THE STORM CALLED AMERICA: HURRICANE KATRINA AS A DISCURSIVE FIGURE AND THE RHETORIC OF TRAUMA

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To all the people who struggled and prayed for me to be here
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Hurricane Katrina is a cultural event that has entered into the rhetorical discourse of America and emerged as a discursive figure. As a discursive figure, Katrina is a tensor – what Lyotard calls a disruptor because of its ability to disrupt normative processes of signification – that intensifies, through hyper-reflection, the discourses of representation and presentation in America. While race and class have long been determinants of the impact and extent of the trauma for any given situation, this project aims to examine the articulation of race and class through articulations that have been given thickness, or intensity, because of the experience of trauma. Ultimately, I am also suggesting that American society has historically, religiously, politically, and economically engineered a culture of disposability that follows along race, gender, religious, and class lines, and these lines are not mutually exclusive. Sometimes they come together in uncomfortable ways, at least for the victim of this disposability.

This project will be seen as a contribution to the research on Katrina because it focuses on how people speak their trauma into existence or render their experience into words. It focuses on narrative control and how people rhetorically situate themselves in a socio-cultural context. The focus of this project is the cultural exigency that Katrina
created. While many scholars have written about specific aspects of the storm – race, class, gender, urbanization, and even scientific observations – there have not been many projects dedicated to the discursive and rhetorical productions of the storm except for the few articles that discussed media representations. This project will fill that void by looking at multiple rhetorical “situations” generated by the storm. I suggest that Hurricane Katrina has been historicized into a figure of signification within various rhetorical threads in an effort to represent and re-present the “thickness” of the experience of the storm and, by extension, of post-9/11 America. This thickness, this density of experience, has a direct effect on the articulation of traumatic experience, and it shapes the response to the storm while simultaneously transforming the storm itself into a discursive figure of multiple traumatic exigencies.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: ARTICULATING EXPERIENCE IN THE FACE OF TRAUMA

The relationship between what we experience and how we talk about that experience is incredibly complex. This project will examine that relationship between experience and articulation. Using Hurricane Katrina, I will demonstrate how the trauma of those who experienced the storm directly shapes the contours of the rhetorical productions that surround the storm. In doing so, I hope to show that the rhetoric produced about an event is the product of the relation between the variability of the perception about an experience and the fluidity of articulation.

Hurricane Katrina is an event with significant implications for American culture. While the storm itself was devastating, what the storm revealed about American society in the 21st century changed the nature of the storm from a meteorological event into a cultural-social one. To be clear, it was not the hurricane itself that made the storm into an Event. Other hurricanes like Hurricane Andrew in 1992 and Hurricane Sandy in 2012 were either larger or deadlier than Katrina.¹ What makes Katrina stand out is the aftermath of the storm, the blatant incompetence or indifference of federal and local government, and the indexing of how race relations would play out in Millennial America. Indeed, one of the main significations of Katrina is its ability to simultaneously reconstruct precedent and sameness. Similar to how we think of “Hiroshima” as an idea that exceeds the actual event of its destruction, Hurricane Katrina is an overdetermined incident and idea that directly reflects and signifies various aspects of 21st century American culture.

America. The storm has become conflated with various socio-cultural histories that have re-affirmed the American narrative of race and class for some observers, unveiled a previously suppressed American narrative of inequality for others, and for others still, demonstrated the issues we only theorize about in our respective academic houses.

Much of the literature on Katrina at this point is contained within essays featured in journals or anthologies. There are also several nonfiction books, such as Dave Eggers’ *Zeitoun*, texts written by historians such as Douglas Brinkley’s *The Great Deluge*, and several autobiographical accounts from survivors of the storm. Additionally, the conversations about Katrina come from multiple disciplines such as history and oral history, sociology, environmental science, English, cultural studies, women’s studies, critical race theory, urban space studies, religion, ethnography, political science, music, and communications. And even though these disciplines are varied and diverse, the conversations tend to emphasize the following concepts: race and class.

It would seem from a cursory review of the written texts that these two concepts of race and class in particular are unavoidable when discussing Katrina. In fact, there

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seems to be a debate over which concept should be most prominent in the discussion of Katrina, with some scholars, such as Michael Eric Dyson, pointing to race as the predominant theme. He suggests that the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina is a result of the consequences of racism in America, and this racism not only helped to create the conditions of poverty that hindered many Blacks from fleeing the storm, but it also affected governmental response as well as media coverage of the victims of the storm. By contrast, scholars like A.L. Reed Jr. and Harvey Molotch suggest that class was a better indicator of the possible aftermath of Katrina, often citing the evidence of Bernard Parrish, a predominantly White neighborhood that also suffered damage. Still other scholars point to the intersectionality of race and class.

This study will take a different approach by focusing on the concentrated conflation of both classism and racism to look at the entire ecology of significations that made the Katrina event possible. I am treating Katrina as a discursive figure – what Lyotard calls a disruptor because of its ability to disrupt normative processes of signification – that intensifies, through hyper-reflection, the discourses of representation and presentation in America. While race and class have long been determinants of the impact and extent of the trauma for any given situation, this project aims to examine the articulation of race and class through articulations that have been given thickness, or

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5 See Cedric Johnson’s edited work, *Neoliberal Deluge*; Hillary Potter, ed. *Racing the Storm: Racial Implications and Lessons Learned from Hurricane Katrina*; and “Reading Hurricane Katrina: Race, Class, and the Biopolitics of Disposability” by Henry Giroux
intensity, because of the experience of trauma. It is the gestures of racism and classism during the experience of Katrina that drives this project. Ultimately, I am also suggesting that American society has historically, religiously, politically, and economically engineered a culture of disposability that follows along race, gender, religious, and class lines, and these lines are not mutually exclusive. Sometimes they come together in uncomfortable ways at least for the victims of this disposability. I am focusing this project on the articulations of the multiple traumas that have made the storm’s interpretation overdetermined.

Hopefully this project will be seen as a contribution to the research on Katrina because it will focus on how people speak their trauma into existence or render their experience into words. It will focus on narrative control and how people rhetorically situate themselves in a socio-cultural context using language. In this sense, I am viewing Katrina as disruptor that “refuses/disrupts all attempts at assimilation into an ongoing genre of discourse.”

The cultural exigency that Katrina created is the focus of this project. The identity rhetoric surrounding Katrina reintroduces and re-examines the same questions about American identity, American ethos, and American citizenry that occurred in the twentieth century.

While many scholars have written about specific aspects of the storm – race, class, gender, urbanization, and even scientific observations – there have not been many projects dedicated to the discursive and rhetorical productions of the storm except for the few articles that discussed media representations. This project will fill that void by looking at multiple rhetorical “situations” generated by the storm. I suggest that

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Hurricane Katrina has been historicized into a figure of signification within various rhetorical threads in an effort to represent and re-present the “thickness” of the experience of the storm and, by extension, of post-9/11 America. This thickness, this density of experience, has a direct effect on the articulation of traumatic experience, and it shapes the response to the storm while simultaneously transforming the storm itself into a discursive figure of multiple traumatic exigencies.

Katrina re-exposes multiple realities and multiple histories, and what is in circulation around the storm is a set of historical narratives that attempt to conceptualize those realities. Implicated in these depictions of history are politics, economics, media, popular culture, environment, and even history itself. Ultimately, the conversations around Katrina are hyper-reflections on the storm. Thus, what I am trying to do with this project is identify and understand how and why Katrina is figured in various rhetorical threads as a disruptor and discursive figure; then, I will examine the historical, political, and socio-cultural contexts and consequences that transform the storm into a discursive figure. Finally, using popular culture to enter into these rhetorical ecologies of Katrina, I will discuss how those historical, political, and sociological and cultural contexts ultimately transform the storm into a simultaneous criticism, commentary, and examination of 21st century America.

In order to think about the cultural impact of the storm rhetorically, I am going to combine several different concepts: cultural trauma, Jean Francois Lyotard’s “discursive figure” and “hyper-reflection,” and rhetorical circulation and transformation. It is my hope that readers can clearly see that Lyotard was right to suggest that cultural and social experience is intrinsically linked to the system of language; that is, ideological
imperatives, social experiences, collective memories, and national narratives bear down on language and dictate the form and the construction of the language system, while, in turn, the language system provides epistemological – and sometimes phenomenological – stability to the experience. And from that system of relations, one creates various other exchanges and relations that form more publics, collective memories, cultural and social experiences, and national narratives.

While the structure of language can create reality by codifying experience within a discursive tradition, the relation between experience and articulation is arbitrary. Further, experience is heavily mediated by social, cultural, and historical contingencies that ultimately dictate the choices we make when we bestow an experience with discursive properties. Trauma affects experience by influencing how that experience enters discourse and how that discourse circulates within a given rhetorical ecology. For this project, Hurricane Katrina is the discursive figure that circulates and accumulates historical and cultural narratives.

As a discursive figure that continues to generate, produce, and reproduce multiple signifiers that enter into rhetoric and circulate around the storm creating social implications, conversations, and significations, the figure enters into multiple rhetorical threads that continue to transform the storm so that it is always a symbol, if you will, for whatever conversation, rhetorical thread, or discursive chain that it is used to signify; thus, everything produced about Katrina is a hyper-reflection on the storm. Works produced about Katrina, including this one, are attempts at finding some epistemological stability for a “hauntingly there alterity” that disrupted the relation
between experience and articulation or utterance.\textsuperscript{7} To further clarify the use of these concepts – cultural trauma, discourse figure, hyper-reflection, and rhetorical circulation and transformation – I will take some time to demonstrate how each concept works separately and how they will work together.

**Discourse, Figure’s Hyper-Reflection on Trauma**

The first thing to understand about Lyotard’s figure is that it is not the same thing as a figure of speech. The figure is “a kind of energy, a force, a power latent within discourse; a power capable of exceeding all thematisation and so creating that potential semantic space within which newness could come.”\textsuperscript{8} Lyotard positions the figural somewhere between phenomenology and discourse; that is, between experience and articulation.

To put it more succinctly, a discursive figure is the line that separates the signifier and the signified; it is a magnification of the arbitrary nature of signification through an examination of the relation between the signified and the signifier, the experience and the word (articulation). The figure emphasizes the collision between phenomenology and discourse, more precisely, how discourse is shaped by phenomena and how phenomena shapes discourse. For Lyotard, human experience has a direct influence on every utterance and every gesture and every system. We never just enter into discourse, for what happens between discourse and phenomenology is beyond the structuralist model. As Lyotard notes, “There is a fact which our experience of speech

\textsuperscript{7} Keith Jenkins uses this phrase to explain how one encounters the figure in discourse. I am using this phrase to suggest that Katrina is the specter, the ‘hauntingly there alterity’ that disrupts the relation between experience and utterance.

\textsuperscript{8} Jenkins, “Modernist Disavowals” 376
does not permit us to deny, the fact that every discourse is cast in the direction of something which it seeks to seize hold of, that it is incomplete and open, somewhat as the visual field is partial, limited, and extended by an horizon.”

Discourse’s attempts to grasp experience is limited to or expanded by the density or thickness of that experience. Likewise, discourse is empty without the experience of perception and the observable; simultaneously, the observable and the perceived are contingent on language to codify it. They are both yoked together in a relation that demands that both are mediated by the other. This is Lyotard’s primary argument in *Discourse, Figure*. To this end, the discursive figure is always intertextual, and it is not just the articulation of experience that is at stake; it is also the articulation of the experience of articulation – attempts to make phenomena manageable and tangible – that matters here, as Keith Jenkins notes, “while the linking of phrases and sentences is a necessity (everything has to be phrased somehow—even silence) what phrase or sentence…comes next is utterly contingent…for Lyotard justice is precisely the attempt to respect the contingency of each linking as the corollary of respecting the singular event-hood of each phrase, each sentence, and thus each ‘actual’ event.”

Lyotard looks at how subjective experience affects articulation, and he suggests that articulation is heavily mediated by the unconscious desires of the subject. For example, just as perception is culturally mediated, when that perception enters into discourse, it is an articulation of the desires of a culturally mediated experience. Sometimes, however, a situation or experience can occur that can cause a break within

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9 Jean Lyotard, *Discourse Figure*. Translated by Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). 32

10 Jenkins, "Modernist Disavowals" 375
the discursive chain, and this break affects the desires of the subject and how the
discourse around that subject is constituted. Lyotard suggests that art or dreams can
serve as the object that can cause a break between experience and articulation. I
argue that trauma and certain other events (revolutions or acts of terror and perhaps
even love) can have the same result. When something occurs that has the potential to
disrupt the relationship between the signifier (experience or observable object) and the
signified (the utterance), what occurs is a separation of perception and experience from
designation, reference, and signification. I am looking at how trauma can create that
break between perception and utterance.

In the anthology *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, the authors focus on the
process of trauma creation and how that process is linked to group identity and
collective affiliations. Jeffrey Alexander, the editor of this anthology, writes:

> Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this
> acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity’s sense of its own
> identity. Collective actors decide to represent social pains as a
> fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they come from,
> and where they want to go.\(^1\)

In this sense, it is not the actual trauma but the process of trauma that matters. If we
consider that there are a multitude of causes that can have a direct impact on the core
of a collectivity’s identity—and in some cases, those threats to identity can form an
identity, as is the case of Black Americans—then we must acknowledge that trauma is
always overdetermined.

This overdetermination triggers a social process in which multiple social and
even cultural events become displaced on to the triggering event. Alexander describes

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\(^1\) Jeffrey Alexander, ed., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2004), 10
the traumatic process as a gap between the event and the representations of that event, and the “cultural construction of trauma begins with the claim” to some “fundamental injury, an exclamation of the terrifying profanation of some sacred value, a narrative about a horribly destructive social process.”12 This gap, then, is related to the break that forms in discourse that is fundamental to the creation of a figure. This gap is what Lyotard calls the “figural space.”13

Because the figure is so mercurial, the only way to get at the figure is via reflection. The unrepresentable figure manages to be represented and re-presented through the process of what Lyotard calls hyper-reflection. That is to say, discourse “does not speak of it, but speaks it, or speaks according to it.”14 It is reflection that “must travel the border zone where the first silence—that of structure—touches the second—that of the phenomenon—to produce speech.”15 In the face of trauma, or the suddenness of the break between experience and understanding that experience, we are always gesturing at the impossible in an attempt to make it possible via language. A loss of words can still be communicated with an open mouth, splayed hands and a bewildered, angered, or fearful expression. And all of these nonverbal, but nevertheless articulated gestures are displaced, condensed, and figured onto whatever object or experience that re-presents and best represents the experience of the event. As Lyotard notes,

One should stop interpreting language as inertia, without consequence...For at the moment we describe the transgressions of the

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12 Alexander, Cultural Trauma, 11
13 Lyotard, Discourse Figure p. 32
14 Ibid, 52
15 Ibid, 50
order of language, we are speaking, signifying, and communicating them, thereby introducing them back into the transgressed order. Herein lies the limitless power of the system, to still be able to utter what reduces it to silence and allow the commentary of precisely what resists it, namely the operations of condensation, displacement, and figurability. For everything can be described, that is, signified, transmitted, even the silences that in language are not of language, even uncoded blanks, even the intervals that resist being regulated, even the torsions that lie outside of syntax.\textsuperscript{16}

This process of capturing experience, even the silences, is called hyper-reflection. Hyper-reflection is a method of re-presenting the unrepresentable once the figure emerges from the figural space and enters articulation. It is an occurrence that takes place in the unconscious between the signifiers that create language and discourse and the signifieds that create concepts and images. It is also mediated by desire. Experiences are interpreted by the viewer or perceiver of the object and it is through the phenomenon of experience, especially traumatic experience, that displacement, condensation, and figurability can occur. A traumatic event is “not constitutable but only graspable through deconstruction and ressus.”\textsuperscript{17} The line that separates the two, the signifier and the signified or the object and the articulation, is where the figural space lives. The line is the space, the figural space, and the event, the trauma, is the disrupter that interrupts the previous relation between the signifier and the signified. And it is the disruptor, the thing that eventually becomes the figure, that enters into the process of hyper-reflection and is articulated through the mediated filter of desires because of the overdetermined nature of experience.

According to Lyotard, in the same way that the unconscious space affects our dreams and reflects our desires, the figural space has the same function except that it

\textsuperscript{16} Lyotard, \textit{Discourse, Figure}, 55-56

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid
works on the system of language. Within the figural space, displacement and condensation occur – all heavily mediated by the desires of the subject – and this process produces a figure. This figure stands in place of the unrepresentable object which is configured, because of its inaccessibility to discourse, as an alterity. This inaccessibility makes all attempts at articulation a gesture *around* the object which then becomes mediated and filtered through our own experiences, and this is then mediated and filtered through a social system which is mediated and filtered through a cultural system.

The disruption that trauma can cause creates a space between perception and discourse that allows “a figure to be installed into the depths of our speech which operates as the matrix of these effects; which attacks our words in order to make them into forms and images…By means of the *Entzweieung* the object is lost; by means of the phantasy it is re-presented.”¹⁸ Now, if we examine the space that occurs in the process of figuration alongside the space that occurs in the process of trauma, we can see how the latter directly impacts the former.

The trauma process is a speech act. It is overdetermined in its constitution and it submerges itself into the figural space of discourse and around the figure being created there. Once this trauma or traumatic process has located the disruptor--in this case, Hurricane Katrina--the trauma itself goes through the process of figuration and it becomes a part of the condensation and intertextualization of the figure. From there, it re-enters into discourse, but it is barraged by the various displacements of the subjects, the individuals caught up in the experience, and the utterances and gestures that they

¹⁸ Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 129
make at the figure. As the figure circulates, carrying its trauma and its displacements, the discursive signs are fragmented, recontextualized, and repurposed by the various publics that the newly formed rhetorical threads address, and each gesture at the figure causes it to constantly transform as it is continuously mediated by the desires of the speaker and the speaker’s public. And all of this is an attempt at reflecting on the original traumatic experience. This is hyper-reflection.

Trauma may produce the speech act, but the hyper-reflection helps it to circulate. Ultimately, what is re-presented is a disruptor (event, work of art, dream, poem or in this sense, Katrina) that is significantly changed and perhaps reified because of its encounters with the trauma process as well as the process of condensation and displacement. All of this creates a situation where there is no singular thread of conversation that can account for or address the meaning behind an event. At most, language can circulate around the tensor, and as it circulates, it transforms the tensor into whatever its public needs it to be.

This is how language attempts to “get at” experience. Within the process of hyper-reflection is a mercurial negotiation between the unconscious, the conscious, the ego, the observable world, and the cultural coding of human experience and language. The observed or experienced object enters into this milieu and comes out identified within a discursive chain in the form of a figure. This figure is the object, or subjective experience, in its intensity – the experience of definitive alterity that demands to be identified or articulated but simultaneously overwhelms the system that is in place. When this happens, the unconscious – which already mediates the language system – begins to apply other forms of mediation as a method of coping and/or locating some
type of epistemological stability thereby heightening the state of affect of the observable experience or phenomenon.

What the event once was is swallowed by a newly emerging figure that has been shaped by the ultimate desire for experiential and discursive stability by the subject, and once this figure enters into discourse in its newly formed state, it takes on more condensations, displacements, and overdetermination, and each instance of condensation, displacement, and overdetermination is a hyper-reflection back onto the original observable experience. The figure, then, shapes the meaning, and the figure is shaped by experience.

We are able to gesture at, articulate, re-present, and re-imagine the unrepresentable through the process of hyper-reflection, and this process is contingent on several factors that include, but are not limited to, the desires of the speaker and/or the audience. This mediation provides some measure of narrative permanence to a victim of a trauma or to a certain public that is related to the trauma or even constituted by that trauma; thus, what hyper-reflection does is create modalities of discourse that help to produce various rhetorical threads in order to gesture at the destabilizing event. These modalities take into account the condensation of the figural as well as the displacement of other narrative fragments, and they merge them onto the original event.

This suggests that once something is perceived, discourse, objects (or events), and experience are all assimilated and intertwined (condensation), metaphors are traded (displacement), and the relations of words and images produce a concept (figurability). This makes the discursive figure and the act of utterance as well as the rhetoric that circulates around it inherently intertextual, and the insistence on meaning
and multiple meanings behind a traumatic experience is the main function of hyper-reflection. Lyotard writes:

In every utterance, there are two dimensions: the dimension of language and the dimension of intention, the linguistic gesture – where the speaker’s intention to signify thrusts itself. We call this dimension “speaking” but only because it respects the constraints of language. The utterance can respect the constraints of language, or it can undo the constraints so as to subject the elements of language to desire, inserting into and between words the same unpredictable intervals that separate and bring together imaginary things and infuse the space of language with desire, built on the polarity of the close and the distant….The utterance places the figural into abstraction, the real into arbitrary endowing discourse with almost the same flesh as that of the sensory.\textsuperscript{19}

Based on this idea, it is fair to say that when we signify, we apply words to a concept or object. The relationship between the words we choose and the concept, object, or experience, is arbitrary. If we take a figure, and place it into abstraction, it can come to mean any number of things depending on the interpreter. Furthermore, this abstract figure becomes arbitrary as we find the words or discourse to constitute an experience or intensity for said object. This indicates that we assign meanings to objects and events in accordance with our experiences. It is important to note that in these cases, meaning is highly subjective; therefore, situations like Hurricane Katrina can have multiple exigencies. These exigencies, then, lead us to a discussion of rhetorical circulation and transformation.

**Rhetorical Circulation and Transformation of the Figure**

The figure, fully-formed, enters into discourse; it enters into a signifying chain – one of its own making, where one begins to hyper-reflect on the original event. If we consider that the figure is created from the disruption of a signifying chain, then we have

\textsuperscript{19} Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 57
to consider that everything that is overdetermined about its causation, condensed by its process of becoming, and displaced by its emergence into discourse creates a new chain – one in which the production of signifiers becomes representations and re-presentations of what the figure represents, and one in which the modality of how that representation takes place is hyper-reflective. The signifying chain that emerges produces rhetorical threads around it that on the one hand substantiate its existence, and on the other hand attempt to gesture at it via articulation. This is where rhetorical circulation and transformation enters the frame.

Rhetorical circulation is, broadly put, the study of how rhetoric circulates through and around a public. A text or an event fragments, combines, re-presents, represents, repurposes and recontextualizes in accordance with the demands placed on it by the speaker and/or the audience. That demand is mediated by desire, the same desire that influences the shape of the figural. Within this circulation is what Catherine Chaput calls “multiple intertwined rationalities.” These rationalities are constituted by the desires of the audience, and they have a particular disregard for temporality and spatiality as they work to constitute rhetoric. An audience is on the one hand interpellated by that rhetoric

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21 Catherine Chaput. p. 9
and on the other hand the audience works as a conscious producer of that rhetoric in order to create a narrative that transcends time and space.

Both Chaput and Edbauer contend that affect moves throughout the rhetorical situation, the speaker, and the audience. This affect dictates the shape of the rhetoric. Affect, according to Chaput, “operates within a transsituational and transhistorical structure and energizes our habitual movements as well as our commonsensical beliefs”; thus, it is affect that measures rhetorical value, and “moves throughout material and discursive spaces to connect the different spaced moments composing its organic whole.”22 Both Chaput and Edbauer recommend that we move away from the idea of the rhetorical situation to the idea of ecologies - rhetorical ecologies for Chaput and ecologies of affect for Edbauer.

Like Edbauer and Chaput, I agree that it makes no sense to think of the rhetorical situation as something that is fixed. If language creates the reality of experience, then rhetoric gives that reality meaning while discourse organizes, categorizes and codifies that reality. These realities are always in flux because they are always already interpellated by the socio-historical paradigms and the affective desires of the speaker as well as the affective receptivity of the audience. Just as a discursive figure can mediate multiple discourses and situations, so too can rhetoric expand the capacity and influence of the figure within the various discursive traditions. If the relation of the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, then it is logical to think of the relation between discourse and rhetoric as one that seeks to undo that arbitrary nature by making it

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possible to have multiple meanings, points of dispersion, and trajectories. Situations and realties are always in flux. Discourse and rhetoric work together to circulate, mediate, explain, and in some cases alter the reality of experience at the point of articulation.

As noted above, I am suggesting that Hurricane Katrina is the event that disrupted the path between articulation and experience because of the trauma that the storm and its aftermath created. This trauma not only creates the conditions for rhetoric to circulate, but it also ensures that the meaning behind the discursive formation of Katrina is fluid. Multiple, deeply affective, experiences are displaced onto the storm causing it to become an overdetermined, condensed figure of an experiential alterity. What is then articulated when we say “Hurricane Katrina” is multiple narrative threads. This is rhetorical circulation. Hurricane Katrina takes on the shape of the desires and experiences of the speakers, and what is distributed are various rhetorical threads in accordance to the desires of the speaker and the audience. I am using transformation here to consider representations. Hurricane Katrina is a representation of race relations, failing infrastructure, and bad policy in its intensity, in its thickness. Katrina is representing a way of experience.

Now, if rhetorical circulation is the flow of rhetoric, then rhetorical transformation is the “process of becoming rhetorical in divergent ways as something circulates and enters into diverse situations.”

23 It is not lost on me that I am using a theory that discusses circulation, and I am referring to an event that has circulation as its trajectory. Katrina became a figure the moment its impact disrupted the trajectory between

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23 Gries, Laurie. Personal Email, October, 2014
experience and articulation and became embedded with affect. Once that affect began circulating, the storm, already figured because of the associated trauma caused by policies and practices that were collapsed into the storm, went through a series of transformations—rhetorical transformations that connected events under multiple figures while simultaneously gesturing at various other situations, outcomes, and transhistorical narratives. Katrina, transformed, came to represent and gesture at race, class, religion, politics, and many other concepts, and it was repeatedly configured and reconfigured for the specific purposes of those various conversations.

Further, there are several key components to rhetorical circulation and transformation that that demonstrate the intensity of experience to create heightened effects. First and foremost, rhetorical circulation and transformation operate because of a linking of signs that then go on to form multiple rhetorical threads. The figure exists because of an amalgamation of events that is then overdetermined and condensed into a form. Once this happens, the articulation automatically becomes intertextual, and this is the second key component of rhetorical circulation and transformation. When a traumatic event happens, discursive chains shatter, and, as in the case of Hurricane Katrina, a bunch of rhetorical fragments are cast outward towards the event in an attempt to grasp it, and these rhetorical fragments circulate around the event, around the storm and its aftermath, around the publics, and around the subjects. These fragments are transhistorical and transsituational. The rhetorical threads that form are hyper-reflections on the condensed figural.²⁴

²⁴ Lyotard, “Hyper-Reflection and Ressus” from Discourse, Figure, p. 51
The desires of the subject, the individuals experiencing the event, are not to be discounted when talking about the perception of experience and the utterance. The figure comes out not as a signifier identifying a signified, but as a series of signifiers attempting to grasp at a signified. These signifiers enter a discursive chain, and they form rhetorics that are addressed to specific publics, and each public takes on the cause of the signifier (via hyper-reflection) as they have come to experience the initial object (the signified). Each rhetorical thread is filtered through the process that I described above, which, in turn, explains the various conversations and meanings that are produced around some experiences.

The individual subject or collective subjects understand their experiences with the object or event through the formation of the figure. After the process of language reaches the object, it is re-entered into language as a representation and re-presentation of the initial experience. Upon this reemergence into language, the object, which has become the figure – changed, mediated, heavily condensed and overdetermined, as well as having been subject to the rigors of displaced desires all over it – begins to circulate within, throughout, and around various publics as rhetorical threads that act as expressions of agency among the various publics. These individual rhetorical threads are the ideological exigency of truth-telling, the reconfiguration of identities, and the collective attempt at testifying to the intensity of the subjects’ own experiences. And as these threads circulate, narratives are formed – sometimes attached to historical narrative threads located within the collective memory of the publics and at other times linking and/or modifying old experiences to new circumstances.
As the figure circulates, it transforms in order to fulfill the needs of its audiences. This is how Katrina and its aftermath should be conceptualized because it seems to travel back and forth between concrete event and abstract experience while continuously being transformed along the way as it slides between multiple methodologies of talking about the realities of an experience. To give an example of how this process of figuration, circulation, and transformation works, the following section will include a close reading of Yusef Komunyakaa’s poem, “Requiem.”

Komunyakaa’s poem situates Hurricane Katrina as a plot point in a long narrative. The poem also treats the storm as a literary and cultural device that connects multiple rhetorical ecologies and intensifies the articulations of experience within those ecologies. And because Komunyakaa takes a narrative approach to his poem, he uses Katrina as the discursive figure that binds all of the histories and narratives together, and all of those histories are displaced onto and condensed into the intensity of the storm. This causes the fixity of the “situation” to dissolve, and what results is a rhetorically transsituated experience or chain of rhetorical ecologies that creates the conditions necessary for the storm’s transformation and its transformative power. Komunyakaa’s “Requiem” is a hyper-reflection on New Orleans, and it argues that New Orleans, being situated both geographically and historically where it is, is a place where something like Hurricane Katrina, and what it re-presents and represents, is par for the course.

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His decision not to specifically name Hurricane Katrina in the poem makes this argument apparent because this storm could have been about Hurricane Betsy or Hurricane Camille. It could have been about a severe flooding rain or even a symbolic storm of poverty, forced land transfers, environmental degradation, or economic and social policies that exacerbated the conditions of the storm. The fact that all of these possibilities exists throughout the poem is what makes the figuration of Katrina possible. All of those things are condensed and displaced onto the storm. When Komunyakaa begins his poem with the coordinating conjunction “So,” he is placing – or coordinating, if you will – the present-ness of the storm with the preceding utterances that have come to define New Orleans prior to Katrina and prior to the beginning of his poem. But Komunyakaa does not keep those articulations hidden.

The last word in the poem is the adverb “already” and in between the coordinating conjunction and the adverb is a fusion of histories from the distant past, the modern past, and the post-modern past that are caught up in the churn of the storm. With the use of the two parts of speech, or two rhetorical devices, Komunyakaa writes outside of the fixity of the rhetorical situation and establishes what Catherine Chaput calls “transsstituated circuits” that circulate around subjects, histories, and narratives, placing identity in flux and creating affective ecologies that affect both the telling and the receiving of the experience of narratives or, in this case, narrative poems. Komunyakaa implies that the storm flooded all notions of spatial and temporal constancy because it presents, for public consumption, the trauma narrative that has

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26 Steinberg, Acts of God, 82 – 86; Steinberg, Ted. Acts of God, 117
27 Chaput. “Rhetorical Circulation in Late Capitalism.” 6
long run concurrent with the more morally sel-righteous narrative that dominates how Americans think about themselves.

“So,” Komunyakaa begins, by the time the “ unholy high winds whiplashed over the sold-off marshland [which were] eaten back to a sigh of salt water, the Crescent City was already shook down to her pilings, her floating ribs, her spleen, and her back bone.” From this point, Komunyakaa begins to work through specific histories to illustrate what it means to be shaken down to a sigh of the former self. He takes us through the history of colonization and the Indigenous people, the history of slavery, and even Reconstruction. Each history points to a specific narrative that is consumed by the ebb and flow of time and regurgitated when time freezes, caught up in the intensity of articulating narratives and stormy moments. Whatever the current narrative inclination may be, the collective traumas of America and New Orleans always remain.

Komunyakaa begins in the Old New Orleans with its “Old World façade” and “quitclaim deeds. This old world, this colonial world, is the beginning of the shakedown that will occur in the city. He begins by looking at the consequences of this colonial era. The Choctaw and Chickasaw, who have a history preceding the Old World in the previous history, are reduced to a ghost song in the colonial history. Komunyakaa is reaching expansively around to not only include the narratives but also the consequences of the narratives. This is rhetorical circulation at work: deeds, histories, and traditions are never left behind. They just circulate around conscious and unconscious memory.

Komunyakaa seems to emphasize the subjective agent responsible for the changes that have taken place. All that is left of the Indigenous people, he notes, is a
ghost song and a “tally of broken treaties and absences.” This not only suggests a violent actor (someone is responsible for the broken treaties after all) but it also hints at another narrative that Komunyakaa is directly addressing. The response of shock and awe at what was happening during Katrina was itself a surprise. Komunyakaa takes up the task of reminding readers that this type of trauma, the trauma that involves a violent actor, is planted in the soil of New Orleans. But the violence is not necessarily physical. And Komunyakaa bears this out with his movement into a new narrative arc.

Referencing the Reconstruction, Komunyakaa links his discussion of King Cotton, the remittance man, and the scalawag, all pointing to economic and political violence against the land, against people who bear the markings of difference, with a prolonged struggle for viability that would emerge both during the Reconstruction era and during the Katrina era. However, since Komunyakaa’s view of history is not necessarily linear, the particular histories he focuses on serve as earmarks of moments of relation. Time, in this poem, is always, already in the process of collapsing into itself while simultaneously merging, twisting, and churning these events, these histories, into a singular, ontological whole. And it is this legacy that Komunyakaa points to when he writes

…already the sky was falling in on itself, calling like a cloud of seagulls gone ravenous as the Gulf reclaiming its ebb and flowchart whole the wind banged on shutters & unhinged doors from their frames & unshingled the low-ridged roofs

This is an image not just of the chaos of the storm but of poverty and proximity to impoverishment. In New Orleans, as in many other places in America, the less
economically secure a person is, the less politically and socially enfranchised. These people tend to gather around the most impoverished places where protections from the water are slack, superfund sites are near and where structures that are supposed to protect one from the elements are compromised. This is what Henry Giroux calls a “biopolitics of disposability.” It is also known as redlining or zoning laws that kept those people over there over there. What is in circulation here is the feeling and the chaos of being othered to such a degree.

The theory of the discourse figure suggests that different affects influence difference. Subjective experiences and those differences are what are articulated and then circulated, transforming the figure into whatever it needs to be in order to fulfill whatever role it needs to portray. Depending on ideological or even collective affiliations, even if the object is the same, the subjective experience will differ and produce different discursive traditions. This is why, as I will show later in my chapters on politics and media, we can have very different versions of the same event floating around the atmosphere.

At the level of affect, it is not a question of veracity but of feelings and the articulation that follows. This affective experience is what Komunyakaa is pointing to. The chaos of feelings comingles with the chaos of experience. All things conflate together, and at the same time, nothing, at least materially, is being held together: not the houses with their “horse-hair plaster walls,” not the land once claimed by the

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Choctaw and the Chickasaw, the remittance man or King Cotton, not the Black folk that worked the land, not the levees that used to keep the Gulf, the lakes, and the rivers out of the city. And because Komunyakaa situates the banging of the shutters in the midst of the galloping flood waters and the “believers humm[ing] ‘Precious Lord’ and ‘Deep River,’” we get a sense of virulent chaos. Spatially and temporally, everything is merged into one experience, intensifying that experience, without any parameters to reign in the chaos.

But this all happened, according to the logic of the poem, prior to Katrina’s arrival. So in this case, all events, all histories, and all narratives are referenced and referential – perhaps even influential – in the creation of a Katrina event. Experience, triggered by a traumatic cultural event, can merge together things that are often treated as disparate and distinct. The merging of these distinctions influences articulation in such a way that, as “Requiem” demonstrates, the chaos of articulation – the inability to distinguish between traumas in time and space – represents and re-presents, perhaps reimagines the chaos of experience.

This is demonstrated also in the pacing of the poem. It is one long sentence with few pauses to allow a reader to even take a breath. There is a sense of inundation here with the chaos of everything. This inundation also intensifies the reading of the poem and the understanding of the experience of being in the midst of a hurricane of narratives. The folklores, Komunyakaa writes, are rising up. In the face of a trauma, at the point where we ask, “what happened?” or “how could this happen?,” Komunyakaa is reminding readers of the “drunken curses” of the Indigenous peoples, the supplications and pleadings of the Black folk, the wailing of the land as men “dreamt land out of
water.” He is also reminding us of Mardi Gras parade krewes, the celebrations of Bacchus and the showmanship of the Zulu. All of these things float inside the floodwaters of Katrina.

And Hurricane Katrina itself has become a part of that folklore tradition. The conflation of stories is always circulating all the time, and as each story circulates, events, narratives, and experiences are transformed. The negotiation of all these identity narratives is what was buried in the “lallygag and sluice” and “pulsing beneath the Big Easy” while they “rolled between and through [themselves], caught in some downward tug & turn like a world of love affairs backed in a stalled inlet.” At this point in the poem, all the situations are becoming more fluid and overdetermined. The folklore began to rise because of Katrina’s ability to expose what was buried underneath. The “knelt down army of cypress” comes together as an amalgamation of identities. Katrina, then, added more fluidity to narratives that were already destabilized and fluid.

Because these narratives were already fluid, they were reduced to a mumble as the “great turbulent eye lingered on a primordial question, then turned—the gauzy genitalia of Bacchus & Zulu left dangling from magnolia & raintrees.” The central questions are: How do we render the experience of all that collective trauma into words? How do we insert that trauma into dialogue? How do we negotiate that trauma into an identity? And where does that trauma begin, and where does it end? Komunyakaa does not give an answer, but because he closes his poem with the refrain, already, he gives the impression that the experience of these cultural traumas are experiences that long ago bled into each other. The answer to these questions needs different rhetorical trajectories and discursive traditions to even begin the process of
articulation because there is no one answer that can satisfy. And that is the purpose of this project. While I will not offer any definitive answers, I will offer different contexts with which the question can be considered.

Komunyakaa’s poem is a repurposing of Hurricane Katrina. The poem’s form is a discursive form that views Katrina as a figure. The fluidity of its rhythm and its allegorical nature produces a heavily mediated utterance about the experience – both historical and present day – of New Orleans. The poem is also an object that makes an attempt at a “temporal transcendence” and a reconciliation of transhistorical and transsituational narratives that tell multiple stories about the land, and its people while simultaneously configuring Hurricane Katrina as another piece of the narrative as it attempts to “cast itself in the direction of multiple discourses.” Hurricane Katrina is a figure that has been inserted into discourse because of its trauma, and as a result, the storm has become a site of condensation, displacement and overdetermination of history, religion, race, class, politics, popular culture, and urban space. In this sense, Komunyakaa’s poem, like the figure of the storm, is layers upon layers of affect within different discursive traditions and rhetorical materialities. This project will attempt to look at how those layers of affect have impacted other discursive traditions that circulate around Hurricane Katrina.

**Katrina Figured**

In this project, I am arguing that Hurricane Katrina has become a discursive figure that moves through different rhetorical ecologies disrupting traditional rhetorical strategies and, in some cases, reveals what lies underneath. This project is about the movement of discourse within instances of rhetorical significance and the relation between experience and articulation. I will explore four main discursive traditions that
also double as social institutions: law, politics, media, and religion. Then I will explore the discourse and articulation of these institutions within dystopian and utopian frameworks.

Chapter 2 will focus on the politics of Katrina; more specifically, the politics of the narratives in circulation around Katrina and, by extension, America at the time of Katrina. To do this, I look at two juxtaposed rhetorical traditions: the mainstream political language of American identity and the urban language of Hip Hop, which seeks to articulate and wrest control of the dominant narrative. Using several of George Bush’s speeches and some of the Katrina rap that would emerge following Katrina that directly implicated Bush, I hope to show a type of call-and-response relationship between these two kinds of rhetorical performance. I intend to demonstrate that rap music has long played a part in the political and social articulations of what it means to be Black in America. It has always been caught in a dialectical relation with the political language of the day, a mirror image, if you will. This chapter will focus on official policy and rap’s response to that policy, dominant narratives and responses to those dominant narratives.

Chapter 3 will concern itself with the discourse of law and order. Using Agamben’s theory of the ‘state of exception’ and ‘bare life,’ I will suggest that the militarization of Hurricane Katrina, the prioritizing of law and order over rescue and recovery, is a gesture at a long-held contempt for and legal permissiveness regarding treating Black Americans and people of color as exceptions to the rule of legal protection. The forces of “law and order” have been central to creating a permanently marginalized and dispossessed class that is always policed and rarely ever protected by
the law. The post-9/11 “war on terror” allowed the Bush administration to expand force-of-law powers. I will suggest that, while Agamben’s philosophy of the state of government is relevant in today’s world, the philosophy misses the mark because it takes a Eurocentric view of the relation between government and its citizens. While it does gesture at the War on Terror as a method used by administrations all over the world to subject Muslim and people of Arabic descent to extralegal activities, it does so with a blinder on to the full extent of the ramifications of colonialism. In this chapter, I argue not only for the inclusion of Black Americans and other people of color in the consideration of Agamben’s incredibly important theory, I also demonstrate how being subject to a state of exception or a bare life bears out on the bodies of Black Americans. Even in the face of trauma – and sometimes that trauma is created by governments and laws – Black Americans remain the exception to the rule of protection.

This chapter will demonstrate how we can use Agamben’s theory to articulate the full expression of legal othering, by considering the Danziger Bridge incident and David Eggers’s novel Zeitoun. I hope to use Zeitoun to explicate Agamben’s state of exception theory. The Danziger Bridge incident, in which several police officers opened fire on unsuspecting Katrina survivors who were crossing the bridge in an attempt to get to higher ground and shelter, is used to demonstrate how we can include the long narrative arc of antagonistic relations between Black Americans and law enforcement to help understand the relations between the two. Agamben’s theory is helpful for inserting the experiences of Black Americans and law enforcement into a theoretical apparatus. And both Zeitoun and Danziger circulate prominently within the rhetorical ecology of the legal language of difference. What I hope to do here is to find a long-term way of
including the experiences of people of color, across diasporas, into these Western-centric theoretical apparatuses. Much can be mined from Agamben’s theory and, while brilliant, it does a disservice to groups of people who have always, already been in the grip of these exceptional states since the onset of colonialism and the post-colonial ramifications that followed. I hope to show that being in the state of exception, being in the midst of a bare life, is not a condition of the onset of terrorism in the new millennium, it is a condition of roving definitions of what and who constitutes terror, and people of color and particularly Black Americans prior to, during and after Katrina, have had to bear this type of legal othering for quite some time.

From here, I will move into discussing media representations of Hurricane Katrina. The media has long produced rhetorical significations of identity that have helped the institutions of law and politics classify people as othered. In this chapter, the media is shown to be both a contributing factor to the trauma of the Katrina event and a mainstay fixture for the signification of identities as mythologies. What circulates in the media, certainly during the Katrina event, are sustained mythologies that have kept identifying significations prominent in the discourse on American identity. The Black demon is the Black demon is the Black demon. Even in times of trouble and duress, the Black person is never free of his mythologized demonic self. What is present in the media is articulated and unarticulated classisms and racisms, biases, that makes the idea of a Black beast more believable than the idea of a Black victim. In the same way that the law and politics enforces norms and marginalizes alterities, the media helps to identify and justify their behavior through the dissemination of mythologies. Similar to my discussion on politics, this chapter will place Katrina within the rhetorical ecology of
narratives. Where the two chapters differ is that this chapter on media will not be about narrative control; rather, this chapter will be about narrative perceptions and differentiations, the mythologies in circulation not only of Blackness but also of Whiteness. By examining the popular finding/looting meme, I will make the case for the media as complicit in detrimental articulations of alterities that maintain a permanent underclass in America.

Finally, I will carry the theme of mythologies in media to mythological interpretations. My discussion on religion will focus on attempts at interpreting and thereby stabilizing the Katrina narrative. This chapter will focus largely on the “folklore rising up,” and it will focus on the production of “god” as a rhetorical device to explain the unexplainable or to manage the unmanageable. Katrina’s figure here is evident in the flood waters: narratives overflowing their banks. This chapter will explore how religion was used to frame the narrative of Katrina. Using Bill Lavender’s poem, “Jesus is the Reason,” I will interrogate the concept of god as curse or cure, and suggest that religious discourse is, above all else, a discourse of stabilized alterities that have been corralled into signification via the utterance. Within religious discourse, breaks in the discursive chain can remain breaks; absences in rhetorical logic can remain absent. God enters into the space and forces meaning and understanding where there is none to be had.

I will close this project with a discussion of the concepts of utopia and dystopia. I hope to use the two concepts as categories of critical analysis as opposed to places, or spaces, that define a landscape. In this chapter, all of the previous topics will coalesce
into a specific landscape of what Richard Nixon calls “slow violence.” Using Benh Zeitlin’s film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, I will suggest that the Katrina event exists because of a multitude of “broken things” that merged together at the right time and the right place to create such a devastating event. However, as Zeitlin’s film tries to suggest, no matter how dystopic the circumstances, utopic imaginings can and should police the border of what seems impossible. This chapter will suggest that while the violence inflicted on the victims of Katrina was slow in the making, there is some possibility of hope that remains, but it will take a structural shift in order to make this hope possible.

In conclusion, I am situating Hurricane Katrina as a specter or a “hauntingly there cultural alterity” that instigated the re-imagining of very old conversations about race in America. Based on Katrina’s overdetermined and condensed status, the storm has been historicized onto and into historical conversations that immediately make the storm transhistorical and transsituational. The rhetoric surrounding Hurricane Katrina is the rhetoric of America.

What I am attempting to demonstrate with this project, and what Komunyakaa demonstrates in his poem, is that the rhetoric and experiences happen on a continuum, and that makes it possible for an event such as Hurricane Katrina to address multiple conversations and experiences. The relations between experiences and articulations are where meanings are located. For example, two people looking at or experiencing Katrina will come away from those experiences with very different outcomes and meanings. Neither would be wrong because each viewer brings to those images their

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own libidinal desires, cultural experiences, and ways of shaping discourses to fit their own needs. This is why the idea of a fixed rhetorical situation cannot work. Meaning is always in flux.

My intention with this project is to show how one event can trigger different meanings and different conversations that are all, in some way, culturally and socially connected. These events, rhetorically driven, are “aspect[s] of a situation that has absolutely no interest in preserving the status quo.” However, they are interested in preserving what Phillip Wegner calls a “fidelity to some universal truth” in an effort to substantiate the idea of experience in some fundamental way. And the conversations and meanings produced help to maintain broad social narratives because they are part of a historical continuum. This project will examine both the event as an aberration from the status quo as well as the rhetoric the event produced which works to suggest that the consequences of the event were indeed part of an American, racialized status quo.

31 Alain Badiou, Being and Event. (London: Continuum, 2005). 15

CHAPTER 2
HECK OF A JOB: RHYMING CONTESTATIONS ON THE VIOLENCE OF POLITICS

As a discursive figure, Katrina has the power to deconstruct rhetorical gestures and unveil the politics behind the political language of identity. In George W. Bush’s first inaugural address on January 20, 2001, he emphasized a version of an American story that evolved from a “slaveholding society” to one that became “a servant of freedom,” a story that showed the power of an America that “went into the world to protect and not possess” and to “defend and not conquer.” This story, this American story, is one that emphasized America’s “faith in freedom and democracy” and unity and liberty. This story that Bush narrates is one of origins and identity. It suggests that the American collective leaves no one, either foreign or domestic, behind, and it rests on the “American promise that everyone belongs, that everyone deserves a chance, that no insignificant person was ever born.”¹

Laying out his compassionate conservative governance policy, which merged his evangelical faith with a neoliberal rationality, Bush pledged to build a nation of justice and opportunity, “because we are guided by a power larger than ourselves, who creates us equal, in His image. Not only will we succeed because of our supposed heavenly favor, we will succeed because the enemies of liberty were warned: America will shape the “balance [towards] a power that favors freedom.” And finally, because a great American story is not really great without the American people, Bush says that “abandonment and abuse are not acts of God; they are failures of love,” and because “Americans in need are not strangers” but citizens, “not problems but priorities,” and he

promised to faithfully oversee government’s responsibilities for the safety of the public, public health, and civil rights.

But there is a caveat to this story. Because America is a compassionate nation, he says that the community, particularly the faith-based community, will play a large part in the character, shape, and dissemination of the American promise and not the government. In this way, Bush’s “compassionate conservatism” would emphasize a conservative demarcation between the American citizen and the government. It is up to the community and private forces to deliver on the American promise; the government would presumably provide the conditions for private industry to ensure the welfare of society. This speech also demonstrates a non-interventionist foreign policy that would position America as the overseers of a guided democracy that was defended and acutely understood by America and Americans alone.

By the time his second inaugural address occurred in 2004, America had fundamentally changed because of 9/11. Bush began to narrate another aspect of the American story, one with an emphasis on a more neoconservative approach, while still maintaining his civic religious tendencies. In this speech, Bush concerns himself with the protection of liberty and freedom. He is no longer interested in defending democracy as in his first speech; instead, the goal is to conquer and eradicate the “enemies of freedom.” Placing the 9/11 attack in civil-religious and binary terms of friends and enemies, freedom and democracy, us and them, he moves America from being the servant of freedom to the master that instigates, shapes, and defines the very meaning of freedom and democracy. Moving from non-interventionism to interventionism, he asserts that America
will persistently clarify the choice before every ruler and every nation: The moral choice between oppression, which is always wrong, and freedom, which is eternally right. America will not pretend that jailed dissidents prefer their chains, or that women welcome humiliation and servitude, or that any human being aspires to live at the mercy of bullies.²

At the core of his sentiment is the notion of equality. Indeed, he urged Americans to “abandon all habits of racism because we cannot carry the message of freedom and the baggage of bigotry at the same time.”³ Equally, he emphasized a kind of moral absolutism in being attuned to the plight of the dissident, the humiliated woman, or the victim of a national, social, or cultural aggressor. Yet the identity of the dissident, the humiliated woman, and the bullied person is contingent on narrative framing. Who gets to be the victim and the one that America needs to protect? This is at the heart of the contradiction within the Bush administration’s policy positions. Immediately after 9/11, the bullied person was defined as such only after it became clear that he/she was being victimized by those we considered our enemies. Likewise, during Hurricane Katrina, the person who needed rescuing and aid had to be differentiated first from the looters, rapists, and thugs.

Once Katrina happened, despite Bush’s insistence in his first inaugural address that “When we see that wounded traveler on the road to Jericho, we will not pass to the other side,” he, in fact, did “pass to the otherside,” so far that he and his administration were nowhere to be found. About five days after the storm hit and the catastrophic destruction of the levees, Bush would emerge in Mobile, Alabama and, despite all


³ Ibid.
evidence to the contrary, say proudly to FEMA director Michael (“Brownie”) D. Brown, “Brownie, you’re doing a heck of a job.” Seeming to contradict what he said in his second inaugural address about rejecting racism and fighting for “the moral choice,” the staggeringly slow response and seeming indifference left many people shocked and appalled. Indeed, while the Bush administration’s rhetoric was inclusive, they made gestures at exclusivity through policy decisions and a performance of indifference in the face of a non-terror related crisis. Within Bush’s narrative framing, from the Inaugural Addresses to his Katrina performance, one has to wonder who, once again, are the humiliated, abandoned, and oppressed people Bush and his government are attempting to empower and protect?

In the midst of the milieu, another storyteller would emerge, critical of Bush and his administration’s malignant indifference to what was happening in New Orleans. Standing in front of a camera for a NBC televised fundraising event, and much to the surprise of his hosting partner Mike Myers, rapper Kanye West would declare, completely off script, “George Bush doesn’t care about Black people.” West’s outburst was met with a great deal of commentary, both for and against his position. George Bush himself called it one of the single most offensive and hurtful things ever said about him during his presidency. And while on the surface, it appears that West was simply reacting to the optics of the moment—which elicited Wolf Blitzer’s comment, “These


people are so poor, so Black” -- I would argue that Kanye is orating an alternative narrative to Bush’s framing of himself within a story of America.

From top to bottom, by every demonstrable measure, Katrina was a disaster, but it was not singular, and, as the Komunyaka poem I opened this project with suggests, it was not isolated. At every level of government, over long historical periods, Bush’s construction of himself as a “compassionate conservative” and of the US as a morally righteous agent in the world would play out during Katrina in both revealing and, to some, horrifying ways. The Katrina event is a revelation of policy-in-action. There was a drowning by policy and a murder by the administration. A common word used to describe the federal response to Katrina is indifference, but I would take that a step further and say that the apathetic response was a display of hostility; an act of state violence.

While Katrina can be placed within the context of other storms that have adversely and disproportionately affected Black Americans, I am interested in the gestures of indifference and the political rationale of disposability on the one hand, and the gestures of defiance, accountability and the commercialization and politicization of suffering on the other. In this chapter, I will explore two narrative traditions: one, conservatively political, and one of the street. In short, I am interested in the relation between governmental oversight of personhood and the urban materializations of identity through the use of hip hop music. The two are running dialogues that situate Katrina within the larger framework of political life of America and the politics of identity.

During Hurricane Katrina, an event that saw narratives shape, fall apart and reshape, only to fall apart again, Bush’s “heck of a job’ narrative was one that seemed
to suggest that the totality of the problems during Katrina were not of the government’s making or responsibility. It is a dissociative narrative that limits federal responsibility and culpability for a catastrophic event. Hip hop, on the other hand, responded to the storm and to the federal and state government in the same way that it has always responded to oppression by policy. In the case of Katrina, all levels of government were folded into and a part of the storm. Both hip hop and politics make discursive gestures at the political and social exigency of experience.

In this chapter, I argue that the rhetorical ecology established by the Bush administration was deconstructed because of the Katrina figure. The administration demonstrated and re-presented an America that sees some citizens as problems and non-priorities. Bush’s own as well as previous administrative neoliberal policies have redefined the social public good in order to shift protective policies and resources upwards and away from those who are most in need, and then, in turn, blame the helpless for their helplessness. Through politically violent acts and a prolonged state of exception, the Bush administration drowned the city by way of policy, and this administration is just one in a long line of administrations since the founding of the country that have diligently worked to exclude various groups of people. Bush’s policies were re-presentations of segregationist and disenfranchising policies that have long been America’s method for dealing with marginalized peoples. Bush’s civil religion and his political ideas merged to form one cohesive justification for the decentralization of citizenry for the sake of business and economic interests. This in turn made the Katrina event one that, because of its placement along color and class lines, was just not a government priority.
Later in the chapter, I will show how rap music emerged as a cultural expression of resistance and narrative reclamation in the context of these historical and persistent deprivatizations. Hip hop has always worked not only to contest dominant narratives of othering but also to signify the experience of the ‘hood’ and the ghetto and to situate neoliberal and neoconservative policies as a malignancy on the life, health, and experience of the urban poor. The Katrina figure circulates around the rhetorical productions of hip hop and the experiences that create it. It is a hyper reflection on the experience of living in these communities. In the wake of Katrina and the Bush administration’s failure to address the crisis, the emerging Katrina rap music argued that the storm and its aftermath were symptoms of a larger, more pervasive disease.

As a discursive figure, Hurricane Katrina presents contestations to the dominating attempts at narrative control attempted by the Bush administration. As Jean-François Lyotard suggests, the figure is often the product of multiple displacements and condensations that merge into discourse as a representation and representation of an event or experience. In the rap music that would emerge because of Katrina, Bush is reified into an idea of how the government values and treats the urban poor, and the Katrina figure intensifies that reification by making Bush and his administration a hyper-reflection on the policy positions taken by government against marginalized people and people in urban communities. Bush’s assertions about what America is in his inaugural address, compared to rap music’s assertion about what America is not, plays into the constitution of Bush as a figure for the United States of America. Certainly, Hurricane Katrina as a discursive figure fits this notion, for what is
displaced onto the storm is a revelation of the consequences of policy that views some aspects of poverty and systematic disadvantages as acceptable.

In circulation within the political rhetorical ecology are the same discourses that circulated around both inaugural addresses: liberty, freedom, faith, and equality. But there are also the ideologies of compassionate conservatism and neoliberalism. This then leads one to question who has the privilege of being included in the American narrative. While the Bush administration maintained that it was attempting to help everyone equally, the disaster in New Orleans was arguably caused by money being taken away from levee protections and the Army Corps of Engineers in order to pay for tax cuts and the war in Iraq.\(^6\) Also, a history of Reaganomics and the Wars on Drugs, Crime, and Poverty were seemingly designed to keep marginalized people vulnerable because marginalized people are economically and socially valueless to a neoliberal agenda. Finally, while I will not focus specifically on the actions of other government officials at both the state and local level, I will, from time to time, include some commentary on their actions as well.

**The Absent Bush Administration**

That George W. Bush stands at the forefront of the finger pointing is no accident. His response to the terror attacks of 9/11 versus his response to Hurricane Katrina were markedly different. And while sure enough the circumstances of each event were vastly different, the leader he wanted American citizens to believe in and coalesce behind during 9/11 was nowhere to be found during Hurricane Katrina. That Bush was still on

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vacation or giving a speech on terrorism in San Francisco while doing an air guitar impression no less, or flying over the damage while looking out of AirForce One’s window, all paint a picture of profound disconnection and an Executive Branch that prioritizes people and situations differently. The entire Bush administration seemingly felt no need to be present during the time of the Katrina crisis.

Hurricane Katrina is in part the direct result of the tax cuts for the wealthy and the deep spending cuts for infrastructure that the Bush administration put forth. In 2001, Bush proposed a $641 million budget cut from the Army Corp of Engineers. In 2002, almost half a billion was cut. In 2004, The Southeast Louisiana Flood Control Project requested $100 million, but the Bush administration only approved $16.6 million. Further, though Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco and New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin do not escape culpability for much that happened, the redistribution of funds away from states and infrastructure tied the hands of what state officials could do. The image of hundreds of buses underwater juxtaposed with people standing along Highway 10 awaiting transport is still one of the most mind-blowing and heartbreaking images form the storm. The Bush administration continued to deny the Army Corps funds right up until Katrina made landfall, and Bush’s response was first to stay on vacation, then to


8 Brinkley, Deluge, Kindle.


dishonestly state that he was not aware of what was happening, and finally, to invoke God and God’s indecipherable purpose to explain the “vast and indifferent might of nature.”

His administration’s response demonstrated, and the media coverage of it at this time confirmed, a catastrophic lack of regard for the state, the city, and the citizens. As Harry Belafonte noted, what was happening in New Orleans during Katrina was simply not a priority for the Bush administration. During Katrina, vice President Dick Cheney was photographed fly fishing. Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff was at a disease prevention conference in Atlanta. Dr. Condolezza Rice, the Secretary of State, was first seen in New York City buying Ferragamo shoes, then later that night, at a Broadway production. Bush’s Senior Advisor Karl Rove was completely missing in action, and FEMA Director Michael Brown was exchanging emails about his FEMA attire, saying that he was a “fashion god.”

At a time of crisis, they had to know that they would be visible, and they needed to pursue the safety and stability of American citizens with the same action and urgency that 9/11 called for. Instead, what they seemed to mostly register was surprise. Four days after the storm, Michael Brown told CNN’s Soledad O’Brien that he and FEMA were unaware that there were people sheltering in unbearable conditions at the New

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12 When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts, episode 2 directed by Spike Lee, aired August 21, 2006 on HBO (40 Acres and a Mule, Filmworks) accessed March 3, 2016, https://www.amazon.com/dp/B004A7SRT0/ref=cm_sw_r_dp_x_HeGDAb474T58N.

Orleans Convention Center and that “they were just as surprised as everybody else.” He went on to say that, “there are people beginning to manifest themselves out of the community that we didn’t know that were there,” and, to Jim Lehrer on PBS’s NewsHour, “we are seeing people that we didn’t know exist that are suddenly showing up on bridges or parts of the interstate that aren’t inundated.”

In the midst of all this governmental mess, the media was replete with images of people sitting on their roofs, in their attics, or wading in water, waiting to be rescued.

New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, on the other hand, was presented as paying attention and getting things done. His impassioned interview with a local New Orleans station, WWL, was met with high praise and empathy. He conducted a rousing radio interview where he voiced his frustration with the lack of a federal response. It was only when he did that interview, according to Nagin, that things started to change. In an interview with Spike Lee for the documentary, *When the Levees Break: A Requiem in Four Acts*, Nagin, showing absolute callousness at worse or a bad understanding of optics at best, waxes rapturous about taking a shower on Air Force One, while at the height of the Katrina disaster. With a smile on his face, Nagin tells Lee,

> You know Air Force One was something that was pretty amazing, and I’ve never been on, what I’m calling a pimp mobile, man, this thing is incredible. It’s like nothing you’ve ever seen; it’s like a penthouse in the sky. They called me and said the President would like to meet with you. I said look, I haven’t taken a bath, been doing this military bathing thing, I haven’t shaved. They said no problem. We’ll set you up. [I] go on Airforce One, this brother from New York takes care of everything...he sent me to the back in the President’s quarters and I get in the

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14 Eric Ishiwata, “‘We are Seeing People We Didn’t Know Exist’: Katrina and the Neoliberal Erasure of Race,” *Neoliberal Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, Late Capitalism, and the Remaking of New Orleans*, ed. Cedric Johnson, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 32


16 *When the Levees Broke*, episode 2, 33:48-35:19
shower, and, you know...he knocks on the door and says, Mr. Mayor, five
minutes they need you. I'm like, to myself, there's no way I'm getting out of this
warm shower in five minutes; they gon’ wait on me.\textsuperscript{17}

Two things are interesting about his retelling. First, Nagin credits himself as being the
one responsible for getting the federal government to act, and true enough, Airforce
One arrived not too long after Nagin’s WWL interview, which suggests that what
concerned Bush was not the visible suffering that the media displayed but the mediated
angst of a person in position of authority. Interviews had been conducted with Katrina
victims who all expressed their frustration, but that did not seem to matter. Nagin,
because of his position as mayor, was automatically granted a wider audience and a
more discerning ear.

Another interesting point about Nagin’s rapture over his ability to take a shower is
that it underlines an intraracial class division that demonstrates the Black middle class’s
ability to gain some measure of access to life saving materials and means of escape
versus the Black denizens of the ghettos and the urban spaces who went days without
showers and, in some cases, food and water. Kip Holden, the Black mayor of Baton
Rouge, also emphasized these class differences when he declared to the press, “I want
to make sure that some of these thugs and looters that are out shooting officers in New
Orleans don’t come here and do the same. I am not going to allow a New Orleans
situation here.”\textsuperscript{18} His use of the racially charged term, “thugs” is a class appropriation of
racist language that further differentiates the middle and lower classes. This statement
was in defense of Baton Rouge officers who vowed to “make life so miserable for

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid

\textsuperscript{18} quoted in John Valery White, “The Persistence of Race Politics and the Restraint of Recovery in
evacuated New Orleanians that they’d decide against making Baton Rouge their home.”\textsuperscript{19} In every single one of these cases, governmental officials perpetuated classist and racist stereotypes while simultaneously demonstrating that they really don’t care about a certain subset of the American public. Governor Kathleen Blanco, citing unsubstantiated reports of crime during a live press conference, chastised the victims of Katrina, saying that “Usually disasters like this bring out the best in people, and now we’ve got people that it is bringing out the worst in, and we are going to restore law and order.”\textsuperscript{20} Meanwhile, New Orleans Chief of Police Eddie Compass, doing his media rounds, circulated unverified reports of babies being raped in the Superdome.\textsuperscript{21} (I will discuss media representations of the aftermath of Katrina in the next chapter.) In each case, what is in circulation here is a narrative of criminality and misfortune that is racial, intraracial, and class driven.

Part of the reason for the delay in search and rescue, especially at the federal level, had to do with Bush’s own ideas about how the government should relate to and interact with citizens. In both of his inaugural addresses, he emphasized the importance of faith-based community actors being a greater service and aide to citizens than the government. Bush entered the White House with promise to fulfill the standard Republican Party platform, which focuses on a belief in private enterprise and small government and an emphasis on individualism and meritocracy. In a 2000 campaign

\textsuperscript{19} Jarvis DeBerry. "Hurricane Katrina was never about you, Baton Rouge." March 9, 2010, accessed April 4, 2017, \url{http://s.nola.com/ujak0LK}.


\textsuperscript{21} \textit{When the Levees Broke}, episode 2,
speech in Indianapolis, Bush laid out his faith-based notion of governance that he called “compassionate conservatism.” According to historian Steven P. Miller,

> The 2000 Bush campaign successfully balanced the inclusive language of compassion with the polarizing language of the Christian Right. Bush’s first major address on domestic policy...was a paean to compassionate conservatism...The candidate called for a “government that serves those who are serving their neighbors...Without more support and resources, both private and public, we are asking them to make bricks without straw...In every instance where my administration sees a responsibility to help people, we will look first to faith-based organizations, charities, and community groups that have shown their ability to save and change lives.”

This distancing of governmental responsibility for the social safety net would of course allow for some funds to be granted for social welfare programs, but only in support of what Bush calls “the armies of compassion,” which includes churches and other religious organizations. And this philosophy is not new. The Republican Party, and certainly the religious right, have long looked at private sources as the real saviors of people and citizenry; government-run programs were nothing more than “oppressive bureaucracies.”

Evangelicals often believe that liberation, any type of liberation, comes from faith and hard work; failure in any aspect of life is then seen as a sign of personal lack of faith and merit, no matter the social factors at play. As I will note in a later chapter, the prosperity gospel is an extreme form of this ideology. While Bush would perhaps position himself as a faith-based Evangelical and not a fundamentalist, there is a sense

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that Bush was championing the same ideals that animated fundamentalists at least to the extent that he could earn their votes, campaign contributions, and loyalty.  

Bush’s compassionate conservatism acknowledges that problems and inequalities exist; however, because of its entanglement with neoliberalism, it emphasizes the idea that the solution to these inequalities would be in the market and/or private interests. The obvious problem with this line of thinking is that Americans specifically and cultures generally tend to organize around what they find familiar and safe. In order for those armies of compassion to go out and be of service to people, there has to be an empathetic response of some kind, and these types of need-based responses rarely see people of color through the same lens as White people. Unfortunately, government engagement is absolutely necessary because it is often the only way to get around systematic injustices including racism and other forms of prejudices. If liberty, freedom, and equality are really the goals for society, history has proven that government intervention is necessary. An obvious example of this is the discussion that occurred in the media over the difference between finding food (if you are White) and looting (if you are Black), which will be discussed in Chapter 5. Empathy is not distributed equally and Black or Brown (or Indigenous and Asian), and everyone’s suffering does not carry the same social or ontological weight. The armies of compassion will not mobilize in the same way in a predominantly Black or Brown neighborhood the way they would in a predominantly White space.

Compassionate conservatism’s objective is the “devolution of responsibilities away from the states” and a greater focus on delineating more responsibilities to those who prefer a “greater moral order” by “strengthening the roles of conservative-favored civil society groups.” Compassionate conservatism inserts a Christian ethos into American governance. At its heart, it is also, according to Bruce Pilbeam, a “paternalistic, inegalitarian doctrine, which justifies authority of the compassionate regulating the lives of those who are subjects of their compassion.” One of the key aspects of Bush’s concern with compassionate conservatism is that this compassion is filtered through a neoliberal lens.

According to David Harvey, neoliberalism is a theory of political economic pursuits that argues for a market rationale, and it suggests that “human well-being can be best advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework” that is “characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets and free trade.” The state’s job is to facilitate, preserve, and ensure that the proper institutional framework is in place. Wendy Brown takes this definition a step further stating that neoliberalism (and neoconservatism) is a part of a political rationality of de-democratization. According to Brown, neoliberalism is a “specific and consequential organization of the social, the subject, and the state.”

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27 Ibid, 252.


Cedric Johnson adds that “neoliberalization does not entail a comprehensive reduction of state spending or capacities, instead, this process crafts a regulatory regime that enhances the conditions of capital communication.”\(^{30}\) Neoliberalism is a social order that is “predicated on the abatement of labor rights, social provisions, public amenities, environmental regulation, and other artifacts of social democracy deemed impediments to capital accumulation.”\(^{31}\) Neoliberals are not necessarily anti-regulation or anti-government; they would use the state to facilitate global profits by organizing all aspects of human activity “under market logic.”\(^{32}\) As Johnson notes:

> The state remains critical to creating and maintaining the institutional underlaymen that supports proper functioning of the free market system—the production and regulation of currency, domestic policing, the military, and the courts system. Under neoliberal regimes, state expenditures are re-routed from social goods, such as child care subsidies, housing, education, health care, unemployment insurance, pensions, and the like toward security measures, and the subsidization of private sector growth. As the redistributive functions of the state are diminished, social inequalities are increasingly managed through more extensive policing and increasingly invasive forms of surveillance and social control.\(^{33}\)

According to Johnson, it is not a laissez-faire policy idea. It is, he writes, an understanding that the state should be used to “colonize all spheres of human activity under market logic.”\(^{34}\)


\(^{31}\) Ibid. xxi.

\(^{32}\) Ibid.

\(^{33}\) Ibid, xxii.

\(^{34}\) To be clear, neoliberalism is not just a Republican agenda. The Clinton administration also has a hand in creating the conditions for an event like Katrina to occur, for these conditions have been in the making, according to many critics, since the Regan era. For more on this, see Neoliberal Deluge by Cedric Johnson and Naomi Klein’s Disaster Capitalism.
Hurricane Katrina exposed multiple vulnerabilities and hostilities related to this neoliberal/neoconservative order. The state no longer provided a safety net for the most vulnerable members of society; instead, according to Henry Giroux, the state “had been transformed into a punishing institution intent on dismantling the welfare state and treating the homeless, unemployed, illiterate, and disable as dispensable populations to be managed, criminalized, and made to disappear into prisons, ghettos, and the Black whole of despair.”

The ethos of neoliberalism is its justification that the inequality that results from policy is on the one hand a means to an end, and on the other, a failure of individual initiative. As Harvey notes, according to neoliberal logic, “if the conditions among the lower classes deteriorates, it [is] because they failed for personal and cultural reasons to enhance their own human capital through education, the acquisition of a protestant work ethic, and submission to work discipline and flexibility.” This argument is realized in both of Bush’s inaugural addresses and in his administration’s policies, by his emphasis on scaling back government help and using what he called “faith-based” initiatives to help disprivilged people. In other words, it is the market and private organizations that will come to the aid of the dispossessed, and Bush’s addresses were essentially a masking of “systematic problems” that were “masked by ideological pronouncements.”

Thus, Bush’s first FEMA director, Joe Allbaugh, in 2001 referred to

36 Harvey, “Neoliberalism’s Creative Destruction,” 34.
37 Ibid.
FEMA and disaster aid in general as a wasteful “oversized entitlement program.”38 This sentiment speaks to Naomi Klein’s argument that one of the Bush administration’s fundamental goals was to privatize as much as could be privatized.39 By deprioritizing FEMA, the administration allowed private entities to move in with obviously questionable results.

One main problem with privatization is that it assumes that, without regulation, corporations will distribute the wealth, the services, and the protections downward. This has been proven time and time again to be untrue. Corporations are ultimately answerable only to their investors, not to society as a whole, and certainly not to the poor or the working class. Given the criminality associated with Blackness, and especially Black poverty, and the lack of empathy it provokes, Bush’s “armies of compassion” policy was doomed to fail from the start.

This policy position, coupled with Bush’s apathetic response, is ultimately ideological. It is a testament to the belief that what happened during Katrina was because of personal and not systematic failings. The reason neoliberalism works is because it is a fundamentalist market logic that drains society of its history and the social implications of those histories. So while Bush made comments about the racial legacy that made Katrina possible, his policy decisions and the administration’s behavior during Katrina suggested that they did not care.

In his autobiography, *Decision Points*, Bush’s assessment of himself during the Katrina event is devoid of all attempts at circumspection or even moderately honest reflection. Calling criticism of his actions a “problem of perception and not reality,” he wrote that

Katrina conjures the impression of disorder, incompetence, and the sense that the government let down the citizens…As the leader of the federal government, I should have recognized the deficiencies sooner and intervened faster. I pride myself on my ability to make crisp and effective decisions. Yet, in the days after Katrina, that didn’t happen. The problem was not that I made the wrong decisions. It was that I took too long to decide.

He then goes on to blame Governor Blanco and Mayor Nagin for the chaos in Louisiana -- but predominantly Blanco, saying that she stalled the rescue process because she would not allow him to federalize the response. He does this while painting himself as the victim, citing Kanye West’s infamous remark, “Bush doesn’t care about Black people.” Kanye’s voice was one among many in the growing criticism directed at the Bush administration’s lack of action.

As a response, Dr. Condolezza Rice was marshaled out as a spokesperson to the Black community and against the notion that the response by the federal government, or lack thereof, was race-based. In a press conference held in Louisiana on September 4, Dr. Rice said, “I am an African American from Alabama. I can tell you that this response is not a response about colors; this is a response about Americans helping other Americans. No American wants to see another American suffer.”

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41 Ibid.
42 Ibid, 309.
43 *When the Levees Broke*, Act #, Spike Lee, Air Date. 24:13-24:24
This remarkable comment has two glaring problems. First, it is not clear why her being an “African American from Alabama” gives her more authority to refute what the world could see with their own eyes. Her emergence in the thick of the Katrina event in this way, after being castigated for shoe shopping and playing tennis with Monica Seles, reeks of tokenism and faux concern and attempts at relatability by the administration. She wants to be celebrated for her Blackness, and that same Blackness provides some type of racial authority against the charges of racism against the Bush administration. However, as I noted earlier with regard to Baton Rouge Mayor Kip Holden, intraracial exercises in erasure along class lines are also problematic. Ray Nagin and the New Orleans Chief of Police Eddie Compass were also complicit in the class othering of the urban poor because of the readiness to believe and transmit unsubstantiated rumors that detrimentally impacted rescue efforts. The second problem with her comments is the most troubling: If the response was about Americans helping other Americans, then what happened? Did the administration change nationalities? Sure, there were many in Louisiana and around the country who mobilized to help the Katrina victims, but those individuals do not have the capacity that the federal government has. Here again, we see the conservative agenda trying to shift the responsibility of social stability away from the government and to the generic “American.” Both Rice and Bush were unwilling to acknowledge that it was decades of policy decisions against government involvement in citizens’ lives that created the Katrina event, and those policy decisions are absolutely racialized.

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This generalizing technique is part of an attempt to have a neutralizing rhetorical affect. This is a part of the Bush rhetorical strategy. As noted above, he was careful to marry his private religion to a civil, public religion that American could generally coalesce behind. Sending Dr. Rice out to make a statement about Americans taking care of Americans was an attempt to stabilize the conversations and regain narrative control. He would use a similar technique during the National Day of Prayer on September 16, 2005.

As previously mentioned, Bush spent a great deal of time casting nature as a wholly uncontrollable force that created havoc in the Gulf Coast. “Through prayer,” he says, “we look for ways to understand the arbitrary harm left by the storm,” and the “destruction of this hurricane was beyond any human power to control.” These are all deflections away from himself and his administration to some abstract, non-containable other. The storm was indifferent. Ironically, the language he used to describe the storm in his prayer was the same language that was applied to him and his administration’s response. The only time he gestured at any specificity is when he referenced the historical continuities of racial and class discriminations. But even in prayer, his language was shaped by his political ideology. He thanked all those Americans who “heard the cries of their neighbors and answered them,” or provided food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, and shelter to the dispossessed. This is Rice’s Americans-helping-Americans mantra. But how long did the people sit atop the roofs, realizing that the


46 Ibid.
government was not going to come, before they had to take matters into their own hands? Their otherness was too othered even in the time of crisis.

**Hip Hop Epistemologies**

If the Bush administration represents a succession and conflation of federal and local policies and social strategies that have worked to turn neoliberal policies into an American epistemology, then an understanding of counter-narratives, or a counter-epistemology, can place the Bush administration and its policies not just in relief with historical narratives but also with global understandings of how people become othered. The surprise that people registered over governmental inaction suggests that what happened in Katrina is not something that should be possible in America. Indeed, the media gave major play to the surprising discovery of an “Other America,” or a “Hidden Race War.” However, this surprise seems either disingenuous or just ignorant. It speaks to a blind ideation of America that is present in Bush’s Inaugural Addresses and a rampant denial of reality. Part of the reason, however, that people registered shock is because many don’t have to live in the reality that Katrina victims face. Another reason is that people simply failed to listen.

Hip Hop has long been uttering a counter-epistemology that has challenged the broad-based ideations of American-ness. The music genre is entangled with utopian historicisms that mythologize and codify the freedom struggles of the Black American experience. In its origins, as some researchers argue, it is a method of resistance. This


resistance fight is broad and covers everything from economic disparities and fighting a different kind of war on poverty (players playing the game or hustlers hustling) to police brutality and mass incarceration to drugs, crime, death, and wealth. Hip Hop, or rap music, takes discursive figures of an American experience of Blackness and re-presents them in distinctly urban terms. It pushes back against the notion of an American ideal and an American promise in the way that only marginalized groups can.

Chuck D, the activist and outspoken front man of the legendary rap group Public Enemy, has called rap music the Black community’s CNN. Like its early cousin, the blues, rap music is meant to capture life as it is and imagine life as it should be. Using the oral tradition (the signifying, toasting, dozens, and shucking and jiving), rap music was originally intended to not only be a form of cultural expression but also to take the reins of the Black life narrative. Some people date Hip Hop’s origins as far back as slavery and the oral tradition born from that time, but most begin with the end of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power movements. This writing will follow that lead. In much the same way that God and religion are deployed as methods of creating order in a chaotic world, rap music is tasked with the same job. In the same way that the gospel and the blues was a testament to conditions and troubles of the world while

49 For an indepth discussion on the breadth of topics covered or addressed in Hip Hop, see That’s the Joint: The Hip Hop Reader, ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2012).


51 Roni Sarig, Third Coast: Outkast, Timbaland, and How Hip Hop Became a Southern Thing, (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2007), X.

searching for some ray of sunshine and affirming an identity, rap music says, “this is who I am, and this is what I am experiencing.” Essentially, this is a discursive methodology for ideological warfare and a stabilizing epistemology.

Kanye West’s assertion that Bush doesn’t care about Black people is an indictment of Bush’s failure as a leader during Katrina, but also as a leader for Black people generally. Despite Bush’s attempts to acknowledge historical inequalities and degradations that made Katrina possible, Black Americans and people of color still exist beyond the margins of the liberty and freedom that Bush championed so heavily in his inaugural addresses. The Bush administration’s policies tapped into the same War on Poverty and War on Crime/Drugs policies that began in the Lyndon B. Johnson administration, and it continued with the redistribution of wealth upwards and away from middle and lower classes that has been the trend since Reagan’s presidency. In this sense, West’s comment is tapping into the message that has always circulated around the origins and the life of hip hop culture, regardless of its commercialization.

Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, one of the most influential rap groups from the 1970s, said it best: “You’ll grow up in the ghetto living second rate/And your eyes will sing a song of deep hate/The places you play and where you stay,/ Looks like one great alleyway/… It’s like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder how I keep from going under.”


Tricia Rose writes, rap is “a Black cultural expression that prioritizes Black voices form the margins of urban America.”55 Like all forms of expression, especially poetry and music and even the oral tradition, rap music is a hyper-reflection on a lived experience that needs to be articulated. Whether it be a party or a call to arms, rap music emphasizes the utterance, the speaking of the lived experience in a manageable form. But rap music has done more than simply speak to a sense of dispossession or even the anger of the youth and life on the streets. Rap, especially conscious rap, has always situated itself as a part of the revolution. It is about getting the word out. It should be no surprise then that rap music had quite a bit to say about the political, social, cultural, and legal situation that emerged during Katrina.

An abundance of rap music hit the internet and the radio in response to Katrina. Within weeks of Katrina roiling New Orleans, New York-based rappers Mos Def (Yasiin Bey), Public Enemy, and Jay-Z released tracks situating Katrina within a larger historical context of disenfranchisement and degradation from “hood” to “hood.” Southern rappers also released Katrina music, including New Orleans natives Lil’ Wayne, Juvenile, and Mia X, as well as Houston based rappers The Legendary K.O. whose song, “George Bush Doesn’t Care about Black People,” framed Kanye West’s admonishment of Bush against West’s song, “Golddigger,” a screed warning men to watch their wallets and their reputations in the face of supposedly money-hungry women. The result was a song that situates Bush as both anti-Black and also anti-poor. As the song goes: “I ain’t saying he a golddigger, but he ain't messin' with no broke niggas.”56

Mos Def’s song, “Katrina Klap,” later renamed “Dollar Day,” opens his song by suggesting that his song, his anthem, is “for the streets” that are “affected by the storm called…America.” Mos Def’s suggestion that the real storm is America is a direct refutation of Bush’s reverential assertions about America’s inherent goodness and blessedness. Set to the music of “Magnolia Clap” by New Orleans’ native, Juvenile, named for the Magnolia Housing Projects which also suffered damage during Katrina, Mos Def expands the Katrina universe to suggest a Katrina diaspora and a Black American diaspora that is not just the movement of bodies across an American landscape but also a movement of repressive ideologies, hysterical blindness, and the rhetoric of liberty and freedom that mocks the Black experience instead of recognizing and including the Black experience within its doctrine. Mos Def alludes to a categorical rejection of Black Americans by America in the opening lines of the song. He tells the story of a woman in Louisiana wading through the waters as the rescue team is coming through. The rescue team is surprised; they ask her how she survived and where she had been. The woman responds, “Where I been? Where you been?” That, says Mos Def, is the size of it.

In “Reading Hurricane Katrina: Race, Class, and the Biopolitics of Disposability,” Henry Giroux furthers this point by positing an argument for why the Bush administration failed so spectacularly during Katrina. It was because “it felt no responsibility for poor Blacks and others marginalized by poverty and relegated to the

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58 Ibid.
outskirts of society." Mos Def concurs when he suggests that the only policy Bush has is to “handle niggas like trash.” This admonishment speaks to Bush’s congratulatory embrace of FEMA director Michael Brown. In other words, despite all the suffering, what Brown was doing was good enough for Bush and, based on their behavior, the Bush administration.

Public Enemy, which has a long history of speaking against what they see as successive and progressive degradations against the Black community, made their contribution to the Katrina discography with their song, “Hell No, We Ain’t All Right.” Like Mos Def, Chuck D rails not only against Bush, but also America writ large. But he frames it not just in terms of Black America, but also of the whole Black diaspora. This “son of a bush” nation is not only “hatin’ on Haiti” but also Black Americans who “be the new faces of refugees, who ain’t even overseas.” In this way, he connects Katrina to global disregard for Black skin as a result of colonialism and colonial mindsets. In contemporary global society, Chuck D argues, there is a pervasive disassociation and disregard for disadvantaged people.

From colonialism to neoliberalism, there has never been a moment where one’s value was not commodified in some way. But as Henry Giroux argues, with neoliberalism, we are seeing a “new biopolitics of disposability.” Neoliberalism also has a vested interest marketizing “politics, private information, life and space” which

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59 Giroux, Biopolitics, 188.


62 Giroux, Biopolitics, 175.
“threaten the possibility of social equality and meaningful democracy.” The reforms created to support neoliberalism have created unprecedented inequality, mass immiseration and vulnerability of the multitude around the world. Against the ideology of neoliberalism, that promises universal benefits from self-regulating market activity, the actual practice of neoliberalization is socially disruptive, inherently crisis-laden, and predicated on pervasive socio-economic development.

The spread of neoliberal policies has accumulated over time to include a staggering amount of displacement, and “colonial and imperial imperatives” that spread violence across various and multiple landscapes. This is coupled with the efforts of the market to “remove or make invisible those individuals and groups who are either seen as a drain or stand in the way of market systems, free trade, and consumerism and the neoconservative dream of American Empire.” This way of governing is what Naomi Klein calls “Disaster Capitalism.” Although not directly stated, the logic of disaster capitalism that Klein details (and the work of the Chicago School of Economics from which it is derived) tends to consciously and unconsciously assign social value to economic value. The main casualty -- the few cracked eggs necessary for the omelet of progress -- is often those people considered to be disposable or expendable. Another aspect of Klein’s argument is that the people involved with this type of imperative act with the moral assurance of being right.

63 Johnson, *Neoliberal Deluge* xxiii.

64 Ibid, xxiii.

65 Giroux, “Biopolitics,” 175.

Within the logic of the disaster capitalist, “the poor, especially people of color, not only have to fend for themselves in the face of life’s tragedies by are also supposed to do it without being seen by the dominant society.” In a tourist town like New Orleans, this is especially relevant. The poor are, according to Giroux, already seen as dead, for it wasn’t just the bloated dead bodies of Katrina but it was also the permanent underclass that a neoliberal market and society treat as dead weight.\(^{67}\) This is one reason why Bush’s administration was so slow; they just couldn’t be bothered.

The Legendary K.O.’s “George Bush Doesn’t Care about Black People” takes up this same point. Framing each verse is a hook that repeats Kanye West’s words in the chorus of the song. The repetition drives the point home. Katrina survivors as well as poor people are ostensibly all alone. And according to neoliberal rationale, they are alone because of what they are unable or unwilling to do better. To that, The Legendary K.O. dismisses Bush and argues that because he is used to “niggas dying,” the apathy of the administration was intentional and, perhaps, tantamount to murder. While that may seem severe, the sentiment speaks to a legacy of malignant intentions as it concerns people of color.

New Orleans-based rappers Lil’ Wayne and Juvenile also remonstrated the Bush administration and the media for what they viewed as deliberate neglect by Bush and by a system that had long rejected them and relegated them to poverty. In the introduction to his song, “Georgia Bush,” native New Orleans rapper, Lil’ Wayne, dedicates his song “to the president of the United States of America” who is known in the “lost city of New Orleans” as “Georgia Bush.” In just the opening lines, this song captures what Tricia

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\(^{67}\) Klein, 182.
Rose argues is the “regional specificity of spatial, ethnic, temperate, and psychological facets of Black marginality.”

There are two main thematic concerns in hip hop that are always paramount: identity and location. When Lil' Wayne opens his song indicating that he is from New Orleans, he is telling a story that situates his ontology within a specific space. What, for example, does it mean to be from the South? What rhetorical and discursive ecology animates not only one's experience but also one's identity? How does it fit into the broader landscape of rap music? When a rapper gestures at her or his experience, rhetorically and discursively, how are they shaping the contours of the conversation about life in a city like New Orleans, and how are they being shaped by that life?

Tricia Rose writes, “[A] Rapper’s emphasis on posses and neighborhoods has brought the ghetto back into the public consciousness. It satisfies poor, young Black people’s profound need to have their territories acknowledged and celebrated.” The Katrina event brought attention to the city in ways that even rappers could not reach, even though, in videos and in the lyrics to the songs themselves, these neighborhoods are often as important to the song and to the rapper as is the rapper’s identity. The two

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68 Rose, Black Noise, p. 11. The song also taps into the malignant misogyny that is pervasive in rap music and that works to display Black masculinity by feminizing those that the rap artist deems unworthy or not on their level. By renaming George Bush “Georgia,” Wayne is casting aspersions at what he sees as weakness, and that weakness is feminine. Hip hop, for better or for worse, is an art form that is always in the process of representing, re-presenting, responding to and authenticating life as it is in the urban space, in the ‘hood or in the ghetto.

69 Ibid, 10.

70 Ibid, 11.
are not easily separable. Yet, the ghetto, Rose writes, is “a central Black popular narrative [that] fulfills national fantasies about violence and danger.”

Juvenile also laments the conditions that made Katrina possible. Having “lost it all in Katrina,” Juvenile testifies to an existence that is extremely poor and perhaps as a result, extremely violent. He writes, “We starvin’! We livin’ like Haiti without no government. Niggaz killin niggaz and bitches lovin’ it.” Juvenile, like Public Enemy, connects different ‘hoods’ in the Black diaspora to suggest an overall story of White neglect and terror. As a result of these extremes, the ‘hood’ spirals out of control.

This perceived and lived violence and danger not only shapes how people who live in those neighborhoods are viewed, it also shapes how people inside those neighborhoods view those on the outside. It is not about being ghetto—which is a degrading way of categorizing people from specific classes and often times races—it is about a living presentation and representation of one’s environment. Rap music both rejects and celebrates these representations. Rappers generally do this by representing place as part of who they are, but they also reject and heavily critique the system or systems that made life in the ghetto. Rose goes on to write,

as is the case for cultural production in general, the politics of rap music involves the contestation over public space, the meanings, interpretations, and value of the lyrics and music, and the investment of cultural capital. In short, it is not just what you say, it is where you can say it, how others react to it, and whether you have power to command access to public space.

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71 Ibid.
73 Rose, Black Noise, 124-145.
However, this emphasis on public space and spatial authenticity seemed to collapse during Katrina. As I noted earlier, both Public Enemy and Juvenile connected the plight of Haitians with the plight of Black Americans. Further, there have long been arguments about the viability of southern rap and southern culture from both East- and West Coast rappers. The clash between regions is both intraracial and cultural, with some East Coast, New York rappers saying that southerners were less intelligent than folks in the north because, “The South has evolved later than us...They have not picked up on the wavelength of where their mind should be.” Lil’ Wayne, for example, was the target of ridicule and dismissal from both Jay-Z and Public Enemy from the East, and Ice-T and Snoop Dog from the West. Embedded in this debate of regional political identity is class recognition. The “dirty South” represents a “dirty poverty” and a “dirty mindset.” However, during Katrina, these differences collapsed temporarily, and everyone stood united against the Bush administration as a historically and currently affronted people. Nevertheless, part of Lil’ Wayne and even Juvenile’s insistence on packaging and commercializing their ‘hood’ is about authenticating an experience.

When Wayne opens up his song, he acknowledges within the first line where he is from, and he calls New Orleans, his post-Katrina New Orleans, the lost city. He is not only tying himself to the city, as he has always done in his music, he is also tying himself to what was done to the city. He then goes on to tie Bush, and by extension White people, to the overall predicament of Black Americans in New Orleans,

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75 Westhoff, *Dirty South*, 6.
suggesting that White people, through complacency and in some cases passive aggressions, simply, “smile like everything cool” while telling untruths about the people dying in the flood waters.\textsuperscript{76} Since hip hop is “an articulation of encounters with an absurd world” and a response “to the existential condition of being free yet oppressed,”\textsuperscript{77} Wayne is locating the trauma of the storm not only in what we all saw, but also in other social contexts.

The conservative theology that sustained Bush’s presidency and that still drives the GOP today helped to establish a set of economic and social policies that aggressively champion the free market over and above everything else. The claim of neoliberalism is that there is the potential for “unlimited prosperity and individual freedom through market reforms” and state divestment from social programs and physical infrastructure.\textsuperscript{78} So when Lil’ Wayne points to the “one wit the suit” with “thick White skin and his eyes bright blue,” and then accuses that man of “having niggas sitting on top they roofs,” he is directly speaking about the movement of resources that created those conditions. In other words, this guy in the suit, this White guy who knows nothing about the ghetto, is deliberately making things hard for the people in the ghetto.

Katrina in and of itself was an event, to be sure, but, according to Wayne, so is Bush.

Juvenile, on the other hand, suggests that the hustler hustle the system. His song, “Get Your Hustle On,” is not only about what happened in Katrina; it is also about operating within the systems created by extreme poverty. Juvenile encourages people


\textsuperscript{78} Cedric Johnson, \textit{Neoliberal Deluge} p. X.
to “take the Pyrex” and then rock it and roll it because “everybody fuckin’ with Ki because it is a street thing.” This is an ode to preparing and selling drugs to get ahead—which points to a persistent problem and debate among rap circles. What responsibility do rappers have while in the process of shining a light on the inequalities present within the communities they represent? For Juvenile, the reclamation of community and authentic experience is tied to a rejection of the state (“your mayor ain’t your friend, he’s the enemy”) and the community practice of preparing and selling drugs.

The rap wars of the 80s and 90s saw politicians and community leaders, both Black and White, citing rap music as the reason for the disintegration of the Black family and the rise of crime rates while rap music pushed against that narrative arguing that systems, legal, political, and social are responsible. Zenia Kish argues that “the call to hustle carries problematic connotations of both economic and sexual exploitation since the hustling recommended by these rappers reproduces their wealth through the exploitation of women’s bodies and of the already impoverished drug-users in inner city neighborhoods.” In Lil’ Wayne’s song, “Georgia Bush,” the feminization of Bush’s name serves as an insult. Lil Wayne also spends a good deal of his song rapping about his wealth in homophobic and misogynistic terms. “Money, money, money” he writes

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79 Juvenile, 2006.


82 Kish, “My FEMA People,” 686.
after his lashing of Bush. “Got money out the ass, no homo but I am rich.” This emphasis on his wealth and his ability to have diamonds surgically implanted in his wrists, as well as his two houses in Miami, and his “Beamer” all seem hypocritical in the face of what he is admonishing Bush for.

Kish suggests that the discourses that these rappers engage in “define agency against the dependence and even abjection imputed to women and practitioners of nonnormative sexuality. This situates the music and its artists ambivalently in regard to many of their post-Katrina critiques of the violence of the political state.”83 I would argue that what Kish calls ambivalence is actually a reproduction of a system that has historically and persistently dehumanized others in an effort to harden the lines of “us” versus “them.” Similar to the language used by the Black mayor of Baton Rouge, calling New Orleans evacuees thugs, people in the LGBQT community, Black or White, are “fags” and women are “hoes and bitches.” These rappers have also learned to emphasize wealth creation and “flossing” (the demonstration of said wealth) from a system that continuously differentiates and celebrates those who have and those who do not.

Kish argues that the hustler “serves to compensate for the dominant discursive splicing of Katrina survivors into criminally violent and looting young men on the one hand, and helpless racialized women, children, and elderly on the other.”84 Because of this splicing, the hustler rejects “these models of deviance and positions himself outside the reach of law enforcement and dependence on government aid and instead fashions

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83 Kish, “My FEMA People,” 687.
84 Ibid.
an autonomous social and economic sphere in which his wealth are strengthened through hyper-masculine channels and networks within the community. Here, Kish suggests that the environment creates the space for this hypermasculinity to exist. I would suggest, however, that what is at work here is multilayered differentiations—others turning around and othering others. Rap music has always consciously argued against the system in the creation of their stories, and this includes tackling racism from the likes of Bush head on. On the other hand, rap music has always been blind to the fact that it uses the same exclusionary language against women and the LGBQT community that they are railing against as it concerns them.

The aspects of the hustler, gangsta, or even the portrayal of hypermasculinity relates to a question of authenticity. It is what Crystal Belle calls a “microcosm of patriarchal and hegemonic ideals promoting male dominance physically, financially, and lyrically” that can also provide “freedom…to Black men, particularly those from working class communities” or an alternative space – a space made necessary for the multiple sites of exclusion – that allows Black men to be expressive without the social stigma and White fear of being a threat. It is also, as Robin Kelley notes, a persona used as part of a “larger set of signifying practices.” These practices largely coincide with American ideals of wealth accumulation, as William Oliver writes:

85 Ibid.
87 Ibid. p. 288.
Hip Hop soul and rap, as a musical genre, have tended to glamorize America’s obsession with achieving status through material acquisition and the manner through which material and social success is sometimes alternatively pursued and ritualized by underclass Black males...In this sense, not only does rap music describe the rage and anger that exists in the ghetto, but it also describes the extreme means that a distinct segment of the Black male population are willing to use to transcend poverty and hopelessness.  

Interestingly, the corporatists and proponents of disaster capitalism also engage in what some would consider unethical and questionably legal practices for the sake of material acquisition; however, they have the power to make their actions legal and socially imperative in a way that a Black male youth does not.

Unfortunately, there are multiple opportunities for illegal activities and many Black male youth find the “opportunity for dealing drugs is literally outside the door and represents a viable ‘job’ option in the face of limited meaningful employment.” To this end, rappers, especially those who speak of hustling and criminality, appropriate crime as a meaningful gesture at signaling their relation to a street code or authentic experience. These rappers make no apologies for doing what they feel they have to do. Instead, they use their life as a subversive form of protest: doing what needs to be done.

Because rap music is a form of “rhymed storytelling,” rappers use the materiality of language to paint pictures of their lived experience, assert their identity, and imbue

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91 Ibid.
themselves and their ties with meaning. As I have tried to argue thus far in this project, the articulation of experience, how things are delivered, what shape the delivery takes, and how the articulation is received, is the material nature of language. As the Katrina figure moves through these songs, connecting and reframing old discussions of injustices in the way that only hip hop can, and to a specific audience, Lil' Wayne and his contemporaries make material the experience of being on the receiving end of those “armies of compassion” that never materialized and those neoliberal policies. He is also calling attention to the legacy of racial hierarchies, but in Wayne’s assessment, those racial distinctions mark one as the enemy.

Wayne is tapping into what Yousef Komunyakaa called “the folklore rising up.” He is also tapping into a persistent vein within conscious rap music that some would call paranoid. The argument is that the government is intentionally trying to destroy neighborhoods and people. Wayne, for example asks,

So what happened to the levees/why wasn’t they steady?/Why wasn’t they able to control this?/I know some folk that live by the levee/That keep on telling me they heard explosions/Same shit happened back in Hurricane Betsy/1965: I ain’t too young to know this/That was President Johnson but now it’s/(Georgia) Bush

Spike Lee also made this claim and was quickly derided for it. In his article, “Legends of Hurricane Katrina: The Right to be Wrong: Survivor to Survivor Storytelling, and Healing,” Carl Lindahl directly addresses the acceptability of such claims by pointing out how quickly and thoroughly the media refuted and wouldn’t even address Spike Lee’s

92 Rose, Black Noise, 2.

claims and those of the people who were in New Orleans during the flood. However, the media had no issue reporting on unsubstantiated rumors of criminal activity that, for the most part, turned out to be untrue. This type of mythmaking is its own act of violence.

For too many, it was too easy to view everyone Black or Brown with “criminal contempt,” instantly shattering the neoliberal fiction of a colorblind society. This is why it was so easy to point to and disseminate rumors of lawlessness and violence during Katrina. Differentiating between looting and surviving became low priority. And while looting occurred, including by police officers, did the media stop to try and consider, as Wayne says, “I ain’t no thief, I’m just trying to eat”? All systems, political, legal, social, and media have marked Black and Brown with criminal intent even while it is clearly policy that created and continues to create these conditions.

Conclusion

As Katrina moves through various rhetorical ecologies, constantly churning and displacing previous methods of signification, the storm sets the tone for the state of relations between Black and White and government and citizenry as we enter the millennium. While the storm did damage enough itself, especially in Buras, where it made landfall, much of the damage was on account of “human agency and ideological prerogatives.” The catastrophic failure of the levee system and the subsequent crisis that emerged pointed to a “deeper crisis in our national politics” that involved the shifting

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95 Giroux, “Biopolitics of Disposability,” 175.
96 Johnson, *Neoliberal Deluge*, XIX.
definitions of what is considered the public good. This crisis is generated by a neoliberal order that moves resources away from social goods that help marginalized people, with the promise that market forces would fill in the gap. This does not work. It has never worked. Instead, the market emphasis has further marginalized already marginalized groups of people, driving them further and further away sustainable and affordable living.

It also sees no problem shifting, breaking, and reconfiguring norms for its own end. The Katrina diaspora, for example, was a shameful reminder of the disregard for families under slavery. As FEMA and the Bush administration began to rescue people, they transported them all over the country, often without telling people where they were going. Families were broken up. Some went to Utah, some to New York, and some, Lil’ Wayne says, went “on to Texas and Georgia.” While it seems monumentally cruel, not to mention inefficient, to separate an already traumatized people from their familial ties, within the neoliberal order certain people are marked as other, and quite frankly seen as disposable. Their trauma is inconsequential.

Nearly all of the rap music cited here is attempting to counter-narrate Katrina. As Rose notes,

Rappers are constantly taking dominant discursive fragments and throwing them into relief, destabilizing hegemonic discourses, and attempting to legitimate counter-hegemonic interpretations. Rap’s contestations are part of a polyvocal Black cultural discourse engaged in discursive wars of position within and against dominant discourses…they are crucial battles in the retention and establishment or legitimation of social power.  

97 Lil Wayne, “Georgia Bush,” 2006

98 Rose, Black Noise, 102.
Within the Katrina ecology, Lil Wayne, Juvenile, Public Enemy, and Mos Def are all contesting those same dominant discourses that Rose writes about. Lil’ Wayne is saying, yes, the Hurricane was devastating to New Orleans, but not as devastating as George Bush.

In Bush’s inaugural addresses, he envisioned an America that lived up to those ideas he found so appealing in the *Declaration of Independence*. America, under his leadership, would see no one abandoned and no one left behind because, as he stated, citizens of America are not “problems but priorities.” People in Bush’s America would have “economic independence” instead of “on the edge subsistence.” Yet every policy decision he made ensured a continuing stratification that became more stratified as a presidential tenure continued. Americans did get left behind, and some even drowned based on policy and ideological decisions. Through policy, Bush treated citizens who were poor, Black, or Brown, as problems and not priorities.

From the Reagan-era rhetoric of the “welfare queen” to the Clinton-era’s “super-predator,” there has been a barrage of political priming that has taught Americans who they should care about and who they should avoid. Bush’s “axis of evil” language is only the most extreme example. Rap music responds to this by carving out a territory that is “engaged in symbolic and ideological warfare with institutions and groups that symbolically and materially oppress” Black Americans. Lil’ Wayne’s song, “Georgia Bush,” rhetorically fights these battles by saying “fuck the police and fuck Bush,” reminiscent of NWA’s highly controversial song that said and protested the same thing, for policy concerns not only have social concerns in times of disaster, they also have

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99 Ibid, 100.
legal ramifications which deeply impacted the Katrina response. What follows is an examination of the ways in which Bush’s policy decisions, as well as the policy decisions of his predecessors, have had sweeping legal consequences for people of color which has detrimentally contributed to their othering.
CHAPTER 3
AS KATRINA CHURNS: BARE LIVES, STATES OF EXCEPTIONS AND THE LEGAL OTHER

That Justice is a blind goddess
Is a thing to which we Black are wise
Her bandage hides two festering sores
That once perhaps were eyes.
—Langston Hughes
“Justice”

For most of the chapters in this project, I situate Hurricane Katrina as a discursive figure that disrupts norms and re-presents those norms, within a rhetorical ecology, in its own hyper-intensive image. And while all aspects of the Katrina event have a revelatory function buried within the destruction, there are two rhetorical ecologies where Katrina’s key destructive force was largely based on what it revealed about systems already in place. The media is one such rhetorical ecology. My examination of the media, which will follow this chapter, situates mediated broadcasts as a major player in creating and sustaining that trauma. My argument against the media is that while all other institutions seemed to falter, the media steadfastly held on to its tradition of criminalizing the Black urban poor to the detriment of the Katrina victims. This suggests that the stories in the media, and by extension society’s dedication to conjuring demons is one of the more stable instigating narratives that circulates within American discourse, and it is, in itself, a source of trauma because of the consequences that follow.

The second rhetorical ecology in which Katrina forced open the truth of current systems is that of the law, which will be the focus of this chapter. The state of relations between urban communities and the institution of law was put on display in the aftermath of the storm in a way that rap music has not been able to do, despite the calls
to “fuck the police.” The militarization of the Katrina response is symptomatic of a legal and political system that has been molded to the will of the unarticulated racial hatred of the state and quite a few citizens against other subjects. The law’s main task is to establish the rules for order in a given society, and it does this under the presumptions of equal protections and the equal distribution of justice so long as those protections are reasonable for the stable function of society. The issue of reasonableness insures that a measure of bias will always permeate the legal system because of a simple question: who determines this reasonableness.¹

Hurricane Katrina, then, is a discursive figure precisely because displaced onto its nature are multiple traumas not just because of the storm but also, for this chapter, because of the state of relations between the state and citizenry as exercised by the law. Katrina, much like the Rodney King beating of the 1990s and the now iconic “I can’t breathe” statement and death of Eric Garner, is a concentrated representation of legal brutality.² What is reasonable, then, is not necessarily what is fair or just. Historically, the determination of reasonableness is based on an overdetermined and intertextual system of laws that demonstrates the unarticulated racial hatred in legal form. This same rhetoric constitutes, at least in part, the overall rhetorical productions of America.

¹ Here, I am talking about the legal definition of reasonableness which is defined as an action that is rational and/or appropriate in usual circumstances. See “Reasonable” Legal Information Institute, accessed December 23, 2017. https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/reasonable

“All laws” as Carl Schmitt notes, “are situational,”\(^3\) and the highly subjective determination of reasonableness can determine everything from permissible use of force by police officers to the entirety of George W. Bush’s *Patriot Act*, which is premised on the idea of a reasonable extent to which the government should go about “protecting America.” Political theorist Giorgio Agamben calls Bush’s Patriot Act an example of a “state of exception.” The theory suggests that because of the millennial and seemingly existential threat of terror and terrorism, Western governments have given themselves unprecedented amounts of power to target the threat of terrorism and, in doing so, have steadily eroded many of the civil liberties that mark the experience of living in a democracy. Agamben’s theory is an attempt to try and explain the “exceptional” relation that Western governments have with their subjects in the modern era. I argue that while the argument is certainly useful for understanding issues of surveillance, the extra-legal detention of terrorism suspects at Guantanamo Bay, and even the racial profiling of people of Middle Eastern descent, among many other things in this post-9/11 era, it is also useful for understanding the experience of people of color in America during the Katrina event.

Most discussions on Agamben’s theory involve the specific condition of Muslims in the Western world. The few articles written about Agamben’s state of exception from a post-colonial, Black lens largely involve examinations of Black experience throughout the diaspora: Christian Sylvester looks at the bare life in the post-colonial and developing African nations of Rwanda and Zimbabwe while Jaime Amparo Alves looks

at the bare life on the experience of Afro-Brazilian culture. For Alves, the bare life presents itself as a double negation, an experience where Afro-Brazilians are treated as neither human nor citizen. Finally the gestures at Agamben’s theory in an American context allude to Agamben through different terminology: ‘liminality’ in place of the bare life for Erica Ball and ‘extralegal violence’ in place of the state of exception for Andrew Hebard. In this chapter, I am suggesting that Agamben’s state of exception and bare life can and should be used to examine the entire arc of Black American life in America, and the lives of people of color, because it provides a sound political and legal theory for the type of marginalization that people of color experience. Once we understand it, specifically the nuances of how the law hegemonically and pervasively legalizes state terror against designated others, we can try to work to dismantle it. What is happening now, in the era of the War on Terror, should have been foreseen, and this chapter will, I hope, demonstrate why.

Hurricane Katrina, as a discursive figure, has provided us with a new way to think about the old problem of Black Americans being an American problem. Because of the intensity of the experience of the storm, it would seem that the Katrina event is just the state of exception that Agamben defines, and certainly the storm was exceptional, but the treatment of Black Americans by the legal arm of the state is not in itself

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exceptional. What is exceptional is the overall experience of people of color in America. In other words, Hurricane Katrina simply showed that people of color, and for the purposes of this project, Black Americans prior to Katrina, during Katrina, and post-Katrina have always been the exceptions to the idea of the law as protector, to the equal protection, and to the conception of what force is reasonable or unreasonable, because to the White imagination, people of color have always constituted a terroristic threat and therefore have always been subject to the force of law, as opposed to its protection.

Using Agamben’s concept of the “state of exception,” a theory about the politics of everyday life post-War on Terror, I will examine this relation between the law and Black Americans by placing it in context of the Katrina event. In particular, I will read the Danziger Bridge incident – the police involved shooting that took place on Danziger Bridge – as an event of rhetorical significance within the Katrina discourse. What makes this event stand out is that it represents, and through the Katrina figure re-presents, multiple intensities that are displaced onto the storm. The law, an overdetermined institution itself, clashes with the overdetermined nature of Katrina in such a way that what results is a hyper-reflection on the nature of the law and the minority subject. The Danziger Bridge incident is ultimately a hyper-reflection, or a reflection in its intensity, on the state of Blackness within this state of exception. In this chapter, I would like to make the case that Agamben’s theory is useful for theorizing the relation between the institution of law and the subjects of the law, especially those designated minority citizens. Before I can do that, I would like to examine Agamben’s state of exception theory more closely. I will do this through the example of the arrest of Abdulrahman
Zeitoun, a Syrian-American resident of New Orleans, whose story David Eggers recounted in 2009, to demonstrate how the theory, as Agamben imagined it, functions.

Zeitoun, Caught in the State of Exception

Agamben suggests that “Today it is not the polis, but the camp that is the fundamental bio-political paradigm of the West.” This camp is the full expression of the powers of the Sovereign, the Sovereign being the one who can declare a state of exception in which a suspension of the rule of law is in effect and the decrees of the sovereign have the “force of law”—or rather, as Agamben notes, the force of law without law. In the state of exception—state of emergency, state of siege, or martial law—the executive is often given broad powers to maintain the safety and identity of the nation. In those times, the law that normally protects citizens in “various forms of life” is suspended, including those laws that protect civil liberties. In the case of Zeitoun, these include the right to know what he is being charged with and habeas corpus protections. But within these camps, these places of indeterminacy or zones of indistinction, no such rights exist. The camp that Zeitoun was taken to, Camp Greyhound, became one of those places of indeterminacy where identity is indeterminate and/or contingent on the state.

Specifically pointing to President Bush’s “Patriot Act,” Agamben calls attention to the broad emergency powers that Bush granted himself in the wake of the 9/11 attack: powers that included the power to detain suspected terror suspects indefinitely without

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charging them, prosecuting them without allowing them to review the evidence against them, holding them indefinitely in Guantanamo Bay without any of the protections of international law, and torture." 8 Within these newer camps, Agamben entreats readers to imagine all the horrors of Auschwitz unfolding in real time, just as it did in Nazi Germany, but with our informed consent, in order to keep the nation safe. The real threat of places like these, he notes, is that "it is not just that some people are marked by the sovereign for exclusion but all people are at risk of being excluded, abandoned, and put to death." 9 The fact that the state of exception, which ideally would provide a sovereign with provisional powers to secure the nation, is fast becoming a way of governance, and Agamben’s fear that it could be any one at all that can end up in a situation where their lives were stripped of political and social value, is valid, especially when we consider that this increasing militarization affecting all aspects of life.

In Zeitoun, by Dave Eggers, Abdulrahman Zeitoun, the subject of the Katrina account, is a private business owner who has multiple properties. He is a married father of four and a law-abiding citizen. He has achieved the American dream. He is also Muslim, and in post 9/11 America, his faith in Islam marked him in ways that made him susceptible to the displacement into a bare life. As a Syrian immigrant and a Muslim, Zeitoun, according to Eggers, is aware of the pervasive racism in New Orleans, but sees it is a rare occurrence. On those “rare” occasions where racism or prejudice would interfere, Zeitoun would make his frustration known. Eggers writes, "His [Zeitoun’s]


9 Ibid, 441
frustration with some Americans was like that of a disappointed parent. He was so content in this country, so impressed with and loving its opportunities, but then why, sometimes did Americans fall short of their best selves?" These comments would lead to a defense of Muslims in America and from there they would include a rumination on the differences in treatment across the racial and religious spectrum.

Since the attacks in New York, he would say, every time a crime was committed by a Muslim, that person’s faith was mentioned regardless of its relevance. When a crime is committed by a Christian, do they mention his religion. If a Christian is stopped in the airport for trying to bring a gun on a plane, is the Western world notified that a Christian was arrested today? And what about African Americans? When a crime is committed by a Black man, it’s mentioned in the first breath…But what about German Americans? Anglo Americans? A White man robs a corner store, and do we hear he’s of Scottish descent? In no other instance is ancestry mentioned.  

Aside from the more technical problems of distinguishing between Zeitoun’s and Eggers’s voices, this passage points to a few important points that will shape the discussion for the rest of this chapter. Once the storm passed, and after multiple days out in a canoe helping rescue Katrina survivors, Zeitoun was held at gunpoint, M-16s pointed threateningly at his direction by six police officers and placed under arrest. He assumed this was a part of a mandatory evacuation effort; he would be wrong. Zeitoun was transported, by boat, to an intersection on higher ground, free of water, where he and his companions were transferred to the National Guard. From there, they would make their way to a bus depot that would later come to be known as Camp Greyhound. It wasn’t until after being roughly handled by both officers and the military, and just before his strip search, that Zeitoun would find out why he was under arrest: he was a

suspected al Qaeda operative, a suspected terrorist. He was never allowed to make a single phone call to family or even to a lawyer.11

First, Zeitoun (or Eggers) points to the contours of the othering that occurs within the law. This is at the heart of Agamben’s theory as it was originally intended. In other words, one contingency of identity is the legal underpinning of identity based on a given act. When identity is established this way, a legal othering takes place in which one’s race or religion becomes symbolic of an individual actor’s affiliations. One actor’s actions form, for the White mind and in the eyes of the law, a contiguous identity wherein the person of color or of the Islamic faith becomes one marginalized legal entity that is within the force of the law but is beyond the law’s protections. In this case, and in the examples Eggers notes, individual subjects are reified into a block, a singular thing that is easily containable and bendable to the perceptions of the state and something that the law works to manage to the detriment of whatever rights an individual who happens to belong to the subgroup may possess. The individual, then, is figured according to the imaginings of a given institution, society, or nation.

The second point that the Zeitoun passage alludes to is this idea of collapsing identities. On the one hand, a White collapsing identity offers protection for the group. The ugliness that marked early twentieth century’s hierarchy of European ancestries is no longer in play. Agamben’s fear, though, is that this protection will erode because of the state of exception. Further, minorities, and certainly Muslims post-9/11 rarely have the same type of group protection, and this is largely why Zeitoun was ‘tagged’ as a threat even while he was in the process of rescuing Katrina victims. The arresting officer

11 Ibid., 212
did not find it necessary to make any distinctions other than the fact that Zeitoun was different in some way that marked him as a threat.

During Zeitoun’s arrest and detainment, one officer, Donald Lima, rationalized the arrest this way: Claiming that he saw some people stealing or looting a store, he made note of the people committing the theft, but he was unable to arrest the perpetrators at the time. While out patrolling, he came across what looked one of the boats used to cart off merchandise from the store. Without asking any questions, he arranged for several police officers to go and arrest the alleged criminals. At no point did he try and ascertain if these were the right people. At no point did he identify any of the stolen merchandise. What he did do was use what became known as the “Katrina defense” to explain his lack of investigation. While Lima was “certain that the men in the house were guilty of something [emphasis mine],” he could not identify what that something was. He did, however, admit to looting and stealing himself, saying that he considered it “part of the mission.” What this suggests is that within the state of exception is an us-versus-them mentality. Bush made sure to delineate those by frequently saying, “either you are with them or you are with us” or some variation on that theme. But this mindset is reminiscent of a colonial, perhaps even nationalistic, mindset and to place it solely within the context of terror is to ignore much of history.

The prison complex Zeitoun and company were transported to was one freshly constructed and supplied with all of the supplies that would have been useful in the rescue and relief attempts throughout New Orleans. Eggers writes,

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12 Eggers, p. 304-305

13 Eggers, 316
This complex and exceedingly efficient government operation was completed while residents of New Orleans were trapped in attics and begging for rescues from rooftops and highway overpasses. The portable toilets were available and working at Camp Greyhound while there were no working bathrooms at the Convention Center and Superdome a few blocks away. Hundreds of cases of water and MREs were readily available for the guards and prisoners, while those stranded nearby were fighting for food and water.\textsuperscript{14}

Here we see another key component of the state of exception. The state of exception prioritizes war interventions over rescue and recovery. Any site at any moment has the potential to be a space for military intervention and the suspension of the law. This ‘camp’ is the site of marginalization that Agamben is referencing. It is the combination of spatial, temporal, and social oppression to such a degree that the subject is no longer a subject of anything other than the contingent identity created by the space and the politics that circulate within the space. The bare-life subject is no longer a citizen or, if they retain any citizenship at all, it is to a marginal and disposable community that deserves, based on necessity, to be marginal and viewed with criminal contempt. Once inside this military/prison complex, Zeitoun was stripped searched and questioned, all while being denied even a single phone call. He and the other detainees were accused of being al Qaeda operatives, and whatever rights or legal protections they had under the previous law had been suspended. Zeitoun’s identity, his ontological self, was being stripped down to a state of bare life.

“Zeitoun,” Eggers writes, “had long feared this day would come:” the day when he would be “harassed, misunderstood, or suspected of shadowy dealings that might bloom in the imagination of a given police officer.” And while Zeitoun was lucky enough

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, 321
to have never experienced that type of profiling prior to Katrina, he had known people who had.\textsuperscript{15} This type of profiling, being at the mercy of the imagination of a White mind, especially one that can shape one’s life in such profound ways, is something that Black Americans have long been familiar with. But Zeitoun believed in the rhetoric of law and order; he believed in America being a nation of laws, and he believed that America would “get it right.” Eggers writes,

> He was not the sort to fear such things. He was not given to conspiracy theories or believing that the U.S. government willfully committed human rights violations. But it seemed every month another story appeared about a native of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Syria, or any one of a number of other Muslim countries who was released after months or years from one of these detention centers.\textsuperscript{16}

For Zeitoun, the fear of having his identity contingent on the imaginations of American perceptions and to have that law circulate around those imaginings was, prior to his own experience, a “conspiracy theory.” Yet, what was for him a conspiracy was a reality for Black and Brown Americans. The enemy is constituted in the imaginings of the dominant society long before those imaginings have material impact. For Agamben, Zeitoun’s experience in Camp Greyhound is a marker of an exceedingly post-democratic political life. Here is where I offer my own intervention: The camp can be Camp Greyhound, or it can be the ‘hood’ or any other urban community. Long before there was a War on Terror, America has wrestled with how to constitute others.

**Bare Life, Black Life, and Hurricane Katrina**

On September 4, 2005, the Bartholomew family – Susan, Lesha, Leonard Sr., and Leonard Jr. – along with Jose Holmes, Susan’s nephew, and James Brisette Jr.,

\textsuperscript{15} Eggers, *Zeitoun* 222-223  
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 265
Jose Holmes’ friend, were crossing the Danziger Bridge – a bridge the crosses over the Industrial Canal and that connects Gentilly and New Orleans East – trying to escape the Katrina flood waters. Brothers Lance and Ronald Madison were also crossing Danziger, seeking higher ground. Barreling towards them in a Budget Rental truck, officers Anthony Villavaso, Robert Barrios, Robert Gisevius, Kevin Bryan, Jay Magee, Michael Hunter, Kenneth Brown, Ignatius Hill, Robert Faulcon Jr., and Morrell Johnson were in the process of responding to a report of a downed officer in the area.\footnote{Ronnie Greene, \textit{Shots on a Bridge}, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015).} Without a word of warning, while the truck was still in motion, the officers jumped out of the truck and opened fire on the Bartholomew and Madison groups. At the sound of the gunfire, the people on the bridge began to run. Leonard Bartholomew Jr. was able to get away, but the rest of his family was not. His mother, Susan, was shot in the arm and leg. Her arm would have to be amputated. Bartholomew Sr. received shotgun pellets to the back of the head, and he was shot in the left heel and the upper back. Lesha Bartholomew was shot in the stomach and buttocks while her cousin, Jose Holmes, was shot in the jaw, arms, right hand, elbow, neck, and stomach. They all survived their ordeals. Lance Madison would also manage to escape. His brother, Ronald, along with Holmes’s friend, James Brisette Jr., would not survive. Brisette was shot “from the heel of his foot to the top of his head. Lance Madison was shot in the back while fleeing. Immediately after the shooting, the cover-up would begin, which included a planted gun and the standard “fear-for-life” defense that police officers have successfully and routinely been able to use in cases of police brutality and misconduct.\footnote{Issac Lara, “Shielded from Justice: How State Attorneys General Can Provide Structural Remedies to the Criminal Prosecution of Police Officers.” \textit{Columbia Journal of Law and Social Problems}, 50. No. 4:} At first, the officers were successfully
able to get away with things. But they had one major problem on their side: their victims survived in order to tell the story. Almost a decade after the initial shootings, the officers would be tried and sentenced to prison both for the shooting and their part in the cover up, but here again, the prosecution of police officers in an officer involved shooting is largely the exception and not the rule.\textsuperscript{19}

The Danziger incident is representative of a type of policing that demonstrates the force of unarticulated antagonisms and the event is not singular in American history. The law has been able to allow racial discrimination to seep into its rhetorical productions by way of a narrow reading of the equal protection clause because of the courts’ preference for the “autonomy of private social relations” and its willingness to accept some racial prejudice because of its “fear of disrupting other values” in American legal and political systems.\textsuperscript{20} Further, equal protection has little value when the racism is “unarticulated or unconscious,” and it has even less value in the face of legal, political, and economic factors that sustain oppressive regimes.\textsuperscript{21} So even though there can be video evidence of wrongdoing by an officer of the law, the legal system which includes investigating officers, judges, prosecutors, and jurors, will gesture at these unarticulated and unconscious biases by granting broad powers of judgment to the officer and his or


\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 1493
her dealings with people of color. To say it plainly, there is always the presumption of
guilt inscribed onto the skin of a person of color and their encounters with the law. As a
popular meme that circulated at the time of Katrina noted, “Black people loot. White
people find.”

Neoliberalism, political maneuvering, and mediated perceptions all have a hand
to play in the discursive figuration of Blackness or the experiences of people of color, as
problematic.\textsuperscript{22} There is no one institution that is more responsible. However, the law,
working as the moral conscience and authority of the state, circulates around the lives
of minorities, which provides stabilization for the state and destabilization for those
minority communities. This is the function that the law has historically provided:
epistemological and rhetorical stability for those it protects and epistemological and
rhetorical (perhaps even discursive) instability for the people it excludes.

While the narrow interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment has contributed to
the mistreatment of people of color on the side of the courts,\textsuperscript{23} this mistreatment begins,
I would argue, at the level of policing. When racial bias infects policing habits,

\begin{quote}
citizens first encounter the community’s strongest normative
commitments…The criminal law, more than any other set of legal
prescriptions, expresses the community’s deepest conviction as to what
behavior is inconsistent with participation in society. Through the
deployment of coercion, police enforce these laws in daily life and thereby
act as perhaps the most salient representatives of the normative authority
to which the state lays claims.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{22} See United States, \textit{Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders}, (Washington, 1964),
also called the Kerner Report, which goes into detail about the consequences of the systematic nature of
racial biases.

\textsuperscript{23} Harvard Law Review, 1493

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, 1494-1495
Police officers are largely allowed to do this because they can rely on statistics that point to the high arrest and crime rates of people of color. However, those statistics do not show the impact of racial bias by the police on those statistics. What results is a self-perpetuating cycle in which police use statistics that their racial biases have created to continue to police racially and extralegally. In Giorgio Agamben’s ‘state of exception’ theory, the extralegality of police proceedings is a hallmark of a state that has used some sort of outside threat as a justification for the dismissal of basic human rights and the suspension, here in America, of the equal protection clause in the Fourteenth Amendment. It is a suspension of the law to enforce the law. The law has ultimately decided that certain peoples in certain spaces should be subject to a type of policing that abridges the autonomy of social relations for some specified groups of people. The outside threat, for people of color, the White imagination.

A similar dynamic can be seen with the enforcement of the Fourth Amendment. On the one hand, the Fourth Amendment places some restraints on what the police can do by stating that, “[t]he right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no warrants shall issue but upon probable cause.” On the other hand, in State v. Dean, the case of a detention, arrest, and conviction of a Hispanic man who argued that he was stopped and racially profiled because he was Hispanic and in a predominantly White neighborhood, the Arizona Supreme Court ruled that

25 Ibid, 1506

26 U.S. Constitution, 4th, amend.

27 Harvard Law Review, 1502
While detention and investigation based on ethnic background alone would be arbitrary and capricious and therefore impermissible, the fact that a person is obviously out of place in a particular neighborhood is one of several factors that may be considered in an officer and the court in determining whether an investigation and detention is reasonable and therefore lawful.”

This principle, called the “out of place” principle, has to make one ask, what indeed does it mean to be out of place? In the small White town of Algiers Pointe, many residents turned vigilante and shot at anyone “darker than a paper bag.” The “out of place” principle is also what made the Gretna police blockade people from seeking respite in their city and do so legally or perhaps extralegally. The law is the strongest indicator of otherness that exists within a state. And the terror of the White normative far exceeds the legal definitions of terror; however, it is the terror of Whites that actually governs.

The argument could be made that there is some measure of constitutional protection from the law so long as one is where he or she is supposed to be, as determined by skin shade. But through redlining, zoning, and districting, legal spaces of degradation in the form of neighborhoods that have concentrated poverty and concentrated violence can represent an aspect of the ‘zone of indistinction’ or ‘camp’ that Agamben writes about. As I mentioned above, I am suggesting that Agamben’s...

28 Ibid


camps can be something like Camp Greyhound or Gitmo, but they can also be any ‘hood’ or urban space in America. Within these camps, because of the suspension of the laws, rights of citizenship no longer apply, and the subject is thereby reduced to that of an enemy of the state in which his or her life, having little value, is one that can be abandoned or done away with. This is the friend or foe dichotomy that President Bush used so effectively in his War on Terror campaign. An enemy combatant, a suspected terrorist, has no rights, and he or she is reduced to what Agamben calls a bare life.

I would argue that the 9th Ward could be considered such a place, but it is not just a site for state abandonment and even death; coming from the site marks the bodies in such a way that they are rejected by society. Living life on the margins as they are, poor people and minorities have to contend with more than just the state and the state’s power. The sovereign, in other words, is not just a politician; it can also be a corporation or the political and legal bureaucracy of a small, predominantly White town. However it is located, it has the power and the force of law through the institution to render a person’s very life indeterminate and expendable. Urban spaces delineate these zones. This is not a result of War on Terror power redistributions. This is a result or at least a continuation of colonial mentalities. The use of the state to make these colonial mentalities material became the function of law enforcement during Katrina.

The poor and dispossessed, living lives “on the margins of social, political, juridical, and biological representation” are constituted not just by their skin color, but also by their social positioning which bestows social value.32 The law and the laws

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representations function as a first line of identification in which the state extends political agency. These officers are representations of a state of exception and a political order that seeks to mark out those figures of the bare life as constituted identities that can, at the whims of the state, be un-constituted if necessary.

James Baldwin suggested that the police are the “hired enemy” of Black America, and this brings up an important point.\textsuperscript{33} Four of the officers involved in the Danziger Bridge incident were Black. The rest were White. All of the victims were Black. So, while the issue certainly does deal with race, there is something more deeply embedded in the institution of the law, especially the “law” that is configured in the state of exception, which marks it in such a way that prioritizes the state even to the extent that Blacks attack other Blacks.

During the Danziger Bridge incident, Ronald Madison, a mentally disabled man in his 40s, was shot in the back by one officer Robert Faulcon Jr., who is Black. Faulcon yelled, “I got him” after his shot hit Ronald.\textsuperscript{34} Officer Kenneth Bowen, White, who had previously leaned over the concrete railing and delivered Jose Holmes’s second shot in the stomach, walked up to Ronald Madison and, according to fellow officer Michael Hunter’s testimony, began stomping the dying man in the back over and over again in his police-issued boots. Hunter testified that Bowen was “very angry, he had a very malicious look in his eye.”\textsuperscript{35} Prior to this, another Black officer, Ignatious Hill, saw Leonard Bartholomew Jr. escaping and opened fire attempting to shoot Leonard in the


\textsuperscript{34} Shots on the Bridge, 38

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid
back. He wanted to “pop that little nigger.” Since, as Lyotard has suggested, discourse exteriorizes language into an object, it makes sense to think about the ways in which the language used by an agent of the law was created for designation, separation, and justification. A “nigger” in this case, has both a social and legal definition regardless of who utters the term. The rhetorical materiality of such a term demonstrates an uncomfortable merging of othering across color lines. In this case, despite the fact that the speaker is Black, the rhetorical and physical violence intended to be inflicted with the use of this word is the same as it would be if the speaker and shooter were White.

Some have argued that Black officers have bought into the motif of the Black criminal. I would argue that certainly people have bought into the rhetoric, but it is also about othering. Middle class Blacks looking down on lower class Blacks, but there is also something more complicated at work here. Police officers, both Black and White, tend to view Black Americans through the same lens of criminal intent. Criminality is Black, but to Black officers, it is this other, over there, away from them, type of Blackness.

In his work, *Black Rage in New Orleans: Police Brutality and African American Activism from World War II to Hurricane Katrina*, Leonard M. Moore observes that during the recruitment of Black officers in the 1970s in response to affirmative action, Black American officers “ushered in a new era of police violence toward fellow African Americans.” Many African Americans found it easier to brutalize other African Americans because they would be exempt from charges of police brutality, their White

36 Ibid, 35
superiors would reward them, and they would be seen as good cops in the eyes of fellow officers.”\textsuperscript{38} This, according to Moore, is why Black police officers welcomed the idea of being police officers who happen to be Black as opposed to being Black police officers.\textsuperscript{39} Moore calls this ‘White policing syndrome’ and it is the perception of the Black community through a White lens.\textsuperscript{40}

This militarization of the relation between citizen and law is what gives the state of exception its power. As Agamben notes, “Because the sovereign power of the president is essentially grounded in the emergency linked to a state of war, over the course of the twentieth century the metaphor of war becomes an integral part of the presidential political vocabulary,”\textsuperscript{41} As one of the few things that actually does trickle down, the war-rhetoric is increasingly being used to describe and in some cases justify interactions between citizens and law enforcement. When the National Guard arrived in New Orleans, responding to media reports of rampant crime and Blanco’s declaration of martial law, they did not arrive with “chainsaws, or bulldozers, no grappling hooks, generators, or field hospitals. They were not equipped to clear debris, repair power lines, or deliver mass medical care…they prepared for an uprising and stood on street corners nervously fingerling their weapons.”\textsuperscript{42} Blanco, for her part, warned New Orleans

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\textsuperscript{38} Ibid
\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Black Rage}, 8
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid
\textsuperscript{41} Agamben, \textit{State of Exception}, 21
\textsuperscript{42} Dan Baum, “Deluged: When Katrina hit, where were the police?” Jan. 9, 2006, accessed, November, 23, 2017, \url{https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/01/09/deluged}
\end{flushright}
citizens that the National Guard, freshly back from Iraq, “know how to shoot and kill, and they are more than willing to do so if necessary.”

Some critics have argued that what happened in Katrina, especially as it concerned the militarization and securitization of the state during the storm, is an example of the police state. However, I would suggest that it is only so in the sense that the force of law is acted out on the bodies of people of color, poor people, and minorities in a way that is not possible with those from the dominant culture because it would be illegal. Zeitoun’s detention and the Danziger Bridge incident are examples of the state of exception at work. In this way, even though the Katrina event itself was so exceptional that it became a figure in much the same way that we think of Hiroshima, what made Katrina possible is that there was already so much room for unarticulated racial biases within the legal system that was already in place.

Walter Benjamin outlined the ways in which the oppressed are always living beyond the margins of constitutional identifications of the subjective self and even human rights. “The tradition of the oppressed,” he writes, “teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight.” This conception of history, in view of the experience of the oppressed, is one in which the law is not the guiding principle, the one thing that separates the state of exception from normal democratic function; the law helps the state of exception to persist. Historian Leonard N. Moore


calls the law extralegal because violence against Black Americans is systematic; it involves not only the police, but also politicians, district attorneys, and judges; it is systematically inclined to keeping the marginalized, marginalized.\(^{45}\)

What results is a dual legal enforcement state. Normative Whiteness is offered protection while disruptive Blackness, Brownness, or even Muslimness is offered policing. The inherent racial bias, made permissible by the courts, allows for criminal law and law enforcement to bear down on Blackness in hostile ways. Not even the trauma of a hurricane could lift the legal manacle around the necks of Black people. Aided by the media’s readiness to report misinformation that cast Black Katrina survivors as violent and “feral” thugs and a social and political climate that seeks to marginalize as much as possible an already marginalized people, what we have is a legal system that was designed and created to maintain, as much as possible, a social order that favors Whiteness.

By and large, these people and incidences are invisible, and, in order for the neoliberal state to function and for the sovereign to retain the power to suspend the rule of law, the bodies of the bare life victims have to remain that way. This is where the force of law comes into play. Agamben defines the “force of law” as the energy that keeps the state of exception from devolving into anarchy and chaos. The force of law “refers to those decrees that the executive power can authorize to issue in some situations, particularly in the state of exception.” It is a technical legal term that “defines the separation of the norm’s vis obligandi, or applicability, from its formal essence whereby decrees, provisions, and measures that are not formally laws nevertheless

\(^{45}\) Moore, \emph{Black Rage}, 2
acquire their ‘force’.”46 Whatever laws or protections were in place are suspended for the sake of these new provisions or policies.

In the case of Black Americans and people of color generally, the laws are not suspended so much as unequally applied. Further, in law enforcement and civilian encounters, officers have the powers, in many cases, to make executive decisions of life and death without the benefit of a trial or jury using the fear-for-life defense even in cases where subjects are unarmed or running away.47 And in many cases, the legal system supports the officer’s decision. The illegal was made legal, or as Agamben says, the illicit made licit, because of the power associated with the sovereign.

One of the more powerful aspects of living in the state of exception is the state’s ability to control life and death as the state sees fit. During the state of siege, the state has the power to make exceptions to the laws, and Governor Blanco, having declared martial law, gave officers license in some cases to respond to rumored threats rather than actual threats.48 Both Blanco and the officers were responding to false information, which makes the case even more egregious, given its deadly consequences. During the Danziger trial, Jose Holmes testified that after having already being shot, Officer Kenneth Bowen leaned over the concrete railing and “shot indiscriminately at the

46 Agamben, State of Exceptions, 38.


residents cowering on the sidewalks.”

Holmes, having received the second shot to his stomach because of this incident, testified, “man, they really want me dead.” His aunt Susan Bartholomew corroborated this chaos in her testimony: “They were telling us to hold our hands up, and of course I couldn’t because my arm was shot off, and I just thought they were gonna – gonna kill me, and they said that they were gonna kill us…I raised the only hand I had.”

The antagonistic relationship between law enforcement and Black America seems to be as fundamental an aspect of American life as the rhetoric of freedom and liberty in American discourse, and this is why Agamben’s theory should be expanded to include the experience of marginalized people of color alongside the experience of Muslims. A plantation is just as much a type of camp as Gitmo. Further, an examination of what constitutes “reasonableness” is necessary because most western governments function on what they consider reasonable excesses of law and politics. Yet, legal conceptions of reasonableness are also historically contingent and mired with biases and prejudices. White America has long maintained that a certain display of force and policing is reasonable for certain communities, which is why this use of force, as found in Danziger, persists. There is also some unarticulated acceptance of the collateral damage that this use of force will undoubtedly incur. For example, this post-9/11 style of governance, which marks societies as being in a constant state of siege, has been deemed not only reasonable but necessary in the fight against terror. Agamben is right

49 Shots on the Bridge, 34

50 Ibid

51 ibid 35
to call attention to the state of things today, but history has always been a good indicator that this current state of exception was not only possible but could be justified in a myriad of ways, but especially through the law.

The law reproduces and re-presents the fears and feelings of White supremacy, and in this sense, the law moves from abstraction to material reality in the form of police officers, lawyers, and judges who are “imbued with the ideas and concepts of the social environment which has molded their personalities.”\(^{52}\) This makes the idea of equal and blind justice a “social fiction.” Furthermore, as sociologist Thorsten Sellin noted in his essay, “The Negro Criminal,” “We are prone to judge ourselves by our best traits and others by their worst.”\(^{53}\) For the Black American, this means that all beliefs prejudicial to him aid in intensifying the feeling of racial antipathy engendered by his color and his social status. The colored criminal does not as a rule enjoy the racial anonymity which cloaks the offenses of individuals of the White race. The press is almost certain to brand him, and the more revolting his crimes prove to be, the more likely it is that his race will be advertised. In setting the hallmark of his color upon him, his individuality is in a sense submerged, instead of a mere thief, robber, or murderer, he becomes representative of his race, which in turn is made to suffer from his sins.\(^{54}\)

As James Baldwin asked, “Does the law exist for the purpose of furthering the ambitions of those who have sworn to uphold the law, or is it seriously to be considered as a moral, unifying force, the health and strength of the nation?\(^{55}\)” To which he answered:


\(^{54}\) Ibid, 52

Well, if one really wishes to know how justice is administered in a country, one does not question the policemen, the lawyers, the judges, or the protected members of the middle class. One goes to the unprotected—those, precisely, who need to the law’s protection most!—and listen to their testimony. Ask in Mexican, and Puerto Rican, any Black man, any poor person—ask the wretched how they fare in the halls of justice, and then you will know, not whether or not the country is just, but whether or not it has any love for justice, or any concept of it. 56

When Jose Holmes, one of the shooting victims, testified that those officers wanted him dead, he stumbled upon a realization about the bare life that figures the law in relation to Black life in disarticulating ways. According to Mark Lewis Taylor, the “Bare life is not just a place that suspends a person between life and death…Bare life is more acutely a matter of being subject to a ‘life’ that can be raped, castrated, mutilated, abused, etc. at will and knowing this so deeply down that death pervades the entire body.” 57

During Hurricane Katrina, the Blackness of the victims impacted the response from the law, even if that law enforcement officer was Black. The refugee became the insurgent. In the eyes of a militarized law enforcement, there seems to be a thin line between the two if the person on the other side of that line has a bit more melanin than what is acceptable or comes from a lower class. The Danziger Bridge event is a hyper-reflection of multiple instances of police brutality, trauma, and intimidation. This is one in which Hurricane Katrina, as a discursive figure, circulates around within, and in-between the overall rhetoric of America and even who has the legal right to constitutes Americannness.

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56 ibid, 444-445

The intensity of the moment is shaped by the multiple traumas displaced onto and condensed down into this one; for, on top of the issue of political disposability that so plague Black Americans, here we have legal mechanisms that not only fail to protect but, in fact, are the very thing that Black Americans need to be protected from. To understand the case of Mike Brown, Walter Scott, and Alton Sterling, one must simply look at what happened during Katrina. Further, to understand today’s Black Lives Matter group, one simply needs to look at the experience of Black Americans in history. It is a part of the rhetorical ecology that circulates around Katrina because the Danziger Bridge incident is just the latest incarnation of a long-preserved antagonism. So, like the billy club that comes down on the speaker, the image of a malignant rage and or hatred comes to mind.

In his analysis on zones of indistinction, Anthony Downy writes, “In the state of exception, to continue on the theme of elision and the sovereign suspension of law” the figured subject caught in the throes of the bare life

is deprived of national civil rights and international human rights – such as habeas corpus, appeal to systems of legality, and increasingly, recourse to Geneva Convention and due process – and is in turn constituted (interned) within a ‘zone of indistinction’ where the dividing line between citizen and outlaw, legality and illegality, law and violence, and ultimately life and death are strategically and at times fatally blurred.\(^58\)

The marginalized subject within the state of exception—to be marginal in an exceptional state is to be profoundly othered in an irreparable way—can be “killed and yet no sacrificed” and "killed without fear of punishment."\(^59\) A bare life “is a stripping away of a

\(^{58}\) Downey. “Zones of Indistinction,” p. 112

person’s subjectivity, their humanity such that they are barely existing beings, they are in fact those whose death can be ordered by the powerful and whose death would register neither as a homicide nor as a sacrifice, valuable in some sense."\(^{60}\) To emphasize imprisonment over relief and rescue, even when the materials for rescues and relief were clearly available but used for imprisonment and detainment instead, is to situate all subjects in such a way that they are “abandoned by the law and exposed to violence as a constitutive condition of political existence.”\(^{61}\)

In his essay on the state of exception in the within the arrangement of democratic politics in America, Mark Lewis Taylor writes,

Sovereignty seizes upon conjured emergency to create a state of exception in which it rules by casting others into a state of bare life…This casting into a state of bare life is not to cast them outside the political order; instead it is a kind of inclusion exclusion, a consignment of some—often many—to a state of existence within the political order, but only as those ready to be, indeed often nearly, excluded from it.\(^{62}\)

The law that operates within this exceptional state is not necessarily outside of the political order, for its task is to protect that order. Indigenous, Black and Latino people have always been the object that needed a type of forced subjectivity to constitute their identity within a political and social space. Muslim Americans and Arabic Americans have also come to be on the receiving end of this state violence not because of fear of terrorism but because of a persistent fear of the other that pervades Western ontology. The marking of Zeitoun, in fact, was simply an expansion of a marking system that was already in place. And this system was extrajudicial only in the sense that the victims of

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\(^{60}\) Taylor, “Today’s State of Exception” pp. 312


\(^{62}\) Taylor, “Today’s State of Exception,” pp. 312
this marking had no legal recourse even if there were laws that protected others from the same accused behavior, for the law often investigates itself and finds itself not guilty of any crimes. To use Agamben’s terms, the law has the power to make the illicit, licit.

This is, in large part because of how people, groups, subjects are rhetorically figured. The super-predator, thug, or terrorist is much easier to be removed from society than, say, Mike Brown or Trayvon Martin, or a contractor in New Orleans who spent his days during Katrina helping people. Identifying people as an enemy rhetorically seems to be more important to the state than the actual welfare of the citizens, and this is where neoliberalism and the state of exception converge. In order for both to work, it is necessary to reify individuals into blocs and away from individual identifications. As Valorie Thomas writes, “the racialization of Zeitoun’s Arab background and the process through which that racial identification is made is synonymous with the appellation ‘terrorist’."63 This type of racialization process is the current way of othering for most Western nations.

Conclusion

The rhetorical ecology of the law is dense with articulations that identify, include, and exclude. As such, within the law is a constant negotiation between citizens and the state. In this chapter, I have tried to suggest that the state of exception is exceptional only in that it maintains its strength based on the social significance of exclusions and not necessarily because it follows on the heels of an exceptionally occurring event. As noted earlier in this chapter, all laws are situational; that is, the situation has the ability

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and power to shape the application of the law. Emergencies can be conjured to react to and reconfigure or suspend those laws as necessary. Narrative framing plays a huge role in how states of exceptions are figured. A neoconservative could lament what they believe is moral decay and, given any measure of political power, they could proceed to wage a cultural war on what they see as threats to their way of life.

George W. Bush, as I argued in a previous chapter, came to represent a manifestation of that cultural war, and he would use neoliberal policies to not only preserve and distribute his neoconservative agenda, but he would also use his powers to declare a state of exception that would effectively hold Katrina victims hostage to federal and state disregard. But his powers to declare a state of exception are based in his abilities as a White, wealthy, upper class male to disseminate identifying designations on people as either a friend or a foe. This trickles down into policing, and this is what Hurricane Katrina, heavily overdetermined and condensed, represents: collapsing traumas inflicted by the state.

Hurricane Katrina is figured as a representation and visualization of Agamben’s bare life; one that has always existed as a “camp” within the “polis,” and one in which the enemy is designated by a sovereign that is more institutional than political. There are many sovereigns at work. Agamben’s concern that this can happen to any of us is interesting in that it does not acknowledge that it has been happening to some of us for certain portions of society quite some time. The events of Hurricane Katrina attest to a systematic and historical state of exception that violently maintained life on the margins for those people caught within Agamben’s bare life, and it did this by not only
implementing policy but by colonizing all aspects of society for this very purpose. And it begins with narrative control.
CHAPTER 4
“DAMNABLE GAZE AND LAMENTATION”: TRAUMACASTS, RUMORS, AND MYTHS IN THE MEDIAPOLIS

To loot or to find. The difference between the two, especially during Hurricane Katrina, was a matter of Black and White. The difference was more than definitional; it was ideological, and this ideological mapping worked to sustain ideological definitions that framed the narrative of Katrina in racially charged terms. Two pictures, both showing two people coming from a store with merchandise: one shows a Black boy and the other shows a White woman and man. These pictures, taken by two different photographers for two different press organizations, signify similar acts in very different ways. These two photos were quickly turned into a meme that circulated during Katrina. The meme comparing the White woman “finding” and the Black boy “looting” made visible the antagonisms and anxieties that permeate the American discourse on citizenry and certainly the Katrina discourse on acceptable and relatable suffering. Trauma has a face. Trauma has a race.

In the image of the Black boy, the caption reads that he “walks through chest deep flood water after looting a grocery store in New Orleans.”¹ This boy carries behind him a floating trash bag in one hand, and a case of Pepsi in the other as he wades in the post-Katrina flood waters. The contents he carries weigh him down as much as the words used to describe him. While it was never determined what was in the Black plastic back, the caption precludes all speculation and immediately paints the young man as a criminal. He is, for all intents and purposes, burdened by the weight of the

context he carries. In his case, the trauma is not his, but it is what he is doing to America that is traumatic. By virtue of being Black and male, he is already coded as a dangerous force.

By contrast, another image, taken on the same day, shows a White woman, followed by a White man, “finding bread and soda from a local grocery store after Hurricane Katrina came through the area in New Orleans.” In this image, we see a woman carrying what appears to be a loaf of bread with a backpack on her back. She is followed by a man who also has a backpack as they wade through the water. That they are finding goods denotes not only survival on their part but that they were also compelled to commit an extraordinary act because of an extraordinary situation. They are suffering so badly that they have to wade through toxic, chest-deep water to get basic necessities. This very idea pulls at the heartstrings of the American self-image. They are bravely suffering through insurmountable circumstances in the way that the Black boy, a child, could not. In this case, the trauma is reflected through their suffering; what is happening to them is the principal concern.

In both pictures, if we are to trust the authority of the photographers and media organizations, we would be making assumptions about the presumed innocence of the figures in the photo. And herein lies the problem. Innocence and guilt are color-coded; this is nothing new to American discourse. What interests me here is the mediation of trauma and suffering, especially as it concerns how they are projected onto subjects by the media and the media’s observers. Media affects the discourse on the suffering of the guilty and the innocent. Circulating throughout Katrina was the notion of presumed

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criminality if one is Black and presumed innocence if one is White. But more importantly, it is the mythos of Blackness (and otherness) that emerged from the White imagination that will be the central focus on this chapter.

Figure 4-1. Finding/Looting Meme by Wrenever

In this chapter, I argue that the Katrina figure revealed the problematic ways in which media handles the Black and the othered face during times of crisis and trauma. The fact that the subject in the AP photo was a child did not protect him from being represented as a criminal. The fact that the White people could have stuffed more in the backpacks that cannot be seen in the photo never enters the conscious imagination. But more than that, both subjects in both images are technically looting, but only one’s actions are allowed to be justified by the circumstances. This is what makes the
difference between looting and finding, criminal acts and acts of survival, more ideological than legal or even practical. It is not hard to imagine that the contents in the Black boy’s garbage bag are the same contents in the White people’s backpacks. The issue here is the method of signification in the process of narrative framing.

This narrative framing manifested itself in various ways throughout the Katrina episode and involves the signification of identification. What to call a person who went through Katrina: A refugee? A survivor? A victim? These titles matter. In the images mentioned earlier, the captions on the photos place the people within a geographical space. The two White people are “residents” wading through chest-deep water. The Black boy does not even get the dignity of being a resident. He is just a “young man,” without a place to call home, who loots. He, then, is the refugee, a displaced person without a nation or a place to return to. He is a person uncomfortably placed within the margins of society in a way that marks him as perpetually, criminally, and tragically other. This was the work of the media during Katrina.

In order to understand why the media worked this way, we must first understand that the media is first and foremost a storytelling organization. It is a space for narrative cultivation and constitution as well as narrative dispersal and transmission. The narratives all engage in a specific type of consumption and a specific type of understanding that situates reality and the world in an epistemologically stable way. To this end, the media shapes context and it is shaped by context. To those who consumed the experience of Hurricane Katrina through the media, there was a certain hysteria that became unleashed. Within the narrative, there were the antagonists – who vacillated between the government and those criminally-minded “thugs” who seemed to
wreak havoc on rescue efforts – and the protagonists, who were the “so poor and so Black” (and at times criminal) of the Katrina chaos. Beyond the margins of the narrative were the Choctaw, Houma, the Hondurans and other Latinos, and the Vietnamese, who seemed to perpetually float beyond the narrative scope of any mediated discourse on American race relations, and by extension, social and cultural trauma, political life, and social experience. Essentially, because the media frames realities, the subject of the mediated gaze is always in the process of being constituted in some way either by the carefully mediated appearance or by their carefully mediated absence.

This chapter will situate the finding/looting meme as an entry point into the methodologies of the media landscape, and I will suggest that the meme performed an epistemologically stabilizing service as it circulated around the Katrina figure within the rhetorical ecology of the media. I will suggest that the media’s emphasis on the spectacle of Katrina re-stabilized the social narrative norms by reasserting the myths of racial and urban criminality or invisibility as inherent to racial and urban communities, while simultaneously lamenting the circumstances that created the spectacle in the first place. On the one hand, media reporting emphasized, with great fanfare, the ramifications of poverty, urban neglect, and racialized zoning; on the other hand, the media worked hard to propagate a long-held myth of urban and specifically Black criminality. Using Roger Silverstone’s concept of the Mediapolis, I will suggest that the

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media, in holding with its tradition of shaping relations and perceptions of experiences, contributed to the overall degradation and suffering of Katrina victims; for, embedded deeply within Silverstone’s conception of the media, though not explicitly stated, is the circulation of Roland Barthes’ myths, and these myths helped to explain the signification of stereotypes.

**Traumacasts: Media Hype and Media Wrong**

According to many accounts, the aftermath of the storm was like something out of an apocalyptic movie, complete with a devastated landscape and a devastated people trying to survive. The living and the dead merged together in an uncomfortable and immediate relation. Those that survived saw their loved ones succumb and could offer no burial. The dead simply floated away or were pushed aside in ever growing piles. Some at the Ernest Morial Convention Center were reportedly stacked in a food freezer.\(^4\) Beyond the Convention Center was the Superdome full of raw sewage, human waste, and more dead bodies intermingled with the living.\(^5\) Then came the reports of crime. Some of the most egregious crimes and criminals imaginable were reported to have come out in the city. According to some reports, people not only had to contend with the devastation of the city and the loss of all their possessions, they also had to learn to survive each other. According to rumor, inside and outside the Convention Center and the Superdome, New Orleans would see the breakdown of civilization and the fall into chaos. The news reports were methodical in their coverage. The Katrina

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\(^5\) Ibid
story that unfolded was incredible, devastating, and very American in its ideological framing.

From the New York Times:

Aug. 31 “Looting broke out as opportunistic thieves cleaned out abandoned stores for a second night. In one incident, officials said a police officer was shot and critically wounded.”

Sep. 2: Chaos and gunfire hampered efforts to evacuate the Superdome, the New Orleans Police Superintendent said, armed thugs have taken control of the secondary makeshift shelter in the Convention Center. The thugs repelled eight squads of eleven officers each he [Police Superintendent Eddie Compass] sent to the place... rapes and assaults were occurring unimpeded in the neighborhood streets...looters set ablaze shopping centers and fire fighters, facing guns, abandoned their efforts to extinguish fires’, local radio said.

September 3: “America is once more plunged into a snake pit of anarchy, death, looting, raping, marauding thugs, suffering, infrastructure, a gutted police force, insufficient troop levels, and criminally negligent government planning.”

From the Washington Post:

Sept. 1: “Things have spiraled so far out of control that the city’s mayor ordered police officers to focus on looters and give up the search and rescue efforts.”

Sept. 1: “We fear the anarchy, the feral fanaticism and, at the heart of it, the primeval bugbear of someone coming after our houses, our stores, our stuff.”

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From the *Seattle Times*:

Sept. 26: “In interviews with Oprah Winfrey, Compass reported rapes of babies, and Mayor Ray Nagin spoke of hundreds of armed gang members killing and raping people inside the Dome. Other unidentified evacuees told of ‘children stepping over so many bodies we couldn’t count.’...The picture that emerged was one of the impoverished, overwhelmingly African American masses of flood victims resorting to utter depravity, randomly attacking each other, as well as the police trying to save them. The mayor told Winfrey “the crowd has descended to an almost animalistic state.”

From the *New York Daily News*:

Sept. 4: “The cavernous [Convention] Center became a chamber of horrors, with grim scenes at every turn. Mark Duperon said he was looking for a relative when he stumbled upon the body of a young girl who had been slashed down the torso. He said she looked to be around 8 to 10 years old. “The soldiers come by and the thugs are right behind them, and they terrorize us all night, said Jerry Newton...” When the lights go out, they [the soldiers] are not here…and then the thugs come out murdering people.”

From Boston.com (The Boston Globe)

Sept. 4: “On Thursday, New Orleans Police Chief Eddie Compass described the savagery inside the Convention Center, where 15,000 people had taken shelter: ‘We have individuals who are getting rapped; we have individuals who are getting beaten.’ He sent 88 police officers to restore order; they were beaten back by a mob. Police snipers took up positions on precinct roofs, on guard against the armed gangs who were roaming the city. Not all corpses turning up in New Orleans were of drowning victims...The federal Emergency Management Agency was trying to operate, director Michael Brown said, ‘under conditions of urban warfare...those who called early on for shooting looters on sight should have been listen too—not because property is more valuable than human life, but because when property isn’t safe from marauders, human life isn’t either.”


From the *Times-Picayune*:

Aug. 30: “Midafternoon Monday, a parade of looters streamed from Coleman’s retail store…The looters, men and women who appeared to be in their early teens to mid-40s, braved steady rain…to take away boxes of clothing and shoes from the store.”

Even in the *American Journalism Review (AJR)*, *Times-Picayune* reporter and AJR contributor Brian Thevenot gave a firsthand account of his experience during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in his essay, “Apocalypse in New Orleans,” that “laid bare the beauty and the horror of mankind and reduced [him] to a sobbing wreck.” Comparing what he witnessed in New Orleans to a combat zone, he wrote about the plethora of dead bodies, rampant looting, and despair. He told the story of one Daniel Weber who spent 14 hours floating on a piece of driftwood after watching his wife drown. He wrote of the 30,000 or so people who filled the Superdome, writing that by four days after the storm hit, many people were “retreating to the larger decks to escape the smell of excrement and the threat of thugs,” and he wrote of the thirty to forty bodies stacked in a freezer in the Convention Center; one of the victims allegedly included a dead little girl with her throat slashed. This narrative angle was not just relegated to the U.S. press. “New Orleans,” wrote the *Guardian*, was “a city…subsumed beneath waves of violence, rape and death.” The *Times of London* reported on hijacked

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15 Thevenot, “Apocalypse in New Orleans.”

ambulances that were tipped over on their sides, medical supply trucks being held up at gunpoint, or hospital staffs coming under sniper fire.\(^{17}\)

The overall Katrina experience, so filtered through mediation, caused material consequences that contributed to the miasma of wrongness that occurred during Katrina. And this is where I argue that the media had a part to play in the conceptualization of Hurricane Katrina as synecdoche of America. Gretna Police chiefs cited the reports of rampant crime as their reasoning for denying Katrina victims entry into their city.\(^{18}\) Baton Rouge officials also used those reports to make life as miserable as possible for Katrina evacuees so they would not be inclined to stay in the city.\(^{19}\) It was also used as a cover for some of the more blatant racist and real warfare tactics that were happening in Algiers Point but were not reported.\(^{20}\)

This is not to say that all the media reporting was problematic. The media rightly pointed to the failures of governmental response, and oftentimes with incredulity and frustration took officials to tasks for their non-response and, in some cases, outright falsehoods. During an interview on PBS NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, in response to being asked when and why things were so out of control in New Orleans, Michael Brown insisted that they were doing everything that they could do, and that the federal government was using all the resources they had available including providing an

\(^{17}\) Ibid


ongoing, uninterrupted supply of food and water to the Superdome. The Katrina survivors sheltered in the Superdome and Convention Center, according to Brown, “had meals every day that they’ve been there.”21 The problem, he would go on to say, is that new survivors were materializing onto bridges and overpasses; “people,” Brown noted “that we didn’t know exist.” Brown would go on several talk shows and interviews and repeat variation of this same theme and the response from journalists was swift and brutal. Ted Koppel, in response to a similar statement Brown made on ABC’s Nightline asked, “Don’t you guys watch television? Don't you guys listen to the radio?”22 CNN’s Soledad Obrien asked, “How are we getting better intel than you’re getting?”23

At every point during the Katrina coverage, the media was not just an objective observer. It situated itself as a witness and truth speaker, becoming a part of the narrative of the Katrina mythos. And for its efforts, the media was the first to congratulate itself on its work as the fourth estate, holding the government accountable, bearing witness to the reality of experience, and reporting and distributing the information that viewers so desperately needed. Writing for the AJR, Rem Rider, who also serves as the AJR’s editor and senior vice president, wrote that he media were finally “Playing Big.” After the “litany of woe for the proud but beleaguered profession,” which suffered because of “shrinking audiences,” the “plagiarism and fabrication cases,” “Wall Street-fueled cutbacks,” the “post-9/11 timidity,” the “WMD [Weapons of Mass

21 Eric Ishiwata, “We are Seeing People We Didn’t Know Exist,” Neoliberal Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, Late Capitalism, and the Remaking of New Orleans, ed. Cedric Johnson, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), pp. 32


Destruction] blunder” and the rise of the internet and blogs, the Mainstream media [MSM] finally “rose to the occasion.”

Rider wrote of his fellow journalists as heroes of old who went out under “harrowing circumstances,” and braved the chaos of Katrina to deliver the news to those people who were starved for information. Journalist Deborah Potter, also writing for the AJR, talked of the media proving its “worth and mettle.” The storm “seemed to free TV reporters from their customary roles as detached observers, letting them show their feelings and act like human beings without fear of compromising journalistic integrity.” The media, Potter writes, “did itself and the country a service that won’t be soon forgotten.”

And finally, Marc Fisher suggested that Hurricane Katrina rescued mainstream media from the criticisms of its War on Terror coverage and the decentralization of the media as a source of information. In the face of the catastrophic happenings during Katrina, people returned to the mainstream press and, according to Fisher, the media “elevated their game, challenging inaccurate statements, by public officials, and providing crucial information to an audience that needed it desperately.”

The mainstream media was, Fisher writes, “essential again.”

Positioning media representatives as effectively part of the brave and intrepid first responders who had the very important job of revealing and capturing the truth of things as they happened, Fisher writes with reverence and even a hint of nostalgia of the “power of the media” and its ability to create shared experiences of “a nation

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25 Potter, “Bearing Witness”

26 Rider, “Playing Big”

27 Fisher, “Essential Again”
gathering in its living rooms to see momentous events on television” and to “feel the satisfaction of reading a newspaper’s first shot at making sense of difficult and complex times.”\textsuperscript{28} It is as if the media had and has the very important job of keeping America together. Dan Rather would agree. Speaking to Larry King on the latter’s live show, Rather called the Katrina coverage “landmark.” He went on to rank the reporting as one of the “quintessential great moments in television news…right up there with the Nixon/Kennedy debates, the Kennedy assassination, the Watergate scandal, you name it.”\textsuperscript{29} And true enough, the coverage of Katrina was copious and hard-hitting. We were, at every turn during the Katrina coverage, awash in a sea of headlines. With everything from criticisms of the Bush administration’s “heck of a job” narrative to the human-interest stories and to the reportage of the “everyday” that seemed to become fundamentally changed because of Katrina, the media’s coverage generated a narrative, a way of seeing and perceiving the storm and the infrastructural and social collapse that became Katrina that had far reaching consequences not only for the Bush administration but also for the Katrina survivors.

With all the praise the media heaped on itself, it took a while for them to catch up and acknowledge that, in too many cases, the coverage was largely overstated and in some cases, outright incorrect. Abandoning objectivity, the media subjectively inserted itself into the Katrina ethos. Even the pretense of distance vanished and the more explicit biases that are usually unconscious became a part of the conscious reportage

\textsuperscript{28} Campbell, “Hurricane Katrina and Superlative Reporting,” 166

\textsuperscript{29} ibid
and experience of the events following the storm. The media, right along with the federal and local government, was implicated in the overall chaos.

In fact, in a bipartisan congressional committee report, the media was later taken to task for the mismanagement of information. “[A]ccurate reporting,” the report notes, “was among Katrina’s many victims.”30 In the weeks and months following Katrina, there would be many retraction articles from the likes of the New York Times, Washington Post, Times-Picayune, and the AJR to name a few. One such article, “Myth-Making in New Orleans,” written by Thevenot, takes the media to task for its rush to print unsubstantiated rumors that had a large impact on rescue efforts. He also includes himself in his condemnation, referring back to the story he wrote about the young girl with her throat slashed among the pile of bodies in a food freezer. It turns out that story, related by National Guardsman Mikel Brooks, was something Brooks overheard while standing in line, waiting to get food at Harrahs’s casino.31

And what of the supposed eyewitness accounts of the girl with the slashed torso? Never found. The reports of rapes in the Superdome or the Convention center? As far as is known, none of these things ever happened. While it is certainly possible that there was some violence and perhaps cases of unreported and underreported rape, the media’s wholesale acceptance of the narrative is troubling—especially so, since in documented cases of violence, the media was largely silent. Algiers Point was the site of violent racial antagonisms and violence where White people were openly and


fearlessly shooting at anyone “darker than a paper bag.”\textsuperscript{32} The question that animates this chapter is why was there an overall willingness to believe the absolute worst of Katrina victims without any evidence of these claims? The reason why these rumors were able to spread so fast and effectively is for the same reason that it is easier to believe that a Black boy loots rather than finds. It is the urban space, the Black face, and the confluences of race that created the mediated state at work during Katrina.

**The Katrina Mediapolis**

In order to understand why the media was able to believe the worst and how it was able to easily transmit those narratives, I would like to consider Roger Silverstone’s “Mediapolis” as a starting point because his work helps to frame a way of thinking about how the media functions. According to Silverstone, the media is where clarity, understanding, judgment, and “the benevolent as well as the malevolent” are located.\textsuperscript{33} It is also where the “mediated enlargement of mentality,” what Silverstone calls imagination, is found. Silverstone sees in the media the potential for social recovery and social good. It is, he notes, an entity and institution that has the ability to construct the world and the reality of the world at the same time that it is constructed by it.\textsuperscript{34} The media has a morality in which the “generality of orientation and procedure within which the world is constructed by the media and within which the others appear.”\textsuperscript{35} In other words, the media orients processes of thinking about reality and those subjects that


\textsuperscript{34} Silverstone, *Mediapolis*, 6

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, 7
constitute that reality. It also plays a significant role in the signification of events and people as well as the construction of meaning. Because the media has this power, it constitutes a moral system that separates the norm from the abnormal in the process of constituting the world and helping to set meaning.

Broadly, the media makes connections in the “centrifugal assertions of identities and connectivities in accordance with shared interests” and it is also a “continuous inscription of difference in any and every text discourse: from crude stereotypes of otherness to the subtle and not-so-subtle discriminations of dramatic characterizing narrative construction.” 36 In short, Silverstone writes, the media’s primary function is the “endless, endless, endless playing with difference and sameness.” 37 But the media could not function without its observer. Caught up in the work of the media “is the work that the audience does or fails to do in the engagement with what they see or hear.” 38 And because of this symbiosis between media and audience, Silverstone identifies a problem with the conceptions of the media as a holding a narrow point of view that animates and disseminates information. While Silverstone takes a broad view of the problem by directing his analysis at the work of Western media generally, I am suggesting that the inclusive and othering narratives that dominate mediated transmissions can be first viewed and understood on the home front. How the media trades in “otherness, the spectacular, and the visible” allows us to get a better grasp on the ethos of the trauma-casts generated because of Katrina. 39

36 Ibid, 8
37 Ibid, 19
38 Ibid
39 Ibid 47
The interaction between audience and media, or rather, the engagement between the two is where one will find Silverstone’s Mediapolis. If the media articulates the main boundaries of culture, then the interaction between media and audience codifies those boundaries into a national and social policy; not the rule-of-law necessarily, but a rule-of-being. The Mediapolis, then, is the “space of appearance” or the public space in late modernity where mediation opens new avenues into seeing new worlds, while at the same time it mediates reception of those worlds. However, because the spectacle of Katrina was as large as its experience, what appeared in the media, what was reported, could have been an opportunity to signify those experiences of American life that are usually left in the margins, or it could revert back to the historical tradition of coding difference as grossly spectacular.

Because of the confluence of American racial prerogatives and the spectacle of Katrina, the narrative traveled the same lines that have historically marked us versus them. It also revealed much about America that was safely hidden from view. In this narrative, the Black demon wanders the landscape posing a threat to the sanctity of civilization (read: Whiteness). The hyper-visualization of Blackness during Katrina and racial spectacle of America allowed Washington Post reporter Linton Weeks, for one to describe Black bodies as “feral” and “primeval.” This is how the Mediapolis functions. It is the “mediated space of appearance in which the world appears and in which the world is constituted in its worldliness and through which we learn about those who are and who are not like us.”40 It is through the relay of information within the Mediapolis

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40 Silverstone, Mediapolis, 31.
that one is “constructed as human (or not)” and the emergence or public and political life
at “all levels of the body politic (or not).”

The looting and finding meme as well as the media reports during Katrina have
immediate impacts on receptivity. The foreigner, or in a Derridean sense the stranger,
made stranger for being both Black and poor, is both hyper-visual and rejected because
they are too visible for comfort. At the same time, in order to get a better handle on the
conspicuous visibility of the Black and poor, visibility was carefully managed despite the
narrative-disrupting chaos of Katrina. Furthermore, the space of appearance during that
Katrina episode was a White space with a Black dot at the center. As Wolf Blitzer
noted, the victims were “so poor and so Black.” The eye was uncomfortably drawn to
that Blackness and the life of that Blackness in New Orleans. Through mediation and
the interruption of that White space by that Black dot, the media worked as an
epistemological stabilizer. Crime and the criminal countenance were personified within
very specific and narrow frames. Whereas the media attempted to control the
disseminated narratives (many of them untrue) during Katrina, the meme that emerged
called attention to the media’s readiness to believe in and distribute the appearance and
suggestion of an inherent criminality.

In this case, both the mainstream media (MSM) and the meme were vying for an
audience. The mainstream media’s self-congratulations were attempts to assert its
authority and objectivity as truth-seeker and truth-teller. Even within the meme, each
image draws on the sympathies of a specific audience. Ideally, seeing a child wading
through water in catastrophic conditions should elicit sympathy in the same way that the

41 ibid
image of the two White people did. But the caption prohibited that sympathetic response, and the image of Blackness, so ingrained in America as problematic, made an antagonistic response all but certain. Placing it within the context of the reports of rampant criminality, it is hard to say if the caption was needed at all, for it was all too easy for the Katrina audience and even some Katrina victims to believe that Blacks, especially lower-class Blacks, were capable of nothing but criminality.

The main takeaway here, though, is the notion of Silverstone’s Mediapolis or space of appearance within the Katrina ecology. What was in circulation was a type of aspect-of-a-criminal that made its appearance because of the morality of the media and the representation of American morality in the media. The media works on a feedback loop, in which, as Silverstone notes, “the media are part and parcel of the everyday, just as the everyday is part and parcel of the media.”\textsuperscript{42} The mythos that functions within society also stimulates the activity of the media. Media coverage tells its audiences how to think about a certain situation. It does more than inform; it provides a framework from which audience members make assessments about their world. So, in an event such as Hurricane Katrina, when the normal relationship between what is experienced and what is articulated completely ruptures, the media helps fill the void by providing us with a supposedly objective view of the day’s events. The media aligns the signifiers in way that is more palatable even if the news itself is repugnant.

Because the media captures ideology and moralizes on and immortalizes it, the space of appearance that constitutes the Mediapolis is really a space for stabilizing identities within a highly stratified space. And because identity narratives are always in

\textsuperscript{42} ibid, 19
circulation, especially in mediated spaces, whether intended or not, mythologies and the spectacle of these mythologies are consistently and significantly in circulation within the Mediapolis, which makes it a space of appearance and representation. 43 Myths and spectacles both circulate through the Mediapolis, producing meanings and interpretations about an experience.

**Myths and Meaning**

What is absolutely true of a myth is that for it “to remain relevant, credible, and viable, people need to believe it accurately reflects present day and importantly [their] realities.”44 New Orleans prior to Katrina was mythical wonderland known for its funeral marches, jazz parades, Mardi Gras, music, cuisine, and distinctive southerness. Everything about New Orleans was an idealized landscape of a leisurely good time or debauchery, depending on your frame of reference. And the people of New Orleans, for the most part, disappeared into this mythical landscape. But as poet Yousef Komunyakaa notes, beneath the “postmodern lethargy” was a city with a high crime rate, one of the most corrupt police organizations in the country, and regular violent clashes between neighborhood gangs.45 But, for the sake of the tourist dollar, many people believed in this dreamy New Orleans wonderland up until the moment the wonderland was washed away.

43 Ibid.


What the water revealed, according to Jonathan Alter, was an “Other America” consisting of high levels of poverty and infrastructure collapse that was, for many, impossible to conceive for most of mainstream America.\(^\text{46}\) However, what is most revealing about the surprise and shock demonstrated by the media over the color of the disaster was that it was a surprise and shock. It is a testament to narrative framing constantly at work in America. Just seconds before Kanye West made his more famous “George Bush doesn’t care about Black people” statement, his ire was focused on the media. West said that he hated “the way they portray us in the media. If you see a Black family it says they’re looting, if you see a White family it says they are looking for food.”\(^\text{47}\) As I noted earlier in the chapter, within media circulation was an idea of Blackness, the poor slave named Uncle Tom or the violent Black named Bigger Thomas.\(^\text{48}\) And it was seemingly easier for a Black person, especially a Black male, no matter how young, to be Bigger than Tom. In this case, what is in circulation are the ideas of palatable Blackness, for a criminal Black is more stabilizing than the suffering Black.

What was on display during Katrina was the “infernal world of Black and red skins with all their scarification and their hideous masks.”\(^\text{49}\) This is indeed a spectacle, a front row viewing of the mythologies created and disseminated by the reporting of the


\(^{47}\) A Concert for Hurricane Relief,” (September 2, 2005), accessed, December 3, 2015, [http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1922188_1922187_1922183,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1922188_1922187_1922183,00.html)


idea of a looting child and a criminal Black man shooting at a rescue helicopter.

According to Roland Barthes, myth is a system of communication, and “it is a message,” “a mode of signification,” and “a form.” A myth’s main task is to demonstrate an ethos; however, myths also have the appearance of being natural and true instead of motivated and carefully crafted. There is an aspect of intentionality in myth-making, but that intentionality is framed in such a way as to appear natural and nonintentional. Barthes writes,

Myths are not read as statements of particular actors, but as outgrowths of nature. They are seen as providing a natural reason, rather than an explanation or a motivated statement. They are read as ‘innocent’ speech – from which ideology and signification are absent. To consume a myth is not to consume signs, but images, goals and meanings. The signified of connotative myths is ‘hidden’ since it can’t be reconstructed through the language or images used to carry it. The utterance is structured enough to affect the reader, but this reception does not amount to a reading.

Barthes looks at myths not as passive discursive productions but as the rhetorics of place, space, and cultures reaching out to grab or take hold of a subject. In other words, we are hailed by mythologies, and, once we acquiesce, we take in the carefully crafted signs circulating within the myths.

If objectivity were possible at all, especially during Katrina, it existed only insofar as it rested on what Barthes calls “the collusion” of Black skin and White imagination. This collusion gives the appearance of naturalness and a broad way of seeing. What is central to understanding the scope of mythologies is that one needs to understand the

50 Ibid, 107
52 Ibid.
transmission of mythologies filtered through “natural” norms that shape social relations. What matters to the viewing public, according to Barthes, “is not what it believes but what it sees.” However, what the public sees is so heavily mediated and naturalized that what is seen is what is already and always within the conscious understanding of being. What matters is whether or not what is seen confirms what is believed.

The finding/looting meme is mythology, and the subjects captured in the images are subjects of mythological framing. The photograph, Barthes writes, “is always invisible. It is not what we see.” What is seen is reaffirmations of beliefs and racial framings. In the image of the White woman finding food, there is an inherent innocence signified within the rhetoric of the photo, which creates a more profound affective response. Because this photo is narratively framed this way the White woman’s decentering in the image points to the extraordinary nature of the situation. This is not normal; the entire situation is abnormal, but this woman and the man behind her are dealing with this abnormal situation by surviving the best way they know how. In contrast, the compounded effect of misreported stories of crime situate the Black boy as a more complex figure.

On the one hand, he is a Black person who is doing what Black people do, which is to resort to a type of instinctual and feral criminality, according to the conscious and unconscious American imagination. As a result, even within the abnormal situation, the stabilizing myth of the everyday-Black-criminal drove the narrative forward, as did the further marginalization of already deeply and profoundly marginalized people. In this

53 Barthes, Mythologies, 4
way, the narratives that frame Katrina should be “examined not as fixed and stable communication phenomenon but rather as part of a complex and shifting terrain of meaning that makes up the social world.”

The mythology that circulates around the meme is the same one that circulates around the constructed identity of Blackness. By choosing the word “looting” over “finding” it situates Blackness within the racist mythologies of the Black demon, and it helps some, especially those within the dominant culture, justify their mistreatment of Blacks. As Slavoj Zizek notes,

Even if all the reports on violence and rapes had proven to be factually true, the stories circulating about them would still be "pathological" and racist, since what motivated these stories were not facts, but racist prejudices, the satisfaction felt by those who would be able to say: "You see, Blacks really are like that, violent barbarians under the thin layer of civilization!" In other words, we would be dealing with what could be called lying in the guise of truth: Even if what I am saying is factually true, the motives that make me say it are false.

Social antagonisms were projected onto this Black boy in a way that placed the White woman’s trauma in relief against the deviancy of the Black boy. Zizek goes on to write,

The reality of poor Blacks, abandoned and left without means to survive, was thus transformed into the specter of Blacks exploding violently, of tourists robbed and killed on streets that had slid into anarchy, of the Superdome ruled by gangs that were raping women and children. These reports were not merely words, they were words that had precise material effects: They generated fears that caused some police officers to quit and led the authorities to change troop deployments, delay medical evacuations and ground helicopters. Acadian Ambulance Company, for example, locked down its cars after word came that armed robbers had


looted all of the water from a firehouse in Covington -- a report that proved totally untrue.\textsuperscript{57}

And while, as noted above, a lot of what was reported was untrue, the issue is with how readily audiences were able to believe the stories and how the stories were used to serve as "rationalizations for organization and institutional paralysis."\textsuperscript{58} The veracity of the narratives does not really matter if the intent is to establish (racialized) social relations. This is the human story that disaster-myth making tries to tell. This narrative generally falls in line with larger narratives of Whiteness because Whiteness is buoyed by familiarity with the ‘object’ of the photo, for as Thorsten Sellin noted, humans are most prone to judge people in specific ways based on our familiarity with the object of our gaze.\textsuperscript{59} Now turning back to our Finding/Looting meme, our immediate framing for this narrative is that, as has been noted, the catastrophe in New Orleans was compounded by the fact that basic necessities were not being met. The affective reach is to immediately \textit{feel} for the subjects captured in this image in the case of the White woman or be repulsed by the image in the case of the Black boy.

The subjects in this image quickly become objects for Barthes’s mythologies. The meme itself, composed of two separate photographs, is a mythology. The photograph, Barthes writes, “is always invisible. It is not what we see.” The press photo, in particular, is designed to deliver a message. The structure of the photo, according to Barthes, is

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid


always in communication with the structure of text and, I would add, discourse.\textsuperscript{60}

Photography, especially the press photograph, cultivates meaning, signification, and memory. It mythologizes moments in time and space. David Campbell calls photography a “technical visualization that both draws on and establishes visual economy through which events and issues are materialized in particular ways.”\textsuperscript{61}

Because this is a journalistic photo, it is automatically endowed with a large measure of “truthiness” that protects the integrity of the subjects in the photo and therefore the objective relations that are established in the viewing of the photo. As Beaumont Newhall writes,

> Journalism has discovered that that camera is one of its most powerful tools. A picture can often tell more than thousands of words, and a picture made by a photographer implies, by its method of production, a basis of fact. All know that such an implication is untrue, by everyone accepts the photograph as the pictorial evidence of an eyewitness—the cameraman.\textsuperscript{62}

The main function of a photo, according to Barthes, is “to inform, to represent, to surprise, to cause, to signify, to provoke desire.”\textsuperscript{63} Because, Barthes notes, every photo is contingent, every photograph is what Susan Sontag calls a “narrowly selective transparency” largely because of the presumption of veracity afforded to the person capturing the scene and transforming it into image and the collection of signs and text


\textsuperscript{63} Barthes, Camera Lucida, 28
that aid in the interpretation of that image. Further, the press photo, because of the presumption of veracity, is “not only perceived, received, it is read, connected more or less consciously by the public that consumes it to a traditional stock of signs.” It is simultaneously denoted and connoted because of its cache of signs. When we place those signs next to text, we have what I like to think of as the mapping of meaning. The image, Barthes writes, “no longer illustrates the words, it is now the words which, structurally, are parasitic on the image.”

The issue here is the authority that we, the public, give the press to make meaning. Because the media holds up existing narratives, we should think of the relation between media and audience as one between rhetor and audience. The press photo is always in the process of interpellating its audience. That is why it can maintain its stabilizing and moralizing force. While the media, as an institution, could potentially destabilize those existing narratives, in the face of a destabilizing event such as Katrina, the media coverage chaotically and haphazardly re-presented racial stereotypes that were intensified because of the intensity of the moment. Blackness within the space of appearance within the Mediapolis of Katrina was based not on facts but on fears, not on truths but on stereotypes.

Because the dominant society works so hard to create spectacles that are “laudatory monologues” about the greatness, purity, or sanctity of those in power, the spectacle “speaks for all others” by presenting and representing a hierarchic society to

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66 ibid, 25
itself.\textsuperscript{67} It does this because all imagery is mediated through ideologies, and ideologies “offer representations in the form of images, concepts, cognitive maps, worldviews…to propose frames and punctuation of our experience.”\textsuperscript{68} In this case, Whites can be anyone or anything in the media, but they will mostly be innocent. People of color, then are pigeonholed into a “narrow array of rules and traits.”\textsuperscript{69}

Within the Mediapolis, there is another type of visibility, and that is the spectacular visibility of trauma. This type of visibility is hyper-intensive and hyper-reflective. The rumors of a third-world New Orleans with shootings, rapes, attacks on rescuers, and the like are all images of Blackness in the American imagination, the thug, the nigger, the violent monster that Whiteness needs to be protected from. There is a rhetorical thread in American discourse, especially in more Conservative circles, that argues that Black Americans are responsible for their own situations, and the imagery and rhetoric distributed during Katrina also circulated that strain of thought. The argument would go something like this: they can’t be rescued because they are engaging in criminal acts so egregious that the government cannot send help.

In his book, \textit{Black Demon: The Media’s Depiction of the African American Male Criminal Stereotype}, Dennis Rome argues the stereotype of Black criminality is largely seeded in utopian ideas of Whiteness and White spaces. He writes,

\begin{quote}
By tying appearances of Blacks so frequently to narratives of crime and victimization, the news constructs African Americans as a distinct source of disruption…the news can easily imply a baseline or ideal social
\end{quote}


condition in which far fewer serious problems would plague the society if only everyone in the United States were native-born Whites.\textsuperscript{70}

**Hurricane Katrina and The Spectacle**

Hurricane Katrina’s circulation through mainstream media essentially maintained the media framing that made a situation like Katrina possible. However, traditional media was only one site of circulation. Katrina also played out in social media where there was a struggle over definitions and authenticity. User-generated content and user-generated narratives challenged the narratives of traditional media. This is where Silverstone seems to pin his hopes for the salvation of seeing and otherness through media.

Social media became the site of contestation that challenged the mythologies circulating in the media. Placing the Looting/Finding photos side by side, and reconstituting them into a contesting object, the meme is designed to challenge the narratives in circulation. The intent is to demonstrate some fundamental hypocrisy that, if left unbound, will escape notice or at least not be noticed in the same way. The marriage between image and image, text and text, and image and text reinserts the mythologies generated by the singular images into a broader historical context.

The signification processes in this meme produce signs that speak to two different types of existence: one that lives life in the bare life and is not permitted—mythically or socially—to leave, and the other that, although caught in the snare of the bare life, is not quite as repulsive. The interesting thing is that for a Black person to say they are oppressed is to be always in the process of imagining that oppression; yet, for

a White person to code all Black people as criminals, thugs, or animals is to speak their particular brand of truth. Ultimately, what this meme does is call attention to the spectacle of race, class, America and even journalism and the mythologies used to sustain them.

The spectacle works with myths to circulate constituted and contingent identities. The two images work together to separate the “us over here” from the “them over there.” This juxtaposition situates the young Black boy in the image, for example, as the problem, instead of the society that makes it necessary for him to wade through dirty water to get Pepsi. And while Hurricane Katrina presents a different affective response, the fundamentals of the argument remain the same. Black Americans are always a problem for America either because of what they demand or what they expose, and in some cases both.

In the American imagination, this question is important because it presumes that the problem of Blackness is a problem of Black people for White people. The construction of the relationship to problemhood suggests that Black people are inherently problematic. Marshaling Blacks into “camps,” whether rhetorical, material or social, is one way that the dominant society has managed to deal with the “problem.” What the media, and its narrative framing exposed was that America’s treatment of its minorities has always belied American rhetoric about the dignity of humanity, life, liberty, and happiness. Situating this American ontology in an event like Katrina produces interesting observations. At a basic rhetorical level, the distance between American rhetoric and practical American experience is great. But that argument can be made for

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a lot of countries. But the fact of the distance between the two is what makes the images of Katrina so significant because America’s rhetorical production is one of its greatest commodities.

Another factor is that Black death or Black suffering has always had a place in the consuming public’s diet. In the case of the young Black boy in the image, violence against him would be justified because of the framing of his deviancy along with the framing of Black criminality throughout the mediated reporting of Katrina. And as has been historically noted, the process of conceptualization involved the absolute subjugation of the subject. Blackness abstracted to essentialism where the individual is lost in the ebb and flow of White feelings about Black people and Black presence. Through mediation, White feelings are reaffirmed. Thus, to read the imagery of Katrina is to read the exclusive signification of being American. And all of these issues play out in the images of Katrina.

This is because of something that I like to think of as relational framing. The narrative of America has always been interlaced with multiple narratives of identity. And it has always been important for the American psyche to separate the proper, Anglo-American from everyone else and on so down the path until you land at the bottom of the hierarchical American chain of impenetrable Blackness. And this is even more complicated when you consider the many sources of the narratives in circulation.

Eddie Compass, the former Police Superintendent during Katrina is responsible for spreading some of the more egregious rumors including reports of “raping babies,” which did not occur. As a police officer, his words would have had some authority and it would have been taken as authentic. He would later say that he “misspoke” because of
the stress of the situation, but this points to pervasiveness of myths and racial framing. Blackness is not just an American problem in the way that it was presented in DuBois meant it, as a problem of the color line.\textsuperscript{72} It is also an American problem in that it spectacualrizes a problem that America has regarding its citizenry. Particularly with the press, Americans are always engaged in a process of “re-cognizing” our relation to each other. As the fourth estate, the press is “a group confessional form that provides communal participation. It can ‘color’ events by using them or not using them at all. But it is the daily communal exposure of multiple items in juxtaposition that gives press its complex dimensions.\textsuperscript{73} But in the case of Katrina, this communion was interrupted. The hysterics of a hysterical situation and hysterical people ruptured the normal discursive chain that characterizes that American experience with the American utterance. So let’s go back to the vision of the hysterical foreigner or, as I will refer to it from now on, the hysterical other. The hysteric has the potential to upset the dominating narrative; this is why the dominating narrative works so hard to suppress the hysteric.

The hysterical trauma of Hurricane Katrina broke through the veil of that which America likes to keep hidden, but the spectacle was maintained. It held whether it was promoting the stereotype of violence or poverty. It held while also promoting the idea of a victimless victim or at the very least a victim that victimized him or herself. While the callousness and intentional specularization that characterized the early twentieth century’s view of Blackness was not as obvious here, the same communicative tropes and ideas were being transmitted and that is that there is something inherent in

\textsuperscript{72} The Soul of Black Folk. pp. 9

\textsuperscript{73} Marshall McLuhan. Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man. 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (New York: New American Library, 1966), p.204
Blackness that makes it ripe for the spectacle. So let’s look at one of the more talked about press images from Katrina.

The dueling images that sparked the debate about the difference between finding and looting created entire conversations about how the media frames its stories. But the criminality, rumored or otherwise, is the spectacle’s attempt to maintain the existing order about itself wherein Blackness is a problem. The thing to keep in mind here is that there are all unconscious reactions that has been conditioned onto the American public for years. The fact that there has to be a debate about whether or not Black lives matter can attest to that.

But again, within the rhetorical ecology of Katrina, the media’s mediated coverage of Blackness circulates within and around old constructions of race and identity. In their work on media and perceptions of Black America, researchers Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki found that because of ongoing segregation, most of what White Americans learn about Black Americans is through television and news.74 Racial isolation encourages stereotypical ideas and intensifies perceptions. Thus, the average White person believes that Blacks are on welfare or involved in criminal activity because of reinforced stereotypes of racial differences that harken back to the Jim Crow era and to what Entman and Rojecki calls “voids.”75 These voids are instances of popular culture not reporting on Black American successes or achievements at the same rate that they report White successes or achievements. Entman and Rojecki noted that a person is more likely to see a cohesive White family unit that is trouble free

74 Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki, *The Black Image in the White Mind*, 2

75 Ibid, 8.
than a Black family unit. These voids, in conjunction with the constant images of criminality, paint a picture of Blackness as too much of an alterity to be considered normal. The Katrina images demonstrate this fact. Entman and Rojecki note, “media images still contain traces of long standing cultural presumptions not only of essential racial difference but of a hierarchy that idealizes Whiteness.”

Thus, seen from a purifying lens, the White couple would naturally be finding food; while looking from a racialized lens, Blacks would naturally loot. The main argument that Entman and Rojecki make is that concerted efforts in the past to situate Black Americans in the White imagination have become unconscious today.

Ultimately, to harken back to Du Bois, how Black problemhood is defined is largely contingent on how Blackness is distributed across the screen. Blacks, especially Black men, have so long been coded as Black demon that to imagine warfare during Katrina was not difficult.

By tying appearances of Blackness so frequently to narratives of crime and victimization, the news constructs African Americas as a distinct source of disruption…the news can easily imply a baseline or ideal social condition in which far fewer serious problems would plague society if only everyone in the United States were natural born Whites.

In this way, Black crime has political agency. To say it another way, Blacks are the repository of American fear so these stereotypes have long been used to serve a narrative purpose for White Americans. The Black person is always in the process of becoming the spectacle and playing out the imaginations of a White fear. That fear,

76 Ibid, 57.
77 Ibid, 67.
though, represents reality to a lot of White Americans. According to Entman, “reality is problematic not only because news stories inevitably select only some aspects of reality and leave out others. More important, over time, the specific realities depicted in single stories may accumulate to form a summary message that distorts social reality.” The consequences of this viewing of Blackness can be seen in the Gretna incident.

After Katrina, Gretna Police Chief Arthur Lawson refused to take storm refugees, arguing that the small city of Gretna was overwhelmed with people as it is and because, as one Gretna resident stated, “They were looting, and they were shooting and we didn’t want that over here.”79 Thus, the messaging by the press, along with, perhaps, racial attitudes by the Gretna populous, prevented valuable rescue efforts. This is the materialization of rhetorical exigencies.

During the Katrina event, the designation of “refugee” to describe Katrina victims was hotly debated because the word has connotations of foreignness surrounding that people rejected. It also challenged the image that Americans have of themselves.80 In this case, the media appropriated the suffering81 associated with the term and placed it onto the American Katrina victim. There could be many reasons for this, but I would suggest that one effect of it was to demonstrate the anti-Americanness of what was happening in New Orleans at the time especially in light of what was happening internationally with Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay.

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81 ibid, 736
From a rhetorical perspective, the status of a refugee is neither “betwixt or between,” and it is an “expression of liminality,” that “challenges the time-honored distinctions between nationals and foreigners.”\footnote{ibid, 737-738} However, the status of the refugee is precisely the point of the spectacle and mediated Black personhood. There is, inherent in the use of the term refugees as well as the depiction of Blacks as looters, criminals, and rapists, a deep conception of exclusion. Connoted in every rhetorical ecology circulating within the storytelling aspect of Katrina is this idea of displaced personhood because of this language of rejection and imagery of otherness.

To go back to the rumors and stereotypes that circulated around the storm, there is the idea of narrative authority. The press made decisions about value and narrative viability. Since the media dictated perceptions of the storm, the media also framed what people were aware of and what people would accept as truth. What emerged, then, was remembrances of various belief systems.\footnote{Carl Lindahl, “Legends of Hurricane Katrina: The Right to be Wrong, Survivor to Survivor Storytelling and Healing,” \textit{Journal of American Folklore} 125 (496) (Spring 2012) p. 140. Accessed Sept. 5 2016. \url{http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jamerfolk.125.496.0139}} For example, as Folklorist Carl Lindahl notes, understanding how we talk about Hurricane Katrina, understanding the stories circulating around Katrina, is a good way to understand how we construct and think about our experiences, why we choose what to believe and who to believe to believe when they speak. Because trauma has the potential to disrupt, the spectacle of trauma seeks to normalize. When we tell ourselves stories about an event, when we mythologize an event, it is in line with the same stories we have already heard or told ourselves.
Media framing indexes mythologies in a way that makes the spectacle real and consistent with preexisting ideas of identity. The media framing of Katrina made the crisis the primary relation by which we understood the event. That is, the event became a spectacle in large part because how it was covered and reported. The media, in other words, became part of the story and the media became the spectacle. Circulating within the spectacle, though were the same racial and class mythologies that have always signified America.

The material reality of media framing was especially noticeable during Katrina, but I would argue that these effects are a part of everyday experience. It is part of the bare life that exist in the state of exception where, through mediation, agency is tied to either victimization or criminality and responses are meted out accordingly. Hurricane Katrina was not just an exposé of the government but also of the traditional media. In all cases, whether it is religion, politics or law, the narrative “got away.” The Katrina figure adds thickness to the myths within the media framing making the myths attain ideological significance. In the same way that religion, as a Barthesian myth, shapes outcomes, the myths generated and circulated during Katrina intensified not only of the experience of the storm for those going through it but also the discursive figure that Katrina would become for those of us observing it.
A GOD FOR EVERY SIDE: RELIGIOUS AFFECT IN THE KATRINA CHAOS

Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each involves His aid against the other… The prayers of both could not be answered.
—Abraham Lincoln
Second Inaugural Address, 1864

When Katrina churned its way through southeast Louisiana, bringing a storm surge that breached levees, and especially after the images of the suffering and dying were transmitted through the media, there was a quick need to contextualize the storm in some way. One of the easiest ways, the more traditional way, was to point to an act of God, to give a religious explication. Religion is, among many other things, an outward expression of a cultural, social, familial or individual experience; it is a collation of mythologies that, as Barthes would say, act as signifiers to experience and culture. It not only identifies and explains, it also justifies and makes permanent ideas that would probably otherwise seem fleeting and absurd. To say it another way, religion seems to move along landscapes and cultures, slowly engaging, shifting, and explaining the everyday. While every chapter in this project has a tinge of religiosity as an undercurrent, if only because of the hegemonic nature of religion and American Christianity, which has served as a base contextualization of American life, this chapter will be firmly entrenched in the religious connotations that circulate around the Katrina figure.


During Katrina, many people offered religious interpretations of the storm’s impact and aftermath. Former New Orleans mayor, Ray Nagin, claimed that God was mad at America for “being in Iraq under false pretenses and Black on Black crime.” Franklin Graham, son of the influential evangelist Billy Graham, suggested that there was a “spiritual Black cloud over New Orleans” because of the city’s “Satan worship, orgies, and widespread drinking and drug use.” Graham contended that, in response to the debauchery, God sent Katrina to start a religious revival. Repent America’s director, Michael Marcavage stated that “this act of God destroyed a wicked city…May it never be the same. We must not forget that the citizens of New Orleans tolerated and welcomed the wickedness in the city for so long.” John Hagee, a minister and friend to the religious right, blamed homosexuality for Katrina when he made the following statements about the reason for Katrina:

I believe that New Orleans had a level of sin that was offensive to God, and they were recipients of the judgment of God for that…there was to be a homosexual parade on the Monday that Katrina came…So I believe that the judgment of God is a very real thing. I know people demur from that, but I believe that the Bible teaches that when you violate the law of God, that God brings punishment sometimes before the Day of Judgment, and I believe that Hurricane Katrina was, in fact, the judgment of God against the city of New Orleans.

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Finally, there is Republican Representative Richard Baker’s comment, “We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did.” Baker was not alone. Quite a few on the religious right made similar comments about why the storm occurred. All of these comments and point to a belief that God brought down New Orleans because of what they saw as moral decay. What it does not say is that Baker, who at the time of Katrina was the Representative for Louisiana’s Sixth District, was just one in a long line of policy makers who made sure, in order to protect the suburbs, that the lines of segregation were fixed in a post-segregation era.

Reading religion onto the Katrina ecology is not much of an intellectual leap. In these interpretations, God’s actions in this setting was not unlike the role of the God in the story of Noah’s Ark. The fact that Katrina entailed a flood alone lends itself to Noahic rationalizations, and there is of course the elemental and symbolic understanding of water as tool for cleansing and renewal in everything from Judaism and Christianity to the tarot. It is a rhetorical move that fulfills the speaker’s ideation of purity and the immorality that needed to be cleansed.

I will attempt to avoid interpreting the event as a religious metaphor for anything. Instead, I want to focus on an explanation of Christian Evangelical usage of religion to explain the flood and to articulate how to overcome it. To begin, it needs to be stated that religion has always been a discourse. It has also always been a rhetorical tradition. It is just as much about materializing identity as it is about understanding space, place, and even the self. As such, it is wholly subjective, permeable, variable and, most

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importantly, affective. In the true sense of the rhetorical tradition, especially in the Evangelical tradition, it moves to the symphony of speaker and audience.

We are all familiar with the story of Noah and the ark. God, displeased with what he saw from mankind, decided that he would cleanse the world through water. And so, for forty days and forty nights, “the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened.”8 And so, the story goes: Noah, ensconced in his ark along with his family and two of every kind of animal, male and female, survived the flood because they were God’s chosen. So began the ritual of water as a tool for cleansing and renewal and the idea of washing away sin as one would wash dirt from one’s body. But there is also the idea that this is the beginning of a long, narrative frame describing a relation between the Judeo-Christian God and the people who worship Him. God serves two distinct and opposed roles: god-as-savior and redeemer, or god-as-destroyer.

The story of Noah, the flood, and the ark suggests that existence, life, is tenuous. Creation can be destroyed and recreated at any time. Some scholars have suggested that the story of Noah is a parallel story of creation, and that within the story is a morality lesson on righteousness and, more practically, acceptance.9 Being outside of the ark, in the rising waters, inscribes a certain undesirability and immorality so acute that death is deserved.

8 Gen. 7:11 (New International Version)

Many religious scholars and thinkers have concerned themselves with historical religious identifications of Black and White America. Black American scholars have often taken the position that Black American Christianity is in response to the conditions Black Americans have had to face in America.\(^\text{10}\) In his work, *Slave Religion*, Albert Raboteau makes a lengthy argument about the transition and transformation that Africans, and eventually Black Americans, endured because of the conditions of slavery and thereafter. Thinkers like James Cone, Albert Cleage, Jr., J. Deotis Roberts, and William Jones all promoted a theology of Black liberation that decentered White Christ and, in its place, installed a Black one.\(^\text{11}\) Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes have all contributed poetic works to this belief. Cullen uses the spectacle of lynching in place of the crucifixion, and Hughes opens his poem about the Scottsboro Nine with the memorable lines, “Christ is a nigger.” The more prominent idea that emerges in Black Christian thought is best found in the likes of Fredrick Douglass and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: “God [is] ever on the side of the oppressed.” Dr. King, a Baptist preacher who was also “the son of a Baptist preacher, the grandson of a Baptist preacher, and the great-grandson of a Baptist preacher,” took a “down at the cross” approach, which saw suffering as part of the eventual redemption through Christ.\(^\text{12}\) A compelling argument

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can be made, similar to my argument about Rap music as a reaction to the conditions of living in America, that Black Christianity is a response to White theology and American society. And for the most part, this is true, but it is a somewhat one-sided way to conceive of the state of relations that Christianity invites.

White Christianity is also a response or reaction to what W.E.B. Du Bois has identified as the problem of the color line. Religious historians like Mark Noll, Randolph Ferguson Scully, and most notably Charles F. Iron, in his *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia*, have all discussed how Christianity was, and by implication is, malleable to economic pressures, social and class standings, and ethnic nationalisms. The stories that these historians tell harken back to Kipling’s “White man’s burden”, but at the center of it all is a constant retooling of Christian ideals within the evangelical tradition to justify the social order, even as rumblings of liberation and freedom permeated the American discourse.

In both theodical positions, religion is the tool used to signify identity through an understanding of the burden the believer has to carry. Based on the idea that there will be some reward for suffering, the question is whose suffering actually matters. This is why religious discussion in America is often divided along racial and class lines. Because of its discursive nature, religion is the ultimate framework for engaging in identity politics, and during an event where status and identity as it relates to inclusion and acceptance were in question, identity politics overdetermined the religious utterances of the storm.

In the story of Noah, mentioned earlier, God is the judge of right and wrong. There is no interpretative deployment of God, there are just God’s actions, and whoever is shown God’s favor, that person will receive God’s mercy and protection. The story of Noah is by and large a story of power. Noah being saved by such a powerful entity is in large part a story about humanity’s supposed smallness in the scheme of things and God’s grandiosity; God’s motivation, and God’s ability; God’s wrath and God’s mercy. These are the main pedagogical directives of the story of Noah. Twenty centuries later, Noah’s Ark is underwater.

Noah’s Ark Missionary Baptist Church, helmed by Senior Reverend Willie Walker, was located just south of the Superdome. The church did not survive the Katrina floods. Apparently the two arks were not built to the same specifications. And while God is said to have sent the rains that caused the great flood in biblical times, the Katrina Flood is caught in the tangle of interpretative debate. To those on the religious right, as I will show, God indeed sent the waters to clean New Orleans. For those on the left, God is not so directly involved in the calamity, but he can at least aid in the clean-up. Nevertheless, the Noah myth and the flooded city drew parallels in large part because of the discursive nature of religion. For all of its sacredness and hyperbole, religion is a form of cultural expression that stabilizes identity. Katrina can be understood in the religious terms of divine retribution and/or divine salvation.

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15 For more discussions on the different religious interpretations between the right and left, see Matthew Sutton’s American Apocalypse. Also, see discussions on Black theology from James Cone and Albert Raboteau, both of whom I use extensively in this chapter.
I tend to think of religion as a house, a discursive house, with many, many occupants, who occasionally fight with each other. And this house is divided into separate wings: one wing for each religion. One the Christian side, there are several denominations in which rhetorical ecologies are always ongoing because, central to an understanding of the religion as a signifier is an obsessive need to identify, perhaps clarify, the signified and form a stabilizing sign. Within the Katrina ecology, as the Katrina figure circulated, what emerged most prominently during the religious debate over meaning was a question of competing theodicies that ran along historically racialized lines.16 This chapter will first examine the material reality of these competing theodicies by looking at Bill Lavender’s ironical, and sometimes scathing poem, “The Reason.” From there, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which God, through the rhetoric of religion, is used simultaneously as a signifying weapon and a palliative fix. The God of Katrina articulates the thickness of representative experience while also holding up distinct and oftentimes opposing interpretations as protective barriers against the other side.

**Jesus is the Reason for it All**

Poet Bill Lavender’s “The Reason” is primarily a response to the various religious interpretations that circulated around the storm.17 Written during the 2006 Christmas season, the poem takes the pop cultural catch-phrase, “Jesus is the reason for the

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season,” and turns it into a mocking refrain that makes fun of the use of the religious rhetoric in circulation during Katrina and immediately after the storm. The poem begins with a dismissal, of the “missa.” Lavender writes, “go, you are dismissed, the anointed king’s dismissal, the happy word that church is out.” Lavender is playing with meaning here. In Latin tradition, “missa,” or mass, means both to dismiss and to send. It is also a noun, meaning the dismissal prayer which signals the conclusion of the liturgy. One way to read Lavender’s dismissal of the missa is as a dismissal of the ritual of prayer itself, for it is, as Lavender will demonstrate, absurd to pray to the entity responsible for creating the circumstances to begin with and, more importantly to Lavender, the call to prayer has reached the end of its usefulness.

It is helpful to think of Lavender’s use of the word “season,” used in the popular, “Jesus is the reason for the season” refrain as both a marker of time, sure, but more a marker of circumstances. We are, according to Lavender, in the season of the flood, and this flood consists of a flood of lies, thieves and carpetbaggers. It is a time of the prosperity of the markets and corporate America at the same time that the people in the Lower Ninth drown in their attics during Katrina. This season, Lavender writes, is not the age of reason, but more the season in hell, a “season for a fifth of bourbon to wipe out the reasons we keep wishing from our pews for this season to be over.”

Lavender’s pivot towards understanding, by making a note of the absence of reason in this particular season, is similar to the age-old question that has always plagued religious theodicy: why does God allow bad things to happen to good people?

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Why do people have to suffer? The answer to that question, at least according to Lavender, is that Jesus is the reason. Lavender is intentionally pointing out the emptiness of that particular excuse. Jesus “transcends time, skittering across centuries like corporate execs across continents” and as he crosses continents he stops to help corporate America bring in record profits. Lavender continues, Jesus is the reason for these jam-packed malls and last minute sales? jesus the savior of the American retail outlet, of macy's and dillards and brookstone and wal-mart, of bed bath and beyond and restoration hardware, jesus saves anne taylor from damnation and ralph lauren from purgatory, jesus rescues amazon from slow growth and brooks brothers from another weak quarter, jesus is the way, the very best avenue for the transfer of revenue

Here, Lavender is particularly attacking the prosperity gospel, which is a religious interpretation specifically tailored to neoliberalism. It is a gospel that focuses on “God’s causal agency in two highly personal—and highly practical—domains of people’s lives: money and health.” God will grant both material and physical prosperity to those who have “sufficient faith.” If you believe in Jesus, you will receive a material reward. The definition of the prosperity ministry makes this clear: “We define the prosperity gospel as the teaching that believers have a right to the blessings of health and wealth and that

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they can obtain these blessing through positive confessions of faith.”

“Jesus Christ provided Christians with the ability to live in total victory, financial prosperity, and perfect health.” Lavender is also poking fun at Jesus’s priorities. And it seems that the more Lavender notes Jesus’s priorities, at least as those priorities as they manifest in America, the angrier Lavender gets. It is at this point that the tone of the poem begins to change from sarcastic to scathing. He points to two specific Bible scriptures that fix Jesus with almost criminal culpability. First, he writes that “jesus is the reason, the way the truth and the light.” This particular line is taken from John 14:6 (NIV), “Jesus answered, I am the way, the truth, and the life.” The line is commonly misquoted to say, “the way, the truth, and the light,” and Lavender also utilizes this misquotation. It is likely this misquote is a combination of another popular scripture that situates Jesus as the center of the world and as, what Lavender writes, the “master of holidays and holy days.” In John 8:12 (NIV), Jesus tells his followers, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” And because Jesus is this light who “set it all in motion from his remote-control armchair back in that empty grave,” Lavender is suggesting, mockingly so, that the rhyme and reason for Hurricane Katrina is located in Jesus’ will, not the intentional acts of men and women in positions of power.

Pointing to the religious right, Lavender is highlighting the hypocrisy and rationalizations of what Naomi Klein calls “disaster capitalism,” and Henry Giroux calls

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the “biopolitics of disposability.”²² He is arguing that Jesus, so figured as both a violent actor and an indifferent, cold and calculating orchestrator of suffering, is responsible for this violence, but not in the way that those on the religious right would have one believe. This is not, in Lavender’s mind, divine retribution. This is revelatory. In Lavender’s allegory, Jesus meanders through time and space causing vast amounts of suffering. While he is cast as the one who deems it so, policies, prejudices, and corporate greed are the real culprits. Poverty and suffering of the magnitude that was revealed during Katrina is politically, legally, and culturally sanctioned. However, just as the slaver blamed the slave for their enslavement or the colonizer blamed the colonized for their colonization, the politician and those proponents of neoliberalism blame the poor for their poverty. And it is a poverty that is god-sanctioned not because of ideological action on the part of the politician but because of moral or character failings on the part of the impoverished. Pointing to the religious left, especially considering the image of Jesus in an armchair controlling the world, Lavender is positing the image of a largely indifferent and disengaged savior who, because of his indifference, is really not a savior at all, at least to those who are suffering.

Lavender again references another scripture to point to Jesus’s culpability. “Twenty centuries ago,” Lavender writes, we had a flood and now we have Hurricane season, despite God’s promise to never destroy the earth by flood again.²³ In Matthew 24:37-39 (NIV), Jesus says, “As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of

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²³ Genesis 9:11 (New International Version)
the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking,
marrying and giving in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew
nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away.” And this
is why, Lavender notes, the floods took New Orleans, “not accidentally but for a reason
because Jesus is the reason.” And this is where Lavender’s frustration seems to boil
over. He writes,

but if Jesus is the reason
for this season
maybe we ought to kill him again
what he did
to the lower ninth ward
would be reason enough
for a second crucifixion
again one of three
but not in the middle this time
dangle him like a thief
to the left or right
a common thief
that comes through the window at night

Here Lavender is taking what seems to be an almost blasphemous turn. However, I
contend that what he is attacking is the rhetorical materiality of Jesus. It must be
remembered that Jesus is as much a discursive figure and rhetorical tool as Hurricane
Katrina. What Lavender is attacking here is the liturgy, the ritual associated with the
rhetorical deployment of Jesus from both the right and the left. While he pokes fun at
the prosperity gospel as I noted earlier, his more shocking lines seem to suggest that
Jesus should be drowned in his attic, his carcass should be tied to a street sign or laid
out in the ninth ward mud “with his feet sticking out from under a barge.” Jesus should
be placed on Danziger Bridge and shot with “nineteen police-issue bullets in his back.”
We should, Lavender writes, “put him in the superdome / and let him shit in the hallway /
with 65,000 believers.” We should put Jesus on “bourbon street and have the people he asks for help / beat him to a pulp.”

This particular rhetorical lashing points to the notion that I noted earlier in my discussion; Jesus is on the side of the suffering, a position that Dr. Martin Luther King most famously held, and one that has its foundation in Matthew 25:40 and 45 (NIV): “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me… I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.” Lavender’s position here is that if Jesus is the reason for not only the flood but for everything from the Inquisition to lynching and the witch trials, then Jesus should be the sacrificial lamb; he should “make tracks” because there is no place for him anymore. But again, the dismissal that Lavender is really calling for is the ritual deployment of Jesus as an escape from reality and responsibility. Lavender’s poem focuses on rebuking the rhetorical ecology of American Christianity. It is these particular rhetorical ecologies that form so much of the religious rhetoric around Katrina, and the following sections in this chapter will explore both sides of that particular debate.

**Rhetoric of the Storm: The Religious Right, and Katrina as God’s Punishment**

One of the main arguments that I am making with this project is that a discursive figure is an overdetermined mechanism for communicating an experience in those instances where a gap between experience and what is articulated about that experience forms, and since the trauma process also involves a gap between the event and its representations, the figural emerges as a concentrated re-presentation of an event that attaches itself to various signifiers depending on the desires of the subject. A figure is the articulation of experience in its intensity and, to use Lyotard’s terminology, ‘thickness.’ When that experience is filtered through trauma, the main goal of discourse
and rhetoric at that point is to provide stability to a destabilized subject and a destabilizing event.

What goes into the creation and circulation of these figures is a strong desire for affective and cognitive understanding of an event. This is why, as Abraham Lincoln famously noted, two sides can pray to the same god and expect very different results. Likewise, in the case of Hurricane Katrina, one group, the evangelical right, can praise what they see as God’s cleansing of human corruption and wickedness, and the people on opposing sides of the aisle can pray to be rescued from what they see as man-made attacks on their very lives. The Katrina figure in circulation within the American evangelical rhetorical ecology allows for those opposing views to exist within one rhetorical ecology or signifying chain, for it is more than just differences in interpretation that occur here; these interpretations dictate actions and actionable ideological framing.

In his essay on the rhetoric of religion, Wayne C. Booth offers this definition of religion:

Religion is the passion, or the desire, both to live right—not just to live but to live right—and to spread right living, both desires conceived as a response to some sort of cosmic demand—that is, to a demand made to us by the way things are, by the way the world is, by the nature of Nature (as some would say) or by God himself (as explicitly religious people put it).24

With this definition Booth points to an idea of not only righteous living but also righteous seeing, for one has to see clearly in order to see things “the way things are” and respond appropriately. Being so affected by the world, the religious subject would be

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hailed to live and to live right. Booth goes on to write, “life as we meet it and live it is not all that it should be; the world does not work as it should. Something is radically wrong. Everybody agrees to that. Religion enters when I add ‘and I ought to help put it right first by righting myself.’”25 And it is the “should” and “ought,” according to Booth, that has to link the subject to some “legitimating or legislating cosmos that made or makes” one live right and create the right world.

What this definition suggests is that religion is fundamentally a reaction to the world or to one’s experiences of the circumstances of the world. To a slave, the constitutive religion would primarily include a discourse of liberty and freedom and protection from the slave owner. To a slave owner, their constitutive religion would include a discourse of growing prosperity through liberty and freedom as well as protection from the heathen slave. Both the slave and the slave owner look upon each other and see wickedness. A given experience, and one’s position relative to that experience, will shape the religious experience. In other words, religion is, in its own way, a hyper-reflection of the world “as it is,” and through rhetoric, it attempts to shape the world into “what it should be.”

As the word “should” also reminds us, religion is also an expression of obligation and identity. It is an articulation of relation and responsibility to either a god, a particular set of traditions, a cultural and familial relation, and to a much larger, universal relation. But this obligation is often motivated by other ideological positions. Social perspectives and the ideology that flows from them constantly reconfigure signifying chains that structure religious discourse. To be sure, every religion is an ideology in its own right,

25 Ibid, 683
but it is also what Lacan refers to as a “master discourse” that shapes all other discourse around it in an attempt to master those other experiences.\textsuperscript{26}

Religion, in its architecture, argues Booth, offers an understanding of a particular order, a sacredness or “inviolability of that order,” a faith in that order, a hope in the form of redemption when something or someone attempts to disrupt that order, and charity from fellow worshippers to endure whatever healing processes the religious subject may encounter.\textsuperscript{27} All of these tenets circulate within the ecology of religious rhetoric as a form of ritualism that mandates specific ways of seeing and being in the world. All these tenets are ultimately constitutive of group or individual self-understanding.

Another definition of religion offers similar constitutive ideas, but it is from a different perspective. Religious scholar Anthony B. Pinn writes,

Religion’s basic structure, embedded in history, is a general quest for complex subjectivity in the face of terror and dread associated with life within a historical context marked by dehumanization, objectification, abuse, [and] intolerance...The quest for complex subjectivity that is the elemental nature of religion involves a desired movement from life as a corporeal object controlled by oppressive and essentializing forces to life as a complex conveyer of cultural meaning with a detailed and creative identity...In this sense, it is the struggle to obtain meaning through the process of “becoming.”\textsuperscript{28}

This definition also demonstrates a reaction to the world, but the rhetorical choices made by both Quinn and Booth signal the break in not only the understanding but the perception of religion and the religious experience. This is what I mean when I argue for


\textsuperscript{27} Booth, “Systematic Wonder,” 684

the discursivity of religion based on social perspectives. Take for example the story of one Clark Fortaine.

Fortaine, who only moved to Plaquemines parish four days before the storm, lost everything. When recounting his story to a reporter covering the Katrina devastation, he asked, “Why does the Lord let this happen to good people? What have we done to deserve this?” Fortaine’s questions are linguistic representations of the break that occurs in traumatic acts. Order has collapsed, and so has Fortaine’s faith and hope. In order to regain that faith and hope, Fortaine would, in the religious parlance, be told to pray because, as Lavender somewhat sarcastically demonstrates, Jesus is the reason.

For Lavender, the religious interpretation used by Clark Fortaine, as well as all the comments of the religious right (and Nagin) about God’s reasoning, God’s desire to punish New Orleans in some way, are problematic. All ignore the real culprit, and that is political policy and social neglect. But for Fortaine, his invocation of God resolves the discourse of trauma, or at least rises from the gap created between the event and that event’s representation. Entering into a signifying chain, god encounters the various displacements and works to restore a new and yet familiar order, a status quo. What emerges is a God uniquely suited to the Katrina situation, but one that Fortaine cannot understand. He does not understand his own rhetorical subjugation.

George W. Bush’s response to the Katrina situation, and by and large to people like Clark Fortaine, deployed God in a slightly different way. Similar to how he attempted to frame America in an ideologically Christian, “compassionate conservative” way, he

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utilizes God not only as a civil, national symbol but also as a buffer between himself and his policy decisions and the people affected by Katrina. During the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance in 2005, Bush offered an insight into reconciliation: “God’s purposes,” he says, “are sometimes hard to know on earth.” These words would be a cold comfort for some, but this is the point of faith, and it is faith that holds the religious rhetorical ecology together. However, Bush’s deployment of God was an attempt to absolve himself and his administration. As environmentalist Ted Steinberg notes, “to implicate God or nature in these disasters is to rationalize the economic oppression that explains why some people can flee impending calamity and others cannot, why some people have adequate housing and other do not why some people live and some die.”

Nevertheless, the utilization of God in this way, by both Fortaine and Bush, representationally situates experiences of the world by the two subjects. For Bush and those on the religious right, there is some morality tale to be understood from these natural disasters, and each event has a moral meaning. But this line of reasoning, as Steinberg notes, is ultimately an “abdication of moral reasoning.” For Clark Fortaine, his question was in response to his encounter with the world and how it should be versus how it actually was during Katrina. He utilizes religion as a coping mechanism for a traumatic event that, based on his comments, has no human agency. In this way, Fortaine absolves the Bush administration: what happened in the aftermath of the storm is morally ambiguous and unexplainable. In this case, the Katrina figure undermines the

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30 Steinberg, *Acts of God*, pp. 211

31 Ibid xxiii and xxiv
argument of the religious right at the same time that it provides those on the right a measure of protection from the consequences of their policies.

God on the Other Side

In Spike Lee’s documentary, When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts, Joyclyn Moses (a resident of the Lower Ninth Ward, which flooded after the improperly secured ING 4727 barge tore through the levee protecting the neighborhood) points out those residents who never made it out of their homes once the water rushed in. She talks about one specific neighbor who tied himself to beer kegs and just floated in the water. For three days, according to Moses, he floated in the water, and Moses, who couldn’t swim and waited it out on the top of her roof says, “I just kept telling him, saying, God gon’ make a way. God gon’ make a way. You can make it.” The man, growing increasingly tired, just kept saying over and over again that he was tired, but according to Moses, she kept trying to encourage him. The man did not survive and, at the time of the making of the documentary, remained in the rubble of the storm.32 James Cone and other historians of religion in the Black community would likely suggest that Joyclyn Moses’s belief that “God gon’ make a way” is reminiscent to the idea of God as a liberator, an entity that makes freedom come. This is the essential nature of Black theology and a more left-leaning view of how God functions in the world. It is a type of public religion.33


The religious right has long held a view of people of color and any and all ‘others’ in moral terms, and it is a hallmark of the materiality of their thinking, economic practices, and policy decisions. The other way of conceiving God is one in which God provides mercy and respite to the tribulations of living in the everyday. For the largely Black American community in New Orleans, it is as Raboteau writes,

Afro-Americans emphasized trust in God instead of man because of the encounters of early Christianity and slavery. As a result, in the midst of dehumanizing conditions so bleak that despair seemed the only appropriate response, they kept believing that God ‘will make a way out of no way.’ Enslaved, they predicted that God would free them from bondage. Impoverished, they asserted that ‘God will provide.’

In what Malcolm X once called a “passive acceptance of suffering for its own sake tantamount to racial masochism,” one of the many aspects of this take on identification with God is an identification with Christ’s suffering, one in which God is a mollifying fix. Christianity “requires an identification with the poor and the oppressed.” This is how Moses was able to demonstrate a measure of faith even as she watched her neighbor drown. Lavender would probably reject this notion on the grounds that there appears to be more than one Jesus or, at the very least, Jesus has an inherent duality that makes

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36 Quoted in Cone, “Black American Theology in American Religion,” pp. 765

37 Raboteau, Down at the Cross, 33
him at times both cruel and merciful. Further, Lavender’s poem suggests that Jesus is nothing more than a device or a way to step outside of a given situation.

Both versions of Christianity are messages of exclusivity. For the religious right, Jesus would never wade through waters to a superdome to “shit in a hallway,” but according to those who view Jesus as their salvation, he was right there suffering as his believers suffered. The Katrina figure demonstrates that God and Jesus are also capable of being discursive figures. All aspects of religion are reactive, and religion casts itself outward in order to explain a world view; thus, the images of the flooded city produced two competing narrative streams. These narrative streams are oftentimes relating to each other in the chaotic midst of signification. In all cases, God is deployed in very specific ways, with both sides offering an interpretation of the experience of Katrina relative to who they are and the given situation. While Hagee, Nagin, and Bush are positioning God as the God of Noah, the God who can and will destroy, the Katrina survivors are positioning God, in this sense, as the God of the Israelites, the God who will, as the popular song goes, “make a way out of no way.” The specific arrangement of signs, the discursive constructions, the rhetorical ecologies are created to confirm and circulate a given discursive construction that all function to say, “this is what this experience is.” Then, the rhetorical ecology that hosts the Katrina figure is simply about assigning signs to a disruptive event.

In her work on public religion, religious scholar Linell E. Cady suggests that public religion is a unifying gesture to “cultivate and nurture a common life within a society.” 38 This is largely why two very different types of Christine theodicy, divided

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along racial and class, exist side-by-side. In the case of Katrina, those on the evangelical right would see the storm as divine retribution against what they see as decadence and immorality, but to some of its victims, their notion of religiosity and the rationalizations were just the opposite. They were not concerned about retribution but about mercy. Their engagement with religion was to wonder how Jesus can, or better yet, when will Jesus make a way out of poverty, neglect, degradation and so forth. The public religion that Cady speaks of is dependent on the public audience. Thus, what is in circulation surrounding the religious signifiers of the storm is identifying markers along a string of signifying chains as they are deployed by each side.

In this case, Hurricane Katrina is a rhetorically exigent power struggle over narrative control. Religion spreads because of the reach of rhetoric, and rhetoric is fundamentally that art of persuasion and argumentation, and it also configures the art of seeing in its definition. To see the world as it is, and understand that it is not as it should be, is to understand that the doing of religion needs to be signified by multiple speech acts and receptive publics. To see New Orleans as it is and understand that it is not as it should be is one of the ‘truths’ that Katrina demonstrated.

Further, religion is a representation of the subject and the subject’s own motivations. Thus, whatever is religiously uttered—however the religious signs are arranged—it is always in the service of representing the subject in some way. In this way, religion is the actor that creates world views, and it is the acted upon that is constantly realigned to confirm world views. God was invoked in the devastation as both a coping strategy and a judgment. Both sides sought justice from God, but both disagreed on how that justice should be supplied. In this way, religion is both a
discourse about the gods and a discourse to the gods. To speak of things religiously is not only to understand the situation but also to orient ourselves within the situation and this orientation does not happen outside of ideological positions.

It is, I argue, these striking dualities of God and God’s usage that Lavender is telling to go. How can God fulfill the desires of these vastly different subjects? In either case, according to Lavender, concept, the god-head is dismissed. This is one way in which the Katrina figure hyper-reflects on discourses. It is not the intensity of God that matters; God is dismissed. It is the intensity of human action—or inaction—that is paramount. The faith suggested by Katrina evacuee Joyclyn Moses and Republican Representative Richard Baker are both rhetorical positions. The difference between the two is the power dynamic that rests with the speaker.

In Joyclyn Moses’s case, she asked the drowning man to have faith. In the face of slavery, you got to have faith. While watching your children die along the Trail of Tears: you got to have faith. While watching your son hang from a tree: you got to have faith. On your way to internment: keep the faith. Shot by a cop or a midnight vigilante: let’s pray; let’s keep our faith. When a hurricane bears down on you: don’t lose your faith. When redlining and zoning removes funding from your community and schools: Jesus will provide. When systematic poverty leaves you with no car and no means of escape: Hold on, sister/brother, hold on to your faith. When Bush is on vacation, Condoleezza Rice is buying shoes, and FEMA director Michael Brown is requesting more time to eat dinner because the Baton Rouge restaurants are getting busy39: Don’t go

astray. Just keep the faith. But what happens when you come to the end of your faith? This seems to be where Lavender is at with his poem. The overwhelming suggestion here is that God is not really on anyone’s side. The religion that circulates around God is simply a tool to further whatever agenda needs to be promoted or to serve as some cushion for the unfortunate aspects of life.

For both Katrina victims Clark Fontaine and Joyclyn Moses, at least according to Lavender, there is no reason for this season, so instead of asking “why,” Lavender writes that Jesus should be forced to endure what the victims of Katrina have had to endure. Jesus needs to “drown in his attic” or have his carcass tied to a street sign. Jesus needs to be on Danziger getting shot. Jesus, removed from his status as king is for Lavender threat to humanity and not the savior. The God and Jesus that not only floats around the Katrina ecology but also the American rhetorical tradition is not only the constant threat or salvation, he is also a constant source of ontological confusion.

**Conclusion**

The American religious rhetorical tradition in particular is never outside of racial, ethnic, gender or class lines. This is what makes it a master discourse: it shapes all others. Thus, the god-figure, as it emerges, can represent those hard lines especially because the civil and public religions is America’s self-narrative which is further stratified by race and class. Because they have always seen themselves as a persecuted minority, their god figure represents whatever social, cultural, or material power they feel they deserve.⁴⁰

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On the other hand, to a Katrina victim or to a victim of the social systems that made Katrina possible, the god-figure is also working to signify not only their existence but their experience through time and space. Those people waving the White flag, trying to get help during Katrina, were not only asking for help, they were asking to be seen as they are because they were experiencing a situation that was not as it should be, but that was historically and socially familiar. Both groups use their respective versions of the god-figure to re-present and represent their experiences with both the Word and the Word in the world.

This is not to say that God is subservient to the notion or existence of mankind by working in the services of mankind’s ego. I am suggesting, however, that God is used this way in language and articulation. God is a discursive figure that fills the space between what is experienced and what is articulated. “God” falls into the depths of discourse and is barraged by experience, desire, and intention only to then re-emerge as a presentation, representation, and justification of a given experience, and this is what the Katrina figure revealed about the nature of American Evangelicalism.

It is not only God, however, but also religion, the rhetoric that is produced around the figure of God, that circulates in this way. That is religion, for it is not just the production of rhetoric that gives religion it’s strength; it is the production of ritual and rhetoric at the same time which circulates around a given rhetorical ecology, and within each ecology can exist discourses of identity, discourses of nations, or discourses of culture and group identity and so on and so forth. They are all circulating within the same paradigm. This paradigm is what is important. According to Lacan, language is such a paradigm, but I have argued in this project, alongside Lyotard that
phenomenology has the power to disrupt discourse and language. But I would also harken back to Lacan’s assertion that we enter into being through discourse by suggesting that all language tries to find stability within a given experience. That stability is structure and this is where we locate being-ness. If nothing else, this is fundamentally what religion does. It explains the unexplainable in way that serves a subject’s desire to understand themselves, a given situation, and themselves in relation to a situation. Even if the unexplainable ends up being a “miracle” or “God’s will,” it is still something that can be explained in a nice, cogent way. And if it cannot be explained in a practical way, God serves as explanation enough. It is a strategy for stabilizing experience.

In his essay on the rhetoric and ideology within the field of religious study, Tyler Roberts suggests that “the word ‘God’ can effect an opening in human discourse and experience not in order to receive some transcendent command that stabilizes identity but in orientation to the ‘other’ that necessarily disrupts and deterritorializes religion, politics, and the cultures of identity.”

God’s retribution is sometimes confused with the subject’s own ego and sense of righteousness. At the same time, God-as-protector is also a function of the ego that feels he or she needs to be protected. God, in this sense, can become subservient to the ego: the God that confirms oneself, one’s social place, and the reason for one’s happiness or sadness. This is ultimately what Lavender seeks to dismiss: this simplistic notion of God as anything other than a divine being. What is in circulation is mythologies of people, not gods. We have seen this with all of colonization and slavery as well as the observations and religion practices created as a reaction to those same systems. We also see this with some strains of evangelicalism and the

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desire to view poverty, of any kind, as a personal failing. What emerges is multiple and often competitive “readings” of God and what God can and will do.

Nevertheless, Roberts is suggesting that ‘God’ can be mobilized for a different purpose. Unlike Lavender, Roberts acknowledges God’s usefulness, and because of this usefulness the God figure can be used for something more utopic in nature, something that can be a method of transcendence beyond differences of any kind. Admittedly, I am personally cynical of this possibility in light of the centuries-old deployment of God as an assault weapon, but the possibility continues to exist, and it is in this possibility that we, perhaps, should reach for in order to prevent another Katrina occurrence. It is in the hope and utopian imaginings that God, as a figure, has generated most of its power.
Towards the end of the 2012 film, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, the main character, a young girl by the name of Hushpuppy, announces that she wants to be “cohesive.” It is an odd statement to make for such a young girl, but in light of the unraveling of her world, the impending death of her father, and the slow death of her hometown because of Katrina-like flooding and encroaching environmental disaster, it is a word that makes sense because it demonstrates the profound weight of that unraveling. To be cohesive is to have some stability or at least the ability to manage each situation in a way that causes the minimum disruption. But, as Hushpuppy learned by the end of the film, cohesiveness is not just a state of being; rather, it is also a process of being. It is an attempt at trying to manage the everyday, most especially in the midst of the extraordinary. Nowhere is this truer than during Hurricane Katrina.

The main argument that I have tried to make with this project is that the storm reels in discourses as it churns, spits those discourses back out in its own image, and shapes rhetorical ecologies in its wake. But throughout the chaos of signification, these attempts at clarification, understanding, and meaning are attempts at trying to get to that state of cohesiveness that Hushpuppy so desperately wants. Every gesture, utterance,

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2 *Beasts of the Southern Wild* directed by Benh Zeitlin, (20th Century Fox, 2012), [https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B00A7JKL94/ref=atv_yvl_list_pr_7](https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B00A7JKL94/ref=atv_yvl_list_pr_7)
and articulation is an attempt to try and manage the unmanageable in some way, for if we can just get a handle on how to conceive of Katrina, we can begin to form a cohesive plan for learning the Katrina lesson.

My approach to working towards this cohesiveness has been to situate Hurricane Katrina as a discursive figure, a disrupting event that has so deeply infiltrated the discourse of America that it has permanently planted itself there. As such, I have looked at various discursive traditions and rhetorical ecologies that are shaped, changed, or disrupted because of Katrina’s disrupting force. Now, I would like to put those distinct categories back together and suggest a way toward cohesiveness through analytic framing. All of Katrina, and certainly every discursive tradition I have mentioned in this project, can be observed through the utopian/dystopian dialectic. Every utterance is a gesture at reaching for that cohesiveness – a utopian clarity of a state of being – through an understanding of the dystopian nature of things as it is today, or at least as it was during Hurricane Katrina. Hope is embedded in the dialectic as is an implicit acknowledgement that things are not quite right. And things were not right long before Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast. What Katrina made most evident was that post-9/11 America is no more racially integrated than pre-9/11 America. We all have our own cultural enclaves that we retreat to, and which provide us with the protections we think we deserve and the illusion of stability. These imaginations are precisely where I want to end this project and focus this chapter.

Specifically, I want to consider the notion of cohesiveness as a reaction to a dystopian reality, one that is disjointed and deeply embedded within contemporary times. We can find that the process of achieving cohesiveness is utopian in that it
attempts to work our way toward righting some of the chronic wrongs that have made Hurricane Katrina possible. In his work on the politics of environmental disaster, Rob Nixon writes, “How can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world?”

Benh Zeitlin, the director, score composer, and co-writer of *Beasts*, takes up that challenge by presenting the story about cascading relations between a daughter, a father, and their community, and the overall relation that the community has with the natural space it occupies. This is a story about relational disasters: cultural, social, and environmental. I would like to offer my own attempt at answering Nixon’s question by expanding on the dialectical concepts of utopia and dystopia. Utopia and dystopia are to be used as categories for understanding the rhetorical gesture the film makes, for Hushpuppy, through her narration, is talking to an audience; she is the rhetor. As a rhetor, she is engaging with an audience to demand, if not actions, then at least answers.

**On Utopia and Dystopia**

Perhaps the best place to begin when considering utopia and dystopia as categories of analysis is with definitions. For some critics, borrowing heavily from Thomas More, utopia is an ideal place. According to Northrop Frye, “Utopia is an ideal or flawless state, not only logically consistent in its structure but permitting as much freedom and happiness for its inhabitants as is possible to human life. Considered as a final or definitive social ideal, the utopia is a static society, and most utopias have a

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built-in safeguard against radical alteration of the structure.”

However, many twentieth-century political ideologies were concerned not just with conceptualizing this ideality, but with creating it, whether it was in Soviet Russia, Mao’s communist China, America’s exceptionalism, or the more contemporary push to what I consider neoliberal communities (that is, communities that utilize global resources for the establishment, maintenance, and proliferation of a very narrowly defined few). In this sense, “utopia” is not only about a belief and thought process; it incorporates how these thoughts are integrated with space or spatial realities. The clearest example of such utopian places are “intentional communities” founded on utopian principles.

Another possible definition of utopia is what Lyman Tower Sargent calls a “social dream” and a blueprint. This conception of utopia consists of “dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live.” In this definition, Sargent attaches an -ism to the words and presents utopia as a process: a thought process as well as a social process that is in constant interaction with the society as it exists. This particular definition expands on the paradigm of utopia as an ideal place, and places it within a real social context, as a social dream of a desired life.

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7 Lyman Tower Sargent, “The Faces of Utopianism Revisited,” p. 3
and society and, perhaps, a way to get there. For Bertrand de Jouvenal, utopia is a
dream that is less than reality but more than a blueprint, because of its ability to elicit a
certain feel or state of being, a tangible feeling-ness that a blueprint cannot provide. 8
Finally, M.I. Finely argues, “The very word Utopia suggests that the ideal society is not
actually or wholly attainable…every significant Utopia is conceived as a goal towards
which one may legitimately strive, a goal not in some shadowy state of perfection but
with specific institutional criticisms and proposals.” 9 In either case, a utopia is strongly
conceived of as a paradise on earth, a paradise that we can perhaps get to one day.
But if we consider utopias as an analytic category, as I am suggesting we do here, then
a utopia can very well be all these things at the same time.

For John Friedman, utopia itself is too abstract, but utopian thinking allows us to
develop the “capacity to imagine a future that departs significantly from what we know to
be a general condition of the present.”10 According to Fredric Jameson, this is the
“Utopian impulse,” which is both systematic and a premise that “serves as the mere lure
and bait for ideology” which could potentially lead to a “Utopian program and Utopian
realization.”11 For Jameson, the “Utopian form is itself a representational mediation on
radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systematic nature of the social

8 Bertrand de Jouvenel, “Utopia for Practical Purposes,” Daedalus, vol. 94, no. 2 (Spring, 1965), pp. 437,


10 John Friedman, “The Good City: In Defense of Utopian Thinking,” International Journal of Urban and
l.68145975&site=eds-live

11 Ibid, 3, 8.
totality.”\textsuperscript{12} It is always political, and it will always be concerned with the dialectical relation between identity and difference. Finally, for John B. Wright and Paul F. Starrs, “utopias are religious and secular, wildly sexual and simply celibate, rural-agrarian and urban-industrial, misogynist and feminist, centralized and archaic, capitalist and communal, peaceful and profoundly violent.”\textsuperscript{13} In other words, utopia or at least the Utopian impulse can fulfill whatever desires an individual or a collective group has, and because of this malleability, utopia is always a reflection on the experience of the present. It is, among other things, a promise of “freedom from restrictive social convention.”

Dystopia, on the other hand, is largely rooted in the present. Like utopias, dystopias are ideological and spatial, but the ideology of a dystopia is rooted in a critique of present social conditions. As Jayna Brown noted in her essay on dystopia in film, dystopias almost always consist of a group of exiled individuals who have the last hope of humanity in their hands.\textsuperscript{14} Whereas narrative utopias emphasize a future community that is created after a series of upheavals, a dystopia is a phenomenon; it simply happens.\textsuperscript{15} Dystopias also have a distinctive affect, what Rob McAlear calls and “appeal to fear” that necessitates some action from the audience member. However,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Paul F. Starrs and John B. Wright, Utopia, Dystopia, and Sublime Apocalypse in Montana’s Church Universal and Triumphant,” pp. 100
\end{itemize}
according to David Sisk, “a successful dystopia cannot propose problems that the reader will perceive as beyond their power change; their mission is to motivate…not merely to horrify.”  

It is much easier to conceive of a dystopia as an analytic category because if we treat it as a lived experience, we simply have to place the dystopia within its context. No matter how fantastical it appears, whether through film or literature, it flirts with what Susan Sontag calls the “imaginations of disaster.”  

It is an examination of the present, which it finds wanting. It is a warning of “certain tendencies in the present which if allowed to continue unchecked and carried to a logical extreme, would result in a world we find abhorrent.”

Both utopia and dystopia are thought processes that analyze the present in some way. In this way, both utopia and dystopia are, according to the editors of *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility*, “histories of the present.”  

Utopias help to clarify the present moment by looking towards a future where the present issue does not exist, and dystopia bears “the aspect of lived experience.”  

This view takes its lead from Karl Mannheim’s understanding of utopia, which closely aligns itself with ideology. He writes,

> The concept of utopian thinking reflects the opposite discovery of the political struggle, namely that certain oppressed groups are intellectually so strongly interested in the destruction and transformation of a given

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18 Freidman, “The God City,” 462


20 Ibid, 2.
condition of society that they unwittingly see only those elements in the situation which tend to negate it. Their thinking is incapable of correctly diagnosing an existing condition of society. They are not at all concerned with what really exists; rather in their thinking they already seek to change the situation that exists.\textsuperscript{21}

In other words, utopian visions arise out of a specific social moment; they are motivated by sociological settings in the same way that ideologies are. This makes them “acts of imagination” that are not necessarily concerned with a specific space or place as we customarily view them. They are, instead, “historically grounded analytic categories” that help us understand how groups see their present as well as the potentialities for the future.\textsuperscript{22} Utopia and dystopia are to be used as analytic categories for understanding the rhetorical gesture the film makes. The main argument I am making for this chapter is that the Katrina figure travels through various rhetorical ecologies, and, in \textit{Beasts of the Southern Wild}, undoes the intentional community of Bathtub. I want to undertake the task of examining the film’s dystopias and utopias “not for what they tell us about an intellectual construct in assorted individuals’ heads but rather for what they reveal about a set of abiding concerns and cultural formations.”\textsuperscript{23}

In an effort to create a given utopia, whole cities and communities have been created. According to Andrew Herscher, “The imagination of the city as a site of order and safety…the city is typically conceived as a refuge from the force of nature, the violence of war, and the threat of the barbaric. In its normal, everyday state, the city is understood to offer protection, to provide order, and to produce culture, with ‘culture’


\textsuperscript{22} Gordin, Prakash, and Tilly, \textit{Utopia/Dystopia}, p. 4

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid
here conceived in its most anodyne version as elevated collective achievement.”

However, as Naomi Klein demonstrated in her work on disaster capitalism, one person’s utopia has turned out to be another person’s dystopia. Those in the richest echelons of the global economy see others’ dystopic conditions as necessary to their endeavors so long as that dystopia does not impact them and so long as they are rewarded for their efforts with their own version of utopia. What matters here, though, is how those utopias and dystopias are conceived. According to Krishan Kumar, the version of utopia that exists today--but which, according to Kumar, is at its end--is one where “global multinational entities and elites have seized the center stage, marginalizing the nation state and its territorial space, and as global capitalism sets in train a constantly destabilizing search for new forms of satisfaction, one that is present rather than future oriented.” For this multinational elite, utopia is focused on present gratification. But according to Zeitlin, this idyll is a fundamental threat to the cohesiveness that his lead character Hushpuppy, and by extension society writ large, should seek.

**Beasts of the Southern Wild**

About twenty minutes into Zeitlin’s film, Hushpuppy stands at the edge of an inlet, and screams out to her absent and mythologized mother, “Momma! I think I broke something!” This moment becomes the turning point of the film. Thunder clashes, glaciers break apart, and the mythical beasts, the aurochs are woken from their


slumber, bringing destruction across the earth as they make their way to a tiny Gulf Coast fishing community called Bathtub, which is cut off from the rest of Louisiana by a levee. A devastating hurricane brings Katrina-like flood conditions to the tiny community, and Hushpuppy and her father Wink spend the rest of the film trying to hold on to their way of life in the face of impending annihilation because of the encroachment of capitalism, rampant consumerism, and neoliberalism on one side and environmental and ecological disaster on the other side. Beasts is a story about the relationship between this father and daughter. That is the central relation that holds the narrative together. As the story progresses and that relation falters because of Wink’s slow death from a blood disease, their entire world and their relation and understanding to the space around them deteriorates as well. But at the time that Hushpuppy makes her confession to her mother, she does not know this. What she knows on screen is that the Bathtub, her community, is the best place on earth. Her father is all-knowing, and her community and her neighbors are her extended family. However, off screen, as a narrator, she is far more prescient and knowledgeable. Based on the lessons that she has learned from her father, Hushpuppy speaks directly to the audience of the film and makes an appeal – an appeal to fear, to sympathy, perhaps – to get the audience to, at the very least, understand life and experience beyond the boundaries that we create for ourselves, and at most, reach out and do something about what is coming before it arises: it is a warning.

Hushpuppy’s small fishing community is under constant ecological threat because of the diminishing marshlands, the encroaching saltwater, and the melting polar ice that will eventually cause sea levels to rise. This community lives a precarious
existence, but this precarity is only possible because of the workings of things occurring beyond the Bathtub, namely, industrialization and capitalism which, in turn, has damaging environmental impacts. In this film, Zeitlin set out to do three things: First, he wanted the film to be a siren alerting to the push of climate change and global warming; second, he wanted to show a world where none of the typical divisions we find in a society are present because he believes that those differences are driven by capitalism, and finally, he wanted to drive home this utopian idea of connectedness. The community he creates, the Bathtub, is an intentional community that deconstructs differences of class and race at the same time that it celebrates self-othering. This is, for director Benh Zeitlin, his version of utopia and it is revealing because, as Jameson notes, how utopias are conceived “discloses the limits of our own imagination of the future and the lines beyond which we do not seem able to go imagining changes in our own society and world (except in the direction of dystopia and catastrophe).” For Zeitlin, the binary had to be capitalism versus those living a natural, real life.

The film opens with a sense of precarity about it. The predawn hours outline a rickety trailer that appears to sit atop oil drums. Our first image of Hushpuppy is of a girl in a ragged tank-top and underwear, sitting on the floor sculpting a pile of mud with one hand and holding a chick in the other. As she makes her way outside, in her underwear (this would prove to be extremely problematic for some critics) she listens to the heartbeats of the animals around her while her father, who has his own trailer, prepares

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food: a chicken, presumably one of their own, that he takes out of a cooler and places on a makeshift grill. Hushpuppy shares her chicken breakfast with the animals.

This opening sequence is Zeitlin’s attempt at demonstrating simplicity. As Hushpuppy notes, all of life can be understood based on one simple rule: “the entire universe depends on everything fitting just right. If you can fix the broken piece, everything can go right back.” As such, everything is reified into its essential nature. Hushpuppy begins the film listening to the heart beat of various animals, and she ends the film listening to the faltering heartbeat of her father. For Zeitlin, real living is knowing the heartbeats -- the heart-rhythms – of the people around you. Real living is being in tune with nature, being one. Real living is living free, and for Zeitlin, that means living beyond the levee and everything that the levee implies. What interests Zeitlin, and by extension his characters, is a disconnection from the world in order to reform or reframe our connections. While Hushpuppy listens to the heartbeats of the animals, she is participating in their signification.

Some of the criticism of the film is that this representation of natural, simple life looks awfully close to extreme poverty and degradation. Throughout the film, there is a high value placed by the characters on being strong, on “beasting it.” Does this representation of freedom imply a return to a type of animalism? For critics like Jayna Brown and Christina Sharpe, the film “romanticizes their abject poverty” under the guise of a “wild magical realism that...aestheticizes the filth and destruction around with major chords of saturated color.”

a view that she refuses to take. Sharpe also offered a similar criticism, saying that we should not see the film primarily as an argument against climate change because, while it is true that we should try and find a way to protect the environment, we should not do so at the expense of Black life. Sharpe reads onto Hushpuppy every nameless Katrina victim that flashed across our television screens during Katrina. She states that Wink and Hushpuppy “index those other primarily Black bodies set adrift in the devastation and devastating aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.”

Further David Walker contends that the film is an example of “squalor porn” which takes a fetishistic view of poverty in which being poor is a “glamorized as a state of being where the oppressed and undereducated exist primarily as a means of contrast to the idealized – if not unrealistic – perception of the middle class.”

Cedric Johnson, reading this film through a critique of neoliberalism, suggests that the film is reminiscent of the “pickaninny” trope which depicts an “unkempt, often half-naked Black child in various forms of commercial advertisements, children’s books, and popular entertainment.” Johnson suggests that the film is “superficially progressive” and it combines “radical posturing, anti-statist politics, and anti-capitalist ideas” that celebrates autonomy, protests, and “wild freedom” that are non-threatening to the neo-liberal order. This film, he writes, is not after revolutionary transformation. And finally, bell hooks,


calling the film a pornography of violence, castigates the film for everything from shameless depictions of Black poverty to what she suggests are the moments of sexual exploitation of the character Hushpuppy in its efforts to “put forth a conservative agenda.”

All the aforementioned critics take a realist approach to the film, disregarding the fact that it is a fantasy—or indeed utopian—film. To take a realist view of the film is to absolutely be hyper-aware of the abject poverty that the characters face. And since the film cannot but be read as a commentary of Hurricane Katrina, there is some validity to the position that the film tends to represent a type of “crisis porn.” However, when Brown argues that the film eroticizes Black pain, she ignores the White people in the film who are also poor and stricken by the Hurricane. Further, Brown suggests that the film’s depiction of the “precarity, instability, and vulnerability of Black life” shows Black life in a very primitive way further demonizes Black people. However, if we were to take a less realist view of the film, then it would be possible to say that Hushpuppy and her father could view Brown’s angst about representations of Black people as heavily class-biased and so deeply derived from a capitalist perspective that, because it cannot imagine another way for people to live, is equally, if not more, deprived and poor in its own way. As for Sharpe and the rest’s argument about the representing of the precarity of Black life, we should look at this film for its commentary on climate change because, as Nixon notes, people of color are usually the most vulnerable to environmental catastrophes, and this is exactly what Hurricane Katrina demonstrated. Capitalism, materialism, consumerism all tell us what poverty looks like. And as Klein clearly

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demonstrated, much of what we understand about what poverty looks like is by design. There are, quite simply, groups of disposable people in the system that we live in. Nevertheless, I would argue that Zeitlin, while keeping that argument in mind, is trying to make the case for life beyond these confines.

Other critics, with a more positive view, decenter race from the discussion. Nicholas Mirzoeff insists this is a story about the visualization of climate change and neoliberalism; yet, he does so without considering the idea that those most affected by climate change would be similar to those people in Bathtub: people in poverty are marginalized including many people of color.34 Literary critic Patricia Yaeger writes that this film is a demonstration of a “dirty ecology.”35 The people on the wrong side of the levee, the people in the Bathtub, simply “make do” with what they have. This is the point of reference that feminist critics mentioned here, and that critical race theorists often critique: in this neoliberal system, people of color too often have to make due. Yaeger is careful to note that all analysis has to begin from an observation of the fantastical elements of the film because it is, indeed, a work of magical realism. On this point, Yaeger and I are mostly in agreement. Where we diverge is on an acknowledgement of the power of myths, narratives, and fantasy to depict people as other. While the film is not a slice of life, it features many recurring tropes that, unfortunately for Zeitlin, cannot be used without consequences. As my discussion on media demonstrated, it is part of the American narrative tradition, and even the colonial tradition, to marginalize people


by othering them into fantastical and evil beasts, savages, or thugs. These stories, no matter their fantastical qualities, are never arbitrary.

As I have mentioned throughout this project, signification begins with ways of seeing and the articulations that soon follow. There is a political language that makes certain lives inconsequential. There is legal language that makes the distribution of justice unequal and socially justified. There is religious language that sanctifies suffering of the other and the self in order to understand who deserves to be called righteous. And finally, there is a tool of mediation that filters, aligns, and arranges these languages, these rhetorical ecologies in ways that are most palatable to a mainstream that is fundamentally invested in a specific way of seeing and being in the world. All of these articulations have their origins in myths, in fantastical othering, in unruly imaginations. It was too easy for America writ large to believe that babies were being raped in the Superdome during Katrina without a shred of evidence. The myth of the Black man is that he is a raging drunk, poor father, thug, and a beast. The myth of the Black woman is that she is too overtly sexual, too masculine (who is the man, indeed!), or too uncouth to be considered within the civilized society. These mythologies had and continue to have real life consequences. So, while Brown and others were overly realist in their assessment of the film, Yaeger’s argument relies too much on a belief in the innocence of fantasy. The best approach is to understand how the real feeds the fantastic and how the fantastic intensifies the (un)real, because both feed into a conception of what is dystopic and/or utopic. Ultimately, this film is an argument for the

type of utopia we can potentially cultivate if we are willing to retool our way of seeing and being in world. It uses dystopia in order to gesture at the potential for hope.

The characters in the film, according to “civilized standards,” live in abject poverty. But this “uncivilized” nature is championed in the film. Multiple times in the script, Zeitlin and Alibar use the words “feral” or “wild” to describe a character or a character’s actions. The usage of both words was not pejorative; after all, as Miss Bathsheba tells us in the film, we are all meat. The words were meant to indicate the nature of nature. Zeitlin seems to be suggesting that this feral and beastlike wildness is the essential nature of humanity.

This feralness is present throughout the film, but it is most notable in a scene where, after the remaining inhabitants of Bathtub survive a Katrina-like flood, they come together to hold a funeral the Bathtub way, which does not allow for crying. During the funeral/celebration, Hushpuppy struggles to shell a crab, and when one of the other celebrating members tries to show her how to do it with a knife, Wink slams his fist down on the table and screams, “No!” He then takes a crab, rips it with his bare hands and sucks the meat from the crab all in one smooth motion. He then takes a crab and slams it in front of Hushpuppy, demanding that she do the same. At six years old, she does not have the strength, but her father begins to chant, “Beast it! Beast it!” over and over again. The crowd in the room soon follows and Hushpuppy, using all her strength, struggles to shell the crab. Finally prevailing, she sucks out the meat from the crab,
stands atop the table, screams, and flexes her muscles, all while screams of congratulations pour in from the crowd.\(^{37}\)

Some scholars see Wink’s call to “beast it” as an age-old attack on the very femininity of Hushpuppy and, by extension, Black women in general. Brown, Sharpe, and hooks all noted Hushpuppy’s ambiguous gender. This is seen throughout the film as Wink constantly refers to Hushpuppy as “Man.” To this, hooks writes,

This transgender casting of Hushpuppy as sometimes representing maleness and sometimes femaleness is the constant image when the film begins. From the onset of the movie the camera highlights the back of the child’s body wearing a thin White undershirt and orange boy briefs leading onlookers to wonder are we seeing a boy or a girl. Again and again the camera zooms in on Hushpuppy’s behind. We see her gleefully running and jumping. Audiences wait for a gendered identity to be revealed. Clearly the camera toys with the child’s body pornographically eroticizing the image.\(^{38}\)

I can see how the issues of beastliness, feralness, and this notion of being incapable of being civilized is always problematic for people of color, even for the sake of art. As I noted in my earlier chapter on media and mythologies, there has long been a history of associating Blackness with beastliness, feralness, and wildness. The fact of the matter is that these associations are extremely problematic. Writing on mythologies, especially those mythologies that impact the lives of people of color, critic Maurice Berger writes,

Despite the visual sophistication and supposed vigilance of media-oriented culture…Western commentators, critics, and academics [and screenwriters apparently], seem not to realize how duplicitous words and images can be. They simply do not understand how myths work, how myths hold us hostage to their smooth, elegant fictions. The subject of race, perhaps more than any other subject in contemporary life, feeds on myth…Myth is the book, seamless narrative that tells us the contradictions


\(^{38}\) hooks, bell. "No Love in the Wild."
and incongruities of race and racism are too confusing and too dangerous to articulate. Myths provide the elegant deceptions that reinforce our unconscious prejudices. Myths are the White lies that tell us everything is all right even when it is not.39

Hushpuppy, on more than one occasion, speaks about herself as more animal than human. Immediately after the Katrina-like flood, when Wink and Hushpuppy go and look for survivors, Hushpuppy observes, “For every animal that didn’t have a Dad to put it in the boat, the end of the world already happened.”40 The insight of a child is one thing, but the parallels that Zeitlin deliberately invites to Katrina makes this insight especially problematic. By referencing Katrina as a figure, as a connoted and overdetermined thing on which he bases his film, he is referencing all of Katrina, including the rhetoric that has always designated Blackness as animalistic. To have that rhetorical fire framed within the imagery of drowning caused some complaints.

Unfortunately, because race and racism affect every aspect of life, word choices are never without consequences. Zeitlin’s notion of the feral and wild is utopian, a signification for an experience of some kind of true freedom. However, as Katrina showed, those words, when used in connection with Black Americans, have the effect of keeping Blacks chained and bound to racist ideas of personhood. We don’t live in a society where words are without racial consequences. It is no secret that historically Black Americans have been portrayed as animals much to the detriment not only of their humanity but of their lives. And there are lingering consequences to these centuries old conditioning; this is why an accomplished Black woman like Michelle

39 Maurice Beger, White Lies: Race and Myths of Whiteness, quoted in “No love in the Wild,” by bell hooks.

40 Beasts of the Southern Wild, 29:05
Obama can constantly be referred to as an "ape in heels." Finally, it is the dissemination of this imagery, especially during Hurricane Katrina, that allowed the rumors of rape and torture not only to arise but persist which, just based on rumors alone, caused rescue services to be delayed, vigilantes to take up arms against those "thugs" and "animals" from the 9th Ward, and police officers on Danziger Bridge to open fire on a crowd of Katrina survivors. This view that Zeitlin attempted to take of his characters is naïve at best. There is the possibility of freedom without feralness.

Zeitlin mostly uses the idea of wildness when discussing Wink, Hushpuppy’s father. Wink is described as an unpredictable and erratic man who is constantly drinking. He is a “wild man with severe features, a frazz of unkempt hair, and brawlers scar.” Wink is simultaneously volatile and noble. He rails at Hushpuppy at the same time as he worries about how she is going to eat when he dies from a mystery blood disease that is slowly killing him. In one scene, Hushpuppy, after angering her father, hides in a cardboard box as her house burns down around her because of a fire that she caused. She says, “If Daddy kill me, I ain’t gonna be forgotten. I’m recording my story for the scientists of the future.” There are two things interesting about that line. The first is that a child will even have a thought of being killed by her father. Many scholars, including bell hooks, have lashed out at this portrayal of Black family life, for it is a common trope to include either an abusive or absent father in stories involving

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43 Beasts of the Southern Wild, 16:41
Black families. And here again we circle back to narratives. Because utopias are byproducts of ideologies it leads me to question why Zeitlin took this route in the same way that I question the easy belief in the idea of the Black looter.

The main mediated image of Blackness in America is one of brokenness. The question, then, is what purpose does it serve to have Wink portrayed as the typical angry Black man? The violent Black man who lashes out. The violent Black man who \textit{loots} instead of \textit{finds}. Here is another question: Is it possible to see Wink outside of those stereotypes that exist? Or is it that Black existence is so coded, so politicized that Blackness is always already reified? Zeitlin and Alibar position Wink as the champion of freedom and independence, strength and masculinity. This already marks the character as political and certainly social, and it is a view that I tend to agree with despite hook’s insistence that he is a dysfunctional character. We cannot situate Wink’s character outside of the progression of his death and the arrival of the aurochs for, in true dystopic fashion, his death is tantamount to a paradise lost for the Bathtub and for Hushpuppy.

I see Wink’s character as an invocation to survive. While the portrayal of an angry and volatile Black man is problematic, especially because this mediated conditioning can lead to violence against Black men, it is also possible that Wink is simply a father reacting to his impending death, the death of his home and social space, and the unintended abandonment of his daughter. In the same way that a Lil’ Wayne or a Jay – Z would do or rap about things that would appear problematic taken out of their context, we cannot situate their bodies, their social bodies, outside of the circumstances that created them, for they are also wrestling with their own utopian and dystopian imaginations. When discussing patriarchy, I think it is sometimes forgotten that men are
often victims of the same patriarchy they represent. His call to “man-up” may be the only language he has access to. To be clear, this is not an apologia for the patriarchy, but if Zeitlin is trying to get us to understand that connectedness of us all in his utopian vision, I am attempting to locate those points of connection, and I think that one way to do that is to understand that cohesiveness with nature and, by extension each other, is not a destination but a process. In this way, I see Wink’s character as an articulation of frustration at being unable to do anything about everything that is coming apart.

It is clear that for Zeitlin, the Bathtub community represents a utopia, an intentional community. Life in the Bathtub prior to Hushpuppy’s admission that she broke something is portrayed as a perfect, cohesive paradise where none of the divisions and differences that we are accustomed to in modern capitalist society exist.\(^{44}\) The absence of material things is seen as a boon and evidence of moral righteousness, and the people of the Bathtub, despite race or gender, are all in it together. Moreover, the main “it” they all coalesce behind is a rejection of the kind of life that exists on the other side of the levee which includes rampant consumerism and a disconnection between the self and nature. The belief in connectedness is the primary driving force behind Zeitlin’s utopian imaginings. The Bathtub community exists on an island in both a physical and conceptual way where the people’s isolation, and perhaps even marginalization, is their preferred way of being.

Early in the film, while Wink and Hushpuppy float in the makeshift boat, they stare dispassionately at the concrete levee and the concrete buildings on the dry side. To them, this view is dystopic. “Ain’t that ugly over there,” Wink asks, while Hushpuppy

\(^{44}\) Benh Zeitlin. Beasts of the Southern Wild, 4:03
narrates about all the ways the Bathtub and its inhabitants are superior to their capitalist-driven counterparts. She says that the Bathtub community members are “who the earth is for.” Hushpuppy does not know or conceive of herself as poor. Her self-definition is not constituted in the way that a capitalist, or someone who is used to seeing things with a capitalists’ perception, would. Hushpuppy and the other inhabitants of the Bathtub see their lives as celebrations of independence and autonomy free from the tendrils of capitalism. They are attempting to be their own sovereigns.

Zeitlin tries to make a case for a life of simplicity, one that binds people together, as opposed to a materialist life of complexity that fosters economic and social competition and leads to human and environmental degradation. All the conditions that came together to make an event like Hurricane Katrina possible are the target of this film’s critique. In its effort to highlight the connections between us, against those systems that seek to separate us, the film essentializes identity in a way that is reminiscent of the colorblind ideological veil that obscured the truth of poverty and race from mainstream America prior to Katrina. To situate a thing or a person down to its essentialness is a difficult thing to do; yet, this is Zeitlin’s main argument: We are all one, and we, as a collective community, stand to lose everything if we don’t make some changes.

Zeitlin’s strategy is to deconstruct the illusions of security and safety that the levee represents, but, as we know, failed to provide protection during the Katrina event. While the inhabitants of the Bathtub believe that they have the most beautiful place on earth, they are also hyper-conscious enough to understand their precarity. The Bathtub is an intentional community that understands differences as a product of capitalism, and
the rhetoric of paradise that permeates the film argues that it is the self-organization, and the social and community bonds that drive the utopian imagination. As such, the inhabitants of the Bathtub believe that they are living--really living--in a way that is not possible to those living on the dry side. For Wink and the Bathtub inhabitants, the Bathtub is their Eden, their promised land, and their place of worship. And all around them, slowly encroaching all over their space, are the consequences of someone else’s utopic vision.

The resident teacher, Miss Bathsheba, includes their community’s precarity and their dystopian surroundings in her lessons, telling her wide-eyed pupils that they need to think about how they are going to survive because “any day now, the fabric of the universe is coming unraveled. The ice caps gonna melt, the water’s gonna rise, and everything south of the levee’s going under. Ain’t gonna be no Bathtub, just a whole bunch of water. Ya’ll better learn how to survive.”45 This eventuality that Ms. Bathsheba presents is an example of Rob Nixon’s slow violence. The argument here is that over time, an accrual of displacement, disregard, neoliberal policies, and colonial and imperial imperatives have bared down on developing nations, and in this case, non-industrial or impoverished landscapes and communities, triggering consequences that are not necessarily explosive and immediate, but nevertheless destructive.

For the utopian, nature can take one of two positions: Nature is either a problem and something to be conquered, or nature is neutral and the problems that arise in

45 Beasts of the Southern Wild, 8:25
nature are problems that humanity created.\textsuperscript{46} It is not too far of a stretch to see where specific groups fall. For the “multinational elite” that Khrishan Kumar notes in his discussion on the ends of utopia, nature would certainly fit in the former category. And those people are largely the antagonists in Rob Nixon’s dystopic analysis of the state of things. Zeitlin, on the other hand, while he does take the latter position that nature is negatively impacted by humans, also seems to accept or at least acknowledge the precarity already embedded in the experience of living with nature as opposed to against it.

This possibility of destruction in the midst of the utopian imagination of the Bathtub helps stabilize the utopian and dystopian elements of the film. Because of their place on the margins, these people act as the narrative force that who can offer hope for a new society, especially because, despite what Bathsheba says, Wink and the others do not seem to view their lives as dystopic at all. In fact, the entire opening sequence of the film is a celebration of their particular brand of freedom. Though the film does represent a struggle with hope and despair, it is what Jayna Brown calls a dystopian landscape with utopian possibilities.\textsuperscript{47}

\textit{Beasts} fits neatly into Susan Sontag’s essay analysis of science fiction genre films. While the film is more fantasy than science fiction, it does fall neatly into Sontag’s imagination of disaster, with a perhaps too simplified moral reasoning.\textsuperscript{48} The monster,


\textsuperscript{48} Susan Sontag, “The Imagination of Disaster,” in \textit{Against Interpretation and Other Essays}, (New York: Picador), pp. 216, 220
the other, has a clearly defined amorality. It just destroys because it wants to, and it is up to the hero to go out and stop it. Superficially, in Beasts, the hero Hushpuppy needs to destroy the aurochs, which rampage over various landscapes throughout the film. Despite her fear of the massive creatures, Hushpuppy has some power to stop them. According to Jayna Brown, Hushpuppy is in essence the Black woman with “mediumistic ability, a witchy access to otherworldly sources of power and information” whose function in the narrative is to hold the film’s ultimate comment on the human condition.50

If that is the case, then we must concern ourselves with what Hushpuppy believes constitutes the human condition. I would suggest that it rests most profoundly in the concept of relation. While Hushpuppy fulfills the trope of a hero come to do battle with the beasts and partially fulfills Brown’s argument about the stereotypical disaster film, there is the possibility that the real message is that the aurochs are not the enemy that we think they are. When Hushpuppy finds herself face to face with the aurochs, she simply replies, “You my friend, kind of.” Better still, perhaps Hushpuppy understands that physical heroic gestures are useless against the real problems we face because the aurochs are just as endangered as the humans. In Zeitlin’s dystopic imagination, the real antagonists never really appear on the screen, but they are always implied. What matters for Zeitlin is what Sontag calls the “aesthetics of destruction” because there is a deep anxiety about contemporary experience and existence.51

49 Ibid

50 Brown, “Human Project,” 124-125

51 Susan Sontag, “The Imagination of Disaster,” in Against Interpretation and Other Essays, (New York: Picador), pp. 216, 220
Thus, the aurochs could signal the environmental destruction, the end of life as we know it, or as the end of the film hints, they can be the entity that reminds us what we have to lose, spurring us to do better. Whether that outcome will be utopian or dystopian is left for debate, but the main point is that the aurochs are constructed in a way that allows them to represent and re-present those aspects of society that are intended to be read as something other than what they are. More importantly, the monster’s body, according to Zeitlin’s utopian/dystopian logic, is more of a reflection, a mirror image, of what we are and perhaps are becoming. Some critics read them as a representation for the impending doom that is coming while others read them as the visual manifestation of Robert Nixon’s slow violence. I would argue that these aurochs are representations of all of those things, as well as the visualization of the unspeakableness of broken things. The people of Bathtub, because of their awareness of their surroundings, an awareness they have only been able to achieve because of their rejection of rampant consumerism, see the end coming, and they understand how that end will be and more importantly, they accept it.

In his book on monster theory, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues that monsters are ultimately the product of the societies in which they are created. He suggests that the “monster’s body is a cultural body.” It is the ultimate site of the displacement of our fears, the things we reject, and the things we hide. It is, Cohen writes, a “construct and a projection that is meant to be read.”52 And because it “signifies something other than itself,” the monster is “always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time

52 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p. 4
of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again." The monster is, ultimately, a reflection of and on the culture that created it. For Zeitlin, there is always the sense that the real monsters are those on the other side of the levee or, at least, the ideals that created the levee are where the real monstrosities lie. The threat to humanity, then, is a certain type of ideology. Within Zeitlin’s dystopic logic, capitalism, and the mentality that follows, is alien to the natural world, beastly to human and nature relations and monstrous in its acceptance and expectation of human suffering in order to achieve its end.

Hushpuppy and her father live, by all capitalistic measures, a bare-life existence, but it is one that they choose: something that cannot be said about the victims of Katrina or, certainly, about the dystopic existence within the urbanscape that exists on the other side of the levee, which is all but invisible in Beasts. In the wake of a moral underpinning that justifies oppressive regimes as well as exceptional states that codifies and makes things legal that really should not be, what happened during Katrina is an example of slow but visible violence and what Klein would call "disaster capitalism." For the environment in the post-industrial age, this has been a long time coming, but because people have come to rely on their material comforts, they can dismiss it. The people on the receiving end of this violence are the least visible people of all and the most vulnerable to any number of monsters coming over the horizon, not the least of which is the way people see each other. Thus, while Zeitlin tried to argue for a type of future that deconstructs differences through a romantic notion of connectedness and

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53 ibid.
54 Klein, Shock Doctrine, pp. 515
community, he does so while assuming that it is capitalism that drives differences such as class and race divisions, and this is not entirely true. Lower class Whites with nothing and living in extreme poverty are just as capable of oppression (though not necessarily systematic) and racism as their upper-class counterparts; the oppression may take on a different form, something other than economic, but it is present nevertheless.\textsuperscript{55} Zeitlin is also suggesting that environmental precarity is the main “other” that has the power to make all other differences less significant for the people of Bathtub. In this sense, the environmental disaster that Zeitlin posits are the “disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest” and will ultimately affect everyone alike.

What Zeitlin has tried to create is a utopian ideal in which everyone gets along because everything is part of the “buffet of the universe;” the people of the Bathtub understand that fighting each other is pointless. There is no racial or political ideological animus. The major threat to the people is the uncertainty of the environment. In the screenplay for the film, Zeitlin writes that the people of the Bathtub are the “hard faces of fishermen and their feisty wives, downtrodden but with a sense of fortitude among them, a community of heart, spirit, passion, and reckless abandon.” “The Bathtub,” he writes, “is a place of true and honest unity.”\textsuperscript{56} The question, then, is how we get from the idealized version of the unity that lives in the film and make it real. While that would be a tall order to try and wrestle with here, I would suggest that we begin with


\textsuperscript{56} Zeitlin, script, pp. 5
acknowledging the lived experiences of the other side. Zeitlin wants to live in a world where differences do not exist, and his utopia makes all of capitalism a part of the dystopian miasma that creates these differences. But as I mentioned earlier, Zeitlin fails to account for the ways in which racism, absent economics, are a pervasive aspect of southern culture and thinking. Zeitlin’s attempt to deconstruct identities down to simple, material matter seems to construe everything else as conceptual except for this idea that we are a part of a cohesive whole. But the reality is that, conceptual or not, living and lived experiences factor into our cohesiveness and, in fact, one’s very visibility or presence.

For Hushpuppy, to be cohesive is to acknowledge that you hear, see, and know the truth of things as they are at any given moment and all the times. After play-fighting with Wink, she stops and says, “Man, you think I don’t know. You think I can’t see.” This presents as an ability to live beyond or at least outside of established categories. Her feet are grounded firmly in what is at the present moment. We must remember that it is Hushpuppy who is making a rhetorical appeal to her audience via her narration. When she says that “sometimes you can break something so bad, you can’t put it back together,” it seems that she has, at least at this point in the film, chosen the side of dystopia as a way of seeing her world, and Zeitlin, despite his ideas about connectedness, has found the limits of his own utopian imagination. “Everybody,” Hushpuppy says, “loses the thing that made them. It’s even how it is supposed to be in nature. The brave men stay and watch it happen. They don’t run.” This heavy dose of reality within this fantastical film seems to suggest that the way forward is to occupy that liminal space: dream of utopia, learn from dystopia, and live. But that is not where the
story ends. Hushpuppy’s confrontation with the aurochs, her ability to establish equilibrium with them suggests that Hushpuppy is beginning to, at least, move beyond the stable categories of utopia and dystopia even as a point of analysis. For her, the magical place of the Bathtub has become what Zygmunt Bauman calls a “utopia with no topos.”\footnote{Zygman Bauman, “Utopia with no Topos,” \textit{History of the Human Sciences}, vol. 16, no. 1 (2003), pp. 11, accessed February 16, 2018, \url{https://doi.org/10.1177/0952695103016001003}} Her way to understanding the process of cohesiveness is to acknowledge that she is a “little piece of a big, big universe, and that makes things right.”\footnote{Zeitlin, \textit{Beasts}, 1:27:00} While the seems fairly dramatic and idealistic, it fits into Zeitlin’s overall utopian impulse. Hushpuppy begins the film listening to the heartbeats of the animals she cohabits with, and she ends it listening to the heartbeat of her father slowly fade. It’s the proverbial lion-king-like, “circle of life” mantra, but it speaks to Zeitlin’s imagination of a good society. From his perch, it is a way to cohesiveness. Despite some of the problems of idealization and racial stereotyping that is present in the film, the idea of simplicity and racial harmony is part of the utopian idea, the cohesiveness, that Zeitlin is trying to advocate.

\textbf{On Hurricane Katrina}

In order to locate Hurricane Katrina within the utopian/dystopian paradigm, it is helpful to try to move beyond the paradigm and turn towards discourse and rhetorical ecologies. One of the main questions I asked myself when I began this project was how discourse was working to organize the knowledge of Katrina. Then I considered the possibility that Hurricane Katrina was working on discourse at the same time that discourse was working on it. This tussle would circulate and enter into rhetorical...
ecologies and affect not only how we engaged with each other about the storm but also how we engaged with the storm and its aftermath. My approach, then, was to find a way to some type of cohesive understanding of the storm through an analysis of the discourses that circulated around the storm and the rhetorical effect that these discourses generated. It is from this place that we can locate the utopian/dystopian dialectic.

The fact that New Orleans was always primed for such an aftermath because of political policy, legal othering, media framing, and religious justifications – among other methods of justification – makes the dystopian impulse much easier to read onto Katrina. Indeed, the fact that we have images, commentary, and evidence of the neglect makes the dystopian impulse impossible to avoid when discussing Katrina. But here I think we can learn from Zeitlin’s film and suggest that there is some possibility of a utopian impulse available for analysis, and this is where Hurricane Katrina as a discursive figure has its greatest strength.

More than anything, Hurricane Katrina was able to hold up a mirror to America for Americans so that a greater awareness of community is possible. The storm revealed quite a bit about the state of America in the 21st century. As I noted in my introductory chapter to this project, one of the main debates about Katrina was whether it was a question of class or race disparities and prejudices that caused many of the worst outcomes of Katrina. From my perspective, the distinctions are negligible against the fact that there is a persistent group of people who are perpetually “stateless inside the state,” but not in the way that Zeitlin imagines it could be or even should be.\footnote{Bauman, \textit{Utopia with no Topos}, 14} The
fact of the matter is that there are people who live like the characters in *Beasts*, and not to be presumptuous, but I am not sure we can call that kind of living freedom in a world as globalized and market-value driven as ours. Even if we were to try to operate from a fantastical place of having no market-driven economy, a socialist or communist dream, can we possibly be rid of racisms? I am not ready to argue that capitalism drives racist impulses the way Zeitlin seems to suggest (in fact, I think he is flat out wrong on that point) but I will concede to the fact that capitalism intensifies those impulses and makes them material in ways they may not be otherwise. These intensities are not just because of capitalism, but also because of politics, religion, media, law, and every grand institution that organizes society into a good society, one where a utopia can, if not be found but one that can be worked toward, even in the midst of a dystopian materiality. And I will acknowledge the hope embedded in Zeitlin’s work: that hopefully one day we can move beyond these differences; in fact, that we must because while environmental disaster will affect everyone differently, it will affect everyone. Zeitlin’s call is a call to mobilize or at the very least, be more aware of the spaces we occupy with other people. We must work towards social and cultural cohesiveness.

*Beasts of the Southern Wild* works as the coda for this project because it presents the main antagonism in circulation throughout the rhetorical ecology of Katrina as questions that have yet to be answered over ten years post Katrina. Did the biblical flood alter New Orleans so fundamentally that, like the Bathtub, even after the water receded, what was left behind was too broken to be fixed? Are the politics that helped create Katrina fundamental to how America will proceed from now on, and how will popular culture continue to respond? Will personhood always be mediated through
ethnic and cultural biases or will social media and new media finally wrest control of the narrative(s) from mainstream media? Will the law and our institutions learn from Katrina and treat people as people and not as byproducts of policy decisions and legal justifications? The answer to these questions can go either ways depending on whether you are inclined towards utopian or dystopian ways of seeing. While I will admit to a rising cynicism about the state of things in the age of Trump, I believe that Hurricane Katrina has taught us, if nothing else, that, like the inhabitants of the Bathtub community, we can be shaken, but we cannot be beaten. Despite the darkness of Katrina and all of the problems covered in this project, another aspect of history that is also present in the Katrina event is our ability, as a community, to overcome trauma and at least try to be better. I believe that this project can demonstrate the ways in which events are figured, especially in our new era of social media where figuration occurs and passes in a matter of hours.

Understanding how people articulate the intensity of their experience is a valuable resource for researchers, and it asks scholars in the Humanities to find a balance between working with theories and concepts and re-seeing the people those theories and concepts discuss. Can we continue to treat things like Hurricane Katrina, 9/11, or even Hurricane Maria in the same way, or will it be necessary for us to change how we conceive of and articulate events? It will be interesting to see how things turn out, but for now, as Yousef Komunyakaa writes, the folklore will continue to rise, the believers will continue to hum, and the occasional “strong unholy high winds” will continue to remind us that what matters most is our ability to relate to and understand each other, something we are still in the process of trying to do, and this is our way on
the path to cohesiveness. If we lose that, if we are unable to do this, then we will be, as Hushpuppy says, always trying to breathe underwater.
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