

## REVIEW ESSAY

### Katrina: A Racist Disaster

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South End Press Collective, *What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race, and the State of the Nation*, South End Press, 2007, 176 pp.

*What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race, and the State of the Nation* is an impassioned collection that explores Hurricane Katrina as a lived experience, crisis of the racial state, and forge for social justice activism. The book's manifold aims are evident in the stylistic and topical range of pieces from contributors that include New Orleans residents, grassroots organizers, poets, and activist academics. The immediacy of firsthand accounts and evocative poetry coupled with frank analysis of activist responses overcome the dangers of "disaster tourism" and sympathetic racial cant that characterize the mainstream media's depictions of Katrina. The book's theoretical efforts toward enabling alternative futures make for difficult reading, not because they are abstruse, but because they speak truth to the grave crucible of renovated domestic racism and global imperial ambition. *What Lies Beneath* will find a welcome audience among activists, concerned citizens, and scholars who seek what Joy James calls a "radical literacy [that] is at least alive to possibilities for change and social transformation, possibilities for resistance." [p. 159.]

Awareness of multiple histories and violences of displacement are imperative for understanding Katrina as a racist disaster. This displacement must be understood within the "ongoing event of racial slavery," [Sexton, p. 125] not only as the context behind how the disaster manifested and continues to play out in the city of New Orleans but also as it relates to national and global articulations of white supremacy and capitalism. My review cannot outline each contribution, and so I focus on the authors' sometimes conflicting efforts to grapple with the meanings of disaster and displacement in relation to racism and the state.

What does it mean when 12 percent of white Americans and 60 percent of black Americans surveyed nationwide believed that racism accounted for the federal government's delayed response to Katrina? Did the prominent images of black hurricane survivors serve as a window onto lingering race and class divides, reinforce commonsense justifications for racial hierarchy, or do both simultaneously?

At stake in competing theorizations of what kind of crisis Katrina actually is are desires and strategies for liberatory social change. While much mainstream and progressive commentary rightly decried the gap between the reality and ideal of American democracy and civil equality, this analysis ultimately does not go far enough in analyzing the state's central role in creating and maintaining white privilege and ongoing violences of racial hierarchy. For instance, in "Slum Clearance," Lewis Lapham denounces the Right—and its apologists, including Richard Baker (R, LA), who said: "We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it but God did" [p. 14]—for their decades long ideological war against the state that "facilitate[d] the loss of life, liberty, and property for several hundred of their fellow citizens." [p. 7.] Lapham's account of the Right's laissez-faire, individual responsibility society places class struggle at the center. But he does not connect racism with the Right's anti-state impulse (shared by Democrats), which has selectively destroyed the welfare state while expanding the repressive arms of the state. His analysis offers an easy strategy of

anticorporate populism, but because racism appears incidental, we are unable to move beyond moralistic denunciations of social divides to understanding how racism structures social and economic life.

Following Cornel West, Manning Marable elsewhere has asked: “Has the public spectacle of Black suffering and anguish evolved into what might be defined as a ‘civic ritual,’ reconfirming the racial hierarchy with blackness permanently relegated to a subordinate status?” Indeed, theorizing the ongoing centrality of white supremacy to understanding disaster, the state, and American society is in order, as Jared Sexton (“The Obscurity of Black Suffering”), Dylan Rodríguez (“The Meaning of ‘Disaster’ Under the Dominance of White Life”), and Joy James (“Afterward: Political Literacy and Voice”) all pointedly argue. Katrina was no aberration but actually revalidated “the sturdy symbiosis between black disposability and American nation building.” [Rodríguez, p. 134.] Katrina enabled criticism of and revalidated white racial dominance whereby the categorical “sanctity of white bodily integrity”—what Rodríguez names “white life”—is constituted through the struggle to secure “ascendancy over the mundane conditions of black suffering.” [Rodríguez, pp. 136, 135.]

Hurricane Katrina resulted in the displacement of over 1.3 million people—frequently noted as the largest internal displacement in U.S. history. Of course, the significance of this displacement cannot be grasped solely by numbers, and as Osayande notes in “A Raging Flood of Tears”: “you cannot measure disgrace with a body count.” [p. 1.] In “Nature Fights Back,” Ross Gelbspan situates Katrina within the science and politics of global warming: the federal government has known for decades that a large hurricane could hit New Orleans, yet monies for investing in flood protection and restoration of wetlands have been pitifully small. Gelbspan attributes the Bush administration’s “antiplanning propensity” [p. 21] to its ties with the fossil fuel industry. Again, there is a racial history to antiplanning. As Jordan Flaherty writes in “Corporate Reconstruction and Grassroots Resistance”:

The “disaster before the disaster” that devastated this amazing city was man-made. It was birthed in institutional structures of racism, and it manifested in the crumbling infrastructures of schools and education and health care, and, later, in a hopelessly mismanaged relief and reconstruction overseen by [...] what some local organizers have referred to as “the disaster industrial complex.” [p. 100.]

(This analysis is rejoined by Naomi Klein, who has dubbed the mix of profiteering from privatized and militarized aid and reconstruction “disaster capitalism.”) Reconstruction efforts have privileged massive contracting corporations, while Bush suspended the Davis-Bacon minimum wage law for federal contracts. The wide-scale recruitment and exploitation of immigrant workers is among the efforts that have “permanently forestalled [the] right of return” for black New Orleanians. [p. Sexton, 126.]

The widespread abandonment that forms the premise of racial/disaster capitalism is illustrated by the reality that first responders were not state agencies or large charities but, as Charmaine Neville describes in “How We Survived the Flood,” remaining local residents, and activists. In “Southerners on New Ground,” both the title of an essay in the book and the organization, SONG, Mandy Carter details how SONG worked with other lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) organizations to coordinate financial, housing, and community support for displaced people, and to educate disaster relief agencies on nondiscrimination. In “This Is Criminal,” Malik Rahim, a longtime New Orleans resident and community organizer, put out a call for support to national activist networks. The response has been global and resulted in the formation of

Common Ground Collective, more fully described in Sue Hilderbrand, Scott Crow, and Lisa Fithian's piece, "Common Ground Relief." In "The Birth of the Clinic," Roger Benham describes how he and other "action medics" arrived from the East Coast and set up a first aid station and then later developed more comprehensive medical care in militarized conditions. The already broken public health sector has not been rebuilt (Charity Hospital remains closed), and the first-aid station has now grown into the Common Ground Health Clinic and the Latino Health Outreach Project.

Given the worldwide trend toward dismantling the welfare state, mutual aid appears to be an increasingly necessary, as well as socially fulfilling, alternative. This makes criticism of ongoing white privilege in the rebuilding of New Orleans important for multiracial, antiracist efforts elsewhere. Activists Benham, Hilderbrand, Crow, and Fithian describe how white privilege has been used to leverage resources. But they also express concern that "so many predominantly white activists were able to flock to New Orleans to work, while so many black New Orleanians did not have the means to do so and remained stranded in their diaspora." [Benham, p. 79.] Indeed, as of late 2006, some 60 percent of New Orleans residents remained displaced (with the figures much higher for the lower Ninth Ward) due to desperately slow funding of housing reconstruction, lack of health and welfare infrastructures, and federal refusal to reopen public housing. In "To Render Ourselves Visible," Alisa Bierra, Mayaba Liebenthal, and Incite! Women of Color Against Violence refer to the presence of non-local white activists and absence of longtime black residents as "back-door disaster gentrification (also known as volunteer fallout)." [p. 42.] They have called for a critical transformation of the meaning of national and interracial solidarity to re-establish both the primacy of local leadership and the priorities of those most affected.

Katrina provided the opportunity for "this current brutal dispossession" of black New Orleanians from their city. [Flaherty, p. 103.] Violence is key to the elite effort to "restructure New Orleans in the gentrified image of a most lucrative and racially hygienic collective fantasy." [Sexton, p. 126.] As reproductive justice activist Loretta Ross has written elsewhere:

"They called this Urban Renewal in the 1950s and 1960s. ... In the 1980s and 1990s, it was called Gentrification. Now it will be called Security."

Thus, state violence has been obscured here as elsewhere through the discourse of security, which promises safety through militarized policing but does nothing to enable livelihoods or self-determination.

The meaning of who and what is recognized as violent is fundamental to the struggle against white supremacy and racial/disaster capitalism. Because of the already existing "domestic militarization" of communities of color, state violence following Hurricane Katrina was rendered invisible by the spectacle of black "lawlessness" and sexual violence. This spectacle was used to justify "a practically nonexistent rescue operation by focusing on calls for more criminalization and population control rather than rescue." [Bierra, Liebenthal, and Incite!, p. 33.] Two indicative markers of population control include the facile manner in which families were forcibly separated while seeking safety, and the chaotic lists of missing people that comprised the laissez-faire effort toward reunion:

families again severed  
like before  
when the auction block was swollen with our blood and tears  
the years are of no consequence

The years are of no consequence, because such disregard for family ties was made possible by continued denigration of black women and their efforts to raise families and create community.

Disregard is not passive but enabled and reproduced by interlocking forms of violence, which work “primarily on the bodies of women of color.” [Bierra, Liebenthal, and Incite!, p. 35.] Incite! insists that legitimate issues of safety and violence be dealt with in ways that do not reproduce sexual or state violence. They argue that developing community accountability within ethnic/racial groups is “an opportunity for communities to assert their own political agency by developing responses to intracommunity violence while also organizing against violence perpetrated on the community by the state.” [p. 35.] For Incite!, building community is an anti-violence strategy [p. 36] that is undermined by “[p]opulation control policies, such as the destruction of affordable housing, denial of health care, lack of environmentally safe public schools, and lack of other critical community services.” [p. 39.] Hence the struggle for community is the struggle against displacement through imprisonment and gentrification alike. In both cases, militarized meanings of security enable dispossession while undermining communities’ capacities for livelihood and self-determination.

The idea of New Orleans as a homeplace seemed to be lost in the controversy over the words and phrases used to name displacement. “Survivor,” “refugee,” “evacuee,” “victim,” “displaced,” “Katrina diaspora,” “right to return,” and most recently “internally displaced persons,” or “IDP.” What appeared to be at issue was the image of the Third World in the First, which troubled the American geographic imaginary and revealed the whiteness of national affiliations.

Before the hurricane  
No tents were prepared for the fleeing  
Because Americans do not live in tents  
Tents are for Haiti for Bosnia for Rwanda

Refugees are the rest of the world  
—Hammad, “On Refuge and Language,” [p. 168.]

The discursive connections between refugee and Third World were rejected by many people who interpreted the rhetoric as a way of rendering black Americans beyond the pale of U.S. citizenship, while simultaneously papering over the scandalous reality that “Katrina was not an anomaly. It was simply business as usual.” [South End Press Collective, “Up from the Depths,” p. viii.] While this reckoning rightly rejects whiteness as the crux of national belonging, it unwittingly reproduces the white supremacist privileging of “American” over the Third World.

A reading of the geopolitics of naming complicates these anti-racist rights claims. As international law scholar B.S. Chimni argues elsewhere, the legal category of refugee has been applied selectively over its short history, even as the more recent invention of IDP undermines the rights of refugees under the cloak of humanitarianism. Common to the selective application of refugee and IDP status has been the effort on the part of wealthy nations to keep the masses of people of the global South in place and obscure the forces fueling migration, which bind the global North and South. During the Cold War, people displaced from and within the newly minted “Third World” were largely ignored (except those favorable to geopolitical calculations) and later contained. By the early 1980s, when many from the global South sought refuge in the global North from proxy

wars and economic deprivations of structural adjustment, their movement was countered by exclusionary migration policies engendering global apartheid in the name of security.

There is, then, an unintended “social truth of ‘black refugees’” that potentially enables interracial, transnational solidarities against “white life as a system of dominance.” [Rodríguez, p. 134.] African Americans share with other peoples histories of forced displacement and diasporic communities as a result of the slave trade, colonization of Native peoples and lands, and ongoing imperial military occupations. Thus, “the time of Katrina articulates a global indictment of white life, framed by the possibility of a political and existential identification with the context and substance of a critical common sense of black and third world death.” [Rodríguez, p. 134.] Around the world, different groups’ capacities for safety and livelihood are structured by the “militarized ordering of human disposability” [Rodríguez, p. 144]—be it through (carceral) containment or forced displacement—at multiple, but related, geographic scales.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights states that internally displaced persons “shall enjoy, in full equality, the same rights and freedoms under international and domestic law as do other persons in their country.” While efforts have been made to use this human rights framework to hold the U.S. government accountable for its despicable (in)actions, does the discourse of IDP in this case merely whitewash the racialized status of “refugee?” James asks:

[W]ill it matter if we are called “Americans” rather than “refugees?” When and where is nation-state membership a passport that possesses tangible value in terms of mobility and survivability, a value that state and civil society must respect for bodies first and foremost recognized as black and impoverished rather than *human*? [p. 160.]

Indeed, the state did not recognize human suffering, but rather saw “black-and-poor” in terms of criminality—deserving neither safety nor survival. Thus, honoring the *human* right to return and recognizing IDP status necessarily means creating a state that is accountable to all out of one that has proved to be so thoroughly racist. The contradictions may be great, but the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition point out that this grievance is shared by other displaced peoples around the world. Rather than bolstering American exceptionalism in the rejection of “Third World” or refugee status, the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition’s efforts emphasize the social bankruptcy of the U.S. state.

The future for a black New Orleans poses the necessity of a third Black Reconstruction (Sexton, after Eric Mann after W.E.B. DuBois) at a scale that must be global. Rodríguez calls for a “different paradigm of *identification*” and praxis that can traverse the transnational, “localized sites of U.S. white supremacy” [p. 149]. The object is to make impossible “white civic life as the fundamental and collective project that simultaneously precedes, constitutes, and overdetermines empire, globalization, neoliberalism, etcetera” [Rodríguez, p. 151]. Indeed, Katrina further illustrates the centrality of racial capitalism to the production of disaster ecologies—whether famines or fires as in Mike Davis’ *Late Victorian Holocausts* or *Ecology of Fear* respectively, or human sacrifice zones created by the military. The dynamics of racial capitalism are also revealed in organizing efforts to rebuild following “natural” disasters, for example, those of Red Thread in Guyana following massive flooding in 2005 or women’s organizing in Honduras after Hurricane Mitch.

*What Lies Beneath* documents individual and collective experience, anger and compassion that work to “demystify the notion of ‘natural disaster’ as something that *naturally* kills the abject”

[Rodríguez, p. 150]. Such demystification is necessary at a time in which the uneven effects of environmental degradation are interpreted in apocalyptic Malthusian terms and veiled in the rhetoric of “natural security.” While the discourse of security has obscured the state violence, the anti-violence strategy that Incite! proposes can clarify the ways in which violence of displacement and containment alike have been central to constituting the conditions for capitalist accumulation. Incite!’s desire to build community places livelihood and self-determination at the forefront, thereby offering the potential of linking anti-gentrification and anti-enclosure struggles. The stakes of racial capitalism and its deadly ecologies are already visceral. *What Lies Beneath* places anti-racism at the center of green reconstruction of ecologies and economies.