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# Katrina and the Banshee's Wail: The Racialization of Class Exploitation

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In this article, the authors examine Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath on the people of New Orleans from a historical materialist perspective. In their analysis, the authors discuss Katrina in relation to capitalism's overall devastating consequences for the ecosphere as well as the global division of labor and its racialized social relations. They further suggest that the racialization of Hurricane Katrina needs to be situated within the disciplinary practices of capital and its process of valorization through unsustainable capital-fueled growth and development, overproduction, resource depletion, and ecosystem destabilization and destruction.

**Keywords:** *Katrina; race; class exploitation*

## ***The Rising Tide of Belligerence***

The social historical panorama unfolding before us is in tumult, ranging from confused and paranoid to lethally vengeful. It is as if all of human decency has been sucked into a vortex of political imbroglia. The Bush oligarchy—poster children for torture and endless war—has become an agglomeration of dangerously cohabiting parasites, enforcers, tyrants, and calumniators—Captain Queegs with Blackberrys—operating out of a den of McCarthy-era redivivus. Here in the United States, the aroma of corruption is as pungent as the flop sweat that graced the storied jowls of an on-camera Richard Nixon. Fear has become the big stick to wield in the service of patriotism, priming us with images and expectations of imminent attack, blurring the distinction between the imagined and the occurrent, between desultory and carefully orchestrated threats, and producing through a sultry atmosphere of impending doom political lassitude among the hapless multitude. Depoliticization has become the official hallmark of patriotism, presaging a quickening of fascism. Condi Rice, with her team of Kobolds, circles the globe, reveling in her newfound role as “warrior princess” as she unsuccessfully assures her sepoys around the world that the U.S. government does not use torture and is protecting the interests of the

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free world. An air marshal guns down a fleeing mentally ill patient who claimed he had a bomb, and Fox News commentators salivate over how well Homeland Security is doing its job.

California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger declined to grant clemency to Stanley "Tookie" Williams—a man he refused to meet in person but whom Schwarzenegger branded a hypocrite—and condemned him to die by lethal injection in San Quentin's chamber of death. Williams was a founding member of the notorious Crips street gang who had been on death row for a quarter century for the shotgun murders of four people in 1979 that he claimed he did not commit and whose trial was based on circumstantial evidence and the testimony of witnesses "whose credibility was highly suspect," according to a 1998 statement by U.S. District Judge Stephen Wilson (Gasper, 2005). Williams had denounced gang violence, written children's books with an antigang message and donated the proceeds to antigang community groups, and had been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. He could have been sentenced to life in prison without parole, but would that have helped to further Governor Schwarzenegger's political career and help him mend his relationship with the far right of the California Republican Party? As a politician and a universal icon of "machismo" in a country whose population supports the death penalty and whose White population has—to a greater or lesser extent—been socialized to fear and loathe African Americans, an execution would give Schwarzenegger much more political capital than allowing an imprisoned Black man to live and write more children's books and perhaps save more young people from joining gangs. It was a forgone conclusion that Schwarzenegger would, in an act of profuse cowardice, refuse to meet Williams face to face and ignore the pleas of teachers, teenagers, social workers, parents, and young children in order that Williams be sacrificed on the altar of Schwarzenegger's own personal ambition. The violence glorified in Schwarzenegger's own films and his insistent claims that he no longer sexually harasses women or admires Hitler could not be far from many people's minds when the Governor issued his statement, rank with self-righteous indignation, challenging the sincerity of Williams's conversion to nonviolence and pronouncing it temerarily a "hollow promise." Schwarzenegger demanded "complete remorse and full redemption," which meant that Williams needed to admit to and apologize for the crimes he claimed he did not commit. But no matter what Williams would have done, he was destined to die in the savage spectacle of state-sponsored murder. For many White people, not only are African Americans predisposed to criminal activity, but they are also constitutively incapable of redemption.

It wasn't that long ago that Americans discovered that maintaining the free world comes at a large financial as well as ideological cost. Earlier in the year, it became alarmingly evident that the Bush administration paid conservative pundit Armstrong Williams \$240,000 while serving as a media "talking head" to help persuade African Americans to back President Bush's No Child Left Behind law. Williams (2006), an African American, recently opined about the "silver lining" of the Katrina disaster by asserting that there is now an opportunity to "rebuild the

lives of people” and that “it is not racist and insensitive to say that blacks must pick themselves up by the bootstraps.” He also argued that “Instead of government programs we need more mentors like Dr. [Bill] Cosby to go into cities across the nation and work to break the destructive cycle of poverty” (Williams, 2006). More recently, it has been made clear that purchasing journalistic mercenaries is not only a major part of a larger and well-fueled government scheme to blur the line between legitimate news reporting and political propaganda here in the United States (as part of Psy-Ops [psychological operations] activities within the homeland itself), it is also an integral part of so-called democracy-building efforts in foreign countries such as Iraq. It has been recently disclosed that the Pentagon hired propaganda-making firms to cultivate by means of psychological and influence operations in the Iraqi media an impression of grassroots support for the American occupation. Mr. Rumsfeld may have closed the Office of Strategic Influence, but he kept it functioning covertly by outsourcing work to contractors such as the Rendon Group and the Lincoln Group, which won additional multimillion-dollar Pentagon contracts for media analysis and a media operations center in Baghdad, including “damage control planning.” Jacob Weisberg (2005) draws the distinction between propaganda (“a calculated and systematic effort to manage public opinion”) and spin (i.e., “lying and routine political dishonesty”). He notes that “when the Bush administration manufactures fake ‘news,’ suppresses real news, disguises the former as the latter, and challenges the legitimacy of the independent press, it corrodes trust in leaders, institutions, and, to the rest of the world, the United States as a whole.”

On the European front, young people of African and Arab descent have recently given the “*bien nacidos*” of France the political megrims in their chosen response—the torch—to decades of criminal misrule, the ghettoization of immigrant youth, and the imperialist practices of entitlement of the capitalist elite. Back home, capitalist exploitation, and its ally, racism, while unwanted guests at the banquet known as the American Dream, are still the primary reasons why the poor are excluded from eating at the same table and forced to scramble for whatever scraps are made available to them elsewhere. Whites are likely to forget why more folks of color don’t join them at the table of good fortune unless a crisis of national proportion occurs. And such a crisis has occurred and continues still.

### ***Katrina: Emblematic of America’s War With the Poor***

On Sunday, August 28, less than 48 hours before Katrina struck, residents of New Orleans were starting to get antsy. Although they may not have been prepared for that devastating *rara avis* among mother nature’s storehouse of storms, they were even less prepared for the human callousness that would follow in its tremulous wake, especially those among the 112,000 people in New Orleans who were without any private form of transportation and had to bear the full brunt of the havoc wreaked by the Category 4 hurricane (at one stage a Category 5 just prior to making landfall). Although they were angry at remarks made by David

Brooks in the *New York Times* that “most of the ambitious and organized people abandoned the inner-city areas of New Orleans long ago” (Bacon, 2005b, p. 14), implying that those who could not leave deserved their fate, they were hardly surprised. This was, after all, “a private-sector evacuation, open only to those with the economic means to participate” (“Katrina: Social Tragedy Benefits Exploiters, Devastates Workers,” 2005, p. 1).

Coiled like a viper in the hurricane's eye, the Specter of Capitalism unleashed its pent-up supply of hell on its historically most vulnerable victims: impoverished African Americans (before Hurricane Katrina, the unemployment rate among Gulf residents was among the nation's highest, with 18% to 30% of people in the region living under the poverty line—twice the national rate—and with Blacks in New Orleans suffering a 35% poverty rate; Bacon, 2005a). In the 1950s and 1960s, Americans witnessed attacks on African Americans by lynch mobs, police dogs, and fire hoses, but the assault on African Americans during Hurricane Katrina was of a different sort. It was an attack on hope: hope that the United States had overcome its historical legacy of racism, hope that educated journalists had moved beyond portraying life in the United States with brutally overt or subtle racist stereotypes, hope that capitalist democracies had made necessary headways in ending poverty, hope that the government could muster whatever it took to care for its poor and dispossessed in a time of emergency. Katrina sounded the death knell of such a hope, a hope born in the crucible of the Civil Rights Movement of earlier—and seemingly much more unreal—times. Not only has the immoral geography of the country been illuminated for the world to see, but the very meaning and purpose of American capitalist democracy has been called into question. Of course, there was no absence of media pundits (such as Kathleen Parker of the *Orlando Sentinel* and Jeff Jacoby and Kathy Young of the *Boston Globe*) eager to defend Condi's condemnation that the slow response to Katrina had anything to do with racism (Bacon, 2005b, p. 13).

Despite the protestations of Condi and the Bush gang that there was no racism involved in the botched response to Katrina, during the days that followed the devastation, the entire world bore witness to the much-vaunted American values imploding in the sinkhole of capitalist greed, avarice, and neglect for the poor and for people of African descent. True, White people were victims of Katrina and its aftermath (we've heard Trent Lott complain about the damage to his home more than a few times in the national media) but not in proportion to the way that it has affected the African American community.

More than just a series of untenable contradictions accumulated in successive moments of bureaucratic neglect, Hurricane Katrina has become emblematic of White supremacist free-market democracy, prompting an international reassessment of the status of the American Dream. Much of this reassessment echoed *The Human Development Report*, an independent report commissioned by the United Nations Development Program. Its 2005 edition (370 pages), written by Kevin Watkins (2005), the former head of research at Oxfam, investigates inequalities in health provisions inside the United States as part of a survey of how inequality

worldwide is retarding the eradication of poverty. We learn, for instance, that the infant mortality rate has been rising in the United States for the past 5 years and is now the same as Malaysia. We learn that America's Black children are twice as likely as Whites to die before their first birthday, and wealth creation does not necessarily mean eradicating or even lessening poverty, because eradicating poverty means providing people with full access to health, education, and other social provisions. What we don't learn is that we have known about similar conditions for decades and longer, and we still seem incapable of overcoming them. It's much easier to blame and demonize the victims, and that's exactly what happened in the case of Hurricane Katrina. One stunning illustration of political naiveté and lack of even a rudimentary understanding of the relationship between race and class can be found in remarks by journalist Kathleen Parker of the *Orlando Sentinel*:

Parker . . . expressed surprise that an African American woman told her "matter-of-factly" that Bush doesn't care about people who look like me because the woman was "an elegant professional woman clearly not of the Al Sharpton school of reactionary politics." (Bacon, 2005b, p. 13)

The act of God that began like a susurrus of wind in the eerie darkness swelled into the piercing, piteous wail of a banshee, a blackened sky draped over the city of New Orleans like the funeral cowl of the unshriven dead. The gale force winds seemed to arch the stars across the horizon like a diadem of death. For many, all would soon be lost in the impending chaos.

To view Bush as responsible for the Katrina response—as some kind of necromancer swathed in a black robe and clutching a copy of *Legemeton* or the *Grimoire of Honorious* in his brittle hand, exorcizing the African Americans from New Orleans to pave the way for a wave of White gentrification—would be misguided but emotionally cathartic. But it would not be an exaggeration to hold Bush accountable for putting the Masters of Capital shamelessly ahead of the lives of the African American population—a move that can be traced to racist antecedents and consequences. A description by Susan Straight (2005) is illustrative:

Americans, and people around the world, registered shock and disbelief at the images of dark-skinned people, many with foreign-sounding vaguely French accents, fleeing their pastel-painted, oddly ornate old homes after Katrina. Ancient cramped homes filled with people who had no cars and not enough money to leave New Orleans. Many were fifth- or sixth-generation Louisianans. Why had they stayed in this dangerous city, which should not have been built where it was, and why did they have so little? No one brought up the slave markets or Congo Square. New Orleans and its surrounding areas were the heart of the immense slave trade in America for more than 100 years. Africans were brought by ship to New Orleans in great numbers, and even after America took the colony from France, made it a state and then banned importation of African slaves, black people were bought and sold in Louisiana through piracy and interstate trade. (p. 17)

President Bush fiddled while New Orleans was being washed away (well, he was continuing for 2 full days to enjoy his month-long vacation, flying to Arizona to munch on some birthday cake with Senator John McCain and plucking Mark Will's guitar for the cameras during a pep rally for the Iraq War ), and planning the next tax cut for the rich. Tom Delay was apparently asking some Hurricane evacuees if their situation was "kind of fun"—even a bit like "summer camp" (Patel, 2005). President Bush's poll ratings have rebounded from some of the bipartisan complaints about the slow federal reaction to Hurricane Katrina because Bush is mentioning the word *victory* just about every line in his current campaign-style speeches on the War in Iraq. It's just another day in America. (By the time this article went to press, Bush's poll ratings had plummeted to 31 percent, as the carnage in Iraq continued.)

A moral panic ensued when the public was fed horror stories about what it was like to be trapped in the inferno of Black anarchism, stories refracted in the cesspool of racism and fear that lies deep within the structural unconscious of a nation founded on violence, slavery, and genocide: African American "wildings" gang-raping women and children; looting stores of liquor and drugs; shooting at ambulances, police patrols, and rescue helicopters; and throwing the city into a vortex of violence and anarchy—stories that were later confirmed as untrue. (We are not arguing that no looting took place but challenge the sentence recently handed down by a judge who condemned three convicted looters—who stole beer, liquor, and wine—to 15 years of prison.) Fox News correspondent Steve Harrington described New Orleans as the "Wild West," and Fox News correspondent Phil Keating characterized a fire visible in some news footage as being set "perhaps for no apparent reason but just for the joy of arson" (Yassin, 2005, p. 11). An article in *USA Today* was unembarrassingly headlined "The Looters, They're Like Cockroaches" (Yassin, 2005, p. 10). Fox News's Viagra posse leader Bill O'Reilly revealed that it was not blood running through his veins but the muck that lined the city's drainpipes when he repugnantly opined the following in the *Florida Sun-Sentinel* (9/10/05):

That "the suffering" of "the poor in New Orleans" should be a lesson: "Connect the dots and wise up. Educate yourself, work hard and be honest. . . . If you don't . . . the odds are that you will be desperately standing on a symbolic rooftop someday yourself. And trust me, help will not be quick in coming. And in O'Reilly's view, help should not necessarily be offered . . . : The white American taxpayers are saying: "How much more do we have to give here?" (Bacon, 2005b, p. 13)

For all the descriptions in military terms about New Orleans being bruited about like "war zone" and "theater of operations" where marauding hordes of looters supposedly overturned every act of human civility, it is interesting to note a *Seattle Times* report that concluded that there was no more violence in New Orleans during the aftermath of Katrina than in any other typical week (Bacon, 2005b, p. 14). Many stories of violence, such as snipers firing at rescue vehicles and police being attacked by mob violence, were later discredited (Bacon, 2005b;

Yassin, 2005). The *New Orleans Times-Picayune* (September 26, 2005) discovered an official count of only four violent deaths citywide for the entire flood period, which was typical of a city that anticipated approximately 400 homicides in 2005 (Yassin, 2005, p. 9). According to Jaime Omar Yassin (2005),

As the *Washington Post* observed days after the hysteria began to die down (9/15/05), National Guard troops were surprised to encounter “virtually no violence” at the Convention Center made infamous by countless unsubstantiated media reports of raped babies and wanton murder. Likewise, on the streets, correspondents such as Nick Robertson (*CNN Daybreak*, 9/5/05) seemed almost disappointed that “I haven’t been asked to wear a bullet-proof vest” by authorities. While there had been some violence, and looting that could only have been motivated by profit, there were apparently no raping/murdering/looting gangs, nor was there any substantial devastation wrought by violence and looting. (p. 12)

In contrast to many prevailing media reports at the time, it would have seemed that the only way to enter the urban hell to help the way-worn victims of Katrina without turning into stone would be to send in Snake Blissen with a rogue team of ex-convicts specially trained in urban warfare. In fact, food was actually airlifted and dropped into the city when, because of the exaggerated media stories of violence, it was deemed too infested with criminals for rescuers to enter the city safely. The *New York Daily News* retorted that because “anarchy, Mogadishu-style, is just around the corner if they’re not stopped,” officials “must do whatever it takes to curb the hardcore, armed, violent felons who are making it impossible to save the city” and who are “a very different breed from desperate citizens who are trying to get food and water” (Bacon, 2005b, p. 14). Of course, it is hard to tell which citizens are trying to get food and water when a White couple was described in media reports as “finding provisions” while a Black man was described as “looting” (although Jonah Goldberg admitted, “I don’t know what’s in the giant bag the black guy is tugging along behind him. Perhaps he really did loot the grocery store for more than mere essentials? The white couple found the bread and soda ‘from’ a local grocery store. Did they go in it?” as cited in Bacon, 2005b, p.). It is telling that the *Daily News* evoked the image of Mogadishu (Somalia), one that the American public associates with “Blackhawk Down” fame, a place where 18 U.S. soldiers were killed in a rescue attempt and where U.S. General Boykin claimed to have taken a photograph of a satanic presence over the city before he went on years later to proclaim George W. Bush as God’s choice for the presidency and to announce triumphantly that the U.S. army sent to occupy Iraq was a Christian army fighting the evil followers of Islam (see McLaren, 2005).

Rightwing journalist Jonah Goldberg, who recently replaced leftist columnist Robert Scheer in a conservative patch at the *Los Angeles Times*, described the survivors of Katrina in the *National Review Online* blog as a different species and inhuman, as a mutant breed that had infested the Superdome—what Goldberg dubbed a “Mad Max/Thunderdome/Waterworld/Lord of the Flies horror show”



(Bacon, 2005b, p. 14). Goldberg advised those still trapped in the floodwaters of New Orleans to "hoard weapons, grow gills and learn to communicate with serpents," "find the biggest guy you can and when he's not expecting it beat him senseless," and "protect any female who agrees to participate without question in your plans to repopulate the Earth with a race of gilled supermen" (Bacon, 2005b, p. 14). Goldberg's comments about a new species of supermen emerging from the urban swamplands of New Orleans appears like the reverse mirror image of the secret Nazi program of SS Reichsfuhrer Himmler to enrich German racial lines with pure Nordic blood known as the Lebensborn program. Allan Breed's report in the *Cincinnati Post* described "naked babies wail[ing] for food as men get drunk on stolen liquor" and a crowd "whose almost feral intensity" prevented a helicopter from delivering water to victims (Bacon, 2005b, p. 14).

If there was a real inferno of violence, it was likely in the New Orleans jail complex that housed more than 8,000 inmates. At the time of the hurricane, many of the inmates were pretrial detainees and transfers from other parish jails who had evacuated their prisoners. But in the case of the New Orleans jail complex, there was no evacuation plan, and prisoners were left to slowly drown. According to Billy Sothern (2005),

even faster than New Orleans police abandoned the citizens of New Orleans many of the sheriff's deputies who guard the city's prisoners abandoned their charges and left men and women wondering whether they were going to die as water rose in their locked cells. As prisoner Dan Bright told *Human Rights Watch*, "They left us to die there." (p. 18)

Apparently, not everybody escaped. Those who did were treated as subhuman cargo:

Prisoners helped one another escape the flood by prying open cell doors, breaking through windows and finding higher ground in the jail. While officials deny that any bodies were found, many prisoners who were there insist that they saw floating bodies. Those who made it out were rounded up by the few remaining guards and gathered on a nearby Interstate overpass. People remained there for almost two days—without water, under the sun. . . . They were left to urinate and defecate on themselves, hampered by restraints so tight that a month later attorneys who visited them could see dark purple bands around their wrists. (Sothern, 2005, p. 18)

When the survivors were transferred randomly to prisons around the state, they were often beaten viciously on arrival.

Of course, these are the same criminals that Bill Bennett wished had never been born. It's not difficult to imagine Bill Bennett strangely transfixed by the televised images of the looting and chaos that were a media mainstay the week following Katrina's wrath, shaking his head in self-righteous contempt, his obscene racist fantasies about bringing crime rates down by aborting the fetuses of New Orleans's African American population, coursing like a riptide inside his pious brain soured by a frat boy's impish self-hatred. We imagine that his heart began

to palpitate with racial pride on hearing Governor Blanco's assurance to the ruling class that they would be saved from savagery:

These troops are fresh back from Iraq, well trained, experienced, battle-tested and under my orders to restore order in the streets. They have M-16s and they are locked and loaded. These troops know how to shoot and kill and they are more than willing to do so if necessary and I expect they will. (Blum, 2005)

Even New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin ordered the city's police force of 1,500 strong to abandon search-and-rescue missions in order to guard the city from the looters (Blum, 2005). There is never any mistaking the priority given to property rights in capitalist societies. A Fox News reporter "boasted that the National Guard and other armed forces, arriving days after the humanitarian crisis had reached critical levels, [and] were 'highly proficient in the use of lethal force'" (Yassin, 2005, p. 11). CNN's Wolf Blitzer could hardly contain his excitement that the cavalry had finally arrived when he announced, "Eight convoys and troops are on the ground at last in a place being described as a lawless, deadly war zone" (Yassin, 2005, p. 12). This news also pleased conservative pundit Peggy Noonan, who, writing in the *Wall Street Journal's* OpinionJournal.com, announced, "I hope the looters are shot" (Bacon, 2005b, p. 14). Never one to be outdone when it comes to protecting the ruling class from barbarism, Tucker Carlson remarked, "Maybe [the National Guard] should have shot people but they didn't" (Bacon, 2005b, p. 14). Ann Scott Tyson of the *Washington Post* (September 6, 2005) wrote a piece called "Troops Back From Iraq Find Another War Zone" that allowed the public to hear from the National Guard itself:

"Just the smell and feel of a war zone in the city put the soldiers on edge." The article, subtitled "In New Orleans, 'It's Like Baghdad on a Bad Day,'" featured young Guard soldiers boasting, "If we're out on the streets, we'll fight back and shoot until we kill them"—though the worst first-hand example of the "violence and looting" that "shocked the Guard protagonists was the sight of '70-year old women in new Nike high-tops.'" (Yassin, 2005, p. 12)

When, in an unscripted NBC benefit concert, rapper Kanye West exclaimed, "George Bush doesn't care about black people . . . [America was organized] to help the poor, the black people, the less well-off as slow as possible," his remarks hit a nerve with people of color throughout the country, but they also underscored the truism that the poor hit the hardest are disproportionately African American. They also echoed the observation of philosopher Paget Henry (2004) that the condition of African Americans in the United States reflects a "persistent and long-term inability to recognize the humanity of people of African descent" (p. 200) among the "dead seeing eye of the Western master self" (p. 201). Henry argues that the African does not qualify as a genuine other in the Western dialectic of the master/slave relationship. According to Henry (2004), Hegel made it clear in his own phenomenology that the African is without self-consciousness

and therefore does not qualify as being part of the second moment of the duplication in the unity of the master self. The African was a slave that was located outside of history and was not able to confirm the humanity of the imperial master. Watching images of African Americans on CNN through Bennett's "dead seeing eyes" (Henry, 2004) confirmed not the common humanity of all those facing overwhelmingly perilous conditions but only his own Whiteness and his palpable and pure racial supremacy, signaling to him how horrifying it must be to be non-White.

Despite repeated pleas from Governor Blanco for emergency relief—500 buses, 40,000 more troops, ice, water and food, base camps, staging areas, amphibious vehicles, the return of the Louisiana Army National Guard's 256th Brigade Combat Team (then deployed to Iraq), mobile morgues, rescue teams, housing, airlift, and communications systems—little materialized the week that Katrina made landfall. The situation was so bad that Rep. Charlie Melancon (D-La), having been pressured to spend time in public relations stunts with President Bush, wrote Blanco's staff that Bush's "entire effort on behalf of the federal government has been reflected in his and his people's nonchalant attitude to the people of LA. You may give him this to read" (Warrick, Hsu, & Hull, 2005).

Those African Americans who had begged in vain to be rescued on floating rooftops, those who drowned in their attics, those who were abandoned and perished in hospitals and nursing homes, those whose bloated corpses floated down the waterlogged boulevards and which remained for months unidentified—all of them bore witness to the violence that was directed at their ancestors, but this time dressed up as "ineffective response" to an act of God. According to faith-based political theory, it was not the place of those affected by the hurricane to question, much less attempt to interfere with, an act of God. A number of fundamentalist religious leaders took to the pulpit and declared Katrina an act of holy vengeance against "Southern Decadence." According to Rev. Bill Shanks, pastor of New Covenant Fellowship of New Orleans,

"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," Shanks says. "God simply, I believe, in His mercy purged all of that stuff out of there—and now we're going to start over again." (Brown & Martin, 2005)

Antiabortion activist Steve Lefemine likened the satellite map of Hurricane Katrina to "the image of and 8-week old fetus" and clamored that "God judged New Orleans for the sin of shedding innocent blood through abortion" (Cooperman, 2005). Citing "Providence" and judgment against "national sin," Lefemine and his kin washed their hands of the moral and social responsibility to assist our citizens in times of tragedy and rather used Katrina to advance their own fundamentalist ideology—a set of beliefs and practices that are increasingly becoming the norm in an evolving "Christian America."

Jaundiced-eyed White House officials can't hide their liver-spotted views of the poor—especially African American poor—that ooze of their mouths like The Blob paying us an extraterrestrial visit from the local sewer. Their avarice is clearly seen in the enterprise zone of the hurricane's aftermath via the financial boondoggles and congressional looting that is taking place, pushed by high-profile lobbyists, global carpetbaggers, market watchers and speculators from the moral swamplands of corporate America, hucksters of free market nostrums, and wealthy contractors with strong ties to Capitol Hill and Louisiana who are attempting to exploit the catastrophe in the most egregiously opportunistic way by calling for unnecessary reconstruction projects in the massive plan to gentrify the city with an exploited, contingent workforce.

We can imagine an old jazz musician sitting on the damp street corner, unaware of the impact that mold would have on his wheezing lungs in the weeks ahead, staring at a waterlogged saxophone case bobbing in steamy sewer like a bloated corpse that had risen up from the river Styx. We imagine his relatives, working in public sector jobs, being denied a living wage when they are finally allowed to return to the city, and then being hit with massive layoffs if they are lucky enough to find a job in the casualized work zone of part-time positions (according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, as late as October, 500,000 of the 800,000 people evacuated had yet to return home; see Bacon, 2005b).

For those that do manage to return to their eviscerated homes and who take a close look at the fine print of their hurricane damage insurance policies, they will notice that the policies cover only for wind damage, not water or flooding. So the policies that they paid into in good faith will be virtually useless for many. But for those fortunate enough to have escaped to Texas, well, we have words of consolation from former First Lady Barbara Bush. After visiting the Astrodome stadium in Houston, Texas, where thousands of evacuees from New Orleans and other affected areas were being housed, Barbara Bush chuckled prior to exclaiming,

So many of the people here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this is working very well for them. . . . What I'm hearing, which is sort of scary, is they all want to stay in Texas. Everyone is so overwhelmed by the hospitality. Almost everyone I've talked to says: "We're going to move to Houston." (Parry, 2005)

But Barbara Bush was not alone in her "subtle racism." Journalist reports of Black inner-city residents and White suburban residents offered a disturbing contrast:

There was . . . a more subtle racism at work in much of the coverage of the actions taken by whites and African-Americans after the hurricane . . . the response of the poor black victims was consistently portrayed as at best selfish, and at worst antisocial and criminal. Commentators were much more generous in their assessment of non-blacks. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (9/1/05) and the *Pittsburg Post-Gazette* (9/13/05), for instance, portrayed residents and business owners from Matarie, Louisiana, a mostly white suburb of New Orleans, as grateful, enterprising and generous. (Bacon, 2005b, p. 15)

We're not so sure, however, that the actions of the residents of the mostly White suburb of Gretna could be described as "grateful, enterprising and generous" while they forcibly turned away evacuees, sending them back by bus into the city, and firing warning shots in the air. "This American Life," an NPR radio show, "broadcast interviews with hurricane survivors prevented from escaping the disaster zone by armed police looking to keep African-American survivors out of their white suburbs" ("Katrina: Social Tragedy Benefits Exploiters, Devastates Workers," 2005, p. 8). This seems more like the surfacing of Jim Crow's ugly head than the actions of Mayberry's Aunt Bee. And the policy force was behaving anything like Andy Taylor and Barney Fife. Jacqueline Bacon (2005b) notes why "is turning one's neighbors away when they are in need—even physically threatening them—not deemed selfish, antisocial behavior" (p. 15).

How many survivors of Katrina were mercifully oblivious to the possible connection between global warming and the intensity of the hurricane, the racial politics of why a preventative infrastructure was not in place, the blaming of the victims because they did not heed the warning to evacuate, the all-out war by conservatives against the poor whose plight they felt were created by liberal programs in the first place, the high-stakes politics swirling around them in the national arena, unleashed by the federal system of "dual authority" established by the U.S. Constitution incorporating both national and state sovereignty? How, centuries later, this recycled quarrel over the division between state and national power would affect the politics of disaster relief was something few could have imagined.

The creators of the 1950 Disaster Relief Act, who were responsible for putting together a permanent federal emergency fund (with the national government assuming a substantial share of disaster relief), would never have anticipated the role that the Strangeloveans in the White House would play in the drama that ensued once Katrina struck The Big Easy. They would have been shocked by the incompetence of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (which at one point turned back truckloads of bottled water and told the Red Cross to stay out of the city) and the shameful patronage used to fill its management positions.

A major hurricane in New Orleans had been listed as one of the most likely major catastrophes to strike the United States, but what occurred when the hurricane struck was as shocking as the hurricane itself. Much of the equipment (high-water vehicles, refueling tankers, and generators) that would have been used to help New Orleans was already deployed in Iraq to help slaughter the Iraqi resistance to the occupation. Instead of being used to help the people of the United States during a time of crisis, these men, women, and machines were conscripted into the service of Bush's bloody war for oil that has brought about a free-market "democracy"—a malediction that some Iraqi leaders have described as a worse situation than during the rule of Saddam. Noam Chomsky (2005) noted that

Bush funding cuts in 2004 compelled the Army Corps of Engineers to reduce flood-control work sharply, including badly needed strengthening of the levees that protected New Orleans. Bush's 2005 budget called for another serious reduction—a

specialty of Bush-administration timing, much like the proposed sharp cut in security for public transportation right before the London bombings in July 2005.

When we think of FEMA, it's hard to ignore its first director, Louis Giuffrida, who, unlike GOP activist Mike Brown who treated his post as something of a sinecure, used his position as a vehicle for preparing the United States for a war between the races. Giuffrida, who had occupied the role of state commander of the California National Guard, was appointed director of FEMA by President Reagan. As Governor of California, Reagan assigned Giuffrida the task of "counter-terrorism" training in the early 1970s. Giuffrida ran FEMA from 1981 to 1985 and authored a number of contingency martial law proposals such as Operation Cable Splicer, designed to arrest and detain anti-Vietnam War protesters and other political dissidents. While at the Army War College in 1970, Giuffrida had infamously written about the need to intern and relocate at least 21 million African Americans in the event of a "race riot" or national uprising. When Reagan formed the Emergency Mobilization Preparedness Board and placed it under the authority of the National Security Council, Giuffrida and Oliver North were brought on board to refine and implement Operation GARDEN PLOT, a plan to suspend the Constitution in the event of a national crisis, such as widespread internal opposition to a U.S. military invasion abroad (see Hoover, 2005). FEMA was folded into Homeland Security after 9/11 but quickly filled its managerial positions with seasoned political hacks and added to unnecessary layers of bureaucracy. The fact that FEMA involves the coordination of various levels of government, both federal and state, enhances the likelihood of systemwide breakdown in the process of interdependent efforts at disaster relief.<sup>1</sup>

White residents who filed insurance claims on their houses had more access to knowledge about resources in making insurance claims and, in contrast to poor Black residents in, say, the Lower Ninth Ward, were three times as likely to seek state help in resolving insurance disputes and received larger financial settlements. Black residents were more likely to accept whatever financial settlement was offered by the insurance company because they did not have access to information about appealing settlement offers to the state. Nearly 75% of the settled cases were filed by residents of predominantly white neighborhoods whereas only 25% were filed by households in majority-black areas (Associated Press, 2006). Not only did White residents possess more information on how to resolve complaints with the state department, they had more financial security to assist them in waging a more protracted struggle.

Just 6 days after Katrina hit a coalition of low-income groups, Community Labor United in New Orleans stood resolute and emboldened, demanding that a committee of affected evacuees "actively participate in the rebuilding of New Orleans" (Klein, 2005). Concerned that a pack of corporate hyenas would descend onto the area and use federal relief funds to "replace our homes with newly built mansions and condos in gentrified New Orleans," Community Labor

United refused to have its citizens victimized twice over, neither instance which could be attributed to a sacrosanct act of God or the result of minor bureaucratic mismanagement. The citizens claimed rights to the land they once inhabited. As Naomi Klein (2005) observed,

it's a radical concept: the \$10.5 billion released by congress and the \$500 million raised by private charities doesn't actually belong to the relief agencies or the government; it belongs to the victims. The agencies entrusted with the money should be accountable to them. Put another way, the people Barbara Bush tactfully described as "underprivileged anyway" just got very rich.

Unfortunately, but perhaps predictably, reconstruction efforts in the devastated area have not actualized the hopes of the people, and we are witnessing—yet again—a return to “profit over the people” in cases when the afflicted expect capitalism's ardent supporters to at least powder their faces with a bit of humanity. Shortly after the dead calm, the Bush administration declared the region a “Gulf Opportunity (GO) Zone,” an ominous designation at best, indicative of the very same policies put into effect immediately following the fall of Baghdad and subsequent occupation of Iraq. Measures to support the Republican agendas included

suspending rules that require payment of prevailing wages by federal contractors and providing displaced schoolchildren with vouchers—another underhanded blow at the public school system. They included lifting environmental restrictions, “waiving the estate tax for deaths in the storm-affected states”—a great boon for the population fleeing New Orleans slums—and in general making it clear once again that cynicism knows no bounds. (Chomsky, 2005)

The Davis Bacon Act's protection for workers' wages (a statute that hails as far back as 1931 that mandates payment of prevailing wages on federally funded construction projects) that the Bush gang had suspended (which would have created large cost differentials between unionized and nonunion contractors, replacing union workers with workers who lacked union protection) was reinstated only after the AFL-CIO and many community groups organized massive protests throughout the region and threat of a congressional vote prompted Bush to back down. Similar protests from labor groups have emerged following the Department of Homeland Security's easing of sanctions against employers who hire undocumented workers, unleashing yet another fierce firestorm in the Hurricane's wake. As a result, the big fat cats of enterprise—Halliburton, Kellogg Brown & Root, and Bechtel—have cashed in on cheap and oftentimes free immigrant labor. Untold numbers of immigrant laborers are being stiffed, going weeks without pay. Nonpayment of wages is a violation of federal law, but when it affects workers rendered invisible because of their immigration status, no one seems to pay much attention.

The politics of immigration is most definitely affecting immigrant workers now doing reconstruction on the Gulf Coast, and they might also inflame existing racial divisions. According to David Bacon (2005b),



the racial fault lines of immigration politics threaten to pit Latinos against Blacks, and migrant laborers against community residents hoping to return to their homes. Community organizations, labor and civil rights advocates can all find common ground in a reconstruction plan that puts the needs of people first. But flood-ravaged Mississippi and Louisiana could also become a window into a different future, in which poor communities with little economic power fight each other over jobs.

Anti-immigrant politicians and common citizens alike are quick to blame immigrant workers for exploiting reconstruction efforts in the washed-out region, for cheating the poor and unemployed residents of New Orleans and Biloxi from the much-needed opportunity to work, and for changing the racial, cultural, and economic demographic landscape of the area. And yet, although the United States eagerly accepted assistance in the form of military engineers, doctors, and nurses from a Mexican military convoy—the first Mexican military unit to operate on U.S. soil since 1846—dozens of displaced Mexican immigrants from Katrina's wake seeking shelter in the safe confines of church shelters have been deported with nothing to show for their extended stay in the land of freedom and economic success than the haggard and fetid water-soaked clothes on their backs. The steady flow of people-swapping taking place across states and the U.S.-Mexico border can be perplexing to some. As U.S. border control agents steadfastly hunt down displaced immigrants and shoo them out of the country, hundreds of others from bordering states and Mexico are making their way to the "GO zone." Within this context, immigrant laborers are conceptualized as actively responding to environmental forces and maximizing their individual interests, a view that fails to recognize the state's role in creating and recreating the conditions for immigrant labor (Burawoy, 1976). Guest worker programs will exploit immigrant labor and force wages down, and communities of color will be forced to compete with each other, sharpening existing race and class inequalities. When proposed tax-free zones for businesses and school vouchers for students take effect, conditions that further enable the exploitation of the poor will intensify. American Enterprise Institute researchers Kathryn G. Newmark and Veronique de Rugy (2006) celebrate the entrepreneurial opportunities that Katrina has created for the capitalist overhaul of education. A \$20.9 million grant from the federal No Child Left Behind charter school program, combined with assaults on the teachers' union, can in their estimation do wonders in bringing about the neoliberal wet dream of a private sector takeover of public education.

Already there is tension mounting in the African American community about undocumented workers arriving in New Orleans. Roig-Franzia (2005) captures the mood:

In a speech to a business group, Mayor C. Ray Nagin asked how he could "stop New Orleans from being overrun by Mexican workers." At a New Orleans town hall meeting in Atlanta, displaced black civil rights activist Carl Galmon complained: "They're bringing in foreign workers from South America, Central



America and Mexico, paying them \$5 an hour sometimes for 80 hours a week. They are undercutting the American labor force in New Orleans.”

After a brief rediscovery of poverty in the United States, only 6 months after the Katrina disaster, most major television networks were limiting its coverage to staging Mardi Gras in a depopulated city or to individual tales of woe and misery, and little was being done on analyzing the roots of poverty and racism in the United States. Even those who were tingling with a little *schadenfreude* at the daily news coverage of pain and suffering were growing weary of the television coverage, and, as usual, the media returned to their crabwise approach to examining the injuries of class, such as the health care crisis among low-income families. According to Neil deMause (2006), “The irony is that coverage of poverty has dropped even as poverty has been on the rise.” During the 8 months of news coverage of Katrina, “network newscasts spent an average of four seconds per night on poverty issues—up from an average of two-and-a-half seconds in the years before Katrina, but still only half the time devoted to the doings of the stock market” (deMause, 2006). This is hardly going to change the minds of perva-cious Americans who for whatever reason need to believe the lazy poor deserve their lot in life and feel their choler rise with any sympathetic treatment of their plight. With such scant and superficial coverage of poverty and class, is there any wonder that people failed to take to the streets in protest after Congress passed the Deficit Reduction Act that slashed funding for Medicaid and other social services, legislation that further devastated the lives of poverty stricken hurricane victims, especially those who had lost their personal documents necessary in seeking medical assistance? We don’t expect the media to provide a *vade mecum* to assist viewers or readers in undertaking a Marxist analysis of capitalist exploitation (while we surely wish this would be the case). But if Lou Dobbs can perorate endlessly about the danger that illegal immigrants pose to the US middle class and deprecate their worth, then we think it is only responsible that a fulsome flattery of the privileged be counter-posed with some hard hitting analysis of the exploitation that is constitutive of the capitalism we are encouraged to defend at all costs. The corporate media is forever fearful of undermining the hegemony of the conventional wisdom of ruling interests. The theme of economic democracy must be put front and center on the national agenda.

Our understanding of Hurricane Katrina needs to be situated within the disciplinary practices of capital and its process of valorization through unsustainable capital-fueled growth and development, overproduction, resource depletion, and ecosystem destabilization and destruction within the capitalist marketplace. We cannot shift our focus away from capitalism’s devastating consequences for the ecosphere as well as the global division of labor and its racialized social relations. Depletion of nonrenewable resources, disruption of natural cycles, and waste and pollution are intrinsically connected to capitalist relations of production, which in turn have their differential impacts on populations in terms of race and gender.

Capitalists accept collateral damage as part of the overall process, and whether it happens to be the deaths of thousands of human beings or eco-destructivity that leads to the elimination of large clusters of biospheres doesn't really seem to matter to the Masters of Capital, as long as this collateral damage has a minimal effect on the lives of the transnational capitalist class. The current ecological crisis and crisis of capitalism brought on by the fossil-fuel shortage has led to resource wars, geopolitical conflicts and unilateral invasions, and the deliberate sacrifice of African American communities and other communities of color within the United States who are disproportionately "cut loose" in times of political, ecological, or so-called natural disasters. Continued assaults on the life-sustaining natural processes and resources all of us depend on can be expected as long as the capital's law of value is not challenged. In the case of New Orleans, the wetlands, for example, were not effective in flood control because they had lost their protection and became casualties of the logic of capitalist accumulation. The wetlands, which provide a buffer against storm surge, are depleting at a rate of about 25 miles per year, and since the 1930s, Louisiana has lost nearly 2,000 square miles of wetlands, losing every 38 min about the equivalent of a football field.

In his review of the exhibition of photographs at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York entitled, "New Orleans After the Flood: Photographs by Robert Polidori," John Updike (2006) notes the reaction of a resident to those visiting New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina: "There are signs that residents of the flood zone sought to defend themselves from oppressive attention. Visible in 1728 *Deslondes Street*, a neatly lettered sign in the fender of an upside-down sedan proclaims "Tourism HERE is Profane!"

In commenting on Polidori's book, *After the Flood*, from which the photographs for the exhibition were taken, Updike (2006) speculates about why such disasters books are produced and questions their intended audience:

*After the Flood* is an opulent volume, brilliantly sharp in its large, 10-by-14-inch reproductions, bound in lavender cloth, and difficult to manipulate anywhere but on a coffee table. It weighs nearly ten pounds and costs \$90; a consumeristic paradox hovers over the existence of so costly a volume portraying the reduction of a mostly poor urban area—"the funky urban environment that gave birth to jazz," a wall legend has it—to a state of desertion and deeper destitution. Who is this book for? Not the flood's victims, who could not afford it. Nor, one suspects, very many well-heeled connoisseurs of fine photography, though there is an abstract beauty in Polidori's close-focus studies of patterns of mold and paint distress, and an occasional Pop humor in the tinselly shoes and glitzy wall decorations the victims left behind them as the floodwaters rose, and a macabre Art Brut in shadowy rooms crowded with cheap furniture as tightly as passengers in a sinking ship.

Such concern for the aestheticization or exploitation of human suffering brings us to a consideration of the various venues designed to profit from the aftermath of disasters on the epic scale of Katrina—whether we are referring to the

World Trade Center, Hiroshima, Chernobyl, or others. It is important here to discern what constitutes sociological voyeurism and artistic or journalistic opportunism and what constitutes serious attempts at addressing the racism and class exploitation that still plagues the United States well into this new millennium.

We need to extend Marx's "relentless criticism of everything existing" not only to the failure of the Bush administration to respond to Hurricane Katrina but also to the capitalist system itself, of which the Bush administration is but one manifestation—albeit one of the most repugnant examples of a "rogue nation" in recent history.

Whether the rebuilding of New Orleans will follow the classic capitalist pattern of increased wealth for the few and misery for the majority is still yet to be determined. One of the challenges of critical educators is to make the interconnectedness between capitalism, ecosystem destruction, and the racialization of the exploitation of human labor more transparent and less seemingly inevitable and to find ways of bringing about a socialist alternative. In this regard, the tragedy of Katrina offers us an important pedagogical opportunity to initiate change not only in the case of New Orleans but beyond the reach of our national borders.

William Grieder (2005) captures the pedagogical moment at hand:

Events, nevertheless, have delivered a teachable moment—an opportunity to reframe and reargue many long-neglected matters. The wheels are coming off the right-wing bus. The President of Oil and War is no longer much believed. The vast suffering and physical destruction in New Orleans have made all too visible what ecologists and social critics have been trying to explain for years. Their warnings once seemed too abstract or remote to require public action. New Orleans announced, for those who will listen, that the future is now. (p. 22)

## Note

1. As a prime example of incompetence knowing no bounds, we find it despairingly consistent that, as we put the final touches on this article, the Small Business Administration (SBA) is being roundly condemned for failing to keep up with Katrina- and Rita-related loans. Despite increasing the number of staff on its payroll, the SBA has only processed half the number of loans it did in a similar period after last year's Florida hurricanes. We find it equally ominous that the head of the SBA, a former Republican fundraiser, previously headed up the SBA's disastrous response to 9/11.

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