

Chapter Two

Hurricane Katrina: Spotlight on Racism and White Privilege

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During the writing of this monograph, one of the biggest natural disasters in recorded history struck the United States: *Hurricane Katrina*. The physical, economic and spiritual devastation will leave a large wound in our country for a long time. Pictures of people suffering were shocking not only to Americans but to people all around the world. News media seemed to focus on pictures of African Americans, though we know that there were many people with losses—including white people, thousands of Vietnamese, Mexican, Honduran, and Salvadoran immigrants living and working in the Gulf States¹ and several thousands of Native Americans from at least six federally recognized tribes.² Many of us had visceral reactions similar to those we had to news footage of police dogs and fire hoses assaulting African Americans and others during the civil rights movement. And for that moment in the autumn of 2005, race and racism were highly visible.

In the extensive coverage of Hurricane Katrina, we noticed that many of the most desperate survivors are people of color. Hearing their stories, we learned of the impact of generations of housing, transportation, employment and other policies that had apparently failed these U.S. residents. We saw a nation that was astonished at the conditions of people in New Orleans before the flooding and high winds. Some of these conditions were revealed in news reports about why people could not leave when they were ordered to do so.

People who have been involved in community building work in New Orleans (including one of the authors of this monograph) have been screaming about the conditions of poor people and people of color in that city for years! We as a nation have not heard, or have chosen not to respond. After all, as a nation, we did not pay attention when people had to live in substandard public housing in New Orleans. We ignored the quality of the schools that did not serve them sufficiently. Transportation, housing and economic policies limited their mobility and thus, their job options.

In fact, we cared so little about these residents that we did not build levees strong enough to withstand completely predictable weather and its consequences. The hurricane protection project, which included repairing the

¹ "There are approximately 30,000 Vietnamese who call Louisiana home . . . there were 40,000 Mexican citizens in Louisiana, mostly in New Orleans. There are also approximately 150,000 Hondurans and 9,600 Salvadorans in the larger region." Advancement Project, "Estranged in a Strange Land." (Community Justice Resource Center Newsletter, Volume 13).

² C. Stone Brown, "Katrina's Forgotten Victims: Native American Tribes," (from the Web site, <http://news.pacificnews.org>, accessed September, 2005).

sinking levees, only received one sixth of what local officials needed.³ Even though the predicted consequences of a category 4 or 5 hurricane were shared in reports, case studies and requests for funding, the federal government did not respond to the needs. And some still blamed the victims who had not heeded the evacuation orders, without understanding that the system was already in place for their suffering to occur. Through ignorance, indifference, media silence and the systems that promote these conditions, most of America did not know or chose not to acknowledge the impact of our resource allocation decisions.

Why were we so astonished at what Hurricane Katrina revealed about the impact of at least 50 years of public policies that we Americans have created and maintained? White privilege. White privilege is the power to feel bad but not be accountable for the policies in place. It is the power to believe that this is about individual choices, and not a system of advantaging one group over others. It is the ability to blame the group suffering from persistently poor outcomes for creating those outcomes, by ignoring the systemic ways in which some groups are oppressed and some are not. It is the Rip Van Winkle effect: the way we can go back to sleep as a nation for 45 years, as we did after watching dogs and hoses turned on Americans in the 1950's and 1960's, wake up in 2005, and be shocked all over again.

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To understand the elusive and sometimes invisible concepts of white privilege and racism, and how they are manifested in the United States, we only need to look closely at the Katrina disaster and its aftermath:

Who benefits from the policy decisions being made, and who suffers?

- The Bush administration initially suspended the Davis-Bacon Act, “which requires that contractors pay workers the prevailing wage of the region, to all federal contracts in the areas affected by Hurricane Katrina.”⁴ At a time when the reported unemployment rate in the area is 25%⁵, the policy suspension will impact families trying to recover lost wages and will also provoke tensions between workers to compete for a small piece of the economic pie. The winners in this arrangement are the large white-owned corporations (Bechtel, Halliburton, and Fluor) who received “no bid, cost overrun” contracts.⁶ One evening news program shared a story of Black and Brown tensions describing how Latinos/as are getting the construction jobs that some believed should be going to the majority of African Americans who live in New Orleans. There was no interview with the white-owned

³ Paul Craig Roberts, “How New Orleans was lost,” (from the Web site, www.antiwar.com, accessed September, 2005).

⁴ Leadership Conference for Civil Rights, Press Release, “Groups Call for the Investigation of Relief’s Efforts’ Failure to Comply with Civil Rights Protections,” (from the Web site, www.civilrights.org, October 25, 2005).

⁵ Eric Mann, *Letter in Support of the Movement in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast: Notes on Strategy and Tactics*, (Los Angeles: Frontline Press, 2005), p. 34.

⁶ Eric Mann, *Letter in Support of the Movement in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast: Notes on Strategy and Tactics*, p. 32.

corporations that created this competition. After a significant lobbying effort, President Bush agreed to reinstate the policy two months after its suspension, though it will not be retroactive.

- FEMA denied state officials' requests for funding to send displaced residents absentee ballots for the New Orleans February mayoral elections. They also denied local authorities' requests to share data of current addresses of evacuees.⁷

Who gets to frame, define, and name?

- The now well-known Yahoo News pictures and their captions (two different newswire services provided the pictures) made a distinction between Black and white people holding food: Blacks holding the food were "looters," but whites were just "carrying" the food.⁸
- New Orleans' homicide rate has climbed to 10 times the national average.⁹ The mainstream news organizations jumped on those statistics and the stereotypes associated with crime and people of color to report uncorroborated stories of looting, rapes, murders, etc. And with these false stories, the media continued to show picture after picture of mostly Black men. There is research that shows that the inflated "crime wave" reported was false,¹⁰ though the mainstream media have not actively reported this information.
- Many have said the fear of violence is what slowed efforts to bring aid to the neediest parts of the city.¹¹ If this is so, then people's lives were endangered not by the violence of people of color but by the stereotyping of African Americans by people in power (often whites).
- Major media outlets (CNN, USA Today, Fox News) described in various ways the devastation of Hurricane Katrina as similar to that found in the "third world." These specific conditions were viewed as somewhat unique in the United States. However, according to the Brookings Institution, "Despite improvements in the 1990's, nearly every major American city still contains a significant collection of extremely poor, racially segregated neighborhoods. In cities as diverse as Cleveland, New York, Atlanta, and Los Angeles, more than 30% of poor Blacks live in areas of severe social and economic distress."¹² On Native American lands, 14.7% of the homes are defined as

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⁷ Mike Davis, "Gentrifying Diversity," AlterNet, (from the Web site, www.alternet.org/katrina/27391/, accessed October, 2005).

⁸ Jonathan Alter, "The Other America." (*Newsweek Magazine*, September 19, 2005).

⁹ "Cities and Crime: New Orleans homicide up as people fear killers, cops," (*Detroit Free Press*, Associated Press, August 22, 2005).

¹⁰ "N.O. Murder Rate Falls Victim to Storm," (*The Times-Picayune*, October 22, 2005).

¹¹ "Katrina's Aftermath," (*Los Angeles Times*, September 3, 2005).

¹² Alan Berube and Bruce Katz, *Katrina's Window: Confronting Concentrated Poverty Across America*, (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program, 2005), p. 1.

over-crowded, 11.7% lack complete plumbing facilities, and unemployment on or near Indian reservations commonly exceeds 50% and in some areas jumps to over 90%.¹³

- A recent USA Today/CNN Gallop Poll showcased people's different worldviews. "According to the poll, six in 10 Blacks say that the government responded slowly because the majority of the victims were poor and black, while nearly nine in 10 whites say race and class were not a factor."¹⁴ These differences of perspective will affect the solutions chosen to address the systemic issues highlighted by the disaster.

Who gets to decide who is included?

James Loewen is the author of *Sundown Towns*, which provides a detailed exposé of predominately white communities and how they exclude African Americans, Chinese Americans, Native Americans, Mexican Americans and Jews—some permanently and others after sundown.¹⁵ Most whites rationalize the existence of these towns and suburbs as only having to do with market value, lack of jobs, or just wanting to live with those with a similar culture and values and not about covert and overt exclusionary practices. Loewen says the catalysts of these communities were labor strife, perceived criminality, violence, fear, economic pressures, etc. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, we are seeing the beginning of this process (and some would say a continuation of a process¹⁶) and the use of similar catalysts to exclude people of color in the rebuilding of New Orleans:

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- Alfonso R. Jackson, secretary of housing and urban development, during a visit with hurricane victims in Houston, said New Orleans would not reach its pre-Katrina population of 500,000 people "for a long time," and "it's not going to be as black as it was for a long time, if ever again."¹⁷
- Though there have been many discussions about new housing, it is estimated that about 70,000 of New Orleans' displaced can move back to the city. The lower Garden District of New Orleans (89% white) and the French Quarter (90% white), which are two of the driest neighborhoods, have vacancy rates of 17.4% and 37%, respectively, according to the 2000 Census (though some

¹³ "Time to Reduce Poverty Among Native Americans," *Native Discussion*, (from the Web site, www.native-american-online.org/_disc8/0000000f.htm, accessed, October, 2005).

¹⁴ Judge Greg Mathis, "Until White America 'Gets It,' Racial and Class Divisions will Continue," (from the Web site, www.BlackAmericaWeb.com, accessed September, 2005).

¹⁵ "A sundown town is any organized jurisdiction that for decades kept African Americans or other groups from living in it and was thus 'all white' on purpose." "... many towns passed ordinances to prohibit African Americans from being within the corporate limits of the town after sundown or forbade selling or renting property to them." James W. Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism*, (New York: The New Press, 2005), p. 4 and 99.

¹⁶ "The most visible divide between blacks and whites in New Orleans, however, concerned the neighborhoods in which they lived. Between 1980 and 2000, segregation between blacks and whites in the city grew, bucking the national trend. By 2000, the average African American resident of New Orleans lived in a neighborhood where 82 percent of fellow residents were black." Alan Berube and Bruce Katz, *Katrina's Window: Confronting Concentrated Poverty Across America*, (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program, 2005), p. 3.

¹⁷ "HUD chief foresees a 'whiter' Big Easy," (*The Washington Times*, September 30, 2005).

of these may be second homes, which are sometimes counted as vacant in Census data). Along with other dry neighborhoods, some of these vacant apartments and homes can be converted to affordable housing for evacuees. So far no effort has been made to do this.¹⁸

- Residents are requesting that mobile trailers be placed back in their neighborhoods so they can begin rebuilding their homes and the community. “Now, with most of the residents of those areas scattered across the country, fear is rising that the government and corporate interests will take advantage of their absence to gain an upper hand. Meanwhile, the limbo status of evacuation feeds the demand for a solution that puts people back in their own neighborhoods as quickly as possible.”¹⁹
- The Department of Homeland Security has pledged, “to arrest and deport any undocumented immigrants ‘caught’ seeking food stamps, emergency rations, or evacuation from the city.”²⁰ Also, seven naturalization ceremonies scheduled for September 2005 in New Orleans were cancelled and they “won’t be scheduling any more there any time soon.”²¹

There is so much at stake, and this is magnified as the Gulf Coast residents struggle courageously to rebuild their region.

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¹⁸ Naomi Klein, “Now the Real Looting Begins,” (*The Nation*, October 10, 2005), p. 16.

¹⁹ “New Orleans Neighborhoods Demands Trailers to Help Rebuild,” (from the Web site, http://newstandardnews.net/content/?action=show_item&itemid=2611, accessed November, 2005).

²⁰ Eric Mann, *Letter in Support of the Movement in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast: Notes on Strategy and Tactics*, p. 37.

²¹ “Illegals Hit by Katrina Worry,” (from the Web site, www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/09/10/katrina/printable832574.shtml, accessed October, 2005).

