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If Not Us, Than Who? Performing Pedagogies of Hope in Post-Katrina America

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This article engages with and challenges the dominant mediated pedagogies circulating in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Interweaving firsthand accounts of the rescue/recovery effort in Louisiana with a critical interrogation of the cultural/political response to the devastation, the text crisscrosses ages, genders, religious, and political affiliations; agreement and disagreement; and racial and class-based logics while painting a disturbing—yet paradoxically hopeful—picture of (post-)Katrina America.

Keywords: *cultural politics; pedagogies of hope; post-Katrina America; race*

“The response to Katrina was effectively the end to the President’s presidency in the sense that people all of a sudden saw the small man behind the curtain.”

Gov. Howard Dean, 2006b

I. “Representing” New Orleans

It’s the images that first strike you: the lifeless body of a fellow citizen cast off to the side of a street, a starving dog gnawing at a bloody limb. A mother gripping onto her infant daughter at the New Orleans Convention Center, begging—pleading—for someone, anyone, to whisk them away from their uncertain future. An elderly man in a wheelchair, clinging to his last shards of breath. A news reporter breaking down into frustrated tears on national television. People—fellow human beings—rummaging in garbage cans or blown-out storefronts for food and water because FEMA had yet to realize that New Orleans was, in fact, a city located in the United States.¹ The collapse of civil society: live and in unliving color.

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The mood is somber. Reflective. Harsh. Sad. Kim Segal, a segment producer at CNN caught in New Orleans (henceforth the colloquial NOLA), recalls the scene unfolding through her journalistic eyes:

It was chaos. There was nobody there, nobody in charge. And there was nobody giving even water. The children, you should see them—they're all just in tears. There are sick people. We saw . . . people who are dying in front of you. ("A Big Disconnect in New Orleans," 2005)

A photojournalist from NBC agrees, declaring that a third-world country he once covered was better off than conditions downtown. CNN's Sanjay Gupta, a medical doctor by trade, relays the shocking brute force of horror in one of NOLA's hospitals:

When patients die in the hospital, there is no place to put them, so they're in the stairwells. It is one of the most unbelievable situations I've seen as a doctor, certainly as a journalist as well. There is no electricity. There is no water. There's over 200 patients still here remaining. ("A Big Disconnect in New Orleans," 2005)

And hardened journalists such as Anderson Cooper and Sheppard Smith break down numerous times during live shots, the former snapping at U.S. Senator Mary Landrieu (D-LA) during an interview,² the latter barking at his on-air colleagues for not "getting" what he was physically witnessing as they sat back in the comfort of their broadcast studio.

Yet in the midst of this hellish event come the voices and actions of dedicated people who are motivated to help, to become engaged with the event, to be present to the scene, as Lauren Berlant³ has said:

- Three Duke University students drive to New Orleans from Durham, North Carolina, forge a set of media credentials, gain access into the cordoned-off city, and rescue several people. ("In Katrina's Aftermath, Duke Responds," 2005)
- Davy Jones Locker, a volunteer-run store serving Navy and civilian personnel and their family members at Stennis Space Center in Mississippi, distributes basic sundries such as soap, dishes, and cat food free of charge.
- Kuwait donates US\$500 million for Katrina relief; the Red Cross likewise raises more than US\$750 million in aid.
- Web sites such as <http://www.katrinaconnections.com>, <http://katrina.im-ok.org>, <http://hurricanekatrin survivors.com>, and <http://katrinasafer.com> quickly spring up, connecting thousands of lost and displaced families.⁴ Internet blogs such as DailyKos.com play a similar role in disseminating crucial information (as well as critically informed commentary).
- A medical team from Anne Arundel County, Maryland, travels to and operates a makeshift hospital in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana; treating more than 1,000 patients; returning a hurricane-battered four-story hospital to satisfactory operating conditions; and restoring faith in the public trust.
- The National Football League hosts an historic Monday Night Football double-header featuring the now-homeless New Orleans Saints in a part-game/part-telethon that raises over US\$25 million (see King, 2005).

- My partner-in-crime, Lizzie, tells me that the Big Global Corporation she works for as an auditor has already relocated employees from the New Orleans branch office and is setting up disaster relief counseling, housing, and aid for those afflicted within the company infrastructure—a disaster relief plan was already on the books.
- Various scholarly journals issue calls for papers to look critically on the situation unfolding before our eyes.
- The popular-public sphere starts to take notice.

A few days after Katrina comes ashore, I get the following e-mail from an old friend of mine:

I just wanted to take a minute and ask you all for your thoughts and prayers this weekend. My roommate, boyfriend, and I will be heading down to Baton Rouge this weekend to assist in volunteer work for the hurricane survivors. We really don't know what we'll find there, but we're definitely moved to go down and help out in any way that we can. So think of us this weekend.

Although I am obviously proud of her commitment to get her hands dirty as part of the on-the-ground relief efforts (especially while I'm sitting back in the comfort of my office writing about the mediated images of post-Katrina NOLA cascading across my television screen), a side of me worries about her: How many media reports have there been about "toxic soup" and other health concerns in Louisiana, I think to myself?

But it's her story, not mine. She should re-present it.

* * *

"How can I help you?"

It was a simple question, asked and answered many times over on many other days in many other places. But not here. Not today. I approached the elderly woman as she began to sift through the men's clothing. From a distance, she looked like a dozen other elderly women I had met, yet as I got closer, I could see the strain in her eyes. Her stooped posture and reluctant smile spoke of a weariness and despair that through the course of our conversation I could only begin to imagine. Yet smile lines were evident around her eyes, hinting at a kind spirit within, revealing a calm inner presence and integrity.

"I need to find some pants fo' my grandson. He takes a 30, but he's real tall. They made that boy tall and skinny," she said, tiredly shaking her head from side to side.

I knew that we had nothing in that size, but I pulled out two pairs that would come close.

The woman looked up at me with a tired sigh and said, "Those will have to do. He has nothin' now." With a slight smile masking her disappointment, she thanked me for my assistance and began to walk away.

I felt a saddened pressure in my chest, the weight of her disappointment bearing down on my shoulders. My heart thumped, skipping an old Jazz beat:

*I wanted to tell her that I was sorry.
I wanted to tell her that I could make things better for her.
I wanted to tell her that everything was going to be okay.
But did I even believe that?*

Around me milled a dozen "shoppers" and volunteers. The sounds of a guitar, dulcimer, and banjo playing "I'll Fly Away" rose above the makeshift partition separating the "dining area" from the "clothing distribution center." Yet the cacophony of voices echoing throughout the gym of the large Baptist church became muted, melting away into the background like the images cast in an Astrid Kirchherr photograph—I could only see the face of the old woman as she began to turn away. Her weathered countenance was like so many faces represented in media accounts in the aftermath of Katrina.

"Do you need anything for yourself?" I called after her.

She turned, faced me, and shook her head softly.

"Are you here from New Orleans?" I asked.

The woman nodded a distant, tired nod. "My fam'ly 'an I are up here stayin' wit' a cousin."

The tears swelled in her eyes as Jenny Wren⁵ recounted a story that was shared by so many others in this city whose population exploded nearly overnight with evacuees rescued as the creeping floodwaters devoured their city, their lives:

"We came up here whenna floods got bad. Seventeen of uss'er stayin' wit' her now."

"I hope she has a big house," I said, revealing my oblivious naiveté.

"We all sleepin' onna floor. She only got two bedrooms an' a bathroom, but at least we not in shelters like a lotta folks." Jenny's jaw tightened noticeably, pulling back her stooped shoulders as a new determination flowed into her melodic voice. "I din't have much before the storm. I had a house, and lived there wit' ma son and grandson. My house is gone now. I got nothin' left."

"What are you going to do now?"

She simply sighed and shrugged. "We'll get by. We always do."

* * *

II. "Reconstructing" New Orleans

In the days following Katrina, calls rang out from all corners of the country to "rebuild New Orleans." Congress authorized an initial \$50 billion in emergency funds.⁶ The American Red Cross pledged untold funds and dispersed thousands of volunteers to the region. Even President Bush himself stated that New Orleans would be rebuilt "better than before." (Hmm. . . . Is that a Halliburton logo I see?)⁷

Better than before. I suppose that is all a matter of perspective: If the powers-that-be have their way, it certainly won't look much like *Old* New Orleans. Rep. Richard Baker (R-LA) admitted as much when he told the *Wall Street Journal*, "We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did" (as quoted in Babington, 2005). Of course, by "cleaned up public housing," Rep. Baker

means that he is thankful that the hurricane displaced those (largely poor) residents who were living in impoverished dwellings, in effect making the now-abandoned or destroyed land prime for real estate (re)development. In fact, Alphonso R. Jackson, secretary of housing and urban development, has already predicted that New Orleans will be “Whiter” now that its pre-Katrina population of more than 500,000 African Americans has largely been dispersed across the country, many to Houston, Texas, and other neighboring urban areas (see DuBose, 2005).⁸

And in its place, does anyone expect the rebuilt city to be anything more than an expansion of the Time Square Lite façade that already existed—a place where jazz music, Cajun/Creole food, and French historical inflections are reduced to banal touristic caricatures that see “neighborhood radicalism and protest as entertainment, myth, human-interest story, or a peculiar spectacle to be gazed at by a curious middle-class” (Mele, 2000, p. 308)? Of course not! If anything, the new branding dynamic sure to take place in NOLA will be “embedded in highly marketable, sanitized styles and signs of subversion, anti-authoritarianism, and experimentation that designate it as an ‘alternative’ space” (Cole, 2001, p. 117). As Friedman, Andrews, and Silk (2004) contend with respect to privatized urban “redevelopment” projects, one of the primary results of such “consumption-based, visitor-oriented redevelopment could be in creating little more than a veneer of change and vitality within the city” in which beneath the shiny new façade of an improved national image, “the underlying realities of urban life frequently remain unaltered” (p. 130). As “tourist bubbles” or “islands of affluence” as Judd refers to them, these rewritten, whitewashed landscapes actively work to “project a reassuringly dislocated experience and perception of safety, fun, and vitality for downtown areas” (Eisinger, 2000, p. 318). Sarah Vowell (2003) got it right when she said, “There are few creepier moments in cultural tourism than when a site tries to rewrite its past” (p. 36).

Where we must go from here is clear. Says Mark Krasnof, a cofounder of the Civic Center Shelter on the Louisiana-Texas border, which helped house many who were lucky to escape Katrina’s wrath,

The very soul of Louisiana is now at stake. . . . If our ‘leaders’ have their way this whole goddamn region will become either a toxic graveyard or a big museum where jazz, zydeco and Cajun music will still be played for tourists but the cultures that gave them life are defunct or dispersed. (as quoted in Davis & Fontenot, 2005)

Fighting against this trend, Glen Ford and Peter Gamble (2005) of *The Black Commentator* plead that

priority must be given to the right to preserve and continue the rich and diverse cultural traditions of the city, and the social experiences of Black people that produced the culture. The second line, Mardi Gras Indians, brass bands, creative music, dance foods, language and other expressions are the “soul of the city.” The rebuilding process must preserve these traditions. THE CITY MUST NOT BE CULTURALLY, ECONOMICALLY OR SOCIALLY GENTRIFIED INTO A “SOULLESS” COLLECTION OF CONDOS AND tract home NEIGHBORHOODS FOR THE RICH.⁹

It is important to remember, also, as Gloria Ladson-Billings (2003) reminded us in her recent address to the American Educational Researchers Association meetings in New Orleans, that the cultural history of NOLA has already been whitewashed numerous times over, renarrated through capitalism's ghoulish eyes: "They sold slaves in this city. They made a tourist stop out of the place where they sold slaves!"

Likewise, if present history holds true to form, the latest "sanitizing" will be done by underpaid laborers, because Bush and his crony capitalist administration had the gall to (attempt to) temporarily suspend the Davis-Bacon Act of 1931 for the Gulf Coast reconstruction effort (see "Proclamation by the President to Suspend Subchapter IV of Chapter 31 of Title 40, US Code," 2005).¹⁰ In response to this suspension of Davis-Bacon, President Edward C. Sullivan, Building and Construction Trades Department, AFL-CIO, criticized President Bush for taking away critical wage protections from struggling Gulf State workers. He stated the following in a press release: "Once again the poorest workers are exploited in this disaster. This Administration's continued disregard for the victims of this tragedy is evident in the President's proclamation suspending Davis-Bacon protection for workers in the hurricane torn Gulf" (as quoted in Corbett, 2005).¹¹

And yet, even despite the pillaging of the city and its surrounding parishes, the spirit of NOLA continues to live on undaunted in the hearts and minds of its many multigenerational residents, as one diarist from New Orleans stated quite poetically on DailyKos.com:

New Orleans isn't what most people think it is. It's not just the French Quarter. It's your neighborhood po'boy shop. It's City Park on a Sunday afternoon. It's sitting on a blanket with your sweetie on the Lakefront at night under a canopy of stars and in front of a carpet of black water. It's going to the funeral of an old acquaintance from Schoen's to Lake Lawn Cemetery. It's the box of beads in your attic from all the Mardi Gras parades you ever went to. New Orleans is our family, friends, foes and fellow city dwellers. She cries out to have her children back with their hustle and bustle and vibrancy. (NOLAWitch as quoted in "The Wound of Katrina Slowly Festers," 2005)

* * *

In the days following Hurricane Katrina, it was a deep-rooted Christian faith that prompted me to act and frustration that charted my course; I just couldn't sit comfortably by doing nothing; I'd seen too much. Spurred on by what seemed like a lack of action by local, state, and federal governments and agencies—and with so many people on both sides of the political ledger quick to offer blame but slow to offer assistance—two friends and I decided to cancel vacation plans and set out for Baton Rouge to pitch in. On a limited budget, and with only a small window of time, we were able to take off from our respective jobs, and we contacted a number of local churches in the Annapolis, Maryland, area to organize donations.

Not surprisingly, we were greeted with a bevy of hesitations in the face of uncertainty:

*"There's no gas . . . you'll get stranded there."
 "What about that toxic sludge? Won't you get sick?"
 "You won't have enough time to really do anything."
 "Aren't they still shooting at people and looting?"*

Others that we knew were stunned that three late-20-somethings would actually be motivated to set aside their stereotypical self-centered agendas and stitch themselves into the moment. Still others offered canned food, toys, and clothing to bring with us. But the most striking donation was a large monetary one given to us with the caveat of strict instructions:

I want this to go to someone who needs it, someone who doesn't have food or prescriptions or anything else. I want it to really make a difference on a personal level, to connect with them. I want them to know that there are people out there who care for them and who are praying for them. A donation to a big impersonal organization wouldn't be the same. I want it to mean more than that.

This would be nearly effortless, I thought. Just look at the human suffering on television! This money would make a small difference to anyone in this time of uncertainty. But as we drove past shelters, social service centers, and churches, the need before us was overwhelming. Everywhere we turned there were people who had lost everything: lines of our fellow citizens stretching for blocks around distribution centers, trees snapped in two that had landed haphazardly on houses and vehicles, and wearied relief workers trying to manage the chaos. Everywhere we turned there were people who had lost everything; everywhere we turned there were people to whom a large monetary donation would surely go far in restoring their faith in the world around them and in giving them hope for the potential of a rebuilt future. Or, not any less significantly, at least helping them to buy a hot meal, a bus ticket, or a place to sleep for the night. But who was I to decide who among the now-homeless, the now-parentless, or the now-childless was to benefit from the charity of others?

* * *

III. "Erasing" New Orleans

Let's cut to the chase. Racism was a factor in the rising death toll from Hurricane Katrina. As Democratic National Committee Chairman and former Vermont Governor Howard Dean stated in his address to the National Baptist Convention of America, "we must . . . come to terms with the ugly truth that skin color, age, and economics played a deadly role in who survived and who did not" (as quoted in Kalette, 2005).¹² More so than that, perhaps, Mark Anthony Neal (2005) is correct in his observation that although rap star Kanye West's nationally televised statement that "George W. Bush doesn't care about Black people" is largely accurate, it is a sentiment that we must complicate: "The initially tepid

and lazy response to Katrina in New Orleans wasn't just a product of racist neglect, it was also the product of the devaluation of whole communities because they didn't possess political capital."

His strong words are echoed by former U.S. Senator and Ambassador to New Zealand Carol Moseley-Braun (D-IL), who spoke out about the general neglect of poor and underprivileged citizens in New Orleans:

I think it's a sin of omission more than anything. They don't see poor people. They don't even think about them, they don't plan for them. How do you tell people to evacuate and then turn your back on those who don't have money for cab fare or who don't have cars? (as quoted in Cole, 2005, p. 368)

Summing up the general sentiment of the day, Rev. George Clements, a Catholic priest who founded the "One Church, One Family" effort to care for storm survivors, stated,

Bush said "The storm didn't discriminate and neither will [the recovery effort]." Well . . . then why were 95 percent of the poor people [displaced by the storm] black? . . . People ask, When did all of this business about Hurricane Katrina and the fact that there were so many black victims start? And I tell everybody it started in 1619 when those first slaves got to Jamestown. (as quoted on The Cliff Kelly Show, WVON-AM 1450, Chicago)

Consider for a moment the Superdome during Katrina as a transient site for the mediation of Blackness in the United States: For a few fleeting days during and after the storm, the Superdome—home to the New Orleans Saints pro football team, as well as numerous Super Bowls and other major sporting events—found itself

officiating between two seemingly warring camps about "urban" blackness: the story of productive black bodies disciplined through sport to entertain and profit privileged fans and owners, and that of undisciplined black bodies that threaten the social good and burden the U.S. economy. (Cole & Giardina, 2005, p. 4)

That is to say, although stories of heartfelt suffering, struggle, tragedy, and rescue rang out from all corners of the Gulf Coast region, this narrative

was countered by a narrative of upheaval signaled by the apparent breakdown of law and order in the Superdome that rendered visible a long familiar trope in the US: the always-already pathologized bodies of black men were used to signal "incomprehensible crimes." (Cole & Giardina, 2005, p. 4)

Stories about rape and gang violence in the Superdome abounded (though now largely discredited)—to listen to cable news reports, a *Mad Max*—meets—*New Jack City* shroud had become draped over a dark, twisted, evil city languishing in chaos. Other reports about "roving [Black] gangs" and [Black] "snipers" were given cultural purchase across the spectrum of broadcast and print media. For example, on his

highly rated Fox News Channel spinfest *The O'Reilly Factor*, host Bill O'Reilly (2005) blatantly inferred that the majority of NOLA's Katrina victims—particularly those caught in the Superdome—were uneducated, poor drug addicts who lived a “Gangsta” lifestyle akin to that of the *Grand Theft Auto* video game world:

Every American kid should be required to watch videotape of the poor in New Orleans and see how they suffered, because they couldn't get out of town. And then, every teacher should tell the students, “If you refuse to learn, if you refuse to work hard, if you become addicted, if you live a gangsta-life, you will be poor and powerless just like many of those in New Orleans.”

This sharp divide of public opinion toward “Black” and “White” survivors was vividly captured in the main of America's popular-public sphere when Agence-France Presse and the Associated Press news agencies became embroiled in a case of image captioning that set off a minifirestorm of debate. The first photo, from Agence-France Press, highlighted a picture of two White individuals (a man and a woman) wading through water carrying bags of food with the description: “Two residents wade through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store after Hurricane Katrina came through the area in New Orleans, Louisiana” (“Controversy Over New Orleans Photo Captions,” 2005). The second photo, from the Associated Press, highlighted a picture of an African American man carrying similar items with the description “A young man walks through chest-deep flood water after looting a grocery store in New Orleans on Tuesday, Aug. 30, 2005.” In 2005 America, racial narratives remain largely static: If you're White, you're presumed innocent; if you're Black, you're presumed guilty until proven innocent.

Yet the story “on the ground,” as it were, never quite seemed to match up with what was being reported. As *Washington Post* columnist Eugene Robinson (2005) was quick to point out, the prevailing mediated pedagogy dominating the Katrina landscape just wasn't true in an empirical reality:

I got there five days after the deluge, when the story, as the whole world understood it, was one of *Mad Max* depravity and violence. Hoodlums were raping and pillaging, I just “knew”—even shooting at rescue helicopters trying to take hospital patients to safety. So it was a surprise when I rolled into the center of the city, with all my foreign-correspondent antennae bristling, and found the place as quiet as a tomb. The next day I drove into the French Quarter and was struck by how pristine St. Louis Cathedral looked, almost like the castle at Disney World. I got out of the car and walked around the whole area, and I wrote in my notebook that except for the absence of tourists, it could have been just an ordinary Sunday morning in the Big Easy. Then I got back into the car, and on the radio a caller was breathlessly reporting that, as she spoke, a group of policemen were “pinned down” by snipers at the cathedral. I was right there; nobody was sniping at anybody. But the reigning narrative was *Mad Max*, not Magic Kingdom. Thanks to radio, television and the Internet, everyone “knew” things that just weren't true. (p. A23)

However, as Ezra Klein (2005) cogently explicates, it isn't enough to simply point out that incendiary news coverage was just spotty work done by lazy or inept reporters. He states,

Those horror stories, now proved [mostly] untrue, were not simply mistaken, they were racist. From the widely reported but never confirmed rapes in the Superdome all the way to the false accounts of sniped rescue workers and roving gangs of looting blacks, Katrina exposed a latent cultural racism that many Americans assumed had vanished. These were tropes more suited to the Deep South of the 1800s than the cable networks of the 21st century.

In working through and unmasking this latent, systemic cultural racism, we must reject outright such outlandish claims that the people of New Orleans brought this tragedy on themselves or that those who did not have the means to vacate the city failed of their own volition. Alongside O'Reilly in the domain of public demagoguery, Senator Rick Santorum (R-PA) heartlessly suggested punishing those who are unable to leave a disaster-stricken area, as when he stated,

I mean, you have people who don't heed those warnings and then put people at risk as a result of not heeding those warnings. So there may be a need to look at tougher penalties, candidly, on those who decide to ride it out and understand there are consequences to not leaving. (as quoted in Hamill, 2005)

Likewise, we must also be mindful of the disturbing corollary to Rep. Baker's aforementioned religio-fascist "blame-the-victim" statement that, in effect, "God cleaned up public housing in NOLA": A nationwide poll of 1,003 Americans conducted several weeks after Katrina hit found that 23% of Americans believe that "hurricanes are a deliberate act of God" (see also Miller, 2006).¹³ This absurd implication—that Katrina was a deliberate, punitive act by God unleashed against the citizens of NOLA—was propagated en masse by those on the far right, such as Michael Marcavage (2005), director of Repent America (a Philadelphia-based ministry), who stated the following in a press release:

Although the loss of lives [sic] is deeply saddening, this act of God destroyed a wicked city. From "Girls Gone Wild" to "Southern Decadence," New Orleans was a city that had its doors wide open to the public celebration of sin. (Marcavage, 2005)

Rev. Bill Shanks, pastor of the New Covenant Fellowship of New Orleans, touched a similar chord:

New Orleans now is abortion free. New Orleans now is Mardi Gras free. New Orleans now is free of Southern Decadence and the sodomites, the witchcraft workers, false religion—it's free of all of those things now . . . God simply, I believe, in His mercy purged all of that stuff out of there—and now we're going to start over again. (as quoted in Brown & Martin, 2005)

And, not to be outdone, the Irreverend Pat Robertson claimed on his September 12 broadcast of *The 700 Club* cable program that Katrina was punishment for the “legalization of abortion.”¹⁴

This attitude simply cannot continue to go unchallenged in the public discourse without dire consequences for the popular-public sphere. As Cole and Giardina (2005) have argued, the blame-the-victim narrative so prevalent in the immediate aftermath is

symptomatic of yet another form of protecting the white public from so-called damaging media images—it is the story that will salvage white American innocence and allow for a cathartic adventure experience in place of activism to change the historical and political circumstances that led to such a crisis in the first place. (p. 9)

This narrative is simply unacceptable. We can do better than this. (Can't we?)

* * *

Jenny left the clothing section to find a place with her family among the rows of wooden picnic-style tables to rest and enjoy a hot meal of chili and cornbread prepared by a disaster relief group from Oklahoma. She had a quiet grace about herself—a spirit of resilience in the face of despair. Her story had struck a chord in my innermost being: Jenny was unassuming and unselfish; she wanted only pants for her grandson, even though she herself had nothing left.

I just stood there for a few minutes, caught in a rush of emotions, thoughts swirling in my soul. I rushed out of the clothing area, heart a-flutter, scanning the tables for the old woman in a lime green short-sleeve shirt who had shared a bit of her life story with me, a 20-something physical therapist 40 years her junior.

I found her in the middle of the gym with her son and grandson.

“Can I have just one minute of your time?” I asked her.

A look of distant puzzlement crossed over the weariness that was so apparent in our first meeting, but she followed me over to the side of the gym anyway.

“Look . . . umm . . . the reason I came here . . . I’m not sure if . . . you see . . . uh . . .,” I stuttered, sounding more like an awkward middle-schooler than the strong-willed, independent-minded grownup the latest postfeminist Nike commercial tells me I should be.

“What I mean is . . .,” I sighed, finally finding my composure lost amid the sea of grief. “A friend of mine wanted to help someone out on a more personal level than just donating some money to a big charity. She wanted it to go to a person. So she gave me some money . . . and . . . well . . . I know that you’ve been through so much, and this will only help for a little while . . . but would you be offended if I offered it to you?”

She stood there, silent. (I stood there, nervous.) Gradually, a smile crept ever so slowly across her face to her eyes. The commotion around us continued, but in that moment, Jenny, an elderly woman from New Orleans, and I, a young, professional woman from Maryland who knew very little of what it meant to be in need . . . connected. Our gazes locked, and the outside world evaporated in the moment.

"Thank you," she whispered, barely audibly.

I handed her the thick fold of \$20 bills. She accepted it with outstretched hands, her eyes welling up with tears. She reached up and hugged me. Held me.

"Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you," she repeated over and over again.

As we slowly broke our embrace, she looked at me and whispered something once again: "God bless you." Tears began to spill from my eyes, overwhelming me. The doubts I had had about having even a small—yet personal—effect on someone seemed to melt away, warmed by the smiling eyes of a woman I didn't even know.

*I couldn't possibly hope to replace all that Jenny had lost; it would have been an exercise in shallow self-aggrandizement to think so. I'd like to think that I was able to offer her hope and compassion, a belief that we're not all cold-hearted yuppies turning our backs on the open wound of poverty, racism, classism, and crony capitalism that Katrina ripped open live on television for the whole world to see. I'd like to think that maybe, somehow, my contribution—my attempt at being present to the scene—might possibly have helped Jenny start to rebuild some portion of her family's life. Maybe it illustrated that God could act through a stranger. Maybe it just helped get her through the day. I'll never really know. But as Julie Delpy said to Ethan Hawke in *Before Sunrise*, the answer must be in the attempt, right?*

What I do know is this, however: In that moment of unexpected connection, we were no longer just a 70-something African American woman from New Orleans and a 20-something White woman from Annapolis; we were witnesses to hope.

Eventually, the days since my encounter with Jenny waned, and I returned to my comfortable existence where there were no ravaged houses, uprooted trees, or emergency shelters. I am no longer immediately surrounded by the sheer amount of public despair and need (though it is still there, shielded by comfortable everyday lives at the local Starbucks). However, the impact of those brief few minutes shared with another human being remains burned to my core, as I was able to stand as witness to the unflinching spirit of hope and human dignity in the face of tragedy, revealed in the eyes of someone I didn't know but who could just as easily have been my own grandmother . . . or yours.

IV. Coda: "If Not Us, Then Who?"

As the days following Katrina turned into weeks and the weeks into months, two more powerful hurricanes slammed into the southern coast of the United States. This time, the discourse was in place, the hero-narratives well planned. Law and order was back up and running, organized. News reports focused on federal help that actually managed to arrive.

Racial issues, of course, were soon ignored once again in the mainstream media. (The running "joke" becoming, "Well, 2 weeks for a national conversation on race seems about right.") Critical discussions about poverty and class silently receded into the mist as attention was once again focused on such pressing infotainment issues as

the Tom Cruise–Katie Holmes marriage, supermodel Kate Moss’s arrest on drug charges, or Terrell Owens’s suspension from the Philadelphia Eagles football team.

Yet for the people living in Louisiana, theirs is a very different reality. One that, although epically tragic, offers hope—a vision of the future, perhaps—of the joining together of hands in the negotiation of race, class, and gender issues at the local level. As Mike Davis and Anthony Fontenot (2005) reveal,

The folks of Ville Platte, a poor Cajun and black Creole community [in Louisiana] with a median income less than half that of the rest of the nation, have opened their doors over the past three weeks to more than 5,000 of the displaced people they call “company” (the words “refugee” and “evacuee” are considered too impersonal, even impolite). Local fishermen and hunters, moreover, were among the first volunteers to take boats into New Orleans to rescue desperate residents from their flooded homes. Ville Platte’s homemade rescue and relief effort—organized around the popular slogan “If not us, then who?”—stands in striking contrast to the incompetence of higher levels of government as well as to the hostility of other, wealthier towns, including some white suburbs of New Orleans, toward influxes of evacuees, especially poor people of color. Indeed, Evangeline Parish as a whole has become a surprising island of interracial solidarity and self-organization in a state better known for incorrigible racism and corruption. What makes Ville Platte and some of its neighboring communities so exceptional? . . . There is a shared, painful recognition that the land is rapidly sinking and dying, as much from the onslaught of corporate globalization as from climate wrath.

Against a multifaceted onslaught ranging from corporate globalization and inept political machinery to global warming and the undercurrents of economic despair, this literal realization of a performative popular-public sphere (see Giardina, 2005) in which the promise of common citizens once again participating with hands joined forward in their common future—coming together in common cause to “forge a new American Century from the bottom up” (Trippi, 2004, p. 125)—gives us reason to be hopeful.¹⁵

* * *

A year on, New Orleans remains an empty shell of its past glory. As Spike Lee’s (Lee & Nevins, 2006) powerful documentary *When the Levees Broke* so dramatically details, decomposed bodies are still being pulled from the wreckage; garbage and debris remain strewn in the streets; the local economy is faltering. To mark the 1 year anniversary, President Bush spins empty platitudes about how the hurricane launched “a moment of great sadness” and how “although a year has gone by, it’s really the beginning of the renewal and rebuilding” (“Bush Sees Rebirth From ‘Sadness’ of Katrina: As Bells Toll on Anniversary, President Says New Orleans ‘Still a Mess,’” 2006). Yet it is poet Andre Codrescu (2006)—not Bush—who offers perhaps the most spot-on commentary of the yearlong fiasco when he states

Katrina was just a storm, but what followed was so hideous that one year later, we can only shake our heads and vomit. . . . In the space of one year, our commander in

chief has evolved from a flyover disaster to a profligate dispenser of cash . . . [in which] the only thing wrong with the vast billions that are supposedly heading our way is that the may actually be handed out in the form of checks instead of being thrown down from helicopters so the groveling masses can wrestle for them like a proper Mardi Gras crowd [because] hurling cash into the streets would, in fact, be a much more equitable way of dispensing treasure than handing it over to people like Congressman Jefferson or a mayor who has been invisible to us since his re-election.

Contra Bush, and in the spirit of Codrescu's stinging narrative, the words of Howard Dean's (2006a) address marking the Katrina anniversary makes us imagine an alternative to the sorrows of the Bush imperium, of the divisiveness knocking on our door:

Katrina was a terrible tragedy, not just for New Orleans and Mississippi, not just for the people who died or still have not been able to move home. Katrina was a tragedy for America. Because one thing people believed throughout the world, throughout this country but throughout the world, whether they liked us or not, they believed that Americans could fix anything. And we believed that about ourselves. That if something really bad happens, call in the Americans, they're the best organized people and the best managing people—they can fix anything. Something really bad happens, call in the Americans.

And what we experienced a year ago was not just the personal loss and tragedy to all of our lives, because so many of us knew people or had family in New Orleans or Mississippi. What we experienced was a tragedy. But seeing, unmasked, the incompetence, and failures, and indifference, of the president and the Republican majority, we need a new direction for America where no one is left behind!

The American people are extraordinary people. What we saw was great acts of generosity, and courage and heroism, of people coming together and opening their hearts, reaching out to help one another. That reminds us that the American people will transcend the incompetence of our leaders. We need a new direction where we are as competent and fair and qualified and caring as the American people showed themselves to be a year ago. We can do better.

We will have a new direction of hope and opportunity in America, based on the idea that we are all in this together. Not just those in the Democratic party, not just those in urban America. We will reach out to those who disagree with us, we will reach out to Evangelical Christians, to rural Americans, we are all in this together. It is time to end the divisiveness.

We have a job to do. Let's get to it.

Notes

1. *The New York Times*, among other media outlets, reprinted former FEMA Director Michael Brown's shocking e-mails from the time when New Orleans was first under siege. These e-mails contained, among other statements, Brown telling one staffer the following: "If you'll look at my lovely FEMA attire you'll really vomit. I am a fashion god [sic]." Other e-mails revealed Brown and his staffers to be more concerned with his dinner reservations in Baton Rouge and a dog sitter for his house than with anything of any consequence.

2. After introducing Senator Landrieu (D-LA), Cooper immediately asked her, “Does the federal government bear responsibility for what is happening now? Should they apologize for what is happening now?” Landrieu responded that “there will be plenty of time to discuss those issues” and proceeded to begin thanking various government officials for their disaster relief support. Cooper then interrupted her and passionately stated the following:

Senator, I’m sorry . . . for the last four days, I have been seeing dead bodies here in the streets of Mississippi and to listen to politicians thanking each other and complimenting each other—I have to tell you, there are people here who are very upset and angry, and when they hear politicians thanking one another, it just, you know, it cuts them the wrong way right now, because there was a body on the streets of this town yesterday being eaten by rats because this woman has been laying in the street for 48 hours, and there is not enough facilities to get her up. Do you understand that anger? . . . There are people that want answers, and people want someone to stand up and say: we should have done more.

3. See, for example, Tyler & Loizidou (2000).

4. For a more extensive list of Katrina missing person sites, see <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9144525>

5. Name changed; also, our homage to Paul McCartney (who likewise borrowed the name from Charles Dickens’s novel *Our Mutual Friend*). Those familiar with the Dickens novel will appreciate the inclusion of the name here.

6. Relatedly, when Bush proposed \$62 billion in emergency reconstruction aid for New Orleans alone, a question remained as to where the funds were going to come from. Would there be across-the-board tax increases? Cuts in defense spending? Perhaps getting out of Iraq a bit earlier (and merely transferring Halliburton’s accounts to the Gulf Coast)? True to form, the President was vague in answering such a question. However, the Cato Institute, a right-wing think tank heavily favored by the current administration, would have none of that talk about tax increases or cutting funds from other areas of defense spending (such as the \$5.3 billion per month spent in Iraq). Instead, policy analysts such as Chris Edwards and Stephen Slivinski

proposed cutting NASA in half, slashing energy research and subsidies just as Congress [was] gearing up to increase them in the face of soaring gasoline prices, cutting the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ budget by \$4.6 billion after its levees failed to protect New Orleans, and eliminating \$4.2 billion in homeland security grants while lawmakers are debating the nation’s lack of preparedness. (Weisman & VandeHei, 2005)

7. Yes. On September 1, 2005, Grieve of *The Houston Chronicle* reported that the U.S. Navy had hired Houston-based Halliburton to restore electric power, repair roofs, and remove debris at three naval facilities in Mississippi damaged by Hurricane Katrina.

8. And still, 12 weeks after Katrina hit, “no one has an answer to where people [who want to return to NOLA] should go. An estimated 80,000 homes had no insurance, and for now, the biggest grant a family can get from the federal government is \$26,200” (“New Orleans Is Sinking,” 2005).

9. For more, see Ford and Gamble’s (2005) “New Orleans Citizen’s Bill of Rights,” available online at http://www.blackcommentator.com/156/156_cover_battle_for_no.html.

10. The Davis-Bacon Act of 1931 established the requirement for paying the “prevailing wage” on public works projects. All federal construction contracts and most contracts for federally assisted construction more than \$2,000 must include provisions for paying workers onsite no less than the “locally prevailing wages,” including fringe benefits. It is recognized by workers both inside and outside the construction industry as an important milestone in the history of organized labor.

11. Sullivan went on to state the following:

Once again this Administration is looking out for corporations eager to profit from a national emergency. They want to pay the poorest workers the lowest wages to do the most dangerous jobs. Suspending Davis-Bacon protections for financially distressed workers in the Gulf states amounts to legalized looting of these workers who will be cleaning up toxic sites and struggling to rebuild their communities while favored contractors rake in huge profits from FEMA reconstruction contracts. This is a shameful action and a national disgrace. It's time for this Administration and those members of Congress who blatantly carry the water for corporate gougers during a disaster to realize that denying fair wages to Gulf State workers is no way to help them get back on their feet. (as quoted in Corbett, 2005)

12. According to the 2000 census, the per capita annual income for Whites in New Orleans, \$31,971, was \$10,000 higher than the national average. The per capita income for African Americans, \$11,332, was \$10,000 less than the national average. This \$20,000 gap between White and Black residents of New Orleans compared to a gap of less than \$10,000 nationwide.

13. It is important to point out that the division between income/education levels and responses is quite stark: 31% of respondents with a high school diploma or less reported believing that hurricanes are a deliberate act of God (compared with 61% who said no), whereas only 11% of those with a college degree or higher reported believing hurricanes are a deliberate act of God (79% said no). (The keyword here being *deliberate*.)

14. With this context in mind, I side with Rev. Dr. Maurice O. Wallace (2005) in being “grievously troubled by the popularity of a commercial Christianity that romanticizes . . . faith for the sake of capital campaigns, political favor and box office receipts.” See also “Six Flags Over Jesus” (2006), which touches on similar themes related to right-wing political organization, theocratic nationalism, and the commercialization of religion in the United States. It is available at <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2006/5/29/193711/698>

15. How we go about enacting such politics of transformation is at the core of Denzin and Giardina's (2006) book of essays *Contesting Empire/Globalizing Dissent: Cultural Studies After 9/11*. They argue that we need “critical, humane discourses that create sacred and spiritual spaces for person and their moral communities—spaces where people can express and give meaning” (p. 4) to the world around them. In so doing, they outline a four-pronged strategy for a repositioned cultural studies project organized around the moral clarity and political intervention (i.e., a focus on the personal and the biographical, the launching of critical discourse at the level of the media and the ideological, the fostering of a critical international conversation that helps us develop a contextual theory of radical politics and social democracy, and the enacting of critical interpretive methodologies that can help us make sense of life in an age of the hyperreal, the simulacra, TV wars, staged media events,

and the like). Such a project embraces a public intellectualism on the order of Noam Chomsky's 1967 article "The Responsibility of Intellectuals," in which he argues that we (i.e., you, dear reader) have a moral and professional obligation to speak the truth, expose lies, and see events in their historical perspective.

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