golden clock  
at the still point of this place.

Lift up your eyes from the moving hive  
and you will see time circling

under a vault of stars and know  
just when and where you are.



## Prologue

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Staten Island is my whole life. *Rosa stares at the green carpet of the hotel room while she gathers her thoughts.* It has got the best of two worlds; it's easy to get to Manhattan for culture and fun, while Staten Island is peaceful and quiet. Before I got sick I used to bike around the parks. I mean... you can see a deer here! *The smile on her face seems to reveal uncomplicated happiness that got challenged along the way. She sits leaning forward in a chair, her stool resting in her lap. The defeated impression drawn by the posture of her 46-year-old body contrasts with her beauty and combative character.*

I grew up in South Beach with my father, mother, and sister. My neighbors came – and still come – from all over the world. It never really was an issue though. The moment you moved to Staten Island, you were a Staten Islander, period. We were all connected. My neighbors took care of each other. The mentality has now shifted, it has all become about “me” and “I've got to get mine”... But I have so many good memories about the area. About the parks, the beaches with the kiddie rides and roller-coaster... That's why I moved back here. They've gone now, but when I bought my house ten years ago, the rides were still there. I am one of those people that always wanted that life-style. There were some new attached houses further up on the hill that I could afford as well, but they had no character to me. It was none of old Staten Island where a family already owned a house for three generations. Back in the day a lot of people found it wonderful communities. “Oh my God, I want to own a little bungalow down the beach” used to be a wonderful thing to say. It ain't anymore.

When I bought my house I still had a job, a big savings account, and good insurance. I never wanted to spend money, I wanted to save it. I was worried that... *Her voice breaks with emotion as she looks at the numerous little jars with medications and the oxygen device on the nightstand.* I was worried that I wouldn't be able to take care of myself. I don't ever want to ask anybody for help, that's just who I am. Before the hurricane I thought I had set up my life so that I would never be in that position. Even the house that I bought... I didn't buy a big house, I bought a one bedroom attached house that was well within my means. If it hadn't had been, I wouldn't have been able to pay off eight surgeries. Most people end up in bankruptcy when that happens!

When I bought the house I was in perfect shape. The only thing that happened to me is that I got sick, that's really it in a nutshell. And I had an insurance agent that made a mistake and nobody wants to fix it. This was a combination, but you can ask anybody. It's never one issue... it always seems to involve illness, insurance, or a bank. Or it's a

lost job because they suddenly let go. And there's no jobs out there. Back then employers were different, they actually cared. When someone got sick at the job, everybody pulled together. Now these big corporations own all the jobs. And it wasn't all great back then, don't get me wrong. But things were easier. The pharmacist on the corner of the street would let you pay a week later, and neighbors would watch each others kids. Those things help people who are struggling.

*Rosa has got an illness called Cushing's disease, that was caused by a tumor in her brain. Symptoms are the loss of adrenal function and the endocrine system. It's a rare disease to begin with, she says. It basically broke down my bone structure and muscles. It affects my blood sugar and blood pressure, my reproductive system and thyroid. Nothing works anymore so I replace it with shots and pills. Most of the time I feel like crap. Thank God they're able to replace a lot of that stuff, but I still need to get my right hip and knee done. The next thing will be my ankles. That's just the way it is.*

*She looks at the streaming rain outside the window of her hotel room. The earth tinted curtains blow in the breeze. I mean really, it's hard sometimes, but I can live with it. It's just that... people look at you like you somehow did this to yourself. It's an awful feeling because I have tried so hard never to let this [having to cope with financial trouble and being displaced] happen. People who have known me my whole life will tell you my nick name as a kid was Happy. I was very optimistic, I always thought the best of people, that was me. And I liked to laugh. Now [after the hurricane] I've become a Skeptic, I've become mistrustful, and I have pretty much no hope for my own future nor for my neighbors future. Wrinkles of sorrow appear on her face. A hotel attendant knocks on the door.*

*When Rosa opens it, the attendant gives her a package wrapped in white paper. Lunch!, she exclaims. A little smile decorates her face as she says Hope, this gives me hope. There are people out there who care. This is coming from a friend of mine in New Jersey. It's those little things that keep me from emotionally drowning.*





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## **Abbreviations**

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USA	=	United States of America
NYC	=	New York City
CSI	=	College of Staten Island
CCA	=	Civic Community Association
NYPD	=	New York Police Department
SBA	=	Small Business Administration
FEMA	=	Federal Emergency Management Agency
IHP	=	Individuals and Housing Program
CEO	=	Chief Executive Officer
ARC	=	American Red Cross
LTRO	=	Staten Island Community and Interfaith Long Term Recovery Organization
IRB	=	Institutional Review Board



# Introduction

*It Takes a Tragedy*





On October 29, 2012, Hurricane Sandy made landfall on New York City (NYC) after it had raged over seven other countries (Helman 2012). The hurricane turned out to be the deadliest ever to hit the city, and the second costliest in the nation's history (Jarabeen 2013:237). Although the city had not been hit directly since 1938, experts have warned officials to take more immediate action. The rising sea-levels and many minor floods, they said, might increase the city's vulnerability (Colle, Rojowsky, and Buonaito 2010:99). Whether or not the hurricane was predictable, few had seen its devastation coming. As can be seen in the maps that follow this introduction, many states have been affected by the hurricane. Some parts of NYC were particularly hard hit, such as the Rockaways in Queens and the East Shore of Staten Island. Over a hundred people died, thousands of houses were destroyed, and the power loss affected millions more.

Disasters have become a major focus in anthropological research, because these tragedies reveal a society's DNA. Pre-existing and newly emerged flaws and strengths in society are revealed in people's struggles in the aftermath of a hurricane (Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 2001; Aldrich 2012). It often takes a tragedy to open people's eyes to these aspects, to change their perceptions, and to foster a critical debate in society. Although the political debate in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina did not endure as long and extensively as people had thought it would, people have been engaged in a public debate (e.g. Adams 2013; Eggers 2009; Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006).

An examination of the flaws and strengths in society is valuable, because scholars, politicians, and in fact all people, can learn from these aspects. However, various scholars (e.g. Bauman 2011; Harvey 2010; Jones and Murphy 2009) argue that this should not be the only focus of analysis. To be able to understand and explain the society we live in, it is also important to investigate underlying ideologies that shape the political, economic, and social system. For example, Bauman (2011), Diamond (2005), and Harvey (2010), contributed to these debates by investigating the impact of capitalist ideologies on people's lives.

Although these studies are highly relevant, Ingold (2011:7) and Tsing (2005:267), argue for an even more holistic analysis that not only focuses on *being*, but also on *becoming*. I agree, because scholars like Adams (2013) show that disasters affect people's perceptions and worldviews. There is another important aspect that deserves scholars attention: the American dream. Ever since the economic crisis of 2008, this national ideology of social upward mobility and of owning a house, a car, and a stable job, no longer seems attainable (Lagomarsino 2012:61; Walley 2010:130). Fogel, Smith, and Williamson (2008:176) describe people's houses as “a fundamental economic and social principle embedded in the American psyche”. Now that people have lost their houses and cars in the hurricane, their American dream might seem even more elusive. People's experiences have therefore changed their perception of the American dream and their environment.

To be able to get a glimpse of potential future changes in society, I will examine the impact of the hurricane on people's worldviews and future (American) dreams. Not only people's struggles, but also people's strengths and hope, are relevant aspects that deserve scholar's attention (Crapanzano 2003). By discussing all of these aspects, this study contributes to debates on disaster studies, as well as debates on the American dream and people's future lines of becoming. The main research question this study addresses, is: *What is the impact of hurricane Sandy on people's lives, worldviews, and (American) dreams?*

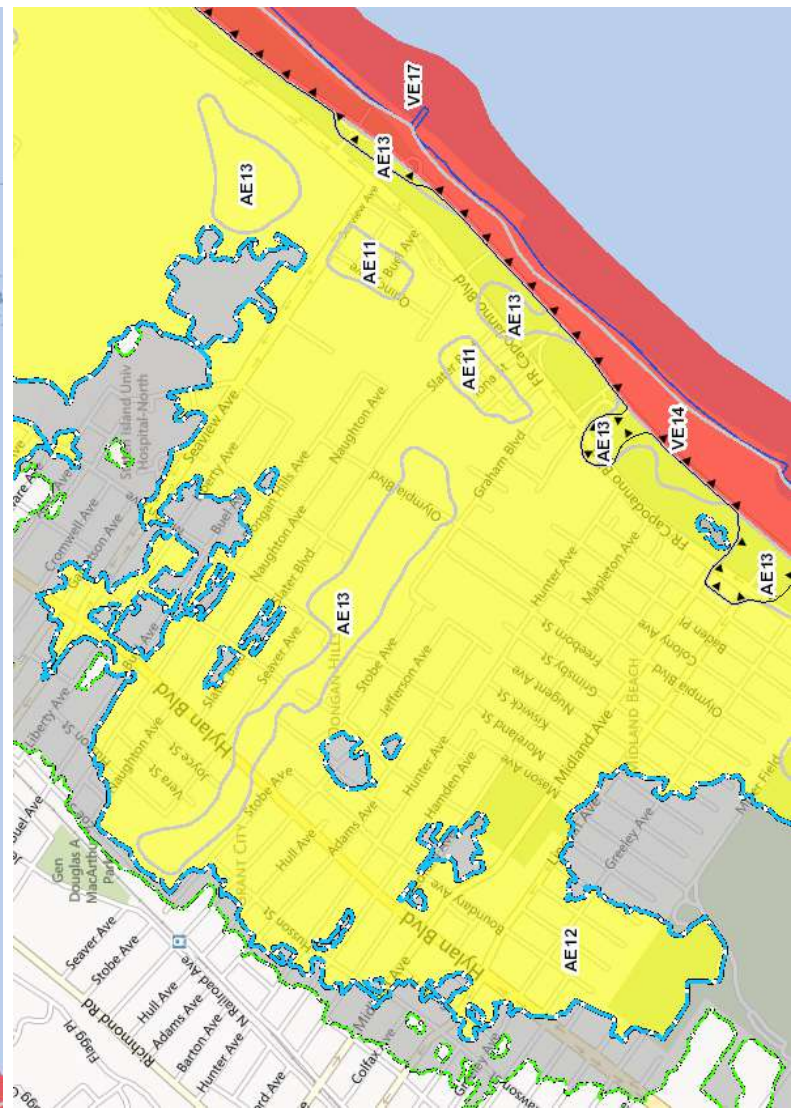
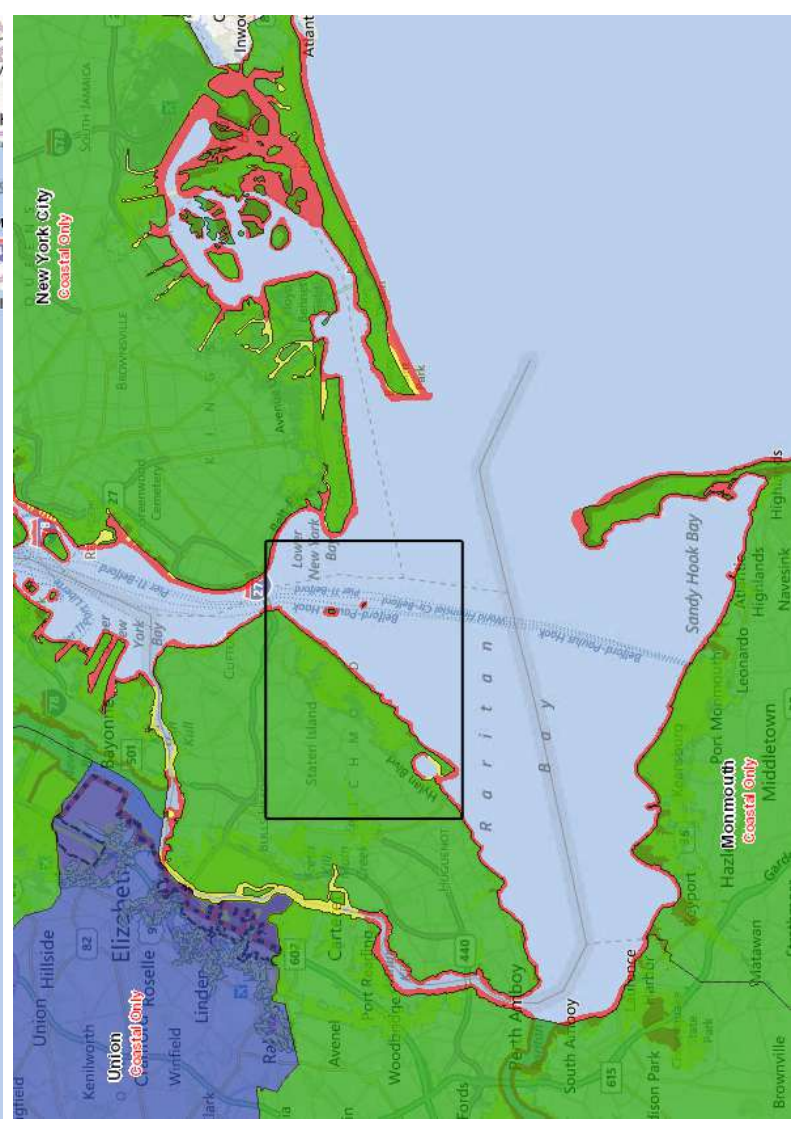
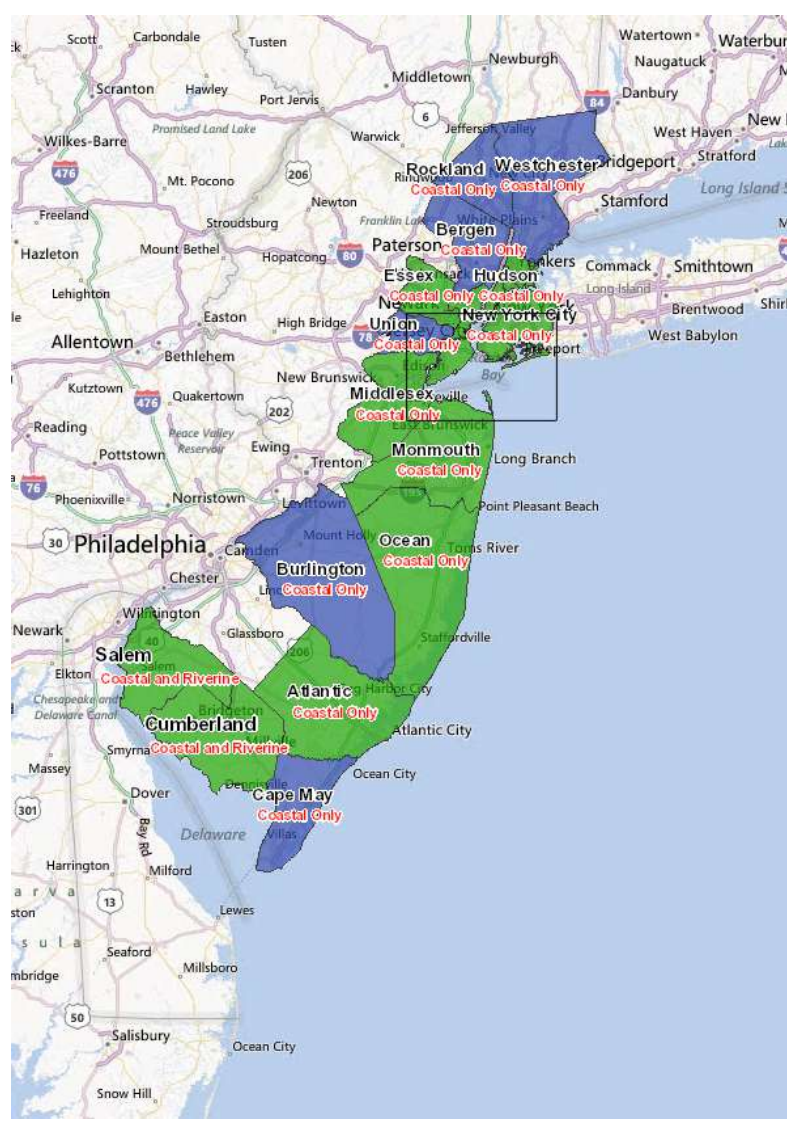
This research study is the result of three months of fieldwork in the East Shore neighborhoods of Staten Island. From February 9 to May 9, 2013, I have examined people's experiences and perceptions in the aftermath of the hurricane. To gain a *multi-sided perspective*, I focused on students of the College of Staten Island (CSI), volunteers, and East Shore residents.

The first part of this thesis focuses on the (political) history of Staten Island and its social meaning for Staten Islanders. In part two, relief and recovery efforts by governmental, volunteer, and grassroots organizations, are being described. When neighbors started to help each other out, people felt a strong feeling of togetherness. This feeling revealed *the basic structure of society*, a new concept that will be explained throughout this thesis. In part three, the impact of the hurricane on people's (American) dreams and worldviews, will be examined. Climate change is one of the topics that has been on people's minds since the hurricane, because people often perceive Sandy as a concrete illustration of the consequences of climate change (Jarabeen 2013:238). When people couple their perspectives and dreams, they often direct their (future) actions (Ingold 2011:7).

Therefore, by paying attention to changing worldviews and (American) dreams, we will take a subtle look at the future. The methodological stance of this thesis is based on *engaged anthropology*, in which participant observation, interview techniques, and the use of relevant scientific literature are the main research methods (Low and Merry 2010:210). In part four, this methodology will be extensively described. The part will end with a reflection on the methodology's strengths, limitations, and future implications for anthropological research. Most names that are being used in this thesis are fictitious. The use of fictitious or real names is based on people's personal preferences, that were clarified by word or informed consent form (Appendix 2).

As Lagomarsino (2012:1) says, "Stories of mankind are what make us human". After the disaster, people felt like survivors of a tragedy that will go down in history. This thesis is based on the stories of the Sandy survivors of Staten Island, who's houses and lives have been lifted off their foundations, but who have found ways to stand strong.









West Shore

North Shore

East Shore

South Shore

**Legend**

- East Shore
- North Shore
- South Shore
- West Shore
- SI Streets
- SI Borough Boundary



# Smagines: Planning for Recovery Program









# Part I. Staten Island

*Forgotten Borough in the Spotlights*







## **Contents Part I.**

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## **1 Staten Island**

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NYC exists of five boroughs: Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island. Staten Island is the largest (153 square kilometers) and least populated borough of NYC. Within New York state, the island is known as Richmond County. In a city of eight million citizens, Staten Island takes a relatively small share (six percent) of almost five hundred thousand inhabitants.

Geographically seen, the island is quite isolated from the rest of the city. The distance between Manhattan and Staten Island is five miles, and the island is located three miles from Brooklyn. From the island, there are three bridges to New Jersey, and one to Brooklyn (Kramer and Flanagan 2012:4).

### **1.1 History**

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Staten Island – home to Native Americans at the time – was discovered in 1609 by the English explorer Henry Hudson who sailed for the Dutch (Burrows and Wallace 1999:14). The island was originally called “Staaten Eylandt” after the Dutch parliament known as the *Staten-Generaal*. In 1667, the Dutch colony was traded to England (Burrows and Wallace 1999:74). Early in the 19th century, people started to settle on Staten Island in greater numbers. In the 20th century, summerhouses were build along the coastline. From the 1960s, these condominiums have been used for permanent residence. The island's population has doubled from 221.000 in 1960 to 482.000 in 2007. This “white flight” consisted of predominantly Italian and Irish Americans from Brooklyn who sought affordable single-family homes in a suburban area (Kramer and Flanagan 2012:5). This is part of a tendency at the time all over the United States of America (USA), when the white middle class grew in income and racial antipathy.

This population growth has changed the demography of the island. Many people have Italian (36 percent) or Irish (16 percent) ancestry. This partly explains people's religious orientation; 58 percent of the island is Catholic, and 20 percent is part of another Christian faith. However, many other religious orientations are represented. Many people speak about the north-south division of the island. The South Shore of the island is known as middle and upper middle class area, where a lot of people with Italian and Irish ancestry reside. The North Shore is a middle and lower class area in which a large African-American, Latin American, and Sri Lankan community live. The East Shore of the island is demographically seen as a mixed but predominantly lower and middle class income area. There are people with Irish and Italian, Eastern European, and Latin American ancestry, as well as first generation immigrants.

Geographically seen, the island is hilly, but also lies five feet below sea level at some coastal

areas. It is interesting to note that the upper middle class and rich people on the island reside on the highest hills of the island, such as Todt Hill. Areas along the East Shore – those at or below sea level – are inhabited by lower and middle class households, because the houses in these areas are more affordable. Residential housing patterns on Staten Island are different from the ones in NYC, because 71 percent is owner-occupied as apposed to 34 percent in the city as a whole. The per capita income is higher than that of other boroughs, which makes it seem as if Staten Island is a middle class haven. Although one-third of the population could be called middle class, a large part is lower (middle) class, with some upper middle class enclaves.

National developments and problems can be seen on Staten Island through the years. 19th century manufacturing communities have vanished because many businesses were fused into larger corporations and taken overseas. The easy credit lending practices of the last few decades drove housing prices above affordability for middle class families. When many Staten Islanders took on mortgages they could not afford, the island became a regional epicenter of foreclosures (Kramer and Flanagan 2012:6). Nevertheless, Staten Island has become a popular place to live for New Yorkers who sought more private space, because the property tax burden is lower compared to other boroughs.

A current problem for Staten Islanders is the over-development. High-rise oceanfront properties and (semi) attached properties have increased the island's density (Kramer and Flanagan 2012:9). Urban sprawl made the community car-dependent because shopping centers and malls are widespread and there is no subway system to Manhattan.

## **1.2 A Tight-Knit Community**

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Stereotypes about the mafia and drug abuse on the island are often being reinforced by the media in shows such as the 2006 MTV True Life show called “I am a Staten Island girl”. Many people said this made them feel different from the rest of the city, a stance that is also articulated by Kramer and Flanagan (2012:9) as a “suburban state of mind”. They were angry about these shows, because it gives the island a bad reputation that is hard to reverse.

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They look at us like we're a drug island. Like we are the forgotten borough. [...] It makes me feel upset. It's because of this island, there is nothing to do, that's why they take pills. It makes you be someone you're not. The city puts that persona on us even though that's not how it is. They should talk to individuals before they say we're up for it. Obviously students at CSI are not taking pills. *Jill, student*

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Amy, a FEMA employee, explained that these stereotypes might also create a more tight-knit community. In her words, it creates a “Staten Island versus the world” feeling of solidarity. This



is why she found people narrow-minded and individualistic when she first came to the island. She felt left out and treated like an outsider. In the aftermath of the hurricane, she saw the strength of that solidarity in the way people immediately stood up for one another and were able to put differences aside. This, she said, has made her appreciate the island. While most people described the island as a tight-knit community, others experienced the lack of a strong feeling of community.

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I just had my group of friends, but there wasn't really a community type of atmosphere. Community was really reserved for if you were involved in a club or in church. *Max, student*

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### **1.3 Politics**

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A large proportion of the island's population (22 percent) works in public and governmental services such as education and the police and fire department, compared to 15 percent of the population of NYC. In the attacks on the World Trade Center 274 Staten Islanders have lost their lives (Kramer and Flanagan 2012:6). Compared to other boroughs – that are predominantly liberal – Staten Island is the only borough with a competitive two-party system (Kramer and Flanagan 2012:19). However, the political orientation of the island lines up with that of the country. The South Shore is overwhelmingly conservative (46 percent), and the North Shore is largely liberal (33 percent), while another group of people (34 percent) call themselves moderates.

All boroughs are headed by a borough president, who nowadays has little formal power and a small budget. The borough president has the right to appoint members to neighborhood community boards. These boards and Civic Community Associations (CCA's) have a voice in local land-use and zoning issues, and can select a member of the city planning commission. A feeling of being the “forgotten borough” also derives from the little legal power the island has within the city government. Because of Staten Island's relatively small population it is represented by three out of 51 members within the city council. Staten Islanders have no autonomous zoning power to keep undesirable government functions out, and can only elect a member of the city council, and few citywide officials such as the mayor (Kramer and Flanagan 2012:11).

The only way Staten Islanders can block unwanted development, is through their dense network of small businesses, non-profits, and neighborhood associations (Kramer and Flanagan 2012:178). Freedom of association is a constitutional right, and interest groups have been effective at blocking development and influencing land policy. An example the closure of the Fresh Kills garbage dump in the 1980s (Kramer and Flanagan 2012:113). However, as Kramer and Flanagan (2012:180) explain, “they can also influence lawmakers to protect narrow interests at the expense of the common good”. An example is the Midland Beach CCA that banned shelters for homeless families. Many Staten Islanders are critical about the flow of power towards City Hall and urban

bureaucracy. According to Kramer and Flanagan (2012:190), there is a democracy deficit on the island, because people feel left out of participation in developmental decisions.

#### **1.4 The College of Staten Island**

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The College of Staten Island (CSI) was found in 1955 and is one out of seven colleges within the City University of New York (CUNY). It is the only public higher education in NYC (Editorial 2006a). This has advantages for students, because tuition is lower than it is at other universities. In-state tuition fees are 5858 dollars a month for residents and 14.978 for non-resident students (Editorial 2006b). Although most students receive financial aid, they have major student debts, which – as will be examined in part three – influences their future (American) dreams. The demography of the island is being reflected at the college, that has about 13 thousand enrolled students. Students are positive about the diversity of the college because people are very respectful of one another.

## **2 The East Shore**

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Although the East Shore consists of more neighborhoods, this thesis focuses on the most hard hit areas among them, respectively South Beach, Midland Beach, New Dorp Beach, and Oakwood Beach. These neighborhoods are beachfront communities with condominiums, high-rise oceanfront properties and (semi-) attached homes. Some residents found that the population density of these neighborhoods contributes to the development of close relationships between neighbors.

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I have a beautiful relationship with my neighbors. [...] I think it's basically a conglomeration of like-minded people, it just happens. [...] All neighbors have a different background. My neighbor on the right is from Italy. Of course he's never been there, but his grandfathers come from Italy. My neighbor on the left, his origin is Greek, it's kind of the same story. The ones further down are French, the ones facing me are Russian, and then there's Polish neighbors. There's one American neighbor who can't trace her background. All of them, everybody, we're very close. In the summer-time we would have a barbeque together, eat and drink together. [...] Aside from faith, the only thing I could think of that connects us physically is that the environment right there, that street, is a bit narrow [...] and the houses there are mostly bungalow. [...] So I'm thinking maybe that's the reason why you see, it's just bungalows, everybody is at face level. You come outside, your cars are packed on the street. [...] So it's easier for you to communicate. *Mike, resident Midland Beach*

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## Part II. Waiting in Limbo Forever

*Flaws, Strengths, and More in Sandy's Aftermath*





## Contents Part II.

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## Introduction

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This part provides an overview of relief and recovery efforts in the aftermath of hurricane Sandy. Efforts of city and state government, volunteer, and grassroots organizations, will be examined. To provide a holistic perspective, a raft of different and important players such as survivors, students, and volunteers, share their experiences about the disaster and its aftermath. Although their backgrounds and worldviews differ, they face similar struggles in the *second-order disaster* that followed the initial one (Adams 2013). People's experiences in the aftermath of the hurricane reveal flaws of society (Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 2001:4; Aldrich 2012:2–3). For example, the financial aid that people received from insurance companies and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), often was too little to cover the high rebuilding costs.

A critical examination of the flaws in society that create or enlarge the problems that people face, is highly relevant because it contributes to a better understanding of society. It is also important to examine strengths that support people to overcome certain problems, for they may play an important role in people's eventual recovery (Aldrich 2012). Although most scholars cover these aspects, their analysis is often limited because they do not focus on ideologies that shape these flaws and strengths. As Ingold (2011:7) states, people's perceptions influence their actions. Therefore, the impact that people's struggles have on their perceptions of society – such as the government – will also be examined in this part.

People's experiences reveal another important aspect of society. Neighbors started to help each other out, and caring individuals donated their time, money, and goods. The hurricane made people reflect upon the most important values in their lives. All 35 research participants said that solidarity, love, and humanity form the foundation of their lives. Many people had lost sight of these values in the more individualistic life they lived before. Thereby the hurricane uncovers something that I call *the basic structure of society*, or in Tsing's (2005:267) words: *the relevant springs of hope*.

## **1 Relief Efforts**

### **1.1 Governmental Organizations**

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In the aftermath of hurricane Sandy, it became clear that relief efforts have been undertaken at all government levels. People have different views and opinions on this matter. Some say it was “a relatively quick response”, while most people state it has all been “too little, too late”. In this paragraph, I will discuss the flaws and strengths in governmental relief efforts and its impact on people's perceptions of the government. It is not always clear which government organization is responsible for certain relief efforts. This analysis can thereby be seen as a reflection of people's experiences as well as an investigation of relief efforts through the methods of participant observation, interview techniques, and the use of relevant literature (Part Four).

#### **City Government – Flaws and Strengths**

According to many residents, no system was in place to warn and evacuate people. This time Rosa – who did receive a phone call from the city government in hurricane Irene in 2011 – was not warned at all. The “access-a-ride” that was supposed to pick her up – NYC transportation for disabled people – was canceled on the morning of the hurricane. Although she is not supposed to drive because of her disease, she took the car and drove to a hotel on Staten Island. Other residents were not warned by the New York Police Department (NYPD), while they were warned in hurricane Irene. Before hurricane Irene, the media made a big fuss about its potential impact. Many people evacuated although the impact turned out to be minor. When they got home, a lot of them realized that they were robbed of furniture and belongings while they had spent an expensive night at a hotel. Because the media attention about hurricane Sandy was as extensive as it had been before, many people underestimated its potential consequences and decided to stay home.

Although many people blame themselves for doing so, they cannot understand why they were not properly warned this time. During the night of the hurricane the media was only paying attention to the *potential* danger for New Jersey, lower Manhattan, and the Stock Exchange building. They were not paying attention to the most vulnerable areas – neighborhoods in Queens and Staten Island. People did not realize that while they were watching the news, the water was already reaching the rooftops of the first blocks along the shores. At least 23 Staten Islanders died that night. Others can call themselves survivors, for they spend the night elsewhere, in their attic, or even on their roof.

*A dusty blue car pulls up on the parking lot of Dunkin Donuts. An African American man in his forties jumps out of the vehicle. His big smile and firm handshake give the impression of a friendly and energetic man. His dark brown eyes sparkle lively as he starts telling me about his experiences.* If anyone questioned the existence of God, my story will make anyone believe in him, *he says.* I will tell you why...

The night of the storm, we were all at home. My wife was watching the news as my daughters were sleeping on the couch. At 7:30 p.m. I heard some neighbor's children playing out on the street, which I found strange because of the time and with the storm coming. So I went outside and saw a bit of wind and no water at all. It still looked peaceful. When I went back inside, my wife and the kids were watching television.

I spoke with a friend of mine on the phone for about half an hour. And as I was talking to him, the water had gotten all the way towards our house. So around 8:00 p.m., when I looked outside the window, I saw the ocean. My yard, which is twice as big as this place – *with his hands he points at the walls of the cafe* – all of a sudden looked like a swimming pool. It had happened so quickly.

Everyone in the house started to panic as we saw the water. “What should we do, where should we go?”, my wife asked me. Within minutes the water had gotten up to the windows, which means up to our knees. We didn't have time to think and we had nowhere to go. Opening the door would mean allowing the water to rush into our living room. We could have swum out, but my kids are only 3, 7, 8 and 11 years old, so they can't even swim yet. And you don't know what's in the water, because by that time the power had gone out and the world had gone pitch black. As the water rushed into our house, we started putting our children up higher and higher to keep them safe, hoping that the water would stop rising *he says, as his expression now shows the fear he must have felt back then.* The water was so cold and because the power went out it was dark too, it was really frightening.

In the end – as the water kept rising – I made a hole in the roof with a hammer, climbed on it and asked my wife to pass me the kids. She passed me the children, the youngest one first. And then when I pulled the oldest one through the roof, the water had already come up to her shoulders. When my wife was on the roof as well, we saw that the water stopped rising. There was a little strap of wood of only one foot which we could lean on to. The wind was blowing really hard now and there were branches breaking off here and there. We saw the sparks and heard the cracking sound of broken power lines that fell into the water. The only thing we saw was the ocean around us and

some indefinable objects that were sticking out above it.

I didn't really fear for my own safety, but I was frightened for my kids. After a few hours like that the kids were complaining that they were uncomfortable. They were leaning against each other diagonally because the roof of our house is so small. So I moved to the top of the roof, putting them down with their legs on each side of it. A little later they sat with both legs on one side of the roof, which to me was the scariest. I was really scared they would slide off and end up in the water. But then I had a painful cramp in my leg. We were all frozen because of the rain that was streaming down our faces, we weren't wearing any shoes, and we had been there for hours. My leg was so painful that I had to let go of my children, otherwise I would have been sliding off the roof myself.

At that moment I realized that none of this was in my hands at all. There was a greater power watching over us, being in charge. We had come that far already. There were so many moments where it could have gone wrong, but it didn't. To me that was a miracle. Hours went by changing positions. I was trying to comfort the kids and was waiting hopefully for a helicopter to come and save us. I called 911 several times that night and they kept saying they were coming. After five hours of the same message but no sign whatsoever, I kind of knew they would not come until the morning. I kept telling my kids that they would be there soon and kept hoping myself too. I wasn't angry with them although they probably knew they could not make it till the morning, because I know they probably did it to keep us hoping and prevent us from giving up.

When the daylight emerged at 5:00 a.m., I could see the devastation, the debris and broken houses everywhere. I noticed at my neighbor's wall that the water line was going down, but really slowly. *With his hands he points at the dividing line between the two paint colors on the wall of the cafe.* That meant the water was receding *he says, as he drags his finger down the wall.* At 8.30 a.m., the water was down to our knees again, so I went down into the house and pulled out the couch from underneath the water. All furniture had gone all over the place, the water was smelling awfully and the damage and debris were just unbelievable. The kids were so tired that as we put them on the soaked couch for a moment, they started to sleep right away. That's when I heard the helicopter above our house. I climbed up to the roof again and waved. They came down and told us that a boat with firefighters would take us to a shelter.

*Mike sighs, and for a split second he stares into the distance.* Although at that moment it seemed like the hardships were over, some were yet to come...

That morning, Mike and his family were brought to Mount Manrisa, a retreat center and one of the temporary shelters on Staten Island. These evacuation shelters were also set up in high schools, churches, and hospitals. They were set up by organizations like Project Hospitality, a charity organization that stands up for the rights of immigrants and homeless people. Although the city government did support and fund some of these organizations, by most people, their relief efforts were perceived as invisible. For example, the borough president held his first and only conference after a month.

However, the interconnectedness of the city and state government sometimes slowed down tasks that had to be undertaken. Like Jimmy – a local politician – said, it took Congress three months to pass the Sandy Relief bill at state level, which has made it harder for the city government to respond effectively. In contrast, it took only eight days to pass the bill in hurricane Katrina. Not surprisingly, people were angry about this. Nevertheless, a relevant question is if the government has learned (the right) lessons out of the previous hurricane.

One of those lessons concerned the sheltering of people. Although FEMA wanted to shelter people in trailers, the city government decided to get people back home as soon as possible. They did this because they were afraid that people would live in trailers for seven years, which happened in hurricane Katrina. This triggered a great deal of anger in Rosa and many other residents, because it gave the impression that people are lazy and prefer these trailers above their own properties. The reason why many displaced people were still living in these trailers had to do with flaws in society, such as the inability of economic and political organizations to provide a safety-net to help them recover (Adams 2013).

Another important task of the city government was the “tag system”. In the first weeks of November, The NYC Buildings Department has assessed the type and degree of property damage in a “rapid assessment process”. Houses that were potentially damaged were tagged by assessors with three different colors: (1) a red tag saying *Unsafe*; (2) a yellow tag saying *Restricted Use*; and (3) a green tag saying *No Restriction*. Red tags were used for highly damaged houses that had to be repaired or demolished. Yellow tags were used for severely damaged properties. In both cases repairs had to be done before people could officially re-occupy their houses. People had to hire New York state-licensed professionals (registered architects or engineers) to make plans for necessary repairs. Green tagged houses had no apparent structural hazards. These buildings could be re-occupied right away (Paulsen 2012).

Assessments were done relatively quickly, but many people are critical about their quality. Robert had received a green tag, while the whole house required major repairs from the five feet of water that washed into their house. The assessor visited his family early November. He came in for

a second and saw that the whole family was living in the house. According to Robert this could be the reason they received a green tag. People's experiences are that assessors were not skilled enough to do the job, or did not take enough time to do valid assessments. A rumor is that assessors were sometimes being instructed to red-tag damaged properties that the city already wanted to demolish before the hurricane.

Although this rumor could not be confirmed, it was clear that a lot of consequences would follow from the tag system. The Department of Finance has re-valued houses and re-assessed people's taxes based on the tag-system. The difference between a yellow and green tag would mean the difference between the requirement of an expensive architectural assessment and no such requirement. The city council hearing on February 28, 2013, between city committees on community development and finance, herein reflected some problems. For people whose houses have been demolished, the remaining market value would be the value of the lot. People who have repaired or completely rebuild their houses, were suddenly required to pay more taxes.

A third program that the city government organized to get people back in their homes as soon as possible, was the "Rapid Repairs program". Contractors were hired to do rapid repairs of heating and electricity in houses that were affected by the hurricane. For people who had nowhere else to go and who therefore had to stay in their devastated houses, the Rapid Repairs program turned out to be very helpful. It provided people with rapid and free of charge heating and electricity, that were very important in the cold November nights. Nevertheless, people who were displaced because they did not have the money to fix their homes, perceived the program as a waste of money that the city could have spent otherwise.

### **State Government – Flaws and Strengths**

FEMA is responsible for relief efforts at the state level. The organization therefore manages all kinds of disasters within the whole country. In the aftermath of hurricane Sandy, the organization suddenly had to deal with the fate of 30 thousand families and their devastated houses in NYC. FEMA dealt with the assessment of the houses and homeowner's claims for funding. As previously described, shelters were largely arranged by the city government instead of FEMA. However, FEMA funded most people's temporarily housing in hotels and rental apartments.

Opinions about the organization's relief efforts differ widely. Some people say they did a good job by responding quickly and providing people with funds. Others say it was too little, because the maximum amount the Individuals and Housing Program (IHP) would pay (31 thousand and nine hundred dollars) does not make up for the high rebuilding costs. A resident's question "How can you build up a life elsewhere with that amount of money when you've lost everything?",

seems a valid one. Others – such as Robert – said it “at least gives you back a roof over your head”. The amount of money that people got from FEMA differs from person to person, and is dependent on the value of their homes and the situation with insurance companies. In Rosa's case, neither of the agencies would pay a fair or sufficient amount of money. While FEMA employee Amy said that “People forget how quick the response really was”, Rosa's case shows that there are people who received too little, or no help at all.

Another source of uncertainty among people were the new rebuilding requirements. On July 6, 2013, a law was passed that required FEMA to revise New York state's Flood Insurance Rate Maps (FIRMs). The revised maps suddenly identify many people's properties as lying in a high risk flood zone (A or V). Therefore people are required to elevate their houses to the advisory Base Flood Elevation (ABFE) level. If they do not elevate their property, flood insurance rates will increase with 25 percent a year, starting in 2014. Most people do not have the money to rebuild their houses to minimum required elevation standards (often an elevation of at least five feet). Homeowners located along the coastline – in V (velocity) zones – are required to build their houses on posts, piers, or pilings. To reduce the gap of funding, people who have gotten the maximum amount, can also apply for Homeownership Repair and Rebuilding Funds (HRRFs). As of May 2013, it is not clear who will get these grants and how they will be distributed. Renters and small business owners are not eligible, and are thereby being left out.

The individualistic rhetoric in FEMA documents is telling for the government's neoliberalist stance towards citizenship. To reduce insurance costs, one of the documents says, people will have to adopt to “higher standards” and “build back stronger and safer” (FEMA 2012). Thereby the hurricane and its consequences are presented as people's individual problem and responsibility, while the government – as will be described later – has not taken responsibility to reduce flood risk.

Furthermore, displaced people who were staying in hotels with the Transitional Sheltering Assistance (TSA) program, felt helpless and insecure. FEMA did not just put them in hotels for the time being, but kept threatening to throw them out every 21 days (March 24, April 14, May 1) (Associated Press 2013; Slepian 2013). This insecurity was further enlarged by the lack of transparency the agency could provide during the first few months after the hurricane.

However, FEMA did try to inform people by organizing housing recovery forums in several neighborhoods. In February 2013, a lot of questions could not yet be answered, although the forum I attended on March 7, 2013, provided people with more details. Several organizations were represented, so that questions about the new flood maps and rebuild policies could be answered. Also, representatives of mental health care organizations, the states buy-out program, architectural

organizations, insurances, and the Small Business Administration (SBA) were present at the forum.

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I am working for FEMA in South Carolina. Two months ago I was asked to come here to assist the relief and recovery program on Staten Island. New York City really has an ego problem if you ask me. The city government comes before the federal government. City laws turn out to be more important. Thereby the city government makes people pay more money and jump through more hoops than I have ever seen in any other country. Why? Because it's New York City! [...] People are living in tough situations, and sometimes you can't help them as you would like to. Nevertheless it is a rewarding job. At least we can help them out a little bit. [...] Sometimes I wish I could do more, but that's not possible within the federal law, and that's what FEMA has to deal with. *William, employee with FEMA*

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Because FEMA's representatives were often seen as *the government*, people often projected their anger and distrust about the government at FEMA employees. While – as William shows – employees are willing to do more to help people, but feel like they are bound to work within the margins of the city and state law. Although FEMA was trying to provide people with transparency, the state of uncertainty and haplessness, often made people impatient (Bauman 2011).

Even though William says the city government has made people jump through hoops, people have argued that FEMA has made them jump through hoops as well. The organization often was hard to reach by phone. Inequalities in distribution of funds were not understood, mainly because it remained unclear what FEMA's assessments were based on.

Although it can be an easy excuse to evade responsibilities, city's often have less resources than states do (Dreier 2006:535). Nevertheless, it is astonishing to see the difference between city and state programs, such as their buy-out programs. Where the state's buy-out program is said to cover 100 percent of the pre-storm market value of people's property, the city's program is said to buy-out for 100 percent of the post-storm market value. This means that some people will get paid a small amount of money to leave an empty lot, because their houses have already been demolished.

### **Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don't**

People should not forget the complex structure and reality the government – at all levels – is operating in. For people who are suffering six months is a long time. For politicians the reality is that bureaucracy, and therefore people's recovery, takes time. As the Rapid Repairs program shows, it often is a matter of “damned if you do, damned if you don't”. Many people were satisfied with the program, but there will always be people who are critical about it. It is hard to do “the right thing”, because as a politician it is hard to satisfy everyone. The marathon that would be held on November 4, 2012, six days after the hurricane, was a good example.

At first, it did not seem like Mayor Bloomberg was going to cancel the marathon. People were angry about it, because 30 thousand Sandy survivors could have used the large amounts of



water bottles and generators that were going to be used to comfort the runners. Although these frustrations were understandable, as Barber (N.d.) argues, cities have a kind of pragmatism to survive. One could argue that it is smart of Bloomberg to cancel the marathon while people were in the city, because by bringing the runners in, the city can make a lot of money. However, people felt like they were being neglected and rendered less important than the city's status and economy. A positive side effect of canceling the marathon was that many runners came to Staten Island to help clean out people's homes out of solidarity with the survivors. In the end, the last-minute cancellation of the marathon thus turned out to be beneficial for both the city's economy and people's recovery.

### **Impact on People's Perception of the Government**

Although human beings always tend to look for scapegoats, people's reasons to be critical are often understandable and legitimate (Lagomarsino 2012:4). For some people, the familiar has become strange, because they feel neglected and punished by a political and economic system they once believed in. The big struggle that people faced in the aftermath of the hurricane, has been an eye-opener for some, and a sad reconfirmation for many. This has created criticism and friction which – as we will see later on – can create community resilience. Friction can slow down productive and quick governmental decisions, but it can be valuable to keep global power in motion when it creates community resilience (Tsing 2005:6). Although individuals can decide to make positive and essential changes, or can try to force the government to do so, many people feel like their own *agency* is limited (Bauman 2011).

By most people, the political structure is perceived as untrustworthy and a burden rather than a blessing. This suggests a major flaw in society: less and less people have faith in the government and many people do not trust its institutions (Harvey 2010). As Ingold (2011:7) says, “Human beings both change the world and are part of a changing world”. Instead, politicians are seen as producers, who do not have the courage to change the world, but who only impress preconceived designs upon the material of nature.

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Politicians often vote the way they are supposed to vote, thereby neglecting their own ideals and judgments. *Rosa, resident South Beach*

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Joseph, a student in politics and philosophy, called this “politics as a game” as opposed to “politics from the heart”. His words articulate a widespread feeling that politicians are only in it for their own social and economic power, not to represent their people.

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It's overwhelming, it's frustrating, and the fact that none of the local offices that are supposed to represent me will help me, makes you not... care for the place you have lived and loved your whole life. *Rosa, resident South Beach*

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The implications people's feelings can have on their lives can be enormous, and should therefore be taken seriously. People can feel helpless and in the end careless or even depressed about the place, city, state, country, or even the world they live in. It is devastating for people's emotions and self-esteem (Bauman 2011:14). It can also diminish people's participation in society, which impacts society as a whole. The government seems to fail in its most important task – to represent and protect its people. Thereby the government, as Bauman (2011:11) rightfully argues, loses its *raison d'être* (rationale). Nevertheless, as Harvey (2010) states, the structure of the political economic system remains intact when people feel too helpless and hapless to make a change. That way the political economic structure and its flaws remain their social power, even though they might have lost support from a large part of the country's population – republicans and democrats alike. This reveals an interesting paradox. On the one hand people want to limit government influence on their personal lives as they have lost faith in its institutions. On the other hand they are dependent on these institutions because they at least provide people with a safety-net, even if it is too little and too late.

## **1.2 Private Organizations**

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A big problem with private companies and insurance companies is that they are capitalistic and profit oriented, not humanity, equality, and problem solving oriented. *Jack, student*

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After surviving the initial flood, many affected residents struggled to save themselves from drowning again – but this time financially. Some people had perfect credit before the hurricane. Others were already in debt for various reasons. Allison, a resident of New Dorp Beach, had to take out an SBA loan to be able to rebuild and elevate her house after hurricane Irene. Some people who did not have any debts were nevertheless living on the edge, such as Rosa. When Rosa's mortgage went up with 89 dollars a year, she decided not to take two of her pills and eat for pennies to be able to pay the bill. However, eventually she was unable to save any money. Instead of giving her a forbearance, the bank reported her financial vulnerability. Furthermore, her insurance company had made a mistake two years before hurricane Sandy by canceling her insurance for the wrong reason. Ever since she has been trying to fix it, unfortunately without result.

Many residents feel mistrusted by the government, because they will not pass the available funds directly on to them. Furthermore, people find it unfair that banks are not making an exception in vulnerable times like these. In the aftermath of the hurricane, people are still required to pay their

mortgage, sometimes on a house they are no longer living in or that has already been demolished. Insurance companies and banks are interrelated, because insurance checks first have to be signed by the bank before the money will flow to people's bank accounts. Also, a higher flood insurance often causes people's mortgages to go up.

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I asked the bank, can I get a forbearance, can I get some time to pay my mortgage? No. We can send you a mortgage relief package, which is about this many papers required about this many from the house which all got flooded out, and unless you fill that out we can't help you. So I went to Staten Island Legal Services, they started calling lawyers, told me to write a hardship letter, I wrote a hardship letter, and I send in all those bills. They still reported me in a credit report. So I had perfect credit before the hurricane and now it's ruined. I just tried to get it refinanced to try lower my payment. I got denied because they reported me [to the credit report]. So some people are saying they want a year forbearance, I didn't even get one month.  
*Rosa, resident South Beach*

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As discussed before, there is a gap between the political and economic system and the citizens or clients they are supposed to represent (Harvey 2010:61; Bauman 2011:11). Ever since the economic crisis, it does not seem like politicians and economics are doing everything they can to make a change and to gain trust and legitimacy, as a lot of things are back to “business as usual”.

### **Diving Deeper – Underlying Ideologies**

People's struggles with banks and insurance companies have made them reflect on the profit-driven ideology of the market that runs on self-interest (Harvey 2010:191). Values then, are not likely to derive from the markets. People's struggles have increased their skepticism about capitalism, and reinforced their understandings of the moral limits of the market, as described by scholars like Michael Sandel (The Reith Lectures 2009) and Lagomarsino (2012:56, 67). Even people who describe capitalism as the best system the world has ever known, acknowledge its limits.

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I think capitalism is the greatest economic system that we have on earth... It has its limits. It keeps the wealthy wealthy, and the poor poor. But it does allow for people who are poor to become rich and wealthy one day. *Michael, volunteer*

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Hereby Michael articulates the American Ideology of social mobility for everyone, while at the same time denying that possibility because “it keeps the poor poor”. With the economic crisis of 2008, the limits of the profit-driven free market have become visible, as well as the little amount of control and regulations the government had set for the economic system. This is understandable because capitalism and neoliberalism have become entangled within the political system, but also within many people's perspectives. The state, as well as consumers, can thus be seen as guardians of the role of capital (Harvey 2010:217; Bauman 2011:52). Capitalism is even perceived as an

essential part of the American identity and ideology. Socialism is often being described as the opposite of capitalism and as a non-American system, while socialism does not necessarily exclude capitalism, but is only meant to manage and regulate capitalism for the common good (Harvey 2010:242). Supporters and opponents of capitalism are both critical of the limitlessness of money as a source of power. It has made people furious about the inequalities that are inherent to this system (Harvey 2010:61). This limitlessness can be seen in the large bonuses that are given to the Chief Executive Officers (CEO's) of large organizations.

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The CEO of the American Red Cross receives one million dollars a year, while many people critique the organizations' role in the relief response [...] *Mason, volunteer*

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According to the American Red Cross (ARC), their CEO earns a base salary of 500 thousand dollars (N.d 2012). Nevertheless, the CEO still earns five times more than the organization's best paid employees. Not only the poor or most vulnerable in society are being hit by the economic crisis, but as sociologist Sassen (Gesprek op 2 2012) explains, especially the middle class – for whom the neoliberal project was designed – is falling through the cracks. Thereby the American dream of social upward mobility, is coming to an end for the largest percentage of the American population. The economic crisis and the lack of a social safety-net, make more and more middle class people on Staten Island (as well as elsewhere in the USA) feel like they are being left out. Many of them are ending up in poverty or losing their house in foreclosure (Kramer and Flanagan 2012:6). They are in a phase of *liminality* where you earn just too much to be able to apply for social support organizations, and just too little to be able to pay off your bills (Kottak 2011:397).

In daily life, neoliberalism and the American Ideology of individual freedom, can predominantly be found in individualism. The idea that every individual has the liberty to be successful, and the opportunity of social mobility, implies that every individual also has the freedom to fail (Bauman 2011:14). It is telling that many people caught up in foreclosure blame themselves (Harvey 2010:151). Sometimes the reason people end up in major debt has got to do with the consequences of living above their means. One could argue living above your means is a personal risk, and the suffering that follows an individual problem. However, the stories in this thesis also reveal the unpredictability of suffering. There are several circumstances that put people at risk of losing their property; their credit. As Rosa said, it can be a lost job, a divorce, an illness, issues with insurance companies, or a bank.

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All it needed was a little bit of extra expenses. *Rosa, resident South Beach*

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The lack of a safety-net in these vulnerable times – both financially and ecologically seen – can be

explained by taking a closer look at freedom and liberty. These *universals* have different meanings in the world and are both embraced and contested at different *scales* (Tsing 2005:122).

Many scholars (Harvey 2010:245; Bauman 2011:17) argue that the liberal idea of individual rights underpins inequality. Individual freedom draws the image of equal access to resources and opportunities, while it is clear that people do not always have equal opportunities (Bullard 2007:68). A child born to poor parents often will not have the opportunity to study at a private school, because of the high tuition. A child of undocumented parents, does not have the opportunity to go to university, because it is hard to acquire the necessary documentation. Nowadays, it is hard to get anything done when your credit is ruined. Banks are not likely to offer (another) loan, because they have become reluctant to take risks.

Although the hurricane's proximity might in some cases have been an eye-opener to people who were directly impacted, many people in NYC were not affected at all. It may seem like the impact of financial problems and the hurricane as such are thereby local, but as Bauman (2011:2) explains, it affects society as a whole.

The markets enjoy freedom not to be controlled by the government, which creates inequality as companies quickly get tempted to choose profit above moral (and sometimes legal) treatment of clients. Some organizations, like the SBA, profit from the disaster, because many people take out loans to be able to rebuild their houses. Contractors profit, because there is a lot of work that needs to be done. While this is just their job, it can be called *disaster capitalism* when they deliberately profit from the vulnerable situation people are in.

The contractors that run off with George's – an 87-year-old man from South Beach – money after they had finished half of the work that they had promised to deliver, form an example of disaster capitalism. On their request, he paid them in advance out of generosity for their good work. He did not have their contact information, nor a contract. He only had their names and mobile phone numbers. As of May 2013, he had not yet been able to track them.

Klein (2007:6) describes disaster capitalism as “orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities”. Although *disaster capitalism* seems less of a problem in hurricane Sandy as opposed to hurricane Katrina – where companies were contracted to transform public schools into private ones – signs are present. The policies of FEMA and insurance companies seem to leave people no choice but to move elsewhere. This would provide a clean slate for developers in favor of new profitable projects such as the building of expensive highrise oceanfront properties or parks. The future will tell if these projects will be realized, but with the current policies it is likely that many low-income families will not be able to return to these neighborhoods.

Would this be true, then history would repeat itself. The same thing happened in hurricane Katrina (Klein 2007:4). The coastline would thereby form a *salvage frontier* to be exploited (Tsing 2005:29). In line with Tsing (2005), I think disasters tell us – more than anything – that landscapes are lively actors. The making, saving, and destroying of resources all coexist in the same landscape. The East Shore of Staten Island pictures the landscape of beloved and affordable communities, as well as a landscape of destruction that people have left in grief and despair. To contractors it displays a landscape of opportunities, a *salvage frontier* that presents itself as a clean sheet of architectural and profitable options. In the long run though, when things are out of control and the balance is lost, frontier instability affects investors the same way it affects residents (Tsing 2005:42).

In some rare cases, a tragedy can also prove to be an opportunity to affected residents. For people in Fox Beach – an oceanfront area in Oakwood Beach – the hurricane will probably turn out to be their long awaited ticket to get out of a highly vulnerable area on Staten Island. The community has been requesting a buy-out from the area ever since 1992, because it is lying five feet below sea level. Infrastructure is crumbling and houses get flooded every time it rains. Residents – united in a community commission – have tried to convince the city government to buy them out so that they could move elsewhere. It did not work. Now, as people's houses got wrecked in hurricane Sandy, the city and state government finally decided to agree. Although residents want to leave the area, they are afraid it will not be given back to nature, but that it will be exploited. The more properties the government can buy within the same neighborhood, the more opportunities the land will offer.

Disasters do not only reveal current flaws in society and the friction it creates, but also demonstrate mistakes that have been made in the past that have enhanced neighborhood's vulnerability to natural disasters. The impact of these mistakes and architectural opportunities for the future were being discussed at workshops called *SImagines*. At these workshops – that were organized for all affected neighborhoods on Staten Island – local politicians, architects, graduate students in urban planning, and affected residents were united.

At the East Shore workshop of April 6, 2013, it became clear that the image of a landscape of opportunity has made many neighborhoods vulnerable to flooding way before the hurricane struck the island. As several residents of Midland Beach articulated, over-extension has created differences in heights that causes lower lying, older, and cheaper buildings to flood every time it rains extensively. Some streets are therefore ironically called “bathtubs”, because sewer drainage systems have been crumbling for years.

Furthermore, the blue belt system – a natural water drainage system – does not seem to

work, as they can not handle the rain water and constantly cause flooding in houses close to these blue belts. Critical architects such as Lagomarsino (2012:59) and scholars like Dreier (2006:539), also describe these problems. They state that an increase of density can lead to inequality among people and a crumbling public infrastructure. Therefore the *smart growth* initiative, a new strategy in architecture that calls for community participation and environmental justice, has come into being (Bullard 2007:25). The workshops seemed to reflect this initiative.

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People in New York City are used to top-down policies, while community participation can only bear fruit to professionals, politicians, and residents. *Boris, student*

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The initiative's mission is highly relevant because these aspects can create more sustainability and equality in people's environments. The problem might be that the political system largely supports the markets profit-driven and top-down strategies.

### **1.3 Volunteer and Grassroots Organizations**

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In the aftermath of the hurricane, local volunteer and grassroots organizations came into being all over the island. Especially in the areas that were hit hard, people started to help out their neighbors. Individuals that were not affected by the hurricane, came from all over the country to drop off donations. Survivors in different neighborhoods had set up tables to receive and distribute donations in their neighborhoods. Several bigger donation centers were set up along Hylan Boulevard, in high schools and offices. Some were organized by volunteer organizations like the Stephen Siller Foundation, others by the city government, FEMA, or local politicians.

The spontaneous donation centers within the neighborhoods along the East Shore of Staten Island (in Midland, New Dorp, and Oakwood Beach), turned from tables into local community hubs. Neighbors could gather for some hot coffee or an evening meal. The three hubs also had a social significance, because neighbors were able to provide each other with emotional and social support after the tragedy. Furthermore, the hubs became important local sites for information. The NYPD provided the hubs with generators, and most local politicians supported the initiatives. As of May 2013, all hubs were still in function because resources were still needed.

Apart from these local community initiatives, grassroots organizations like Occupy Sandy and volunteer organizations like the Stephen Siller Foundation were still providing aid. The American Red Cross responded as an emergency aid organization during the first few months, and has therefore already left the field. Furthermore, there are many other local volunteer organizations and local as well as national churches that have made donations and helped people. Some of them, such as “the Yellow Team” and “Boots on the Ground”, are still around to help people with mold-



remediation and rebuilding efforts. Church clerics and local counseling organizations have provided people with emotional and spiritual support. Local initiatives such as “Sandy Claus” – an individual who dressed up as Santa to donate toys to children in affected areas – popped up as individuals noticed the need for social support initiatives in the devastated area.

Many people describe these initiatives as a major and essential part of their recovery. It showed them that in times of tragedy, people open their hearts to help out people in need, even though they were complete strangers. Where governmental organizations did not provide direct aid in terms of food, water, and cleaning supplies, grassroots and local volunteer initiatives did. Therefore this direct safety-net, as was the case in hurricane Katrina, thereby became an affective choice of individuals rather than a civil right provided for by governmental organizations (Adams 2013:11). Volunteers helped people to clean out their houses. This was essential for people who had nowhere to go, because mold could cause a health hazard.

Although many people felt *betwixt and between*, trapped in uncertainty about the future, they experienced a strong feeling of togetherness (Jones and Murphy 2009:90). The mutual effort to survive created a more tight-knit community. Furthermore, as people reflected on the things they value most in life. The only thing they had left were their lives and each other, which made them realize that social relationships formed the most and in many cases the only valuable support-system they had left.

This has made them realize that the basic structure of society is not individualism and materialism, but something that money can not buy. Something they had missed before the hurricane. It reveals what I call the *basic structure of society*. This concept is about essential values in the lives of human beings. It reveals the most important values of humanity: the solidarity and love that connect humanity as a whole. Underneath the more individualistic and materialistic lives they lived before, solidarity has turned out to be the basic structure.

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It's a we thing, not a me thing. *Donna, community leader*

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### **Occupy Sandy**

One of the grassroots organizations that had been doing recovery efforts on Staten Island, is Occupy Sandy. The organization has derived from the Occupy Wall street movement. People have expressed their gratefulness about the organization's relief efforts, mainly because of the direct aid they provided, such as food and clothing. Thereafter they have mobilized individuals (via social media) to volunteer in different neighborhoods in New York and New Jersey. Other organizations – like “World Cares”- have been directing volunteers to clean out homes, do mold remediation, and

demolition. They have also undertaken needs assessments, which involve creating a database of people's needs and situations in different neighborhoods.

People of other volunteer organizations often described Occupy Sandy as a good mediator at the Long Term Recovery (LTRO) meetings. However, not everyone is positive about the organization. Volunteers' motivation to help the 99%, is hard to accomplish. They are unable to reach all people in need. Immigrants (without documents) are being excluded because of their requirement for a FEMA number.

Although their criticism of top-down government is reflected in their horizontal organizational structure as well as their collaboration with other organizations, it is interesting that they are being funded by rich individuals and companies who donate money to the organization—the 1% that Occupy Wallstreet once fought against (Maslin Nir 2013). According to several volunteers, there is a big difference in the way Occupy Wall street was perceived as opposed to Occupy Sandy. While some people saw Occupy Wall street as a powerless or destructive movement, people often do appreciate Occupy Sandy for their relief efforts.

### **The American Red Cross**

The ARC – a national volunteer organization – has mobilized volunteers from all over the country to meet disaster related needs of different communities in New York and New Jersey. James, one of the employees with the organization, said that together with FEMA, their goal is to “facilitate and organize local community efforts and resiliency, and to meet the disaster related needs of communities”. Their list of immediate response efforts starts with the distribution of food and needed goods, and providing people with shelter. The city government did not allow the organization to take the lead in sheltering, but they did provide portable showers and toilets within and nearby the shelters. The organization has provided donation centers with (heated) blankets and boxes of canned food. Other than that they have advertised for donations and organized fund raisers. Although people were grateful for the help they got, they expressed disappointment because of a lack of transparency. People had no idea if, how, and where the donated money was invested.

The day of our interview, James showed up one and a half hour late, apologized and invited me to have the interview in a yellow cab on his way to a meeting. When I confronted him with people's experiences, he was understanding and transparent.

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We were not prepared for this, nobody was. If we were, we would have responded better.  
*James, employee with the American Red Cross*

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It took the organization a week to get their trucks on the road to hand out hot coffee, tea, and

sandwiches, while their aim is to get it done in three days. Advertisements had to be made, volunteers had to be mobilized, and it was hard to get to the affected areas. They could not provide people with hot meals, because they did not have a kitchen up and running on the island. The ARC realizes that other organizations did manage to provide people with hot meals. Local grassroots and volunteer organizations as well as community hubs made use of social media to motivate individuals and restaurants to cook meals and drop them off at the different volunteer sites.

James said that the ARC has therefore realized that collaboration with local partners is highly relevant. Part of his job has become the identification of *units of agency* – local community leaders that can make a change (Tsing 2005:214). The organization wants to set up a collaboration with local volunteer organizations so that they can be better prepared in case of another disaster.

Other than that, the hurricane has been an eye-opener to flaws in the organization's structure. James said that 90 percent of the organization – consisting of trained volunteers – live all over the country. A very expensive matter, because the ARC pays volunteers for their expenses. James now believes it is better to have local employees that are being paid to do the job. He is part of the overhead, the 10 percent of the organization that is being paid to direct volunteers. He would like to see the organization's overhead as less of a top-down organization, although he thinks it will be a challenge to achieve that change. His reflection shows that relevant lessons can and are being learned. After all, “mobility means nothing without mobilization” (Tsing 2005:214).

#### **1.4 From Local Gathering to NGO – Long Term Recovery Organization**

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In December 2012, the Staten Island community and Interfaith Long Term Recovery Organization (LTRO) came into being to facilitate communication and collaboration between all volunteer, grassroots, and governmental organizations spoken of before. The group discusses relief efforts in different subcommittees such as a food, finance, public housing, and rebuilding committee.

The organization quickly came into being because Staten Island already had a strong Interfaith Clergy network that could organize meetings in local churches. Although organizations with different ideologies – such as religious and non-religious – are represented in the organization, they share a *common cause* (Tsing 2005:245). In the first place, the organization's goal is to realize a better coordinated collaboration among different organizations to be able to provide adequate aid to Sandy survivors. Secondly, they wanted to have a strongly organized and diverse group of people that would be ready to respond if Staten Island would be hit by another disaster.

Within five months, the organization became an NGO – called 501c3 by tax law – and started to get grants from the government. Scholars like Lagomarsino (2012:64) see the creation of an NGO as a political strategy to diminish people's resilience and criticism by including them in the

political body. They have a way to control people as they will have to apply to government rules and regulations. On the other hand, one could argue that it gives people an opportunity to work within the system, whereby they might have more social power to accomplish their goals.

Sometimes money can divide people and make them forget their common cause. Nevertheless, Karen – disaster relief coordinator – said that the friction has so far led to *productive collaboration* (Tsing 2005:245). The open structure of the organization allowed anyone to attend their meetings, whereby journalists and residents were welcome to join the table anytime.

## 1.5 Community Efforts

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They constantly speak of “community”, but what do they mean by saying community? *David, student*

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In Carrier's (2012:105) words, “community identity is made up of connections forged through shared practices and constructions such as kinship, friendship, and residence”. Thus, who is part of a community and who is not, depends on personal and public understandings of shared practices. Community recovery is seen as “the process of re-population by survivors”. Neighborhoods and community efforts differ widely. As said before, some communities – such as Fox Beach in Oakwood Beach – wished to be bought out. Others wanted to get back home as quick as possible, which could be seen as *community recovery* as articulated by Carrier (2012).

In the neighborhoods where a community hub was set up (Midland, New Dorp, and Oakwood Beach) communities were also represented by a CCA. Although one would think the these associations would represent the whole area, residents and volunteers felt like the Midland Beach CCA does not want to represent all residents in the neighborhood.

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One of the organizers of the association came down here to tell us they want to close down this place [volunteer center on Midland avenue 551]. And then she pointed at a donated microwave asking us if she could have it. Can you believe it? We can laugh about it, but it was weird. I think they want to shut us down because they really have a delusional view of Midland Beach. They only want to take care of a small part of the community – the part they identify with themselves – the white Roman-Catholic middle class. This women has come down here to receive help herself, but she's good now so I think she doesn't care anymore. There are a lot of immigrants and lower class people that live here too. They still need help, but apparently they're no part of the associations community. *Emily, volunteer*

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Although one person can not represent the whole association, this quote shows that the interpretation of the word community is not always inclusive to all people in a certain geographical neighborhood. Thereby people can be excluded and discriminated against.

## 1.6 The Invisible Ones – Living in Fear, Facing Inequality

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An important and quickly forgotten story, is the struggle that undocumented immigrants face. Their experiences largely remain invisible because of the fear that people experience to share their stories.

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Los inmigrantes tienen miedo a hablar, por eso se quedan callados [Immigrants are afraid to talk, therefore they remain silent]. *Laura, resident Midland Beach*

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The conditions they live in make them feel like outsiders, like beings without rights (*zoë*), instead of citizens (*bios*) (Downey 2009:113). Laura, a 50-year-old woman who came to the USA because of the poverty she experienced in Mexico, says she largely faces the same struggles as anyone. But because she is undocumented, she is not able to get help from any agency, such as FEMA or insurance companies. Only undocumented immigrants with children who are born in the USA received some help. Kelyn – a student from Colombia – told me that some students at CSI who grew up in an undocumented family have struggled to make it to college without required papers. Their graduation officially does not mean anything, so that they often end up working at a McDonald's restaurant.

Being undocumented severely affects the whole family. Employers often abuse people's fear for deportation and inability to take legal action by underpaying them or laying them off. The laundromat where Laura worked fired her after two years because the new owner did not want to have an undocumented employee. Also, Laura got ripped off by her former landlord because he did not want to return her deposit of two thousand dollars. When she complained about it, he threatened to call the police. Organizations like Make the Road New York help (undocumented) immigrants in cases like these. The organization has put pressure on Laura's former landlord to return the deposit, which he eventually did. Still, the aid they can offer is limited. Laura's difficulties at finding and keeping a job have made her financially vulnerable. Her inability to get any help from agencies in the aftermath of the hurricane, has only made it worse. She suffered from a depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms. The hurricane has made her realize that it is unfair that she did not receive any help.

People's strength to move on and to cope with their feelings of injustice came from their faith in God and from the help they did receive. As is the case with most people, family, friends, and neighbors have helped them to evacuate the night of the hurricane and have provided them with temporary shelter in the aftermath. Melany and Sarah both have children who are born in the USA and therefore received some money from FEMA (one and five thousand dollars). Laura did not receive any money, because her children were born in Mexico. Nevertheless, both Melany and Sarah also face financial vulnerability. Both of them had trouble finding a job. Their situation has

made them reflect upon the country in which they thought they could fulfill their dreams.

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Perdí todo. Tengo dos niños, pero me quedo sin dinero. El punto es de que si no tienes papeles, no tienes ayuda. Y es injusto. El huracán no vió ni color, ni raza, ni estatus. Esto lo que pasó nos afecta a todos, no? [I lost everything. I've got two children, but I don't have any money. The problem is that when you don't have any papers, you won't have any help. And it is unfair. The hurricane did not see color, nor race, nor status. Didn't what happened affect us all?] *Sarah, resident Midland Beach*

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A rumor that lives among people in Midland beach, is that many undocumented immigrants died in the hurricane. They are not counted for because they could not be identified. The idea that people have died in their rental basement apartments and are not talked about, is hard to endure for many people. Ruby's daughter, who works on the ambulance, has seen that many more people have died than was reported in the media. Although this is just a rumor, it is a relevant one, because it is a sign of the treatment of immigrants as beings that can not be seen as citizens.

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It hurts, because it is as if they never existed. They are human beings too, you know? *Ruby, resident South Beach*

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The social impact that laws and their underlying ideologies have on people's lives, is often being forgotten or ignored. Like these stories show, from a humanitarian perspective, it is highly important to reconsider these ideologies and their impact on people's lives. Because, as Tsing (2005:5) argues, “how we run depends on the shoes we have to run in”.

## **2 Resilience**

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In several neighborhoods forces of opposition emerged because of the economic crisis, the failing relief efforts, and people's realization of certain flaws and injustice in society. In politics, resilience is described as the positive networked adaptation of a community after a crisis (Aldrich 2012:7). Networked relationships among people (*social capital*) thereby forms an important strength to help people get through these vulnerable times. Different individuals and organizations have shown that they can indeed make a significant change (Dreier 2006:544). Community resilience can thereby be a way for the government to justify distance or withdrawal from relief efforts in the recovery process.

Still, there are tasks that require federal and state support, such as prevention and the realization of a fair and effective financial safety-net (Adams 2013). Rulers can only survive if people accept suffering. Protest can ruin the legitimacy of power and can thereby be a “practical model to oppose business as usual” (Harvey 2010:237; Tsing 2005:206–211). Although the nation in many cases eventually forms the key site of political struggle, resilience often emerges from

localities. To draw attention to people's struggles and needs, protest marches and rallies were being organized in several neighborhoods in NYC.

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Politics is one big chess game that has to be played. Unfortunately, if you don't know how to play the game, you'll lose. If you don't do or say anything, you'll be forgotten about. *Michael, volunteer*

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On March 9, 2013, a rally parade was held in Midland Beach. It was arranged by the founders of the Walk a Mile in Our Shoes initiative. People from different affected neighborhoods in NYC walked through their neighborhood for one mile. Residents, community leaders, and volunteers, told the media that a safety-net still was not provided for. As opposed to the first Walk a Mile in Our Shoes rally on January 12, 2013, this time only local media paid attention.

On May 7, 2013, residents and volunteers from New Dorp Beach protested against the closure of the community hub. The city's Park Department claimed to have done a survey among residents in the neighborhood. According to the department, residents wanted a clean and empty beach and park. Angry and disappointed residents said they had not been surveyed at all, and that most people still needed the hub. Again, only the local television station (NY1) and a journalist from the local newspaper showed up. People feel like the city wants to close the hub because it does not look nice and organized. They feel like upper-middle class people from the area who are back into their rebuild houses again, no longer want to be associated with the hurricane and the problems that people are still facing. As of May 9, 2013, Donna has found a nearby vacant lot where she can put up the hub again.









## Part III. Our Future

*Changing Worldviews and (American) Dreams*







### **Contents Part III.**

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## Introduction

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Anthropology has a long tradition of description of *being*, with a focus on perceptions and practices that shape peoples lives. Visible and articulated strengths and flaws in society and underlying ideologies could be seen as *being*. However, current conditions often form the *seeds of becoming* as they shape people's perspectives, dreams, and thereby potential future change (Dooling and Simon 2012:167).

Anthropology is the *study of human becomings*. Therefore it is important to look further than the current conditions that people face. An examination of people's change of worldviews, opportunities, and dreams can shed light on future paths of becoming (Ingold 2011:9, 72).

In this part different people – predominantly students – will share their worldviews, such as their thoughts about climate change. The impact of the hurricane on peoples perception of the American dream as well as personal dreams in life, will be discussed. Because people's perceptions often influence their actions, we might be able to take a small look at the future (Ingold 2011:9).

### 1 Proximity

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People's lives are shaped by histories of becoming. Therefore it is instructive to get to know people's life histories. A glimpse of the motivations and thoughts that move people through time along different paths, can create a greater understanding of who they are and the events that have shaped their thinking. For many people the hurricane forms a tragedy that changed or reconfirmed their (future) worldviews and dreams.

*As we walk along the High Line [the former elevated railroad along the West Side of Manhattan], Jack shares his sharp reflections on the hurricane. Sandy has created this proximity, so maybe it has changed, but people tend to belittle these problems [climate change] unless it affects them personally. It's weird, people should care about each other as fellow human beings when they hear about Syria, or the hurricane in New Orleans, and not only when it hits their own houses! A few years earlier, Jack had been living on the streets of New York, addicted to drugs and alcohol. He got addicted as a teenager, because of pain of his childhood and the temptation of an instant feeling of happiness. It made him forget his own insecurity and the problems in the world, until his body could no longer live without it. It was horrible that I could no longer communicate with the world around me. I didn't feel anything. It has been three years since he went to rehab and decided to go back to school. The pain of his childhood – he grew up on Staten*



*Island – has got to do with the individualism, conservatism, and lack of solidarity that he felt at the time.* I found it too restrictive and had a different worldview, that I felt wasn't shared by the people around me. It made me feel lost. After the hurricane, it was shocking for me to realize that a lot of people actually need that proximity as a wake up call, as a way to change their perceptions. That it actually took a tragedy to make them feel connected to their neighbors.

Like Jack articulates, it is striking to see that it is proximity that creates togetherness, and that makes people reflect and change their perceptions. Many other students also found it striking to see that it takes a tragedy to reveal the best in people. But the question is if the hurricane has really changed people's perceptions. Many students (14 out of 15) feared that people would quickly return to business as usual when they picked up their lives again. For students like Jack, preconceived ideas were confirmed. For others, the hurricane has been an eye-opener. However, for students, volunteers, and residents, it is the proximity of the hurricane that has intensified their reflections.

## **2 A Change of Worldviews**

### **2.1 Climate Change Versus an Act of God**

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The way we perceive our environment and the ideologies that foster our understandings as human beings, influence our lives in many ways (Tsing 2005:154). When “mother nature” shows her devastating force, nature becomes an object of reflection. As several scholars (e.g. Jarabeen 2013; Colle, Rojowsky, and Buonaito 2010; Tsing 2005) show, climate change, and people's concern about it, is not a new phenomenon. Nevertheless, it has become a worldwide concern. Now that ocean-water has damaged people's houses in NYC – an area that has been safe for years – people started thinking about its causes and the urgency for prevention. Most people talked about climate change as the major cause of the hurricane. Others said it was an act of God.

Some critical students find that calling the hurricane an act of God, can create a perception of disasters as non-human concerns. This could diminish our acknowledgment of climate change as people's responsibility.

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In this country, laws too often are based on religion. The problem is that laws thereby have subjective and unsubstantiated underpinnings. It creates law and policy based on fear. I think everything we do should be based on scientific evidence. *Max, student*

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However, many religious people did not at all diminish or ignore the role and responsibilities human beings have in acts of God and their aftermath.

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I think it's like a wake up call from God you know, God wants to say “Wake up, you've got a lot to do in life, you can't be drooling over comforts and pleasures [...]! *George, resident South Beach*

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Jack as well as George believe that people got too comfortable, and have therefore become more individualistic and materialistic. Thus, people have lost sight of values that would bring them real happiness, such as integrity solidarity. George not only saw a lack of integrity on behalf of the contractors who ran away with his money, but also on behalf of the government. When he was young, he had already missed it, but he saw it getting worse and worse. This reinforced the ideas that he already had. He believes that if we were hurting a bit, we would be more attentive to the amorality of the profit-driven political and economic structure of society.

It is interesting to see that Max – a democratic student and atheist – and George – a republican and religious man – in the end come to the same conclusion. They both see the hurricane as a wake-up call that requires people to act and make a change.

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My question is: when are people gonna wake up? We need to come together and make a change on a very broad scale. We have been warned about this, the global climate change. Why aren't we as a society, as a human race, doing more? *Max, student*

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## 2.2 A Wake Up Call

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The answer to Max's question might be *now*. Some people saw the hurricane as a wake-up call that has changed their worldviews and their sense of urgency for a change. However, many people fear for the ignorance of people who did not get affected.

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Not a lot of people are really worried about the environment that they are living in. I believe everybody knows about the glaciers and everything going on in other countries, but I don't feel like it hit home with them as much as it hit home with me because I have lost so much and now I have realized so much. *Jill, student*

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Max's question why we, as human beings, are not doing more about climate change is a valid one. The environment is vulnerable to human-made destruction and disasters, and we are in fact destroying our home planet (Tsing 2005:123). Many world leaders acknowledge climate change as a global phenomenon that requires international collaboration. Nevertheless, many countries are not or hardly taking responsibility by making relevant changes in society, such as the reduction of the use of fossil fuels and the subsidization of alternative energy sources. Why we are not doing more, relates to ideologies that shape the profit-driven political and economic system. What many politicians do not seem to understand, is that sustainable alternatives can be as profitable or even more profitable. However, being concerned with the environment is often articulated as something

that is not American, but rather European. It is an interesting phenomenon, because disasters like tornado's and hurricanes more often hit the USA.

As scientists, we have to be aware of the impact of the language we use and the subtle implications it might have. Climate change suggests a natural phenomenon, predominantly caused by natural processes instead of human beings. This perspective of the planet as something we are not part of, creates a dangerous distance from the reality of our mutual interdependence (Tsing 2005:124). As activists and nature lovers might state, the earth needs us to protect her, but the other way around also counts. Our every day reality as human beings is that we need a healthy planet for our own conservation. Climate skeptics might argue that disasters are not at all man-made, and therefore of no concern, but in the end it is not that relevant who or what causes climate change to happen, nor if “it” is happening at all. What is happening is visible all over the world, because in the first half of 2013, people's houses got flooded in NYC, were lifted up by tornado's in Oklahoma, or burned down by excessive bush fires in Australia.

Even though it is visible, disasters can be perceived as surreal happenings that are hard to grasp from a distance and too painful from nearby. Some people articulated a sense of surreality in their experiences with the hurricane. People described their experiences like walking around in a war zone, or like waking up in *I am Legend* or *The Wizard of Ozz*.

Although the hurricane appeared to be surreal to them during the first days, they soon realized that they were dealing with reality. And (un)fortunately, nothing beats reality. Climate change is a growing concern for many people, who feel unprotected by the government and corporations. Marshlands have been taken away for profit-driven industries in New Orleans, as well as in New York, which makes people wonder when lessons will be learned and actions will be taken to protect peoples lives and the environment.

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We've destroyed our environment enough that it is destroying us now. *Mason, volunteer*

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The climate seems to be changing faster than society is. Although this is an alarming development, there are reasons to be optimistic. Maybe, as Joseph said, New Yorkers will now realize they are more vulnerable than they thought they were.

### **2.3 We are Young – A New Generation**

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We are part of a very important turning point in history. *Boris, student*

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Many students described the hurricane as a moment of reflection that might foster social change. For this generation of students, disasters become an even more pressing concern for the future,

because they might largely impact their lives. Many students believe that this will happen again, and – like residents and volunteers – feel like the government should do more to safeguard its people and the future generations to come. Student's awareness and concern about climate change have increased because of their experiences with the hurricane.

However, many of them articulated the fear that people that were not affected by the hurricane, are unaware of the full scope of the problems we are facing. Other than that, feelings of carelessness and helplessness were articulated as reasons that most people sit back and do not take action.

Adults, as well as social scientists, often articulate the selfishness of the new generation that has become more individualistic because of consumerism and social media (Giroux 2003). This conclusion is at odds with these students, who appear to be smart and critical thinkers, who do care and act in interaction with their environment. Therefore, we should be careful in scientific research to draw generalizing conclusions about groups of people. They can create stereotypes and categories that further divide instead of unite society.

These categories can, in Mason's words, “cloud” social relationships. As we have seen, the word *community* can unite, but also divide people, because categories of distinction are being used to include certain people and exclude others. Many people – especially students – articulated the pain they feel because of an everyday lack of humanity.

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People are at odds with their neighbors because of differences. When really we're all from one planet. I don't know what to do with that information. Why is there any divisiveness when we breathe the same air? None of us are immigrants to planet earth. Everyone in this country is from somewhere else, except for Native Americans. And look what we did to them *Mason, volunteer*

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### **3 The American Dream**

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The largest part of the USA – what is called the middle class – is facing financial problems. Thereby the classical American dream of owning a house, a car, and a stable job, has become largely unattainable for many people. The American dream of social mobility, thereby seems like a *crumbling national ethos* (Walley 2010:138).

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And the American dream of getting money and saving for retirement... now it's just about getting the job to pay the bills. I have so many student loans that I need the job to pay my bills. I can't even think of retirement or the future. Or saving money for college for my son as devastating as that is. [...] The American dream incorporates the future, but I can't see that far into the future anymore. *Jane, student*

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In the aftermath of the hurricane, people's futures have become even more uncertain. For many

survivors of the hurricane, their American dream was destroyed when their houses, cars, and credit got damaged or destroyed. Thus, this concept of the American dream – if it ever existed at all – has largely come to an end. Many people describe it as a myth that was meant to stimulate the economy. A myth that got out of hand with the economic crisis of 2008.

However, criticism of the American dream ideology already existed in the sixties, when Martin Luther King Jr. held his famous public speech about capitalism and individualism in the USA. Like Bullard (2007:104), King Jr. believed that healthy equal neighborhoods were essential for positive human interactions. These interactions are important because, as Lagomarsino (2012:51) explains, they form the foundation of neighborhoods and cities, and thereby of society.

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Real freedom would be; not having so many policies and rules that hold people back from having a better life. Not getting arrested for being undocumented and looking for work.  
*Kelyn, student*

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The American dream is a concept like *freedom*, that has meaning within a historical context. It is interesting and sad to know that Kelyn's comment coincides with Martin Luther King Jr's ideals, that have thus not been realized by now. The American dream can be called an *engaged universal* within the USA, because people largely have the same understanding of its meaning (Tsing 2005:8). However, its meaning is being contested and is no longer seen as a *universal concept* now that people call it a myth or even a nightmare (Tsing 2005:84–85). Many people spoke about the American dream as an old-fashioned concept that applied when their grandparents were young, as well as a limited concept that only focuses on materiality.

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As George Carlin [American stand-up comedian] said, it's called the American dream because you must be asleep to believe in it. I think the old idea of the American dream refers to owning your own property – your own house, car, job, and little yard. If that defines who you are... I think for those people who lost some of these things in the hurricane it's hard, they must be in an existential identity crisis. *Jack, student*

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This coincides with Bauman's (2011:9) perspective of the American dream as “a dream dreamed by uncertain and insecure people who might be aware it is a dream, but unable to stop dreaming it”. Many people have stopped believing in the old understanding of the American dream, so they construct their own views of what it should be. Many students articulated that another, less materialistic perspective on the American dream is needed.

#### 4 Personal (American) Dreams

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It's not just external, it's also internal. Part of the dream is being satisfied to the extent that it shouldn't make you feel bad. To be sure of yourself, not only to improve in a materialistic way, but also in a spiritual sense. A house and car are a necessity, everything on top of that is an improvement. Sandy has destroyed not the dream but the products of the dream. *Eric, student*

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As Eric's words show, people's personal understandings of what the American dream should be, differ from the original one. Although Eric was the only student out of fourteen who explained the 'classical' American dream as its theme of life, it is interesting to see that he did articulate the American dream as more than materialistic. It indeed is a relevant question if the old American dream is the pursuit of happiness. As the *basic structure of society* revealed in the aftermath, social relationships rather than materiality are said to be the aspects that really increase people's happiness (Lagomarsino 2012:61).

People have experienced that in this liquid-modern time, consumerism and materiality are rendered more important than caring for other human beings (Bauman 2008:54). Although many people do not agree with this ideology, students fear that especially people who were unaffected by the hurricane, as well as wealthier affected residents, will not change as a result of Sandy.

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Most will keep "American dreaming", write Sandy off as a divine anomaly, and deny that any waters (social, sexual, political or actual) will ever rise again. *Jack, student*

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Jack describes his personal American dream as people's ability to make a (radical) change to their own lives, and become whoever they want to be. In light of his background, this is an understandable, and humanity-directed view. Furthermore, all students stated that a sense of togetherness, should be there always, and not only when a disaster happens.

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The changes I was mentioning before [more equality and sustainability] would come about if people were aware, if people questioned the world they live in, the top-down structures. The battle is like David and Goliath, but there is no alternative. We have to do it, because the government won't do it for us. *Hugo, student*

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The reason people might hold on to "American dreaming" might be because of fear of uncertainty and insecurity, or of hardships they could face in their own future lives.

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The hurricane has opened me up to the fact that life is really fragile and the world is not a safe place. *Max, student*

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As Jenny said before, the flip side of the American dream, is the American debt. Student's lives are

hard in terms of finance, because tuition is high and students often work many (about 20) hours a week to be able to pay for their full-time study and living expenses. This severely impacts their lives, because they are under pressure with this many hours of work and little hours of sleep. Although many students have become pessimistic about their own future because of the hardships they face, their personal dreams largely articulate optimism and realism.

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I wouldn't call my dream an American dream, but I believe in idealistic realism and realistic idealism. *Joseph, student*

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Dreaming and idealism, they say, is needed to imagine possible realities and strive for ideals, while realism is necessary to avoid disappointed if dreams do not come true. Student's personal dreams thereby reveal a boots on the ground mentality as well as a hopeful narrative.

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I saw hope and the strength of a community when I was doing volunteer work. A teenage boy of only 14 years old handing out some of its own toys to a kid from the neighborhood of only six years old, turning a huge smile on her face, that there is hope. A mum that took her daughter with her to the parade to educate her about what's going on, that there is hope. *Joseph, student*

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## 5 Reflections – Hope

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According to Michael Sandel (The Reith Lectures 2009), times of hardship can be great for moral and civic hope renewal. The aftermath of the hurricane has made people reflect on the American dream of social upward mobility, that now seems less and less attainable. Students wish for a more social state and more environmental justice in the future. These remarks draw back to the *basic structure of society*, as human values are rendered more important than material ones. If this generation brings their dreams into action, they might be able to make a change. However, Sandy survivors fear that people who were not affected by the hurricane will not put their dreams and perceptions into action. Especially among students, individualism and its consequences create what Bauman (2011:20) calls *freedom fatigue*. They are tired of a system that is based on individual freedom because they see how it leads to amoral behavior of individuals with power. In their eyes, the promise of equal opportunities and social mobility has become a tiresome myth. However, as Clifford Geertz (Ingold 2011:9) argued, in theory human beings have the equipment to live a thousand kind of lives. Life is a movement of opening, thus the door to a different future is open (Ingold 2011:10). Students perceptions of what the American dream should be implies a relevant *message of hope* (Crapanzano 2003), because they will form a new generation of professionals that might inspire their environment (Giroux 2003).









# Part IV. Methodology and Reflection







## Contents Part IV.

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## Introduction

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In this part I will reflect on the methodology that has guided my fieldwork process. In line with Scheper-Hughes (1995) I find it important to ethically examine anthropological methodologies and practices. Although it is impossible to provide the reader with full transparency, I think it is important to be clear about our processes of data collection, analysis, and writing. Anthropologists rarely discuss the exact steps taken during their own fieldwork process. This might be an attempt to be as objective and academic as possible. However, thereby we only partly succeed to tackle the mystery of doing fieldwork. Because – as Ingold (2011:17–18) argues – studying people's histories and lines of becoming is our goal, I think we should also aspire to provide more insight in our own (theoretical and methodological) lines of becoming. Adequate attention to the design of the study, can alter the validity (De Walt and De Walt 2011:122). Therefore, the first chapter provides a short overview of the steps that I have taken in my fieldwork process. In the second chapter I will critically reflect on theoretical methodologies, their challenges, and their future.

### 1 Fieldwork Process

#### 1.1 Getting Started

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This research study – as many others – started off with a list of theoretical subjects that I am interested in (Appendix 1). When I heard of hurricane Sandy in October 2012, I realized that the topics of my interest might coincide in its aftermath. By studying relevant social scientific literature, I was able to think of relevant research questions (Appendix 2). The initial main research question focused on students only; *What are the effects of hurricane Sandy on the perception of 'the American dream' among affected students in New York?* I decided to do research among students at a college in one of the most hard hit boroughs of New York. At CSI I found a faculty adviser – assistant professor in sociology – that could help me to obtain permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to be able to do research among students (Appendix 3). Although it took me two weeks to adjust forms and do a mandatory and extensive ethical research test, I found it important to take those steps in a proper way. It helped me to thoughtfully consider and phrase privacy and confidentiality issues in the Informed Consent paper (Appendix 4).

#### 1.2 Fieldwork

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During the first weeks of fieldwork, I visited the most hard hit neighborhoods on the island and met people of different ages and backgrounds with different experiences and perceptions. The people I met enlarged my vision of relevant topics. Therefore I realized that it was important to broaden my

initial main research question to the current one; *What is the impact of hurricane Sandy on people's lives, worldviews, and (American) dreams?* This change did not affect the research question for students, but only broadened my research perspective to also focus on residents and volunteers. Therefore I did not report this change to the IRB.

I met people by visiting different neighborhoods. I met residents on the streets, in donation centers, and community hubs. By participating in volunteer relief efforts and attending community meetings, I was able to meet more and more people. Apart from this *snowball-sampling*, I also used *judgment sampling* to encounter students who were affected by the hurricane (De Walt and De Walt 2011:130; O'Reilly 2009:198). To inform students about this research study and invite them to participate, I held a small presentation in research classes of social work students and at a sociological congress. Students could subscribe to a list if they were interested, or call me in case they wished to subscribe anonymously.

The main methods I employed during the fieldwork period existed of *participant observation* (mainly among residents and volunteers) and the use of *informal and open interviewing* (mainly among students). Participant observation enabled me to understand people's struggles and the different relief efforts. I also read scientific literature and local newspapers (*non-participation*) (De Walt and De Walt 2011:25). By *informal and in-depth interviews* with students, residents, and volunteers, I got to know people's worldviews and perceptions (De Walt and De Walt 2011:48). Most interviews were *unstructured*. In that case I only used a topic list. Some interviews were *semi-structured* because I used a list of open questions (De Walt and De Walt 2011:139). I audio-recorded many of the interviews, because it enabled me to focus on the conversation in a more informal way. Recordings were only made when people gave their permission, either on the informed consent form (Appendix 2) or by word. To guard people's confidentiality and privacy I kept personal information and audio-recordings in encrypted databases on my computer.

The students I interviewed came from different faculties (9 social work; 2 urban planning; 1 sociology; 1 psychology; 1 political science and philosophy; and 1 computer science). The large number of social work students might have biased my data. They could have been more willing to participate, and might have had a different perspective on topics like climate change and the American dream in contrast to students from other faculties.

### **1.3 Data Analysis and Writing**

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While in the field, I had only analyzed data through open and axial coding. *Open coding* helped me to gain insight in the most important topics. *Axial coding* helped me to adjust research and interview questions to gain more specific insight in certain topics (Boeije 2010:76). When I got home, I

realized that my choice to only collect and partially analyze data during my fieldwork period, had left me with a lot of work. For example, I still needed to transcribe and analyze 20 out of 33 interviews.

By collecting this much data, I found it hard to do data reduction, to select certain stories, and leave others out (De Walt and De Walt 2011:181). To create an overview, I arranged all data on post-its on the door of my office and in digital databases. I highlighted different categories, such as (1) Experiences with the hurricane, (2) Relief Efforts, (3) Hardships and Strengths, and (4) (American) dreams (O'Reilly 2009:38). After this selective coding, I created a theoretical writing plan and added the most important field data (Boeije 2010:90). Thereby I had a conceptual and empirical model that I used to write the thesis. I decided to use literal quotations to do justice to who people are and the stories they shared (De Walt and De Walt 2011:196).

## **2 Reflections**

### **2.1 Objectivity**

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Perspectives, morals and feelings are often believed not to fit into the *objectivism* that is defined by science (Moody-Adams 1997:1). However, objectivity does not only exist in quantity, but also in qualitative data – in the nature and meaning of relevant phenomena (De Walt and De Walt 2011:116). Objectivity within anthropological research is not a representation of “the truth”, but rather of objective possibilities (De Walt and De Walt 2011:111; Willis 2000:24). People's experiences and perspectives can make us understand relevant phenomena and their potential meanings in society.

What is “real” is being constructed by individuals who use their knowledge, feelings and experiences, to describe “the reality” from their own perspective. According to Žižek (1997), “The Real” can therefore be described as “a hollow fantasy that is made up of ideologies that structure our social practices”(Bohm and De Cock 2005:283). In line with Žižek, I think it is relevant to examine the ideologies, perceptions, and experiences that shape the reality that people perceive. However, I do not agree with his description of reality as a hollow fantasy. “The truth” is collaboratively constructed and contested, not by hollow fantasies, but by lively imaginations that influence our perceptions and actions.

This does not necessarily mean that this is automatically a personal reality, rather than a shared one. Also, although changes take place over time, it does not mean that the research is not valid or only applies to a particular locality within a specific time-slot (De Walt and De Walt 2011:113). Current problems that people face, such as financial problems and climate change, are not only local, but global (Tsing 2005:272). As we have seen throughout this thesis, people from



different ages and with different backgrounds and ideologies, share comparable struggles and future dreams. As Ingold (2011:1) states, humans both produce culture and are a product of culture. As qualitative researchers we are our own research instrument, and our own product of culture. Therefore it is important to be aware of and clear about the way this impacts ourselves and our research findings.

## 2.2 Engaged Anthropology

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The theoretical and methodological stance I have employed in my fieldwork period primarily links to *engaged anthropology*. Over the last two decades, *engaged anthropology* came into being as a methodological stance that acknowledges that being a human being who cares, should be the bottom line of research (Low and Merry 2010:203). Engagement takes place through collaborative fieldwork with communities. In personal interactions, by sharing and supporting each other, more equal instead of hierarchical relationships emerge.

Interaction is the primary process through which we collect and eventually analyze and interpret the complex nature of human existence. By doing fieldwork, we acknowledge that people's experiences and perceptions are essential to an understanding of what makes humans human (Perry 2003:95).

As a researcher with a safe, hygienic, and affordable place to stay on the North Shore of the island, I was in a different position than many survivors. To be able to get a better understanding of people's situations, I tried to find a place to stay along the East Shore. It was hard to find, and I soon realized that sharing the same histories, struggles, or living conditions was not a precondition for understanding. Empathy, respect, openness, humor, affect and a concern for sincerity – in Jackson's (2010) words “a state of inner commitment” - were sufficient to be able to get to know people in a profound way.

Instead of keeping to methodological and theoretical plans and schemes that we have thought of in advance, I think it is important to be open to what people find important in life. Although engaged anthropology acknowledges the importance of working with people in a more equal way, academical hegemony still exists (Smart 2010:322). People are being described as informants, who provide the researcher with information, but it is the anthropologist that interprets that data. Throughout this thesis, I have deliberately avoided the words *subject* or *informant*, because I think this “others” people. It turns them into research objects, which still implies a hierarchical relationship instead of an equal one. The people we work with are self-reflective. Sometimes they even use anthropological concepts to analyze, understand, and explain their environment (Low and Merry 2010:210). I think it is important to take people seriously by seeing

them as unique and knowledgeable. After all, “the stories of mankind are what make us human” (Lagomarsino 2012:1). Furthermore, these stories form the foundation of our research.

*Rapport* is an essential aspect of engaged anthropological research and methods like participant observation. I agree with Jackson (2010:279) when he states that the building of a relationship of *rapport* (trust), has got to do with sincerity rather than authenticity. Being truly interested to get to know people and recognizing and accepting that people research us too, is more important than being an “authentic” member of society. I expressed gratefulness for people's willingness to share their stories. I deliberately approached every conversation as a valuable gift, no matter the content. Thereby, relationships of trust emerged, and I was able to get to know people in a profound way. Although, as Geertz (1973) argues, *thickness of description* does not always mean better representation of people's stories, I agree with Jackson Jr (2010:284) that the same *thickness* is a function of how affected encounters have been for me and the people I worked with.

It is hard to theorize “the ethnographic exchanges that grease the wheels of ethnographic knowledge transmission” (Jackson Jr 2010:284). Nevertheless, I would describe the following aspects as important in doing fieldwork; respect, love, openness, reciprocity, and independence.

I think *respect* can be called the foundation of the building of a relationship based on *rapport*. In line with Ingold (2011:229), I found that by focusing on anthropological research as “not ethnography”, I was able to forget about the end product and be open to the storyline that unfolded as I got to know people. By being flexible and open to people's schedules and preferences, interviews took place wherever and whenever people felt at ease. This often created an informal ambiance. Some people took me out to have an interview that took the whole day. With others I spend an hour at a cafe, or the CSI campus. I visited most people at their houses, whereby I got to experience their living conditions.

By asking open questions such as “Can you tell me something about yourself?”, “What do you find important in life?” and “What are important personal values to you?”, I was able to get to know people in a more profound way. We got to talk about subjects that people found important, which often turned out to be interesting and relevant contributions to the study. I also asked people what they wanted me to know about their lives. This enlarged my understanding of the most important topics in people's lives and enabled me to adjust the research direction.

With the second aspect, I mean *love* for fellow human beings, feelings of empathy and solidarity. Although my bachelor degree is in Social Work, empathy is an aspect that can not be trained by study, but is part of people's character which grows through experiences in life. Sharing life histories, humor, hobbies, dreams, and hopes – even though these aspects do not always seem to have anything to do with the research question being studied – can contribute to a mutual

relationship of *openness*. In my case it brought me closer to people and led me to relevant research insights. Nevertheless, I only shared my own opinions or feelings when I thought it would be relevant to get more in-depth information or to establish a stronger relationship. In relationships of affect it is important to be open about one's doubts and personal boundaries. Because as researchers we are human beings too, we need our privacy and distractions to put our minds at ease. By writing fieldnotes and keeping a logbook and a diary, I was able to document and examine my research findings, thoughts, and feelings.

When we give our attention, time, and openness, we have a chance to get the same things in return. I think these things are therefore the core parts of *reciprocity*. Another important part of *reciprocity* came into being by spontaneously helping people out in the rebuilding of their homes and by doing volunteer work. Furthermore, I attended different meetings and engaged in conversations at community hubs.

A critique on engaged anthropology or participatory research is that “it runs the risk of compromising the objectivity and integrity of anthropological research” (Johnston 2010). By focusing on people's needs, anthropology could look like social work rather than social science. Like Johnson (2010), I oppose this argument. Anthropological research is *with* people, not *about* people. In case of the latter, people would only function to color the painting of ethnography with field data that fits the description. Rather, the drawing we present as ethnography, should primarily be drawn from their life stories, not from our preconceived ideas or research plans.

*Independence* might seem to contrast with all other aspects. However, I think it is a relevant aspect. Having a *multi-sided perspective* of people's situations and perceptions can be more nuanced and holistic. Therefore I deliberately chose to focus on people of different ages, backgrounds, and ideologies. Although I think we should not want to be totally independent, a little bit of independence can avoid people to see the anthropologist as advocate of only one group of people (Jackson Jr 2010:285). From the second week of the fieldwork period, I drove around on a bike that I got from a volunteer of the Stephen Siller Foundation. This gave me an easy, cheap, and independent way to get around. Having my own place to stay that was not affiliated with an organization or community in the research area, also increased my independence.

### **2.3 The Future**

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By doing fieldwork I gained insights that only came into being because I had seen people's circumstances, heard their stories, and felt their hardships (Ingold 2011:222). Nevertheless, one could argue that participation in a research site is a low form of collaboration.

*Collaborative research* – a new direction that aligns with *advocacy* and *activist research* –

goes further than this, and could be seen as a next step in engaged anthropology (Jackson Jr 2010). It is about shared leadership and management of the direction of a research study (Low and Merry 2010:210). The question is whether this is something to strive for. Although researcher and research participants might be more equally involved in a research study, shared leadership might have certain disadvantages. When a researcher works with a governmental, private, or community organization or with one group of people, a conflict of interests might emerge. Thereby anthropological research might lose its holistic perspective. Also, I think we should be careful not to take over local processes and diminish people's empowerment.

Nevertheless, a more collaborative approach might be the future of anthropology. I think research participants should be more involved in the thinking of interesting research topics, and by joining in writing and debates. So far, anthropologists come up with research topics and locations, while people around the world might feel the urgency for the investigation of other processes too.

Anthropologists should be more engaged in public debates on anthropological topics (Low and Merry 2010:212). Our knowledge is not only valuable to a scientific public, but to people around the world because it is about the world we live in. By being more involved in public debates, we can position ourselves as actors in the world instead of bystanders to the world. I do not think action and taking sides is a precondition for *activist research*. Social change can take place when debates about anthropological topics have a more public character. When people think about certain issues and are in open dialogue about them, learning, critical thinking, and empowerment can take place.

As researchers I think we are responsible for the knowledge that we have and the categories that we have created. Categories are relevant in cognitive processes of memory and communication. However, when anthropological concepts or categories are being misused in society – for example when *culture* is being described as the only reason for moderate school performances – we should step up and join the debate on these issues (González 2004). Dividing people into *emic or etic categories of description*, does sometimes makes us forget we are in fact talking about human beings, whether they are black, white, poor, or rich (De Walt and De Walt 2011:65). Therefore I argue for a more inclusive focus on human beings and their struggles in future anthropological research. The stories in this thesis are about people, whether they are students, residents, or volunteers. Their stories tell us about conditions of vulnerability that we all face.

Margaret Thatcher once said “There is no such thing as society”. There is no entity called society that operates apart from individuals. We are society as we construct it. Human beings shape the fate of humanity when they just live their lives. Knowledge about the way they do so, and the consequences it might have, is therefore important. It can make us understand how the flaws in the

systems that are shaped by human beings – such as capitalism – have come into being and how they could be solved (Harvey 2010:238). Thus the current condition and the future of humanity ought to be on the forefront of the public and political debate. I think as anthropologists we have a responsibility to foster this dialogue. Inaction is a form of action. By not engaging in the political and public debate, we write ourselves off as irrelevant or at least marginal social science (Low and Merry 2010:211; Jackson Jr 2010:281).

Despite these ambitions, writing is our primary form of expression. “Accessibility of our writing then, becomes a key issue” (Smart 2010:323). Therefore we should also think about ways to make our writing more accessible to a wider public. The proximity that anthropological research can create to otherwise elusive and complex realities, is one of its biggest strengths.









## Part V. Conclusion







This study contributes to the field of *disaster studies* as described by Hoffman and Oliver-Smith (2001) and is inspired by Ingold's (2011:9,72) focus on *becoming* rather than *being*. By focusing on students, East Shore residents, and volunteers, I have been able to examine a broad scale of experiences and perceptions. Such a holistic examination of society is important to be able to perceive phenomena from different angles. This study is highly relevant because disasters are affecting people worldwide. The aftermath of hurricane Sandy has revealed flaws and strengths in society (Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 2001; Aldrich 2012). As opposed to other studies, this study is more holistic, because it also focuses on the impact of the hurricane on people's worldviews and (American) dreams. Different experiences reveal shared and contested thoughts and feelings. The stories in this thesis can thereby tell us something about humanity as such. Many problems that people face (such as financial vulnerability and climate change) are not only local, but also global. This thesis is not only about Sandy survivors. It is about human beings who suffer, dream, and love.

As we have seen throughout this thesis, the impact of hurricane Sandy on people's lives has been significant. Their opportunities, worldviews, and dreams have changed. In Part two, we saw that the financial aid that people received from FEMA and insurance companies in the aftermath of the hurricane, was too little to cover the high rebuilding costs. Some people were already living on the edge because of the economic crisis. Others – who had perfect credit before the hurricane – are in debt as well. Many people therefore perceive government relief efforts as too little too late.

A hundred years ago, natural barriers such as marshland, dunes, and trees, protected the East Shore coastline. Over the last few decades, these barriers have been taken away in the construction of a boardwalk, parking lots, and parks. In Tsing's (2005:59) words the coastline forms a *salvage frontier*, a landscape seen as an exited market opportunity. Residents explained that the city government has allowed the building of new attached homes at different street levels, whereby lower lying bungalows flood every time it rains extensively. Some of these areas are therefore ironically called “bathtubs”. Over-extension in building and failing sewer drainage systems in Midland Beach reveal flaws in society that already existed before the hurricane.

Underlying ideologies of these practices have been examined. As Bauman (2011:14) argues, individual freedom provides people with a chance to succeed, but also with a chance to fail. Many people in foreclosure blame themselves, while as Harvey (2010:151) explains, social inequality and suffering are inherent to the political and economic system of capitalism. Now that the middle class is “financially falling through the cracks”, the American dream of social upward mobility and profit-driven individual freedom and materiality has become a myth rather than a feasible dream to strive for (Gesprek op 2 2012; Harvey 2010:191). The stories in this thesis, of predominantly middle class people, show that suffering can be highly unpredictable. A lost job, illness, or issues

with insurance companies or banks, can already ruin people's credit. Undocumented immigrants – who's voices are rarely heard because of their fear of deportation – face an even more uncertain future. Many of them can not apply for financial aid from the government, and are exploited by employers. As human beings without rights, they feel excluded from society.

In the aftermath of hurricane Sandy, a social safety-net was not sufficiently provided for by the government. And although politicians face a complicated task, people's reasons to be angry are understandable. As Adams (2013) argues, with a political system that supports free markets and taboos big government, a social safety-net becomes an affective choice of individuals rather than a civil right. Caring individuals from all over the country have helped people out. Volunteer and grassroots organizations as well as churches and local community hubs came into being to provide people with food, cleaning supplies, essential information, and a site of social support. The strong feeling of togetherness that survivors experienced in the aftermath of the hurricane, has made them reflect upon the most important values in life. Materiality was rendered less important than social relationships. The hurricane has uncovered the *basic structure of society*; essential values in people's lives that they had lost sight of – solidarity and love that connect humanity as a whole.

However, people are angry about the government's inability to protect and represent its people. As Bauman (2011:11) rightfully argues, the government thereby loses its *raison d'etre*. People showed resilience by protesting against social injustice and the lack of a safety-net (Harvey 2010:237; Tsing 2005:211). However, they predominantly experienced a feeling of helplessness and powerlessness. These feelings can create less participation and resilience in society (Bauman 2011:14). Vulnerability and insecurity then, indeed form the foundations of governmental power (Bauman 2011:20). When ideologies and governments are seen as all-encompassing entities, opposing business as usual seems impossible. Therefore many students fear that people will turn themselves into helpless or careless bystanders who's true voices are not being heard. Democracy – community representation and participation – is thereby undermined (Bauman 2011:20). There is a gap between people's core values – humanity and solidarity – and the political and economic system, which often chooses money above solidarity and morality.

Part three described the impact of the hurricane on people's worldviews and (American) dreams. For many people, hurricane Sandy has been a concrete illustration of the consequences of climate change (Jarabeen 2013:238). As Tsing (2005:154) argues, disasters transform nature into an *object of reflection*. But by calling nature an object of reflection, it is described as something we observe from a distance rather than the environment we live in. People's perceptions have changed because of the hurricane. Whether climate change was perceived as an act of God or a scientific phenomenon, most people perceived it as a wake up call that requires social change.

The American dream of owning a house, a car, and a stable job, has become unattainable for many people. As Jane said, the American dream used to incorporate the future, but debts create a day to day survival mode of paying the bills. People therefore perceive the American dream as an old-fashioned myth that is too individualistic and materialistic. Students have described alternative (American) dreams that focus on spiritual, social, and environmental development instead of or apart from materialistic development. They say it should not take a tragedy to create a feeling of togetherness and to make people think about the consequences of climate change. They wish for a more social and environmentally equal future. Their dreams articulate a hopeful narrative that can make us imagine other social realities in society (Tsing 2005:268). Although student's perceptions might influence their future actions, I think we should all be aware of the choices we make in life. Life is about balance. We are all just “little pieces in a big, big universe” (Zeitlin 2012). We rely on each other for knowledge, resources, and skills. I hope history will not repeat itself. I hope it will not take another tragedy to foster a relevant political and public debate on the future of humanity.

The proximity that anthropological research can create is valuable for our understanding of (the conditions that shape) people's experiences and perceptions. As we have seen in the first chapter of Part three, proximity creates reflection. By doing fieldwork, we acknowledge that proximity is needed to be able to understand the world we inhabit. However, our engagement in the world should not end with ethnography (Ingold 2011:222). *Engaged anthropology* should not only be limited to participant observation (Low and Merry 2010:210). Although it is called *engaged anthropology*, we are not truly engaged in the world because we still largely focus ourselves on a scientific public. Thereby we remain bystanders to relevant public and political debates that foster social change in society. By participating in these debates, we can address relevant issues and share our knowledge. We should not forget that people are self-reflexive experts of their everyday realities, and should be seen as equal human beings rather than informants or research subjects.

However, people's personal worldviews and (American) dreams could not have been investigated otherwise but through *in-depth engagement* in the field. By being a truly interested human being who cares, equal and close relationships of affect and trust were established. Through open interviews, informal conversations, and participant observation, I have been able to present highly detailed and relevant narratives. I think being open to the storyline that unfolds as we meet people, and being active in society through public debates, is the bottom line of true engagement. To conclude, people's stories tell us that humanity is something we continually have to work at (Ingold 2011:7). The only thing that is given to us, is our lives and the way we live them.



## Epilogue

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I wouldn't be standing here if I was a victim. I am surviving this whole thing, *Rosa says when she returns with two cups of coffee*. I may not financially or mentally survive, but physically I will. I am too stubborn not to. But I don't know what people could do to get themselves out of this mess. Look at NYC – a little USA – it's the same thing, it's just what's happening. You either got to find a way to climb back up that ladder, which today is impossible, or you... I'm sorry, I'm just rambling on and on, *she says, while she looks at the clock. After asserting her that I have got all day, and that I am interested to hear her "ramble on", she smiles, and continues her story.*

It has just put people on that last rung of the ladder holding on and when the ocean came in, we fell off. And I always thought that we could learn; here's what went wrong and now this time we're gonna do it different. I watched all those Katrina town-hall meetings. I was very upset at the time seeing what happened – all those people – and then I realized probably two months ago that the same thing is gonna happen. I mean, it wasn't as many people, but the recovery is looking very similar. Where everybody was struggling in Katrina we're still struggling. We didn't learn anything, I am sorry, but we really didn't learn anything.

And I know the governor is talking about giving those houses back to mother nature, to “let it be marshland again”. But that's not what's gonna happen, they're gonna build tall buildings that none of us could ever afford. That will hold them off for a while until eventually the lower half of Manhattan goes under. I think at the last – probably the 11th – hour there will be somebody to build some sort of system like they build in New Orleans. They will protect the wealthy sections of the city somehow, even if that sacrifices Staten Island and goes across New York harbor. I think people like me who can no longer afford to move up on the hill are just gonna go, there's gonna live other people here. I feel discarded from the home I lived in, the place I loved, but it doesn't matter – the new, wealthier people are gonna come in.

I remember back in the day people would say “What, are you a communist?” No. I'm a human being that cares about other human beings, that's all I am. I'm not trying to dismantle the country, I'm trying to get us back where we were. Now all people are working for themselves. I don't think that's gonna work any longer, I really don't. I think this hurricane is an example. Look at the parts of the city that recovered, where did the focus go in the beginning? The tunnels, the subway system. Getting big business

rolling again. I know it sounds horrible and it's upsetting because we have such a remarkable set up and greed got in there and destroyed it.

I think that's the key: you can have the American dream as long as everything goes right and you don't get hit with any strange obstacles that can happen in life. Now I find myself on the other side and I don't know what to do. And I don't want to keep begging, I can't tell you what that does to me. It's not me. And I am not begging for anything but to get home. Not to be foreclosed on just because we had a hurricane.

I wanted to say "I'm ready to go", and then I start crying because I'm not. At a certain point you just don't want to be fighting anymore.

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## Credits

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- Page 1 Photo by Lilja Anna Perdijk
- Page 2 Poem by Billy Collins, 1941  
Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), Arts for Transit – Poetry in Motion
- Page 19 Photo by Lilja Anna Perdijk
- Page 23 FEMA (Valenzuela, M)  
June 19, 2013. Best Available Flood Hazard Data  
<http://fema.maps.arcgis.com/home/webmap/viewer.html?webmap=2f0a884bfb434d76af8c15c26541a545>, accessed August 12, 2013.
- Page 24 Simagines  
The Simagines: Planning for Recovery Program is sponsored by the partnership of the Department of Urban Affairs and Planning, CUNY, Hunter College and the Staten Island Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. With assistance from the National and Metro Chapter of the American Planning Association, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the College of Staten Island, CUNY, and the Staten Island Foundation.
- Page 25 Photo by Lilja Anna Perdijk
- Page 35 Photo by Lilja Anna Perdijk  
This photo shows “Waiting” by Scott Lobaido.
- Page 61 Photo by Lilja Anna Perdijk
- Page 75 Photo by Lilja Anna Perdijk

## Appendices

### Appendix 1 – Topic List

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Neoliberalism	American Dream
Vulnerability (ecologically, socially, financially)	Insecurity and Inequality
Freedom and liberty	Political economy
Social relations	Future perspectives
Movement, knowledge and description	Interconnectedness

## **Appendix 2 – Informed Consent Form**

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*To preserve the original layout, the form is presented on the following three pages.*

**CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AND UNIVERSITY OF UTRECHT**

*College of Staten Island*

*Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Social Work (SASW)*

**Consent to participate in Research Project**

**Project title:** In Sandy's Shadow – the effects of a hurricane on students perception on 'the American Dream'

**Principal Investigator:** Lilja Perdijk  
Graduate Student  
College of Staten Island (CSI) and University of Utrecht (the Netherlands)  
New York, New York, 10314  
646 715 6805

**Faculty Advisor:** John Arena  
Assistant Professor in Sociology  
CSI  
Building: 4S. Office number: 225  
718 982 3779

**Site where study is to be conducted:** On Staten Island + on CSI.

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**Purpose of the research**

This research project is conducted by Lilja Perdijk, a student from the University of Utrecht (in the Netherlands), in fulfillment of her MA degree in Cultural Anthropology. The research project investigates the effects of hurricane Sandy on students values, dreams, opportunities and future perspectives. The purpose of the research project is to gain insight into students experiences with the hurricane as well as their values, dreams, opportunities and future perspectives. Dr. John Arena, PhD, Assistant Professor in Sociology at the College of Staten Island, is serving as CO-PI and Advisor to Lilja Perdijk in the United States.

**Main procedures involved in the research**

This is a qualitative research project in which participant observation and open and informal conversations through unstructured interviews will be conducted. The interview is expected to take 1 hour. For those who are not interested in participating in the interview, but still want to contribute to the study, a request can be made to the researcher for a questionnaire that the participant will fill out by hand and return to the researcher.

**Confidentiality**

Confidentiality will be seriously monitored. Fictitious names will be used instead of real names in an effort to protect your confidentiality. Audio and video recording will also be used for the purpose of collecting accurate information during our time together. Fictitious names will be used in the research report (master thesis) for research participants who don't want their real names to be used. Fictitious names will be used in presentations about the research project, both to researchers and non-researchers. Audio- and video recording will only be done in full agreement and consent with research participants and only if they want to be recognizable and identifiable, the information will

CUNY UI - Institutional Review Board

Approval Date: February 26, 2013  
Expiration Date: February 25, 2014  
Coordinator Initials: *LLM*



be used in potential presentations about the thesis. If people do not want their audio and video information to be public, the information will only be used for data collection and analysis by the principal investigator. The information (for example an audio-recorded interview), will be erased by the principal investigator right after the interview is written down.

### **Foreseeable risks and discomforts**

Because the project is about the effects of hurricane Sandy as well as personal values, research participants must be aware that personal and sensitive subjects can emerge. This could cause feelings of discomfort with the research participants, but of course this depends on the personality of the research participant and his or her experiences and thoughts about the event. If such feelings arise, you are advised to contact a medical professional right away. If you do not have access to a medical professional, please contact 1-800-Life-Net (1-800-543-3638). Furthermore, breach of confidentiality is always a risk in studies like these. However, the researchers will work to protect your confidentiality with the use of fictitious names and not storing consents with the actual data that is being collected.

### **Benefits of the research to society and the research participant**

Participating in this research project could cause feelings of relief in a personal sense, and in general contributes to a valuable portrait of perceptions of affected students in New York in the aftermath of hurricane Sandy.

### **Contact in case of questions**

The Principal Investigator can be contacted by email ([lilja.etc@gmail.com](mailto:lilja.etc@gmail.com)) or cell phone (646 715 6805). John Arena, sociologist and lector at the College of Staten Island, is faculty advisor of this research project. John Arena can be contacted by email ([John.Arena@csi.cuny.edu](mailto:John.Arena@csi.cuny.edu)) or phone (504 520 9512). Furthermore, Diederick Raven, anthropologist and Director of the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences from the University of Utrecht, provides guidance in this research project as the principal tutor. Both professors can be contacted in case of research-related injury or emergency. He can also be contacted by email ([D.W.Raven@uu.nl](mailto:D.W.Raven@uu.nl)), or phone (+31623672726). If you have questions regarding your rights as a participant, please contact Angela Cartmell, College of Staten Island Human Research Protection Program Coordinator at 718-982-3867 or [angela.cartmell@csi.cuny.edu](mailto:angela.cartmell@csi.cuny.edu).

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Approval Date: February 26, 2013  
Expiration Date: February 25, 2014  
Coordinator Initials: *ACM*

**Statement of research participant's rights**

Participation in this research project is voluntary. Research participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

**Statement of Consent**

When results of this research are used in presentations or publications, I agree to be identified \_\_\_ by my real name \_\_\_ by a fictitious (fake) name.

\_\_\_ I do not \_\_\_ I do agree to allow the researcher to video record our session with the understanding that the images of me will be presented to individuals in the Netherlands.

\_\_\_ I do not \_\_\_ I do agree to allow the researcher to take photographs of me and my house with the understanding that the images of me will be presented to individuals in the Netherlands.

“I have read the above description of this research and I understand it. I have been informed of the risks and benefits involved, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. Furthermore, I have been assured that any future questions that I may have will also be answered by the principal investigator of the research study. I voluntary agree to participate in this study.

By signing this form I have not waived any of my legal rights to which I would otherwise be entitled.

I will be given a copy of this statement.”

Printed Name of Subject	Signature of Subject	Date Signed
_____	_____	_____

Printed Name of Investigator	Signature of Investigator	Date Signed
_____	_____	_____

## Appendix 3 – Approval Letter

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### Human Research Protections Program

College of Staten Island (CUNY) HRPP Office

DATE: February 26, 2013

TO: Lilja Perdijk  
FROM: College of Staten Island (CUNY) HRPP Office

PROJECT TITLE: [432209-1] In Sandy's Shadow - the effects of a hurricane on student's perception on 'the American Dream'.

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: February 26, 2013

EXPIRATION DATE: February 25, 2014

RISK LEVEL: Minimal Risk

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 6 & 7

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The University Integrated IRB has APPROVED your research. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and assurance of the participant's understanding, followed by a signed consent form(s). Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any modifications/changes to the approved materials must be **approved by this IRB prior to implementation**. Please use the appropriate modification submission form for this request.

All **UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS (UPS)** involving risks to subjects or others, NON-COMPLIANCE issues, and SUBJECT COMPLAINTS must be reported promptly to this office. All sponsor reporting requirements must also be followed. Please use the appropriate submission form for this report.

This research **must receive continuing review and final IRB approval** before the expiration date of March 25, 2013. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for the IRB to conduct its review and obtain final IRB approval by that expiration date. Please use the appropriate continuation submission forms for this procedure. PLEASE NOTE: The regulations do **not** allow for any grace period or extension of approvals.

If you have any questions, please contact Angela Cartmell at 718-982-3867 or [angela.cartmell@csi.cuny.edu](mailto:angela.cartmell@csi.cuny.edu). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within the City University of New York's records.

CC: John Arena

## Appendix 4 – Sub-questions and Research Methods

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### 1. What are student's experiences with hurricane Sandy?

#### *Research methods*

1. Informal conversations with affected students during volunteer work with fellow students and in informal settings, such as breaks in between courses at the university.
2. In-depth interviews with affected students after building up enough rapport (cf DeWalt and DeWalt 2011:47).

### 2. What does 'the American Dream' mean to affected students in New York, both in general and personally?

#### *Research methods*

1. Informal conversations with affected students during volunteer work, chatting in cafés, shopping, and during breaks in between courses at the university or sport's activities.
2. In-depth interviews with affected students after building up enough rapport.
3. Questionnaire → I will distribute the questionnaire among the students at the lecture I follow at the College of Staten Island. For a wider distribution I could distribute the questionnaire among students of the faculty of Sociology and Anthropology with the help of my faculty tutor.

### 3. What are important values to the affected students and how do they live up to them?

#### **Research methods**

#### *Research methods*

1. Informal conversations with affected students during volunteer work, chatting in cafés, shopping, and during breaks in between courses at the university or sport's activities.
2. In-depth interviews with affected students after building up enough rapport.
3. Questionnaire → I will distribute the questionnaire among the students at the lecture I follow at the College of Staten Island. For a wider distribution I could distribute the questionnaire among students of the faculty of Sociology and Anthropology with the help of my faculty tutor.

### 4. What is the effect of hurricane Sandy on the way these values are perceived among affected students in New York?

#### *Research methods*

1. Informal conversations with affected students during volunteer work, chatting in cafés, shopping, and during breaks in between courses at the university or sport's activities.
2. In-depth interviews with affected students after building up enough rapport.

**5. What is the influence of hurricane Sandy on the perceptions and experiences of vulnerability among affected students in New York?**

Research methods

1. Informal conversations with affected students during volunteer work, chatting in cafés, shopping, and during breaks in between courses at the university or sport's activities.
2. In-depth interviews with affected students after building up enough rapport.

**6. Does hurricane Sandy affect future perspectives of affected students in New York, and if so in what way?**

Research methods

1. Informal conversations with affected students during volunteer work, chatting in cafés, shopping, and during breaks in between courses at the university or sport's activities.
2. In-depth interviews with affected students after building up enough rapport.
3. Questionnaire → I will distribute the questionnaire among the students at the lecture I follow at the College of Staten Island. For a wider distribution I could distribute the questionnaire among students of the faculty of Sociology and Anthropology with the help of my faculty tutor.

**7. (How) did hurricane Sandy influence social relations of affected students in New York and their relation (feelings, ideas) to the political economy of the city and the country?**

Research methods

1. Informal conversations with affected students during volunteer work, chatting in cafés, shopping, and during breaks in between courses at the university or sport's activities.
2. In-depth interviews with affected students after building up enough rapport.