

Guest Editorial: *God's Gon' Trouble the Water: An African American Academic's Retrospective on Hurricane Katrina*

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As I sit here watching a pre-recorded interview on CSPAN's *Washington Journal* with Senators Mary Landrieu and David Vitter of Louisiana, I am amazed that it was slightly more than one year ago that the city I had come to love—the city in which I was introduced to beignets and the phrase, “Laissez les bon temps roulez” (Let the good times roll)—would become the focus of our national attention for weeks to come. Like many of my colleagues, I would remain transfixed to the television screen watching a tragedy that was at best surreal and at worst nightmarish unfolding right before my eyes. Hordes of people, most who looked just like me, stood on rooftops waving their hands, shouting, crying, and seeking relief from any source that was willing to lend a helping hand from the exigency they faced. A decision was made “to stay and ride out the storm;” whether made voluntarily in an effort to protect hearth and home or involuntarily due to financial constraints that precluded their abilities to escape New Orleans (hereafter, the City), the harsh reality faced by the remaining inhabitants was survival.

Human survival, a concept that has been in many instances associated with the scientific work of Charles Darwin, has served as the conceptual framework and intellectual fodder to make us feel better about the rampant inequities we see in the material wealth possessed by a small fraction of the population in our nation. Much like the argument bell hooks makes in her book, *Where We Stand: Class Matters*,

Nowadays, it's fashionable to talk about race and gender: the uncool subject is class. . . . As a nation, we are afraid to have a dialogue about class even though the ever-widening gap between rich and poor has already set the stage for ongoing and sustained class warfare.” (hooks, 2000, p. vii)

Katrina forced us to deal with the very issues associated with class that hooks mentioned; we were forced to take a firsthand look at the harsh realities of American life. Namely, we had to recognize that for African Americans, socioeconomic status follows race like a shadow; that ability and opportunity share an inverse relationship; and that the benefits of living in a capitalist society are, at best, disproportionate and, at worst, nonexistent.

As an academic, I readily saw how the larger national debates sparked by Katrina had profound implications for how I viewed myself as an African American. Measured by society's standards, I had attained some personal and professional successes (e.g., doctoral degree, tenure and promotion, comfortable salary, health benefits), what some would view as the very accoutrements that made me different from those who lined the thoroughfare to the New Orleans Superdome seeking refuge. Nevertheless, I saw us as sharing more similarities than differences and the themes taken from this catastrophe were the same lessons, perhaps expressed in different terms, which applied to me as a tenured college professor of color.

This invited editorial highlights and extends my publications in *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, “Wade in the Water: A Contemporary Metaphor” and *Teachers College Record* (TCR), “Wade in the Water: Lessons Learned from Katrina by One African American Academic”—both published recently (Bonner, 2005, 2006a). Additional commentary and insight was gained from my presentation of a paper at the Third Annual National Black Counseling Psychologists Conference conducted at Howard University (Bonner, 2006b). It was thrilling to be afforded the opportunity during the conference to connect with key individuals who also shared my passion for this topic. Although the themes and dialogue in this article parallel the TCR

publication, there is a significant departure and extension of the previous information that provides a more comprehensive focus on how these themes are realized for African American faculty, in general and for me, in particular, as a member of the academy.

THEME ONE: BIRDS OF A FEATHER DON'T ALWAYS FLOCK TOGETHER

The widespread disparities found to exist within the City as well as between the City and its next door neighbor, Baton Rouge were broadcasted in both media and print outlets. Even today, one year after this catastrophic event, we continue to read and watch heated debates about the lack of equity found to exist not only within but also between the City and some of its closest surrounding neighbors—i.e., Baton Rouge. In the previous article, I appropriated the phrase used by many who dared to describe these inequities—“a tale of two cities”—an appropriate moniker used to describe the gaps in socioeconomic levels as well as racial demographic profiles readily witnessed in the City. Hence, it was and still is within the City where we have witnessed the severity of these disparities, for example, with those who inhabited the Ninth Ward and the individuals who inhabited the City's Garden District serving as the best examples of this distal relationship.

Before and even after Hurricane Katrina, any discussion of the ever widening gap between rich or poor in the City potentially rendered one a complainer, a socialist, and a demagogue, one who set out merely to undermine the wealthy and provide excuses for those who lived beyond the thin veil of middle-class status. For those who lived outside of the clutches of poverty—many of their contacts with the people who lived on the “other side of town” were limited to their strolls past the street performers from these communities who would solicit money for their exhibitions or their drives through the “bad neighborhoods” they couldn't avoid on the way in to work.

The experiences of faculty of color closely approximate these same experiences. Aguirre (2000) states, “Despite its portrayal as a community immune to the problems found in the world outside its ivy-covered walls, gender and minority status are used in academia in much the same way they are used in the world outside” (p. 39). Thus, we see how African American faculty in academe, much like their African American counterparts outside of higher education, experience life in two parallel worlds.

So often African American faculty are viewed as possessing less intellectual capital that bring fewer needed assets to the table. According to Turner and Myers (2000), “Faculty of color report that colleagues expect them to be less qualified or less likely to make significant contributions in research” (p. 27). An outcome of this lack of confidence in the abilities of these faculty members is their relegation to teach introductory courses or courses that many of their White peers view as non-essential (i.e., diversity and multicultural courses or ethnic study courses). For many African American faculty members, these misconceptions are transported from faculty to student culture. Students become readily aware of the professors who teach the important “core” courses or advanced level graduate courses in their fields.

Additionally, many African American faculty become “pigeonholed” and stuck in areas that some have referred to as academic ghettos, such as, African American History or Black Studies, which are perceived to be tangential to the “real academic” subjects taught by White faculty. According to Alger (1999),

an African American medieval historian or Hispanic professor of English literature can also challenge assumptions and subtle forms of prejudice precisely by defying stereotypes. If students enter college with preconceived notions of intellectual abilities and interest based on race or national origin, these prejudices can be overcome by exposure to individuals who provide living demonstrations of the falsity of these race-based notions. (p. 141)

THEME TWO: GIVE ME JUST A MINUTE TO EXPLAIN MY WORLD

Everyone, including the victims of Katrina, expressed disbelief and remorse for the lives they saw being literally washed away before their eyes. Those of us who were external to the devastation in New Orleans could only conjecture about the deep pain and despair that these individuals must have been experiencing. What emerged from the commentary provided on local news stations and

by the political pundits who capitalized on the opportunity to get some free “air time” was a projection of a life for these individuals that would far surpass the one that they were leaving behind. Some even referred to this relocation experience, albeit under dire conditions, as a “blessing in disguise”—a chance for the masses to remove themselves from what they perceived to be suboptimal conditions and to start life anew. Even former First Lady Barbara Bush was quoted as saying, “And so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this—this is working very well for them” (*Editor & Publisher*, 2005, Web content). Apparent in this comment was the underlying Eurocentric paradigm on which not only the media and Mrs. Bush employed, but also the broader society.

Lamentably, what many who operated from this Eurocentric paradigm offered up by way of commentary overlooked the fact that not all of the victims of Katrina held their same perceptions—for the victims, leaving New Orleans and starting life anew was not an asset but served more as a liability. In no way am I inferring or mean to communicate the naïve assumption that all of the victims of Katrina functioned completely outside of the strictures of a Eurocentric paradigm. One key example is the New Orleans-based music empire Cash Money Records—with its founding members and artists from the lower socioeconomic sections of the City displaying their largesse (“bling-bling” in the hip-hop vernacular)—as the benefits of acquiring wealth and status. Nevertheless, even the co-opting of Eurocentric frameworks of fortune and fame for these men was modified to fit notions of success from a very down home, New Orleans-based, Afrocentric perspective.

One could ask, how could the perceptions between those external to New Orleans and the New Orleans community of color be so vastly different? The difference can partially be explained by the differences seen in individual worldviews. Wieder (1992) reports, that while African Americans have been required to suppress or even jettison Afrocentric worldviews in the face of myriad institutional arrangements of White domination, the continuation of an Afrocentric worldview has been fundamental to African Americans’ resistance to racial oppression. For African Americans, family and tradition, communalism and spirituality are central components in the way they see the world and how they attempt to explain it. For Europeans individual effort and competition combined with a more objective stance on the workings of the world are the typical modes of operation (Myers, 1988).

Academe and White faculty tend to embrace Eurocentric operating paradigms that are often at odds with what African American faculty view as essential. A requirement to subjugate passion for reason and spirituality for practicality are found to run counter to the African American scholars’ soul and essence. Any attempt to distill the complexities associated with imagery, symbolism, and rhythm (aspects of the African worldview) scream reductionism in their attempts. For all the inhabitants of the ivory tower, behavior that falls outside of pre-determined and rigid Eurocentric boundaries runs the risk of being denigrated and referred to by the ultimate moniker of death—anti-intellectual.

Significant is what Contreras (1998) reports as an “acculturative” as opposed to a “socialization” process that faculty of color must go through to mirror the behavior of White faculty. Or, what Stanley (2006) refers to when she states that “we want to be able to maintain systems of power and privilege by asking those who are ‘different’ to walk the assimilation line and be like the majority” (p. 335). I describe this mirroring behavior as “code switching,” in which African American faculty “move back and forth between identities, a strategy used to survive in disparate worlds” (Bonner, 2006c, p. 85). I went on to state,

although faculty of color frequently view this code switching process as an inherent burden of their status as minorities in majority contexts, there seems to be an unstated sadness in their reports. At a very core level, they appear saddened by the fact that they are essentially asked to ‘put their ethnic selves on the shelf’—to tuck away their true identities to gain acceptance. (p. 85)

THEME THREE: A STANDARD BY ANY OTHER NAME IS JUST NOT THE SAME

E-mailed messages, including news clippings and narrative accounts of the Katrina tragedy that I received, were in and of themselves a lesson in research; namely, I quickly achieved data saturation—friends and colleagues repeatedly forwarded me the same stories. Although titles and captions varied, the stories were essentially the same. One e-mailed clip in particular seemed to elicit the greatest reaction, as depicted by the string of dialogue among the multiple recipients who received and commented on the piece before it arrived in my inbox account. The clip contained a photograph depicting a White family in New Orleans wading in waist-deep water with food items they reportedly “found” while foraging, and an African American family depicted on the very same page that was reported to have “stolen” their items by way of vandalism and looting. The tenor of the string of e-mail messages I received from my agitated cohorts typically reflected anger and outrage, but not a single message conveyed a sense of surprise at the article’s depiction. My immediate thought was, had we as African Americans grown to expect a less than favorable perception of us as a people?

What played out in the media was the characterization of the people of New Orleans as acting out pre-determined patterns of pathology—they were not characterized as enacting or operating schemes for survival to alleviate their pain and suffering. Nothing short of a conceptual framework that validated the publics already jaded and tainted view of the people of New Orleans would suffice as an explanation for their behavior; namely, the people of the City “were up to no good,” and any attempts at justifying their behavior was viewed as unacceptable. Even the likes of notable New Orleans spokespersons, such as Harry Connick, Jr., who attempted to empathize and outwardly show some sense of solidarity with the City’s inhabitants, faced the public’s acerbity. He was not only vilified for his statement [paraphrasing], “I can understand why some of the people have taken to looting,” but was also asked to make a public apology.

African American faculty, much like the victims of Katrina, sees this double standard being exacted in multiple forms across the academy in very profound ways. For example, key decisions are often made without the input of faculty of color. According to Thompson and Louque (2005), as African American faculty, they realized two critical points: (a) their opinions were not important to most of their colleagues, even those who feigned interest, and (b) although they attained the status of full professor, this still did not accord them power, influence, or recognition as “key players” (p. 47). Oftentimes, even the best achievements and efforts by African American faculty afford them little favor among their non-minority colleagues. Aguirre (2000) explained this as “a dilemma in which faculty of color must be overachievers in a context where White faculty are themselves not overachievers” (p. 72).

Still another area in which double standards are found to adversely impact African American faculty are in tenure and promotion decisions. Although the higher education triumvirate—teaching, research, and service—are often espoused as being co-equals; it is readily apparent that when final decisions for evaluation and merit or tenure and promotion are made, research prevails with teaching and service occupying the role of runner-up. So often this message is not conveyed, mainly due to the esoteric cloud that often hovers over tenure and promotion processes. This lack of transparency in expectations becomes problematic for faculty of color who are more than capable of producing the required quantity and quality of research for tenure and promotion, but who become sidetracked with service-related obligations (i.e., serving as the minority representative on admissions and search committees, the advocate of color for individual and student groups, and the role model and mentor for legions of students who may or may not be associated with them via disciplinary linkages).

Menges and Exum (1983) reported that faculty of color struggle with balancing service-related obligations with teaching and research due to their high visibility, perception of representation of diverse perspectives, and role as mentor for legions of students of color. However, those who attempt to recognize and empathize with this “double-bind” that African American faculty experience are often met with a degree of consternation. Therefore, the academy

should attend to and address the hegemonic way in which service is defined for the purposes of tenure and promotion (Tierney & Bensimon, 1996).

THEME FOUR: COULD YOU TELL ME YOUR NAME AGAIN?

The names associated with the people of New Orleans: victims of Katrina, evacuees and refugees were evolving almost as quickly as I could read or keep up with them on the nightly news. Of all of the monikers and labels that seemed to float out there, it was the designation of these individuals as “refugees” that seemed to go down like a jagged pill. I did not quite understand why I had such a strong reaction to the media’s application of this term. What I soon realized is that in settings in which this term was used prior to Katrina, implied that refugees were individuals who sought safe political or religious haven in distant and foreign lands. My ever-mounting feelings of angst prompted me to consult my nearest source of information—the Internet-based version of *MSN Encarta Dictionary* (2005). There it was, the definition of refugee: “Somebody who seeks or takes refuge in a foreign country, especially to avoid war or persecution.” A foreign country—why would we use this term? Were the people of New Orleans foreigners? Were they not American citizens?

As much as I tried to sidestep the belief in conspiracy theories, it was hard to fathom that in some way I was not being manipulated to feel that the events in New Orleans were happening somewhere outside of this country to some other group of people instead of my African American brothers and sisters who just so happened to live in a neighboring state. Was this the strategy—to subconsciously provide the necessary cues to the American public and to make this disaster and those who were experiencing it seem foreign and removed from our spheres of existence? This experience revealed the strong influence that names and labels have on our thoughts, perceptions, and requisite behaviors.

What I have witnessed in academe is the use of very similar tactics. Labels and monikers are often doled out even before an African American faculty member has an opportunity to interview. I have heard them used and often wondered if they have been applied to me in searches: for example, labels such as, affirmative action candidate, diversity hire, and opportunity hire. This labeling process, although typically set into motion for the right reasons (i.e., increasing the number of faculty of color on campus), often takes an ugly and vitriolic turn. Associated with these terms are campus perceptions that these faculty members’ abilities and skills are sub par. Additionally, Turner and Myers (2000) call attention to what they refer to as a “pervasive attitude of complacency,” stemming from higher education’s view that “hiring one person of color per department is enough” (p. 27). Just like the subconscious view of the Katrina victims that I embraced, students who are enrolled in courses taught by these African American faculty members, as well as their colleagues, often embrace similar views (Bonner & Evans, 2004).

What I have witnessed and learned as a result of Hurricane Katrina one year later has been both interesting and profound. This tragedy pushed us to our limits as a nation, and, in many ways, it tested our resolve. We witnessed the best and the worst in the human condition in vivid Technicolor. Now the question becomes: Where do we go from here? For me, that question requires a response from two different but overlapping vantage points. As an African American male—I feel we must move toward an ever-increasing focus on the needs of all African Americans, dismantling the arbitrary boundaries found to exist due to socioeconomic status and class. Hurricane Katrina was not about rich or poor, but about the unequal status of Black people in a land that espouses liberty and justice for all. As an African American male faculty member, I feel we must rally against hegemony in the academy, which is operationalized in the form of tacit assumptions, stereotypes, and commonly held views. It is critical that these issues be addressed both within and outside of higher education—after all, the promise is “the fire next time.”

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